PIPELINES TO PATHWAYS: REFRAMING AND RECLAIMING BLACK YOUTH IDENTITIES THROUGH PERFORMANCE

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ABSTRACT

Sonny Eugene Kelly: Pipelines to Pathways: Reframing and Reclaiming Black Youth Identities through Performance
(Under the direction of Renée Alexander Craft)

This dissertation is a critical performance-centered approach to resisting the dominant narratives that dehumanize and criminalize Black youth and perpetuate the School to Prison Pipeline in America. This approach engages the persons, perspectives, and positionalities of Black youth and their community members en route to articulating, analyzing, and addressing their experience with systemic criminalization and dehumanization. To this end, the *Pipelines to Pathways* project executes and examines a performance-centered process of antiracist analysis, artistry, and action for, and with, Black youth and their community members. The examination of this process is framed by critical race theory, critical interpersonal communication theory, the communication theory of identity, Goffman's dramaturgical model of communication, and theories of critical performance and pedagogy.

This examinations is based upon two case studies: (1) a performance-centered youth participatory action research project with a group of Black youth in Fayetteville, North Carolina and (2) a performed autoethnography project based upon my own experience as a Black caregiver. This project qualitatively examines the performance process at work and exhibits its power to create spaces and generate intentional practices for Black youth and their community members to explore, examine, and engage in antiracist attitudes and actions that reframe and reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities.

This work is dedicated to the more than four million Black youth living in America today. May you come to thoroughly examine, explore, enact, and enjoy your beauty, dignity, and agency. May you speak, write, act, dance, sing, shout, play, and create in excellent ways that make the world stop and take notice. May you invest every gift and dedicate every performance to the project of LOVE. Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with all your might (Ecclesiastes 9:10).

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PREFACE

Because there's something inside so strong! I know that I can make it…
(*Freedom Schools* theme song "Something Inside So Strong" by Labi Siffre)

In 2011, as a youth pastor at a large predominately Black[1]church in San Antonio, Texas, I served as the supervisor of a Children's Defense Fund (CDF) *Freedom Schools* program. Based upon the Freedom Schools that rose up in Mississippi churches during the "Summer of Freedom" in 1964 under the leadership of civil rights leader and scholar Ella Baker, modern day *Freedom Schools* have sought to educate and empower marginalized children of color through academic and culturally enriching activities since 1995 (CDF, 2014; Hale, 2011). This six-week summer camp includes literacy training, mentoring, field trips, character development opportunities, and multiple extracurricular activities. But, for me, the embodied performance evident in the *Freedom Schools* program is the magic, the electric force, and the connective tissue that energizes the program to profoundly impact and empower youth.

Each day, all of the scholars (students), servant leaders (young adult intern teachers) and adult staff at every *Freedom School*s site across the nation start their programming with a gathering called *harambee*[2]. This session includes group songs, chants, and dances in the African

1 I capitalize the "B" in "Black" and the "W" in "White" whenever I am referring to people groups. These proper nouns do not assume that the people groups that they name exist as homogeneous monoliths. They do, however, implicate the uniquely divergent social, cultural, and psychological experiences of distinct groups in America. As such, I treat Blackness as a cultural group identity that is "an amalgamation of cultural traditions and social realities that are fused by racial isolation and class distinctions" (Hecht, M., Jackson, R., Ribeau, S., 2002, p. 24).

2 *Harambee* is Swahili and used in many eastern African countries to mean "all pull/come together." *Freedom Schools* employ elements of language, music and style based upon many African and African American traditions in order to celebrate the cultures and languages that are the roots of the identities of many of the underrepresented youth served by *Freedom Schools*.

traditions of call and response, collective action, and spiritual connection. There is also a storytelling time where an honored community guest reads a children's story for the larger group. "Cheers and chants" are shared boisterously, as students "strut their stuff" (sharing their own individual movement styles) and participate in synchronous dances, songs, and chants (based upon contemporary popular music, traditional African and African American music, and new creations developed by the youth and staff) with the larger group. The daily celebration of *harambee* is an example of how the design of *Freedoms Schools* mobilizes public embodied performance to facilitate regular experiences of what anthropologist Victor Turner (1982) refers to as *communitas* – a sort of "magical" social phenomenon wherein individuals experience unmediated connection with each other in one common flow and movement (pp. 76,77). D. Soyini Madison (2012) conceptualizes communitas as a force that "animates collective action, [as] it rises in a temporal cohesion where individual identities come together in a kind of rapture, a transference of communal, affective energy" (p. 6). The dynamic social interactions and consistent call for self-expression exhibited by these practices reveal particular communicative and performative processes that empower participants to engage with each other, their larger communities, and their own identities.

I have observed the three most salient results of these communicative and performative processes to be (1) the creation of spaces for examination, expression, affirmation, and witnessing of identities; (2) the generation of intentional practices for examining, expressing, and reframing identities; and (3) the empowerment of participants to engage in antiracist attitudes that reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency in themselves and others. These forces are essential drivers of the final two components of every *Freedom Schools* summer program – a public performance and an act of social activism. At the end of each summer, *Freedom Schools*

participants are encouraged to design, rehearse, and perform a creative arts-based presentation for their larger community. Participants also partake in some form of collective public activism, such as a march or a letter writing campaign (Smith, 2010). These activities allow the scholars to shine and to connect their personal interests and skills with their new knowledge and collective critical consciousness around self and society.

The CDF *Freedom Schools* model and the rich body of qualitative and quantitative research that it has produced since its inception in 1995 have consistently revealed the positive impact that *Freedom Schools* participation has had on a wide range of measurable outcomes for students and their communities in terms of academic performance, positive self-concept, attitudes toward school and community, and social engagement (Bethea, 2012; CDF, 2014; Green, 2014; Hale, 2011; Jackson, 2009, 2011; Jackson & Howard, 2014; Smith, 2010; Taylor & Lara-Cinisomo, 2015; Taylor, Medina, & Lara-Cinisomo, 2010). However, I am particularly drawn to the fact that the "magic" of *Freedom Schools* begins and ends with performance.

Fast forward to 2016 when I learned of 19-year-old Ravon Jordan, an aspiring college student and fashion designer who graduated from Fayetteville Urban Ministry's Find-A-Friend youth intervention program. In May of 2014, Ravon attended a Fayetteville City Council meeting uninvited. Just weeks before, one of his best friends was gunned down in the Cambridge Arms apartment complex. Ravon came to ask the Council members to close Cambridge Arms or clean it up, so that it could be a safe place to live. This young Black man stood up wearing only a white t-shirt and jeans. He spoke up eloquently and artfully before an audience of mostly White faces. He spoke against gun violence and the devaluation of Black lives. He used metaphor to compare paying rent in Cambridge Arms to paying for one's grave. He compared the previous ineffectual approaches to reducing violence in Cambridge Arms to "putting lipstick on a pig."

Just 41 days later, he was shot to death at a party. Though he was silenced by gun violence, the "magic" of Ravon's poetic approach to antiracist activism speaks to, and through my work today.

My quest to understand and to practice this magic informs and feeds a performance-centered praxis toward constructing and expressing emergent narratives that declare the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of marginalized youth and their communities. I developed the *Pipelines to Pathways* project as a multi-modal performance-centered approach to recreating that magic that I felt during harambee in the summer of 2011. This work was created to honor the voices of those young people, and their allies, who sang, danced, spoke, and walked out their beauty, brilliance, and bold purpose with reckless abandon. This project is driven by my belief in the power of performance to engage, enliven, and empower marginalized Black youth toward collective transformation.

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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

CIPCT	Critical Interpersonal Communication Theory
CRIPCT	Critical Race Interpersonal Communication Theory
CRT	Critical Race Theory
CTI	Communication Theory of Identity
FAF	The Find-A-Friend youth program of Fayetteville Urban Ministry
IPC	Interpersonal Communication
IPCT	Interpersonal CommunicationTheory
PAR	Participatory Action Research
YPAR	Youth Participatory Action Research

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Introduction

> I believe in the power of words
> I believe in you and I believe in me.
> I believe our words have the power to set people free.
> I believe the things that we say,
> Can change "them," "those," and "they" to "us," "these," and "we."
> For you see, when we use our words responsibly,
> They have the power to teach, build, and even heal.
> The words that we say put wings on everything we can think, dream or feel.
> So, man, woman, boy, and girl,
> Never forget that your words can (and will) change the world!
> ("The Power of Words" by Sonny Kelly for the youth)[3]

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project forges routes whereby Black youth, their caregivers, and their community members can be empowered to creatively express their identities in ways that reclaim and reframe their sense of their positive, dignified, and agential selves. I hypothesize that these routes are activated and enacted through the process of collaborative, critical performance-making and sharing. Through these avenues, we can critically engage, express, and embody our own identities. These identities are framed by our lived experiences, stories, standpoints[4], and positionalities[5] and claimed by historical, socio-ectonomic, psycho-social,

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[3] I wrote this poem as a gift for the youth with whom I have worked since 2002. Today, I perform this poem to open creative self-expression workshops. It is means of inspiring people to liberate their voices toward transformation.

[4] This term is based upon Black feminist and Critical Race Theorist Patricia Hill Collins' (1986) "Standpoint Theory" which states that every individual has a different understanding and perspective of self, society, and events based upon their social standing in the larger social sphere. One's standpoint is the social vantage point from which one sees the world. One's perspective of self and society is limited, formed, and informed by that standpoint.

[5] Cultural communication scholar Kathryn Sorrells (2016) presents "positionality" as a question of one's access to, and interaction with power within a given social hierarchy. She defines positionality as "one's social location or position within an intersecting web of socially constructed hierarchical categories" (p. 13).

interpersonal, and discursive forces that dehumanize and criminalize Black youth. This project outlines and examines a critical approach to reframing and reclaiming our identities by creating spaces, generating intentional practices, and empowering Black youth through performance.

Pipelines to Pathways pursues a deeper collective understanding of the impact that racialized dehumanization and criminalization have on Black youth, their caregivers, and society at large. It examines the extent to which creative performance-centered modes of expression like original poetry, theater, photography, and performed ethnography can clarify and magnify the voices[6] of Black youth and their caregivers in relationship to what has been called the "School to Prison Pipeline." Further, this project analyzes how a performance-centered approach to critical pedagogy, critical inquiry, and public dialogue can amplify the perspectives, insights, and critiques Black youth and their caregivers make of the educational and criminal justice systems in our everyday experiences by placing them into an antiracist[7] frame in the public sphere. By attending to the creatively expressed standpoints and positionalities of Black youth and their caregivers, *Pipelines to Pathways* works to de-colonize[8] traditional top-down, outside-in approaches to research and intervention (Smith, 2012).

Pipelines to Pathways develops a performance-centered model of examining and sharing our stories. It frames them in larger contexts and claims them as discursive beacons of human

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[6] We don't *give* voice to our collaborators or interlocutors, but rather, "their history of speaking before, during, and after our arrival requires research" (Madison, 2018, p. xxxi). I consider the performances of voice as publicly staged embodied and/or creative expressions of self and lived experiences.

[7] I use Ibram X. Kendi's (2019) definition of "antiracist" as a word to describe people, practices, and policies that actively and intentionally support racial equity and antiracism, and that actively resist racial inequity and racism.

[8] *Decolonizing* research has been defined by Linda Tuhiwai Smith as that which puts the collaborators first while acknowledging and celebrating their humanity, unique knowledge, and perspectives. This requires a keen understanding of what Smith (2012) calls "indigenous researcher agenda" as one that considers what research with any community will *do* for them. Informed by a drive toward "self determination" and dignified agency, the indigenous research agenda focuses on "building capacity and working towards healing, reconciliation and development" (p. xiii). In this project collaborators, co-learners, and co-performers enact and read "research as a site of struggle" and service (Smith, p. 41).

beauty, dignity, and agency. Through the *Pipelines to Pathways* project my collaborators, co-learners[9], and I have committed ourselves to examining and expressing our perspectives, positionalities, and lived experiences in words and ways that impact our realities. Working through the performance-making process, I examine how engaging and enacting voice through performance can resist dominant narratives that delimit and disparage Black youth identities[10] in America. I also examine how performance can engage multiple modalities of interpersonal communication and public dialogue in ways that educate and invigorate individuals and publics toward antiracist attitudes and actions.

We theorize our identities through our stories. For people in America, these stories are always racialized. For Black people in America, these racialized stories have historically silenced us and subjugated us to the whims and expectations of White supremacist norms. While there is no single Black identity, America's particularly persistent form of racism has always created - and continues to create - false racial monoliths by which we often abide (wittingly and unwittingly). Consider the discussions about who will win the "Black vote" or how to address the absence of "the Black father" in "the Black family," which degrades the "Black community." In America, Blackness is often reduced to a singular identity that is often pathologized and problematized. Even the term "Black-on-Black crime" assumes a case of self-inflicted harm - a kind of twisted self loathing homicidality that is projected onto Black people. This is a sticky route to traverse; laden with pitfalls and red herrings. As Hecht, Jackson, & Ribeau (2002) observe in their exploration of African American communication through identity and culture: "There is no single and correct way to be 'African American.'" These identities are negotiated in

[9] My workshops are based upon Paulo Freire's (1970) concept of critical pedagogy, wherein the teacher is also a student ("teacher-student"), open to learn from students as he facilitates meaningful dialogue and interaction.

[10] Like Hecht, et al. (2002), I pluralize 'identities' in this context "to accent variance in African American experiences, while recognizing that there is a shared set of realities among African American interactants" (p. 1).

context and situationally emergent. As identities emerge, they present problems for the interactants, problems managing individual identities, and jointly negotiating conversations" (p. 2). These problems give rise to generative cognitive dissonance and critical consciousness around racism's fallacious positivist claims and ontological suppositions around culture, justice, equity, power, relationships, and identity.

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project seeks to incite this cognitive dissonance and critical consciousness to the end of reframing and reclaiming Black youth identities. The research process for the *Pipelines to Pathways* project spans three years and includes *My Life Matters* – a performance-centered participatory action research (PAR) project with 35 Black youth collaborator - and *The Talk* – my own critical autoethnographic analysis of the dehumanization[11] and criminalization[12] of Black youth in America. The *My Life Matters* collaborators and I developed poetry, photography, and theater to engage diverse public audiences. With *The Talk*, I performed a one-person autoethnographical drama analyzing and expressing the embodied roots and routes of racism in America[13] as they are traced through my own memories, experiences, stories, relationships, and interpersonal interactions.

The research praxis I have engaged in over the past three years has examined how the performance process can magnify positivity, repair dignity, and enact agency for, and with, marginalized Black youth[14], their caregivers, and their communities. This research employs

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[11] I refer to dehumanization of Black youth as the convergence of the colonial economization and animalization of the Black body as a beast of burden, and the modern securitization of youth (especially Black youth) as an existential threat to Western society's peace, prosperity, and productivity.

[12] I utilize sociologist Victor Rios' (2011, 2017) definition of criminalization as a "process by which [marginalized youth's] styles and behaviors are rendered deviant, and are treated with shame, exclusion, punishment and incarceration" (p. xiv).

[13] I continue to perform *The Talk* at universities, schools, churches, and other civic spaces at the writing today.

[14] "Marginalized Black youth" refers to those who face potential or actual court or school disciplinary involvement based upon past behavior or exposure to high levels of poverty, violence, or incarceration in their communities.

embodied modes of storytelling based upon African and African American storytelling traditions, poetry, photography, and live performance. The *Pipelines to Pathways* project pursues an embodied application of what June Jordan, founder of The Poetry for the People Initiative, refers to as the "impassioned embrace of language, the meaning of that highest calling; the difficult fabulous pursuit of the power of the word/the voice/the poetry, of people who live and die together, mostly unknown to each other; mostly seen, but not heard" (Jordan, 1995, p. 3). I have found that the performance process can create spaces and generate intentional practices that empower Black youth and their community members to reframe and reclaim our voices, our power, our relationships, and our identities.

Research Questions

Broadly, I want to discover the routes by which a critical performance-centered approach effects social transformation toward antiracism and racial equity in the private and public spheres. This project seeks to create performances that incite in their participants critical consciousness, response-ability[15], and a sense of social responsibility that resist the racialized dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth. I apply antiracist analysis[16] to theories of communication and performance studies to answer the following questions:

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[15] D. Soyini Madison (2012) uses the term "response-ability" to capture the coalescence of virtue and ethics that should occur when one encounters inequity. She argues that "both virtue and ethics as critical practice must also assume the responsibility of advocacy" (p. 97). My ability to act on this sense of responseability depends upon the resources and information available to me. It also depends upon my willing diologic engagement with those who suffer from inequity. Madison borrows the term from philosopher Kelly Oliver's (2001) concept of *witnessing* which includes "an obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the responsibility to respond by others" (p. 18, 19). Oliver conceptualizes response-ability as the root of subjectivity. It is as a dialogic form of subjectivity that requires a "response to address" (p. 5). She notes, "Subjectivity is founded on the ability to respond to, and address, others" through witnessing. As an antiracist researcher it is my responsibility to present and address Black youth as positive, dignified, agential subjects. Their responses to being addressed as such beg an ethical responsibility in their witnesses to critically examine the roots of racism and forge potential routes for antiracist action and empowerment.

[16] Antiracist analysis consists of the practice and products of critical research that actively and intentionally supports racial equity and antiracism, and that actively resists racial inequity and racism in praxis and in theory.

- How can the performance process create spaces where the persons, perspectives, and positionalities of Black youth and their caregivers can be examined, expressed, affirmed, and witnessed?
- How can the performance process generate intentional practices for Black youth and their community members to examine, express, and reframe their persons, perspectives, and positionalities?
- How can the performance process empower its participants to engage in antiracist attitudes and actions that reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities?

I hypothesize that the praxis of staging, repeating, and dialoguing around performance-centered forms of self-expression can empower performers to engage and transform the stories and layers of identity that frame of their sense of self and society. I believe that the performance process can empower them to reclaim their own sense of positivity, dignity, and agency, while calling others to claim theirs as well. As the Poetry for the People Collective articulate in their ground rules:

> The art of telling the truth is a necessary and a healthy way to create powerful, and positive, connections among people who, otherwise, remain (unknown and unaware). The strangers. The goal is not to kill connections but, rather, to create and to deepen them among truly different men and women (Muller & The Poetry for the People Collective, 1995, p. 16).

This project examines the impact that the performative public framing and claiming of our personal and collective stories can have on efforts to promote antiracist consciousness, dialogue, and action among truly different people.

In order to accomplish this, I grapple with elements of culture, race, identity, communication, and performance. I have practiced what Communication Theorist Michael Hecht (1993) calls “layering of theory,” whereby “alternative ways of knowing […] are continually

juxtaposed and played off each other and/or blended together" in the work of forging routes to a richer understanding of the issues at hand (p. 76). To address issues of culture and race, I rely on a framework informed by critical race theory. To analyze the communicative issues of identity, relationships, and power, I apply the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 2002), Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of communication, and critical interpersonal communication theory (Moore, 2017). To address the power of performance, I apply theories and practices of embodied performance, performance ethnography, performed ethnography, performative poetic inquiry, and performative writing.

The Theoretical Framework of *Pipelines to Pathway*

> [T]he critique of what we are is at one and the same time the historical analysis of the limits that are imposed on us and an experiment with the possibility of going beyond them (Foucault, 1984, p. 50).

I argue that compelling embodied performances of the lived experiences of Black youth, their caregivers, and their communities has the potential to reveal and lift what antiracist educator Lee Ann Bell (2010) calls *concealed stories* (those that "reveal both the hidden (from the mainstream) stories told from the perspective of racially dominated groups, as well as stories uncovered through critical analysis of historical and social science data that illustrate how race shapes experience in our society"), *resistance stories* (those that "demonstrate how people have resisted racism, challenged the *stock stories* (dominant narratives) that support it, and fought for more equal and inclusive social arrangements throughout our history but seldom taught in our schools"), and *emerging/transforming stories* ("new stories deliberately constructed to challenge the stock stories, build on and amplify concealed and resistance stories, and create new stories to interrupt the status quo and engage change") (pp. 23-25). Bell's *Storytelling for Social Justice* model is a route by which these three forms of critical storytelling can do the work of

deconstructing *stock stories* –"the tales told by the dominant group, passed on through historical and literary documents, and celebrated through public rituals, law, the arts, education and media" (p. 23). These are the dominant narratives that support and reify extant racist[17] norms.

I argue that stories that align with Bell's *Storytelling for Social Justice* model have the power to incite collective critical consciousness around racist structures of domination like the School to Prison Pipeline[18] . This project seeks to cultivate a "counter-storytelling community in which race and racism can be openly discussed in diverse groups and in which risks can be taken to expose how systemic racism operates in our daily lives and our role in supporting or resisting racial patterns" (Bell, 2010, p. 94). As writer and commentator Baratunde Thurston (2019) declares, "Systems are just collective stories we buy into." Thus, I propose a method of curating and performing critical stories toward an antiracist consciousness that encourages and empowers us to buy into critical antiracist action and social transformation.

I argue that to begin this process Black youth identities must be reframed from what Rhetorical Studies Theorist Eric King Watts (2017) would call the existing *biotrope* of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth. I use the term *biotrope* to refer to a simultaneously metaphorical and metonymical approach to the meaning and value that a collective social imaginary assigns to bodies, based upon certain biological characteristics (Daut, 2016; Watts, 2017). In other words, the Black youth body serves as a symbol for criminality (metaphor)[19].

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[17] Here, I utilize author Ta-Nehisi Coates' (2015) definition of "racism" as "the need to ascribe bone-deep features to people and then humiliate, reduce, and destroy them" (p. 7).

[18] The Children's Defense Fund has coined the phrase, the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline®*, often referred to as the *School to Prison Pipeline,* to explicate the statistical correlation between the disproportionately high rates of child poverty, school discipline experienced by black children and equally disproportionately high rates of incarceration for black people in the U.S. (Advancement Project, 2010, Alexander, 2010, Cass & Curry, 2007).

[19] The Oxford Dictionary defines metaphor as "a thing regarded as representative or symbolic of something else, especially something abstract." Thus, the biotrope serves as a symbol of certain abstract phenomeona like criminality.

Simultaneously, the Black youth body serves as a substitute – a sort of short-hand - for criminally prone people (metonym)[20]. While all criminals are not Black youth, the body of the "Black youth" (especially when it is clothed in modern hip-hop dress) carries with it the weight of preconceived notions of that tend to attach themselves to the American imaginary of the Black youth as "at-risk," violent, dangerous, "Super Predatorial" etc.).

I argue that the *biotrope* of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth serves in the American imaginary as a source of what Sarah Farmer (2010) refers to as "moral panic" – a general state of fear and apprehension that perpetuates a stereotype of Black youth criminality. This biotrope objectifies the Black youth subject, delimiting her subjectivity. Kelly Oliver (2001) describes this assault on subjectivity:

> Being othered, oppressed, subordinated, or tortured affects a person at the level of her subjectivity, her sense of herself as a subject and agent. Oppression and subordination render individuals or group s of people as other by objectifying them. Objectification undermines subjectivity: to put it simply, objects are not subjects (p. 7).

Oliver argues that this process of objectification can only be overcome through the process of witnessing. She notes that

> Through the process of bearing witness to oppression and subordination, those othered can begin to repair damaged subjectivity by taking up a position as speaking subjects. What we learn from the beginning with the subject position of those othered is that the speaking subject is a subject by virtue of address-ability and response-ability (p. 7).

This process generates a sense of obligation among all participants in the witnessing process to "respond to our environment and other people in ways that open up rather than close off the possibility of response" (p. 15). Oliver (2001) posits "address-ability" and response-ability as "the roots of subjectivity" (p. 7). Only through open-minded and open-hearted witnessing can the Black youth be addressed in accordance with his inherently positive, dignified, agential

[20] The Oxford Dictinary defines metonym as "a word, name, or expression used as a substitute for something else with which it is closely associated.." Thus the biotrope serves as short-hand for the sterotypes associated with it.

identities. Only when he is addressed as such by witnesses is he empowered with the ability to respond in accordance with his positive, dignified, agential identities.

The biotrope of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth, on the other hand, serves as the objectified subject of a powerfully pervasive stock story that persistently dehumanizes and criminalizes Black youth, while justifying the mechanisms of the School to Prison Pipeline. In fact, the School to Prison Pipeline appears, at its surface, to be a very linear stock story:

(1) A Black child grows up facing disproportionate exposure to negative psycho-social and socio-economic obstacles. (e.g. racism, poverty, and violence) (Camilleri, 2007; Cass & Curry, 2007; CDF, 2015, Ginwright 2010, 2016; Morris, 2016; Rios 2011).[21]

(2) The child goes to school and is disproportionately implicated in, and punished for, socially abnormal or "unacceptable" behavior (or the appearance thereof) (Camilleri, 2007; Cass & Curry, 2007; Morris, 2016; Rios, 2011, 2017).[22]

(3) The child is significantly more likely to experience negative interactions with law enforcement, and to end up incarcerated than their White counterparts (Alexander 2010; Camilleri, 2007; Cass & Curry, 2007; Monahan et al., 2014; Morris, 2016; Rios 2011, 2017).[23]

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project mobilizes the performance process to create spaces for antiracist self-expression, generate intentional practices of antiracist self-expression, and

[21] According to the Annie E. Casey Foundations Kids Count database (2017), Black children are three times more likely to live in poverty than white children.

[22] According to the United States Government Accountability Office Report to Congressional Requesters report on "K-12 Discipline Disparities for Black Students, Boys, and Students with Disabilities" (2018), Black boys were over three times more likely (and Black girls were five times more likely) than their White counterparts to be suspended.

[23] (*Ibid*) *Black* K-12 students are more than twice as likely to be referred to law enforcement and four times more likely to experience school arrest than their White counterparts.

empower Black youth and their caregivers to confront and counter this stock story with their own antiracist anecdotes, attitudes, and actions.

A Communication Theory of Identity Approach

> [I]dentity is inherently a communication process and must be understood as a transaction in which messages and values are exchanged. These messages are symbolic linkages between and among people that, at least in part, are enactments of identity. That is, we, as communicators, would like to believe we are simply talking to others; instead, we are also exchanging codes of cultural personhood (Hecht, et al., 2002, p. 211).

To effectively push back against the stories that frame and claim Black youth identities, we must first develop a deeper critical understanding of the ways in which Black youth identities are dehumanized and criminalized in America. We cannot gain this understanding by focusing only on the structural and systemic racism and inequity that may *push* youth into the School to Prison Pipeline; or by focusing only on cultural or individual patterns, deficits, or pathologies that may *pull* youth into the School to Prison Pipeline. The youth who are directly affected by this phenomenon can be empowered to resist and address the School to Prison Pipeline themselves. The pathway to this empowerment begins with addressing and mobilizing the symbolic and dynamic nature of identity at both the personal and political level. Because "identity is inherently a communicative process," the communication theory of identity (CTI) also helps us to examine the ways in which it is framed and claimed (Hecht, 1993, p. 78).

CTI finds its foundation in symbolic interactionism. Herbert Blumer (1969) developed symbolic interactionism from his mentor George Herbert Meade's notion that "human beings act toward things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them," and that meaning is created via human interaction (p. 2). In staking a claim to human interaction itself as an episteme, Blumer (1969) was confronting the raging logical empiricism/positivism and behaviorism of his time. As a result, a symbolic interactionist approach to human communication

tends to address the limited perspective of late 20th century sociology and psychology that trained its gaze on stimulus-response psychology, ignoring notions of agency, and subjectivity.

Blumer (1969) declares that the primary premise of symbolic interactionism is that "human group life is necessarily a formative process and not a mere arena for the expression of pre-existing factors" (p. 10). In other words, rather than a means of discovering the roots of identity, symbolic interactionism was designed to discover and display routes of identity formation and expression. Blumer (1969) notes that people construct their sense of action and identity, based upon the sense of meaning that they derive "through an interpretation of situations which confront them" (p. 74). Thus, symbolic interactionism's focus is not merely on the psychological or social factors that have acted on individuals themselves, but on the constellation of human interactions that they constantly interpret and reinterpret as articulations, negations, and/or affirmations of self.

In this context, George Herbert Mead (2012) introduces a crucial core concept of symbolic interactionism called the "generalized other," or the "attitude of the whole community" (p. 354): "So the self reaches its full development by organizing these individual attitudes of others into the organized social or group attitudes, and by thus becoming an individual reflection of the general systematic pattern of social or group behavior" (Mead, 2012, p. 357). Therefore, people (often referred to as "agents" in the symbolic interactionist framework) undergo a constant process of identification, interpretation and definition of self and situation. This process produces the "self object," a conceptualization of self that is conditioned by social systems and unique human groupings (Mead, 1934; Blumer, 1969). Mead (1934, 2012) and Blumer (1969) posited a binary self – the "I" subject who acts upon the world, constructing self and reality, and the "me" object who is simultaneously acted upon and constructed by social interaction. Today,

the theoretical traces of symbolic interactionism are evident in identity-centered approaches to interpersonal communication theories like the communication theory of identity (Hecht, 1993).

Communication Theorist, Michael Hecht (1993) expands this notion of a singular socially constructed self by examining identity formation as inherently "communicative and relational" (cf. Julia Moore's (2017) insistence on subjectivity superseding mere identity in critical interpersonal communication theory). Hecht (1993) examines identity through frames, which he defines as "means of interpreting reality that provide a perspective for the understanding the social world" (p. 81). He posits frames as both the perspectives with which we see the world and as "ways people conceptualize their own identity" (p. 81). His Communication Theory of Identity (CTI) adds a more complex framework to our analysis of the self by positing "four frames of identity" that are constantly at play in identity formation and transformation. They are the *personal frame*, *enactment frame*, *relationship frame*, and the *communal frame.* Analyzing identity through these four frames helps us to "layer" our analysis of the complex social process through which we communicate, construct, internalize, and effectuate our sense of identity (Hecht, 1993, p. 76).

Hecht (1993) defines the personal frame as one that focuses on individual identity as expressed through one's sense of self-concept (cf. George Herbert Mead's (1934) "self object"). The enactment frame focuses on the social interactions of individuals and how those interactions communicate identity. This frame is based upon symbolic interactionism understanding of identity formation which states that identity is emergent and dependent upon social interaction. The relationship frame of identity extends this notion that "Identity is mutually constructed in social interactions" to the context of human relationships (p. 79). Hecht (1993) observes that the relationship frame attends to the tendencies of individuals to define themselves in three ways: (1)

by comparing themselves (in relation) to others (e.g. being the oldest, youngest, Whitest or Blackest person in the room), (2) by defining their own place in particular relationships (e.g. in relationship, the individual is transformed into "friend," "teammate," "cast mate," etc.), (3) and by allowing relationships to subsume individual identities (e.g. youth group participants become known as a research team). Finally, Hecht's communal frame of identity "locates identity in the group not the individual or the interaction" (p. 80). This frame attends to how we bond around projects, common interests, mutual threats, and other collective endeavors to create a collective sense of self.

Hecht (1993) argues that, at any given analytical moment, one may study identity through any combination of these frames depending upon the most salient elements at play. For example when we are examining the impact of collective narratives on collective consciousness, the communal frame rises as most salient. The other three frames are still applicable and relevant, but may, or may not be included in the analysis, depending upon the research questions. The CRT approach tends to view identity through a racialized communal frame. Hecht, et al. (2002) complicate this perspective by observing that "African American communication is grounded in African American cultural identities" that have been mutually framed by race, despite the diversity of individual persons, experiences, and relationships that comprise them (p. 1).

The CTI framework offers a route by which my collaborators and I might conceptualize our Black identities in the context of interpersonal interaction, shared Black culture and racialized acculturation as it is constructed for, and by, us. Hecht, et al. (2002) conceptualize communication as a cultural process in the context of Black identity. In their analysis of how Black identity is communicated in modern America, they establish the following assumptions about culture:

> • culture is historically and socially emergent [Based upon shared history and shared meanings, cultural identity is transferred generationally and transformed through interaction.]
> • people co-create and maintain culture as a function of identity [Cultural terms often overlap with other categorizations, like race. Thus, terms like "Black" are often expressed to label one's race and culture as a communal identity.]
> • people negotiate their identities when they come in contact with others [Our relationships, social positions, and interactions especially inform our relational and enacted frames of identity.]
> • memberships in cultures are pluralistic and overlapping [This intersectional approach allows us to examine the ways in which the personal inevitably becomes political, and how the political manifests itself in the personal in a plethora of ways.]
> • culture is a system of interdependent patterns of conduct and interpretations [Cultures possess deeply rooted, affectively charged codes and unique patterns of symbolic interaction that indicate membership and personhood.]
> • perceptions provide a rich source of interpretive data [Combining oral history, performance, and a narrative approach, allows us to more profoundly engage with the processes by which I/we frame and reframe my/our identities.] (pp. 26 – 27)

Thus, the CTI framework offers us a lexicon for pulling identities up from the downward push of external racism and the downward pull of internalized racism.

A Dramaturgical Approach

> Universal human nature is not a very human thing. By acquiring it, the person becomes a kind of construct, built up not from inner psychic propensities but from moral rules that are impressed upon him from without (Goffman, 1993, p. 362).

If Hecht sees identities as the conglomeration of four frames of identity, Goffman stretches these frames into multiple faces of identity expression. According to Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical framework, a person's self is actually a series of masks (faces) that are conditioned by social norms, rules and expectations, and presented in specific social contexts. Goffman (1993) defines "face" as "the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact" (p. 359). The conglomeration of each of the faces that one puts on constitutes the "self". What it means to be a particular person in the moment is to project a particular face to others.

Erving Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical model of human communication posits a continual "Information Game" wherein all humans are performing at all times, thereby presenting a "face" to the world audience. An individual's face is constructed via a comprehensive process of mobilizing that individual's activity in order to meet, defy, or comply with the expectations (or perceived expectations) of their audience members (the rest of society). The individual selects her face, which is framed by a given front in any given social interaction, with the goal of achieving certain personal objectives and aspirations.

A "front" refers to the particular modes by which one performs the face in a given situation, that is: "the expressive equipment of a standard kind intentionally or unwittingly employed by the individual during his performance" (Goffman, 1993, p. 22). Goffman's (1993) front is comprised of "setting" and "personal front." The "setting" is the environment, or scene (furniture, landmarks, weather, etc.) wherein the front is expressed. The "personal front" includes items of expressive equipment (e.g. age, race, gender, rank, dress). Goffman divides "personal front" into "appearance" (phenotype, body type, dress, etc.) and "manner" (attitude, accent, posture, gestures, etc.) (p. 24).

Setting and personal front don't always agree, because the intentions and aspirations of the individual performer and their choices of face and front don't always match the diverse contexts within which they are performing. In fact, a front can take on a life of its own. "Collective representation" occurs when a front becomes institutionalized, stereotyped and takes on a stability and meaning of its own beyond specific tasks (Goffman, 1959, p. 27). Goffman (1959) warns, "Since fronts tend to be selected, not created, we may expect trouble to arise when those who perform a given task are forced to select a suitable front for themselves from among

several quite dissimilar ones" (p. 28). When a particular face/front combination doesn't match with its holder's intentions or aspirations, a "performance disruption" occurs.

The disproportionate rates of school discipline and incarceration that Black youth experience are evidence of the high stake performance disruptions that they face. Engaging in performative face modulation and positive front management can empower Black youth to counter the performance disruptions that result from their systemic dehumanization and criminalization. I define performative face modulation as the practice of choosing the performance pieces, characters, characterization, and delivery (materials, masks, moods, and modes) that one will perform for a witness. I define positive front management as the practice of choosing the key elements that frame the impression you will make, such as space, time, dress, and audience members to invite. In order to resist and counter such disruptions, Black youth must be empowered to claim positive, dignified, agential faces that are framed by positive fronts.

A Critical Interpersonal Communication Approach

> [I]nterpersonal practices also sustain an inequitable social order through the articulation of what is and should be (Moore, 2017, p. 258).

As Hecht, et al. (2002) observe, the communicative aspects of any social concerns like the School to Prison Pipeline are inextricably and bidirectionally bound to its cultural context. In other words, "all communication exists in a cultural context and all culture is communicated" (p. 2). Thus, a critical communication theory approach to examining the lived experiences and social interactions of youth who are most susceptible to the School to Prison Pipeline may also help to address the cultural and communicative roots and routes that have formed, fostered and facilitated it thus far. To this end, I apply Communication Theorist Julia Moore's (2017a) suggestion that the field of Interpersonal Communication Theory (IPCT), being inherently empirical in nature, should take on *critical empirical research* – "critical theory used to critique

and promote change in the observable world" (p. 2). She calls on IPCT scholars to utilize critical theory as "a lens through which to critique and work toward changing unjust operations of power" (p. 2). She argues that by actively incorporating three key critical theory concepts - *power, identity,* and *relationships* - within IPCT scholarship, a more socially relevant Critical IPCT (CIPCT) will emerge (p. 5).

IPCT was born, for the most part, out of a post-positivist empiricist turn in the behavioral sciences and psychology in the late 1950's, through the 1960's. Julia Moore (2017a) notes that critical theorists have derided IPCT for its traditional commitment to "individualism, cognitivism, subject intentionality, and ahistoricism" (p. 3). Moore (2017a) urges a critical turn in IPCT that replaces these tendencies with an "alternative definition of the person as a cultural manifestation inextricably linked to historical processes" (p. 4). She observes that between 2006 and 2013 83.2% of published IPCT journal articles were postpositivist (based upon empirical evidence and mostly quantitative data), 13.9% were interpretive (based more on qualitative data like ethnography and narrative), and only 2% of all IPCT articles could be called "critical" (applying a keen attention to power differentials, culture, and history to all data) (Moore, 2017a, p. 1). Moore (2017a) suggests that IPCT theorists employ "theories of discourse and power [that] will enable communication scholars to enrich their empirical analyses of everyday communication practices and relationships and adopt the 'critical edge' of critical concepts/theories to challenge injustices of the status quo" (p. 5).

To get at the power factor, Moore (2017, 2017a) posits Michel Foucault's critical theory of *Power/Knowledge* and discourse analysis as fruitful lenses for analyzing interpersonal interaction. Moore (2017a) suggests that IPCT shift from perceiving power as "social influence" to perceiving it as a "dispersed, unstable and plural, and as operating through knowledge claims

about what is true and real," as evinced in dominant discourses (p. 6). Studying the dynamics of salient social influences without accounting for the historically rooted and socio-economically routed power dynamics at play cannot possibly render the kind of authentic and relevant critical understanding of those interactions that is necessary to generate social transformation. Moore (2017a) also suggests that IPCT shift from a focus on "identity" (a self-contained, autonomous agent) to one that analyzes the more dynamic phenomenon of "subjectivity" (one that is continually being constructed and constructing itself based upon an array of "historical and cultural process") (p 7). Finally, Moore (2017a) suggests that IPCT expand its focus from individual relationships to their power-laden contexts that are formed and fostered by discursive "regimes of truth" – the persistent and pervasive master narratives with which we theorize our existence and reify our sense of self and society (p. 8). She suggests three methodological approaches that can facilitate IPCT's up-take of this critical turn: "(a) critical interpretations of qualitative data, (b) criticism of qualitative data, and (c) arts-based approaches" (p. 12). Moore (2017a) argues that these shifts and re-focuses have the potential to make IPCT more rigorous, relevant and readable to scholars and laypersons alike, while contributing to the resistance and transformation of social inequity and injustice.

In addition to addressing one of Moore's (2017a) key critical elements (identity/subjectivity), CTI serves as a larger framework that I use throughout the *Pipelines to Pathways* project to examine and explore how the performance process engages and dances with and between the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers of identity. I apply CTI to examine "how individuals frame and enact their personal identity and how these identities are relationally and communally expressed, negotiated, and defined" throughout the performance process (Hecht, et al., 2002, p. 216). Furthermore, I recognize, as Hecht, et al. (2002) have, that

the Black (African American) experience in America has manifested uniquely racialized identity formations that are constantly at play when we discuss the framing and claiming of identity. As we seek to explore and express our stories, we draw interstitial life blood from each of our epidermalized layers of identity (cf. Fanon, 1967, "epidermalization").As we travel through the performance process, I assess the modalities of identity (subjectivity), relationships, and power that ebb and flow within and between participants throughout the performance process. While the CTI framework has the potential to engage all three of the Moore's key critical concepts to some degree, I have also employed Erving Goffman's dramaturgical model of communication analyze the routes by which *power* impacts social influence and interaction.

A Critical Race Theory Approach

> Despite the scientific refutation of race as a legitimate biological concept and attempts to marginalize race in much of the public (political) discourse, race continues to be a powerful *social* construct and signifier (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 8).

I pursue this line of research through a Critical Race Theory (CRT) lens that is specifically Afrocentric[24]. Because African-descended (Black) youth are the most acutely impacted by the School to Prison Pipeline, I focus here, on the unique historical, socio-economic, psycho-social, interpersonal, and discursive factors that disproportionately *push* and *pull* youth of African descent toward the *School to Prison Pipeline* (Alexander, 2010; Cass & Curry, 2007; Ginwright 2010, 2016; Morris, 2017; Rios, 2011). Further, African and African American storytelling traditions, materials, and modes inform my practices of performance-centered pedagogy, ethnography, and PAR throughout this project. Aligning with CRT's emphasis on the power of storytelling and Lee Ann Bell's (2010) *Storytelling for Social Justice* model, I depend upon embodied storytelling to "deconstruct" existing oppressive paradigms while co-

[24] It is uniquely attuned to the African American (Black) experience and perspective (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

constructing a positive sense of the dignified agential self with, and for, Black youth and their caregivers. This performance-centered process pursues active self-production[25] with, and for, Black youth, their caregivers, and their communities.

CRT education scholar Gloria Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that the *raison d'être* of CRT is to expose and contend with the fact that in America's ostensibly post-racial meritocracy, "race continues to be a powerful *social* construct and signifier" (p. 8). CRT mobilizes storytelling and rigorous discursive analysis to expose hidden structures of domination while countering and confronting them with subjugated and resistant voices. CRT has the potential to meet, complement, and supplement theories of performance toward this end. The embodied action of performance engages the luminal space between the conceptual corpus and the material viscous, generating nuance, affective force, narrative logic, and the potential for transformation.

As a praxis of research, reporting, and storytelling, CRT presents us with a clearly articulated lens through which we can analyze, amplify, and address the root causes of racist oppression and its conceptual and material routes. Since the 1990's diverse disciplines have been taking up this lens to apply a CRT assessment to social psychology (Goff et al., 2008, 2014), pedagogy (hooks, 1998; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Kharem, 2006; Nasir, 2012; Ginwright, 2010, 2016), philosophy (Taylor, 2016), rhetoric (Watts, 2001, 2017), film (Barrish, DuVernay & Averick, 2016) performance studies (DeFrantz, 2014; Fleetwood, 2011; George-Graves, 2014), journalism (Coates, 2015, Kendi, 2019), sociology (Bonilla Silva, 1997; Rios, 2011), cultural studies (Gilroy, 1993; Hall, 2002; Weheliye, 2014; Silva, 2016) and other diverse disciplines

[25] Michel Foucault promotes "new forms of subjectivity" that I will refer to as "self-production" - a person's active resistance to the hierarchical forces that tend to commodify, objectify, and normalize them (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 216). *Self-production* is the process by which individuals overcome delimiting factors and freely explore the fluidity and endless possibility of their own identity - a"critical ontology of ourselves" (1984, p.50).

(Crenshaw, 2011). Guided by these six principals, most CRT theorists mobilize their research and scholarship toward social transformation:

Race is a Social Construct

CRT scholars recognize race as a construct of racism, and they diligently work to reveal the circuitous routes that lead to its contrived roots. According to Kimberlé Crenshaw (1988), CRT's focus is to reveal and attend to "the singular power of racism as a hegemonic force in American society. Blacks have been created as a subordinated 'other and formal reform has merely repackaged racism" (p. 1331). Ladson-Billings (1998) says that CRT's task is the "deconstruction of oppressive structures and discourses, reconstruction of human agency, and construction of equitable and socially just relations of power" (p. 9). While race is a social construct, it is one with teeth, lurking in the shadows of a purportedly "post-racial" society.

The Systemic Nature of Racism in America

Crenshaw (1989) contends that CRT should reveal the fact that even antidiscrimination and antiracist efforts are often rooted in a "white racial context that is seldom acknowledged" (Crenshaw, p. 154). In order to reveal the normal and systematic nature of racism in America, CRT scholars focus on "unmasking and exposing racism in its various permutations" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 11). In the context of education, Ladson-Billings (1998) observes that "the social school curriculum as a culturally specific artifact designed to maintain a White supremacist master script" (p. 18). Furthermore, CRT recognizes the fact that the individuating practices of neoliberalism tend to misrecognize, totally ignore, or violently deny the existence of structural racism and systemic poverty, declaring their true causes to be "individual pathologies" and "cultural deficits" (Crenshaw, 2012, p. 1451).

Storytelling

CRT scholars often begin their analysis in the archive, but they tend to finish in the realm of storytelling (Crenshaw, 1989, 2011, 2012; Bell, 1995; Ladson-Billings, 1998, 2018). CRT scholars use "parables, chronicles, stories, counter stories, poetry, fiction, and revisionist histories to illustrate the false necessity and irony of much of current civil rights doctrine" (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 13). CRT scholars have found that within these stories reside the concealed stories that can most effectively counter and question the existing stock stories (Bell, 2010). Ladson-Billings (1998) argues that, for CRT scholars, stories "add necessary contextual contours to the seeming 'objectivity' of positivist perspectives" that are embodied and perpetuated by stock stories (p. 11). Crenshaw argues that storytelling is a crucial technique for giving voice to those subjugated sectors that are often elided from the larger conversations about race in our society (Crenshaw 1989, 2012).

Critique of Liberalism and Dependence on Hegemonic Processes

Derrick Bell (1995) argues that CRT are "highly suspicious of the liberal agenda, distrust its method, and want to retain what they see as a valuable strain of egalitarianism which may exist despite, and not because of, liberalism" (p. 899). A classical liberal approach to legal change in the U.S. is based upon a slow, incremental process that seeks to honor existing precedent while gradually generating new more progressive precedents. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr's words are often enlisted to support this paradigm – "the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice" (King, 1958). This gradual process of progression has proven to take generations to produce significant change. Crenshaw argues (1989, 2012) slow social transition is even slower for those with lower levels of social capital, agency, and positive visibility such as Black youth.

The Prerequisite of Interest Convergence

Decades of CRT analysis reveals the principal of *interest convergence* - that is to say that Black people have historically only been afforded concessions and socio-economic benefits to counter or remedy racism when those concessions and benefits have also benefited White people, forcing further investment in White privilege (Bell, 1980, Ladson-Billings, 2018). For example, historically, "Whites have been the primary beneficiaries of civil rights legislation" in the U.S. (Ladson-Billings, 1998, p. 12). While this legislation was ostensibly aimed at addressing the plight of racially marginalized peoples, it benefits more White women than any other group (Ladson-Billings, 1998). White women tend to participate in White households and raise White children, thus investing a large portion of the benefits of civil rights legislation directly into White households. CRT scholarship cautions that until matters of racial inequity are perceived by White people as a threat to their own welfare, they will remain un/under-addressed.

An Intersectional Approach

Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) intersectional approach to CRT, considers race from the vantage point of Black feminism. Crenshaw (1989) argues that a failure to reckon with the intersectional nature of oppression is a failure to honestly and fairly confront oppression. For example, while Black people, poor people and youth have historically experienced unique degrees of disproportionate marginalization in this country, the poor Black youth lives at the intersection of an exponentially demoralizing degree of marginalization imposed upon one body. An example of this is the formation of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth biotrope born of a confluence of diverse factors adumbrated above. These intersections grow more precarious as you consider additional demographic factors such as gender, sexuality, and dis-ability. A CRT analysis recognizes that paying special attention to the suffering of the most

marginalized among us expands our understanding of the impact of structural racism and moves us closer to solutions.

Critical Race Interpersonal Communication Theory

Based upon these six tenets, I apply a CRT lens to CIPCT in order to address and analyze the particularly racist roots and routes of human interaction whereby Black youth are disproportionately criminalized, marginalized and institutionalized in the U.S. To this end, I propose a Critical Race approach to IPCT, or a CRIPCT framework, that critically analyzes these roots and routes of racism and criminalization in order to form and inform emergent routes toward equity and justice for racially marginalized youth in America. The activist edge of CRT, combined with the accessibility and immediate application of the empirical research of IPCT has the potential to generate a uniquely critical antiracist mode of IPCT that can "unearth, critique, and pose radical solutions to social inequalities" (Moore, 2017a, p. 2).

The School to Prison Pipeline may be a problem with systemic racist roots, but, we can begin to transform it if we critically address its interpersonal routes that are paved by elements of power, identity, and relationships. For example, Crenshaw (2012) observes that "the relationship between underprotection and overpolicing is not solely a matter of state power but also the consequence of political elisions that have undermined the development of a more robust critique of social control and the expansive vision of social justice" (p. 1471). This critique and vision should be applied to the racialized interpersonal interactions that racially marginalized youth experience in their schools and communities. bell hooks (1998) warns that the "ideological elements embedded in a White supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist society […] are routinely mirrored and maintained in educational contexts" (p. 1). A CRIPCT approach challenges scholars to consider the social means and modes by which educational and judicial systems

disproportionately discipline the bodies of Black youth (Cass & Curry, 2007; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Morris, 2017).

Thus, a CRIPCT approach to social research can both trace and reveal extant patterns of racism that foster and facilitate the School to Prison Pipeline. By naming and tracking the roots and routes of systemic racism and focusing on identity, relationships, and power, a CRIPCT approach to youth empowerment helps researchers and practitioners of youth intervention programs to conceptualize the pathways to social transformation. Committed to author reflexivity and social transformation, the CRIPTC scholar should always feel the generative burden of accountability in her pursuit of justice, equity, and social transformation through her research. Thus, CRIPTC scholarship has the potential to inform intervention efforts that empower Black youth and their community members to resist and transform oppressive perspectives and practices that dehumanize and criminalize Black youth and their communities.

A Performance-Centered Approach

> Theatre allows us to converse with our souls – to passionately pursue and discover ways of living with ourselves and others. We are all artists, and theatre is a language. We have no better way to work together, to learn about each other, to heal, and to grow (Rohd, 1998, p. xix).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project relies on theories of performance, performance-centered writing methodologies, performative writing, and performance as a means of antiracist intervention and advocacy for, with, and by Black youth and their caregivers. Sociologist Philip Manning (2003) has observed a narrative turn in sociological research that began in the 1980's whereby research is increasingly interpreted and reported with an expanding focus on matters of "voice, autoethnography, cultural studies, narrative, and quasi-poetic work" (p. 1038). The *Pipelines to Pathways* project is an example of this approach.

It seeks to produce creative embodied performances of self-expression; examine psycho-social, historical, political, and discursive phenomena through performance; and mobilizing performative experiences to call people to action toward antiracism in the world. How can performance do all of this? In short, a performance-centered approach has the capacity to engaging the intellectual, experiential, spatial, and temporal excesses with which the social challenges of this world (like the School to Prison Pipeline) present us.

Such an ambitious objective requires a dauntingly comprehensive understanding of the factors at play. The challenge of apprehending, addressing, and advocating with, and for, Black youth against their dehumanization and criminalization simultaneously exceeds the parameters and scopes of objective statistical measurement and of subjective individual experience (Dei, et al., 1997, Rios, 2010, 2017). A deeper understanding of the impact that the School to Prison Pipeline has in the lives and minds of Black youth lies hidden in the liminal space marked by intellectual and experiential excesses. While attempting to observe, examine, or measure the phenomenon intellectually, it is impossible not to impact, mask, or at least blur some of the phenomenological elements at play in the lived experiences of Black youth and their caregivers. Conversely, focusing on the lived experiences alone tends to develop in the researcher a deleterious myopia that can skew and even obfuscate a comprehensive view of the structural and systemic issues at hand. Add to these excesses the fact that publics and individuals are perpetually limited by space and time. Our desire to visit and explore the worlds of which we speak exceeds our capacity to actually go there and spend the time required to engage others (Peters, 1999).

A performance-centered approach offers uniquely flexible, reflexive[26], and expressive modes of engaging these excesses of intellect, experience, space, and time. I contend that performance-centered scholarship is uniquely adept at critically engaging this kind of excess, in the ways that it merges embodied and textual knowledges, as well as empirical and imagined possibilities as they coalesce and express themselves through, and to, the bodies of performers and audience members. The performance stage becomes a fluid, yet very real space, where time is subjective, experience can be played and re-played, and issues can be pondered, debated, and presented anew.

As Performance Studies Scholar, Richard Schechner (2013) observes, "Performance isn't 'in' anything, but 'between'." Transcending fixed bodies of knowledge such as archives, texts, and post-positivist experimental protocols, performance abides in the realm of the "inter" – the liminal (p. 30). In the context of his study of tribal cultures, Victor Turner (1982) refers to the luminal as "a free and experimental region of culture, a region where not only new elements but also new combinatory rules may be introduced" in a ludic (or free and playful) fashion (p. 30). Performance is not a fixed object of study, but a happening that "takes place in action, interaction, and relation" and demands an active witness to glean and engage with the knowledge that unfolds in the happening (Schechner, 2013, p. 30). Dwight Conquergood (2013) states:

> Performance studies brings this rare hybridity into the academy, a commingling of analytical and artistic ways of knowing that unsettles the institutional organization of knowledge and disciplines. The constitutive liminality of performance studies lies in its capacity to bridge segregated and differently valued knowledges, drawing together legitimated as well as subjugated modes of inquiry (pp. 151-152).

Thus, the performance process operates means of playfully reimagining the narrative.

[26] I define "reflexivity" as "the process of reflecting critically on the self as researcher." It is a "critical subjectivity" that entails "a conscious experiencing of the self as both inquirer and respondent, as teacher and learner, as the one coming to know the self within the process of research itself" (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 124)

Schechner (2013) argues that all performances are "restored behaviors" or "twice-behaved behaviors" – that is, they are re-hashings, rehearsals, repetitions of behavior that has already been practiced, expressed and/or executed in the past (p. 28). Though, it is humanly impossible to track the absolute ontological roots of any behavior, the act of exploring all behaviors "as" performance helps scholars to unwrap, unearth, and understand the deeply rooted truths about ourselves and our world that often exceed the capacity of positivist inquiry.

Performance Studies Scholar Diana Taylor (2016) notes, "Placing an event/image outside of its familiar context or frame can be, in itself, an act of intervention" and performance (p. 18). To this end, the *Pipelines to Pathways* project is a performance-centered intervention that depends upon reframing images and voices of those community members most affected by the criminalization and marginalization of Black youth. This performative reframing can publicly and personally rupture and resist the extant discursive frames that tend to essentialize, minimize, or otherwise trivialize their lived experiences. In pursuit of this endeavor, my collaborators and I have engaged the performance process as a means of procuring and presenting our creative expressions of self and society. To this end we privilege the creatively and performatively expressed perspectives of marginalized Black youth, their caregivers, and their community members as vital sources of valid expert knowledge on the subject.

A performance-centered approach offers us the ability to simultaneously intervene in and examine the systemic racialized dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth in America. On one hand, the *Pipelines to Pathways* project employs performance as "an episteme, a way of knowing, not simply an object of analysis" (Taylor, 2004, p. xvi). On the other, this project mobilizes performance as "both a method and a manifestation of ethics and advocacy" (Madison, 2012, p. 14). Like Della Pollock (2005), I privilege performance as "both an analytic and a

practice" that has the capacity to "identify systemic problems" (like the School to Prison Pipeline) and "introduce alternative voices" (like the opinions, positionalities and perspectives of Black youth) (p. 1).

By engaging and magnifying these voices, performance is able to "[transmit] memories, [make] political claims, and [manifest] a group's sense of identity" (Taylor, 2003, p. xvii). This work is indeed personal and political. For, as performance studies scholar Dwight Conquergood (2013) so astutely observes, performance has the unique capacity "to induce self-knowledge, self-awareness, plurality, reflexivity that makes it political" (p. 19). Through the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, we engage performance as a means of voicing our actual and aspirational understandings of self, struggles, and solutions.

In addition to serving as a vehicle for naming and examining the selves and the systemic racialized dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth, performance also serves as what Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett describes as a "generator of theory" (Zerbib, 2014). In other words, it guides my collaborators and me on a generative journey from naming and claiming our own identities and challenges toward the powerful act of theoretically and narratively framing those identities and challenges for ourselves and others. The end of all of this work is to establish a critical consciousness in all participants that drives us toward social transformation.

The route to social transformation is through the transformation of the hearts and minds of performers and audience members. Ultimately, for us, performance serves us as a "means of communication and as a subversive tactic to win hearts and minds in their efforts toward a more humane and democratic society" (Madison, 2010, p. 1). My collaborators and I engage in a critical dialogic performance process as a means of building solidarity and a base for political activism among performers and audience members. In other words, through performance, we are

able to call each other and our audience members into the struggle for social transformation. At the same time, performance operates as a powerful "ubiquitous force in our social and discursive universe" that begins to transform the hearts, minds, and souls of its participants in its very *doing* (Madison, 2012, p. 166). My collaborators and I design and facilitate public performances for community members and leaders that "[create] a community of witnesses by and through performance" that will call the witnesses to action toward antiracist solutions (Taylor, 2003, p. 211). It is this embodied connection of diverse peoples in a performance space that translates to embodied action toward equity and justice beyond the performances and publications.

As such, performance, as practiced through the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, wields the unique capacity to simultaneously generate a transformative trinity that Performance Studies Scholar Dwight Conquergood (2002) refers to as *artistry* (aesthetic work and experience), *analysis* (a rigorous approach to learning and developing knowledge), and *activism* (real world impact that changes the world for the better)[27]. Of course, *activism* implies some *action* beyond the publication of study results or the production of a play. The work of this research project is committed to actively seeking solutions to challenges that confront Black youth and their communities.

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project is a performance-centered examination and exploration of diverse modes by which seeking, staging, and sharing our own unique stories can expand and enrich the stories of larger audiences, while advocating for, and moving toward, social equity. To clarify, I have sought to utilize a unique conceptualization of the term *performance* (and its adjective *performative*) here. In this work, I use the term performance to refer, at the most basic level, to embodied expression devised, dramatized, and staged or framed

[27] Conquergood (2002) often ties the concepts of artistry, analysis, and activism together with alliterative triads. His three I's are *imagination, inquiry,* and *intervention.* His triad of C's is *creativity, critique* and *citizenship.*

for public witness (i.e. "performed," in the aesthetic sense). Performance Studies Scholar Renée Alexander Craft's (2015) more constative definition of *performance* is appropriate here – "a framed event, set aside in space and time, with its own script, costuming, props, and movement vocabulary" (p. 2). I also espouse Communication and Rhetorical Studies Scholar Kathleen Glenister Roberts' (2004) more functional definition of performance as that which "happens when someone draws upon their knowledge to make it into action, to transform tradition into communication so that it might be shared" (p. 135).

I use the term *performative* as a direct adjective of the noun performance (as explicated above), while acknowledging and playing with the richness and nuance that this word his historically performed in the context of communication and performance theory. Rather than merely an utterance that *does* something in the world, as J.L. Austin (1962) conceptualizes the word "performative," or as a means of expressing, reifying, and/or resisting normative social roles and expectations as Judith Butler (1993) conceptualizes it, I have built upon both of these understandings to construct a uniquely composite definition. I add to these conceptualizations of the performative a belief that performance is marked by embodied expression that indeed has the capacity to *do* things in the world by reflecting, engaging, and even resisting social norms.

When I describe my approach as performative, I particularly mean that it employs Performance Studies Scholar Dwight Conquergood's commitment to the "three-tiered evolution of performance" from *mimesis,* to *poiesis,* to *kinesis* (Conquergood, 1998; Madison, 2012, p 188). My performative process begins with *mimesis* - a mimicking or reflection of lived experience through embodied expression based upon focused study and analysis. In turn, a deeply reflexive and critical application of *mimesis* tends toward *poiesis* - an aesthetic doing and a becoming that impacts both performer and audience members emotionally and intellectually,

charging them to critically contend with their own respective mindsets, standpoints and positionalities. This performative approach aims toward *kinesis* - real, embodied action within the performance space and beyond, that addresses the situation at hand and moves toward more equitable and inclusive social understandings and outcomes (Conqergood, 1998).

My use of the term performative also bears the burden of Cultural Studies theorist Homi Bhabha's idealized conceptualization of a performative as that which describes "action that incessantly insinuates, interrupts, interrogates, and antagonizes powerful master discourses" (Bhabha, 1994, p. 32). In this sense, the performative reframing and reclaiming narrative that *Pipelines to Pathways* accomplishes stands in the tradition of the transformative performance work created and performed by critical performance scholars and practitioners like Bertolt Brecht, Augusto Boal, June Jordan, Meade Palidofsky, Mitchell Capel[28], and Mike Wiley[29].

My performance-centered work is strongly inspired by nationally acclaimed North Carolina actor, playwright, and educator Mike Wiley who conducts dialogic performances of ethnography and docudrama in classrooms, theaters, and other public forums around the nation. Having participated with Wiley's work both as a performer and an audience member, I can say that I emulate his efforts to performatively turn "audience members into students who learn that they indeed belong in the struggle for truth, human justice, and the reconciliation of this nation's sordid past and unsettled present" (Kelly, 2019 p. 302). This project focuses this intent upon the School to Prison Pipeline and the forces of racialized dehumanization criminalization that feed on what Cultural Theorist Stuart Hall (2002) would call its roots and forge its routes.

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[28] Though not cited in the References section of this document, Mitchell "Grandaddy Junebug" Capel has been my mentor and model in the tradition of African and African American storytelling since we met in 2003.

[29] For a comprehensive examination of Mike Wiley's work in critical performance, documentary theater, and performed autoethnography see S. Kelly's article, "Mike Wiley: A Multi-faceted Artist on a Mission for Social Change, published in *The Routledge Companion to African American Theatre and Performance* (2019).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project seeks to articulate and analyze the communicative processes by which co-learners, performers, and audience members engage in deeper dialogic critical understandings of ourselves and others, and the racialized society within which we live. It evinces Bell's (2010) argument that "the arts play an important role in building a community where risks can be taken and shared, and new norms established for acting against racism" (p. 110). Grounded in what Dwight Conquergood (2013) refers to as "dialogic performance" which is based upon a "performative stance" fueled by "energy, imagination, and courage," this work "struggles to bring together different voices, world views, value systems, and beliefs so that they can have a conversation with one another" (p. 75, 77). Like Conquergood, I propose that dialogic performance is "the means as much as the end of honest intercultural understanding" (p. 77). By performatively reframing who we are, we are able to claim whom we can be, thereby reconstructing a more equitable present and hopeful future for ourselves (Ladson-Billings, 1998).

My use of the term dialogic is also based upon David Bohm's (1994) definition of dialogue as an open, empathetic, collective, coherent, iterative, and reflexive sharing of unique perspectives, ideas, and ideals between participants that comprises a "*stream of meaning* flowing among and through us and between us" (p. 7). The kind of dialogue that *Pipelines to Pathways* pursues is what Lisa Schirch and David Campt (2007) conceptualize in their work on "dialogue for difficult subjects" as an open and continuous mutual learning process that "aims to build relationships between people as they address a common concern" (p. 6). It is through the episteme of critical dialogic performance and performance-making that I seek to facilitate intrapersonal and interpersonal dialogue that can reframe and reclaim a positive, dignified, and agential sense of self for, and with, Black youth, their caregivers and their larger communities.

This project presents public and small group performance as a means to express, examine, and empower the perspectives and lived experiences of Black youth and their caregivers. It also seeks to augment the existing body of research on the subject of Black youth dehumanization and criminalization with creative and embodied expressions of those perspectives and experiences. Through the performance process, I examine and explore the potentially generative relationship between Eric King Watts (2001) and bell hooks' (2015) respective conceptualizations of *voice,* as well as Madison's (2010) notion of *response-ability* (as derived from Kelley Oliver's 2001 conceptualization of ethical, loving witness).

I utilize bell hooks' (2015) term "coming to voice" as a means of capturing the process by which Black youth and their caregivers search out, confront, and choose to share their own perspectives and positionalities in personal and public spheres. hooks (2015) articulates this process as such:

> Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of 'talking back,' that is no mere gesture of empty words, which is the expression of our movement from object to subject-the liberated voice (p. 9).

Thus, I use the term coming to voice as a means of naming the process by which Black youth and their caregivers intentionally engage in the act self-production that empowers us to personally claim and narratively frame our positive, dignified, agential selves. Ultimately, I argue that our voices can serve as an effective vehicle of internal and external resistance against our dehumanization and criminalization. For, voice has the power to push against the School to Prison Pipeline's pulls and to pull against its pushes.

I understand this "voice" to be an emergent phenomenon that Eric K. Watts (2012) defines as the "sound of affect... the most essential quality of being human" (p. 16). Voice cannot

exist without a witness who is willing to hear. In other words, in order for voice to exist there must exist some *other* with the power to endow voice to the utterer by their very attention to the utterance. Thus, Watts (2001) posits a notion of voice "that is constitutive of the public acknowledgement of the ethical and emotional dimensions of public discourse" (p. 179). He argues that "'voice' is the enunciation and the acknowledgement of the obligations and anxieties of living in community with others" (p. 180). D. Soyini Madison (2018) defines voice as "the embodiment of a material self, a full presence that is in and of a particular world" (p. xxi). These notions of *voice* have simultaneously ethical and material implications for the performing/expressing/voicing subject and her witness(es).

Coming to Voice through Performance

This process of performance-making-and-presenting seeks to empower subaltern storytellers to "come to voice," in the words of bell hooks (2015). She explains how the process of publicly voicing her own personal reflections and experiences facilitated a "coming together of the idea, the theory, and the shared personal experience that was the moment when the abstract became concrete, tangible, something people could hold and carry away with them" (p. 3). It is through this powerful process of publicly "talking back" that "the oppressed work to expose the false reality – to reclaim and recover ourselves" (p. 3). She argues that for people from marginalized groups coming to voice "is not solely an expression of creative power; it is an act of resistance, a political gesture that challenges politics of domination that would render us nameless and voiceless" (p. 8). Thus, the act of coming to voice is all at once expressive, libratory, and resistant.

This coming to voice is a public declaration of our positive, dignified, agential selves that is every person's birthright. By boldly expressing themselves the positive, dignified, agential

selves of each performer reveal the invaluably informative and potentially transformative knowledge and perspective that already exist in their body and mind. Publically sharing our voices allows us to engage what bell hooks (2015) calls:

> The struggle to end domination, the individual struggle to resist colonization, to move from object to subject, is expressed in the effort to establish the liberatory voice- that way of speaking that is no longer determined by one's status as object – as oppressed being. That way of speaking is characterized by opposition, by resistance. It demands that paradigms shift- that we learn to talk – to listen – to hear in a new way (p. 15).

My research examines how the performance-making-and-presenting process facilitates the lifting, voicing, listening to, and analysis of these knowledges and perspectives, while empowering the performer and audience members to more critically and effectively address the root issues at hand.

Response-Ability and Responsibility through Witnessing

Madison (2010, 2012) argues that the public performance and witnessing of *voice* facilitates a sense of *response-ability* among the participants – that is a reflexive moment wherein participants consciously acknowledge and engage their moral obligation and ability to respond to the new understanding that they have gained about themselves and others from the performance. The witnessed and the witness own their "obligation not only to respond but also to respond in a way that opens up rather than closes off the possibility of response by others" (Oliver, 2001, p. 18). Madison (2010) observes: "Stage performance becomes a dynamic space where response-ability, advocacy, and ethics are heightened and ultimately culminate. The fieldwork data *travels* to the public stage with the hope that the performance will invoke a response (ability) among a group of spectators" (p. 12). To this end the *Pipelines to Pathways* project creates performances in small workshop settings and stages them in larger public settings with the goal of evoking voice and response-ability among all participants. The result is public

performance that expresses our voices, facilitates response-ability, and calls participants to wield a collective responsibility toward antiracism.

I have found that voice and response-ability are always dynamically at play with and within the participants of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project. They operate as a continuously generative dialectic when I (a Black artist, scholar, teacher and parent of Black youth) work with marginalized Black youth to express our lived experiences - as I do in The *My Life Matters* PAR project. I find myself reaching new understandings and modalities of my own sense of voice and response-ability while I challenge and empower the students to grapple with theirs.

Activating Voice, Response-Ability, and Responsibility through the Performance Process

These experiences have inspired me to write and perform *The Talk* - a one-person performed autoethnography piece that grapples with the pressures and burdens that the caregivers of Black youth experience as we endeavor to raise our children to survive and thrive in a racialized America. *The Talk*, combines elements of autobiography, poetry, oral history, theatrical dramatization, mediated audio/visual material, and performed autoethnography to analyze the current state of racial affairs in the U.S., and how these affairs collide, penetrate, intercept, and sometimes coalesce with the process of identity formation and transfer for Black youth. All the while, I invite audience members to struggle with me to answer one crucial question: "How do you explain to a seven-year-old his all-encompassing Blackness?"

Ultimately, all of the performances produced by the *Pipelines to Pathways* project seek to humanize unique aspects of Black American experience. They also seek to challenge audience members and performers to confront the tensions that perpetuate existing racial hierarchies, inequities, and miscommunications. Through these routes, performance emerges as a powerful way of calling in performers and audience members to engage their voices and response-abilities

in the service of antiracism. The hope is that performance can empower the darker brothers and sisters of this land - whose ancestors were uprooted from their African homes - to extend new roots into the fertile soil of America's imaginary, reclaiming and reframing a positive, dignified, and agential sense of self for, and with their peers, caregivers, and communities.

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project stands in the tradition of the transformative performance work created and performed by performance scholars like Bertolt Brecht and Augusto Boal. Brecht's (1957) *epic theatre* refers to public performance that incites critical consciousness by "teach[ing] the spectator a quite definite practical attitude, aimed toward changing the world" that begins with placing the spectator into a more active and critical role than is typical of Western theater (p. 57). Brecht's epic theatre engages the spectator in a manner that challenges and invites her to response-ability. Brecht used screens and projected titles accompanied by "epic" acting in order to confront the spectator with real life representations of the bourgeois reality in which they lived[30]. It portends a change in the concept of the orthodox dramatist theatre that this epic theatre should enact through a process of *literarization* – that is the clear display and articulation of existing social conditions in such a manner that spectators are called to critical consciousness, and motivated to act toward social change that will take place beyond the theatre, and in other social institutions.

While Brecht insists upon engaging audiences through modes of performance that incite critical consciousness, Boal's *Poetics of the Oppressed* (or *Theatre of the Oppressed)* approach to socially transformative theater calls the performer and audience to immediate dialogue and

[30] Brecht's essay "The Literarization of the Theatre" in *Brecht on Theatre*, articulates the tactics that he employed to achieve an "epic" "literarization through performance. *The Threepenny Opera*[1] (*Die Dreigroschenoper*) is a "play with music" by Bertolt Brecht, adapted from German dramatist Elisabeth Hauptmann's translation of John Gay's 18th-century English ballad opera, *The Beggar's Opera*, with music by Kurt Weill and insertion ballads by François Villon and Rudyard Kipling. The work offers a Socialist critique of the capitalist world. It opened on 31 August 1928 at Berlin's Theater in Schiffbauerdamm.

action within the performance space - “all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society [to] arrive at the poetics of the oppressed, the conquest of the means of theatrical production” (p. x). In this way Boal expands Brecht’s notion of performance as a tool and expression for social change by expanding the field of players and broadening the space in which those players act and interact (Cohen-Cruz, 2010). This expansion and sometimes coalescence of the roles of performer/actor and witness/spectator creates a particularly dynamic and fertile possibility for critical dialogue and interaction.

Boal’s approach to space is also unconventional, expansive and liberating. Theater scholar Peter Book (1996) uses the term *empty space* to reconceptualize the way that we understand theater itself. Brook argues that, beyond a structure or framed area where aesthetic performances are assigned to take place, a theater space itself is really "any space in which theatre takes place" (p. 9). He argues that any empty space becomes a theater when it is entered, or engaged by a person who is being watched. For, it is the unassuming, yet acutely self conscious, embodiment of theatrical performance that renders it powerfully engaging and alive. According to Brook, in this fluid liminal space, we call a “stage,” “the vehicle of drama is flesh and blood and here completely different laws are at work” (p. 17). Boal (1995) calls this space the “therapeutic stage” and the performances that occur there as “rehearsal for revolution.” This is the space necessary for the facilitation of the kind of transformative and unifying dialogue that David Bohm (1990) calls for. He says that this dialogue ideally happens in "empty place, where we can let anything be talked about" free from the fetters of oppression and hierarchy (p. 49).

Boal (1995) argues that performance can turn this space into transformative space when we conceptualize it as bi-dimensional. The *affective dimension* and the *oneiric dimension.* He argues that in the mind of the spect-actor (a combination of spectator and actor that is the result

of melding the two roles via dialogue and interaction between performers and audience members during the performance) memory and imagination play powerful roles. The affective dimension of theatrical performance empowers the performer to invest their emotions and memories into the characters and storyline being played out. The oneiric dimension empowers the spect-actor to commit to the "as if" and the "what if" all at once. In this dimension "the dreamer does not observe; here she penetrates into her own projection, she passes through the looking-glass; everything merges and mixes together, anything is possible" (p. 22). By activating both dimensions, Boal argues that Theatre of the Oppressed "is a mirror which can penetrate to modify our image!" (p. 29). Performance Studies Scholar Jan Cohen-Cruz (2010) declares that "Boal's premise for activating the specta(c)tor represents a meeting of politics and aesthetics: people with the least amount of power, joined together, may find solutions that one could neither imagine nor, in most cases, carry out alone" (p. 62). A performance-centered approach that honors and activates this dichotomous approach to space can help us to conceptualize the reclaiming and reframing of memories and imagined possibilities all at once.

As a practice, embodied performance has the potential to empower performers to express their own knowledge while honoring what communication scholar John Durham Peters (1999) refers to as the "holiness" of embodied presence in the communication process. By performing live embodied public presentations of personal and collective narratives that examine the trauma and triumphs experienced by the marginalized, the practice of embodied performance invites audience members and performers to experience Boal's therapeutic stage together. This is a social space generated by the acts of live performance and performance witnessing where performers and audience members are all encouraged to imagine new possibilities together.

This critical performance-centered approach may produce "reflective, invited, practical knowledge that helps people to name, and consequently, to change their world" (Conrad et al., 2015, p. 26). I argue that matching the embodied performances of lived experiences and perspectives with public audiences generates “therapeutic stage” experiences that facilitate a critical self-production for performers and audience members. This critical self-production can lead to critical consciousness, conversations, and courses of action that counter the forces of marginalization and oppression.

Creative, public, embodied performance has the unique capacity to recognize and name the sundry seemingly divergent or incongruous elements at play in oppression, and to allow them to converse and coalesce in the bodies of the performers (if only for a moment). In *The Art of Interpretation* Wallace Bacon (1947) uses the term *tensiveness* to refer to the process by which oppositional forces “move rhythmically between contrary pulls” both within the performer, within the text that the performer is to interpret, and between the performer and the text (p. 41). Conceptually, this tensiveness can be extended to the space between the performer and the witness (cf. Boal’s “spect-actor”). Bacon argues that “these oppositions create awareness in us if we attend to them without distraction” (p. 42). He states that the performance (or live embodied interpretation) of poetry requires that the performer find ”congruence” between the multiple internal and external tensions that comprise the tensiveness at hand in seeking to find and express the meaning of the text for an audience. This congruence, when achieved is referred to as *coalescence* - a state of shared essence where, through the process and act of making and doing embodied performance the text, performer, and their respective tensions are mutually embodied. In this way, embodied performance empowers the performer to express, examine, and interpret the excess that is presented by tensiveness. Thus, a performative approach presents new

possibilities for analyzing and addressing both the pushes and the pulls of the School to Prison Pipeline.

Clinical psychologist, Dr. Burnett-Zeigler (2019) recently noted the grossly disproportionate rates of suicide between Black and White male youth in the U.S. She suspects that "Black youths too often receive the messages that their lives are not valued and that they are less deserving of support, nurturing and protection than their peers of other backgrounds. Compared with white kids, they receive more detentions, suspensions and expulsions in school, have higher rates of arrests and incarceration, and fewer options for high-quality education and stable employment." She argues, "Many black youths are often fighting for their lives in a system actively working against them, which can be exhausting and feel like a pointless, uphill battle." Burnett-Zeigler (2019) observes that, perhaps the most important way to address the increasing rates of Black youth suicide is "to encourage young people to express negative thoughts and emotions without shame or fear of judgment." Self-expression to an affirming, loving witness is a crucial part of the pathway to healthy self-production.

The cornerstone for any intervention aimed at motivating people to activate their agency toward personal and structural transformation – thus reclaiming their own right to self-production - is self-efficacy. As such, I view self-efficacy as the cornerstone of agency. Having emerged as a popular term among social cognitive theorists like Albert Bandura in the 1990's, self-efficacy is defined as one's faith that their intentional pursuit of specific endeavors can and will succeed. Self-efficacy has been positively correlated with healthy life choices, academic success, goal attainment, and negatively correlated with depression, anxiety, and delinquency among adolescents and children (Bandura, 2004; Carroll et al., 2009; Jonson-Reid, et al., 2005; Muris, 2001, 2002; Nebbitt, 2009; Primack & Primack, 200). Self-efficacy has emerged in the

fields of cognitive social behavior as the fulcrum for self-production which can lead to individual and structural change.

Research has shown that telling our stories publicly can generate a powerful sense of positive self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-actualization, especially among marginalized youth (Cohen & Palidofsky, 2016; Conrad, 2013; Conrad et al, 2015; Madison, 2010; Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012). Witnessing someone's story has the potential to make us pause to compassionately consider their point of view. Thus, storytelling and witnessing emerge as powerful modes of dialoguing with, and loving, others.

Overview of Methodology

> [T]he object of dialogic action is to make it possible for the oppressed […] to opt to transform an unjust reality (Freire, 1970, p. 174).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project examines the performative, pedagogical, and communicative processes that rise to play in the contexts of my collaboration with a youth-intervention organization, marginalized Black youth, performance artists, peers, parents, my progeny, and diverse publics. Through the performance process, we have expressed, embodied, and examined the personal and collective[31] stories that have grown from our perspectives on, and experiences with, America's chronic dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth. I examine the extent to which this process creates spaces where the positionalities and perspectives of Black youth and their caregivers can be examined, voiced, affirmed, and witnessed. I mark how this process generates intentional practices for Black youth and their community members that allow us to examine, voice, and reframe our persons, perspectives, and

[31] Critical pedagogy scholar and youth intervention professional Shawn Ginwright (2010) uses terms like *collective trauma, collective healing,* and *collective hope* to articulate the means by which whole communities and people groups can be oppressed or liberated through and against their collective experiences of oppression, resistance, liberation (or the possibilities there of). I use "collective stories" or "collective narratives" to articulate those stories that are generated from and through certain collective experiences of dehumanization and criminalization.

positionalities. I also analyze the capacity that this process has to empower its participants to reclaim the inherent dignity and agency of Black youth. In my execution of the process, analysis of the data, and articulation of our findings, I apply a form of performance-centered poetic inquiry. This performative poetic inquiry has facilitated a more textured, nuanced, enlivened portrayal and understanding of Black youth identities and how they are/can be performatively framed/reframed and claimed/reclaimed as positive, dignified, and agential.

Performative Poetic Inquiry

I am using Sandra Faulkner's (2017) definition of poetic inquiry as "the use of poetry crafted from research endeavors, either before a project analysis, as a project analysis, and/or poetry that is part of or that constitutes an entire research project" (p. 210). If performance has the capacity to engage, handle, and process the excesses that we encounter in research; poetic inquiry lends the researcher an added capacity to "meld the scientific and the emotive, understand and comment on [lived experiences], and to embrace uncertainty" (Faulkner, 2020, p. 14). Take, for example, the performed oral history work of Anna Deavere Smith. She observes that people speak in "organic poems" (Smith, 2005). To capture the essence of her interlocutors and to step into the poetry of their lives, she practices poetic transcription of their recorded interviews. In other words, the *Pipelines to Pathways* project positions a performance-centered approach to poetry "as/in/for" scholarly inquiry and critical analysis (Faulkner, 2017, p. 210). In addition to poetic transcription, this project also presents the poetry produced by collaborators and found in literature as expert accounts and data for analysis.

The data collected is based upon co-performative witnessing[32] surveys, a performative repertoire (including poetry, scripts, and photographs produced by, and with, my collaborators) and observations from live performances, focus groups (workshops), personal memories, surveys, and post-performance talk-backs[33]. I practiced direct and poetic transcription of focus group sessions, post-performance talk-backs, and field notes. You will find excerpts from both throughout this dissertation.

To this data, I apply a theoretical framework based upon critical race theory, performance theory, and the communication theory of identity. I evaluate the intellectual and aesthetic routes through which this performative poetic inquiry addresses my research questions using Sandra Faulkner's (2016) *Ars Poetica.* To address the challenges presented by the patently aesthetic, profoundly evocative, and oftentimes playful process of poetry writing, Faulkner (2009) proposes that practitioners of poetic inquiry measure the impact, relevance, and efficacy of their praxis using her ars poetica approach. Ars Poetica presents a rubric of poetic criteria based upon elements of *artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery/surprise, conditionality, narrative truth,* and *transformation*. Ultimately, I developed a praxis of performative poetic inquiry that examines the capacity of the performance process to lift our stories, create spaces for sharing and witnessing our stories, generate intentional practices for performance-centered critical analysis of our stories, and empower us to mobilize these stories toward antiracist

[32] Dwight Conquergood (2013) uses this term to expand on anthropologist Victor Turner's call to critical ethnographers to perceive and place themselves as "co-performers" in the research field. He notes, "The power dynamic of the research situation changes when the ethnographer moves from the gaze of the distanced and the detached observer to the intimate involvement and engagement of 'coactivity' or co-performance with his historically situated, named, 'unique individuals' (p. 93). Co-performative witnessing is a reflexive witnessing of self and other from within a mutually shared experience of meaning making and performance.

[33] The post-performance talk-back is a common feature of contemporary theater where performers return to the stage after the performance to field questions and appraisals from the audience. From my experience, the talk-back generally functions as a dialogic extension of the applause and usually focuses on the aesthetic elements of the performance.

attitudes and actions. In this way, poetry and performance merge and emerge as interwoven epistemes.

Critical Performance and Performed Ethnography

This project also weaves the practice of critical ethnography into the poetry and performance that it generates. When I refer to *ethnography,* I mean the practice whereby scholars experience first-hand the "lives and stories of real people" and communities, then analytically and reflexively record those experiences and observations for the purpose of later sharing those lives and stories with larger audiences (Madison, 2010, p. 4). In this way, ethnography functions as both "a method of social science research" and "a genre of social science text" (Conquergood, 1991, p. 179). As Education Scholar Dr. George J. Sefa Dei (2007) and his team learned from their research with Black students in Canada, I have found that "ethnographic research gives a stronger voice to the collective struggles of our subjects, and brings to the fore the intersections of many complex issues" such as racism, sexism, poverty, and the complicated dynamics of intergenerational, interracial, and intercultural communication (p. 33).

This project also includes the practice of what D. Soyini Madison (2012) calls *critical ethnography* - that which "enunciate[s] and clarif[ies] the obscurities of injustices and then […] thoughtfully offer[s] just alternatives…" (p. 109). She champions a *critical ethnography* that not only seeks to improve the conditions of the subjects being studied, but also seeks to unearth and lift what Lee Ann Bell (2010) refers to as concealed stories. These are the stories that, when told, counter and uncover the invisible operations of power and control that bolster and embolden existing hegemonic structures.

This project applies critical ethnography to the performance process; thus transforming it to critical performance ethnography. This performance-centered method of ethnography may

include the experiencing, exploring, and explicating of existing cultural performances like poetry workshops, theatrical performances, festivals, rituals, etc. (ethnography *of* performance) (Conquergood, 1989, 1991, 2002, 2013; Alexander Craft, 2015). Conquergood (1989) observes that performance ethnographers "[take] performance as both the subject and method of their research" (p. 82). What we write, say, and do performatively, forms a repertoire of cultural performances that are replete with rich insights into our own experiences, perspectives, and positionalities. These insights help us to critically examine and express our identities and the structures, systems, and situations that push, pull, and threaten them. I apply critical performance ethnography as a tool to glean these insights and to leverage them toward antiracist action and attitudes.

In the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance and book (APPENDIX B), for example, my collaborators and I use live performance, poetry, storytelling, and photography to examine the exogenic and endogenic forces that threaten our sense of self. We also examine how these forces form and inform our struggles and that pave pathways to our solutions. In turn, I critically examine the performative, pedagogical, and communicative elements at play in this performance-centered process. I practice performance ethnography (informed by critical race theory, the communication theory of identity, and theories of performance) to track how this process creates spaces for coming to voice and response-ability for Black youth; how it generates intentional practices for Black youth and their community members to examine, express, and reframe their lived experiences; and how it empowers its participants to reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth.

In contrast, I also use D. Soyini Madison's (2018) definition of perform*ed* ethnography: "w*hen performances in the field or performance ethnography is adapted for the stage or*

*communicated through modes of performance it becomes perform**ed** ethnography"* (p. xvii). The script that the *My Life Matters* collaborators and I wrote for the play *Our 'Ville* (APPENDIX A) is an example of this. We compiled our poetry, the insights we gained through workshops and focus groups, and our own memories of lived experiences to draft a full-length play that we intended to perform for larger communities. Our intent was to share this performed ethnography of our lives in *Our 'Ville* as a means of publicly presenting our antiracist analysis of the impacts that violence (especially racialized, gendered, and internalized violence) has had on our lives.

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project also includes an element of performed autoethnography. I use Tami Spry's (2011) definition of autoethnography as "a critical reflection upon one's experiences within specific social/cultural/political locations" (pp. 130, 131). Thus, perform*ed* autoethnography is a methodology for reflexively processing and expressing autobiographical research analysis through the acts of demonstrating, dialoguing about, and developing performances of self-expression. I accomplish this through the performed autoethnographical work entitled *The Talk.* I have performed *The Talk* for thousands of audience members as an effort to publicly dramatize and embody my own experiences, perspectives, and positionalities with regard to the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth.

Ultimately the *Pipelines to Pathways* project has produced critical performance ethnography, performed ethnography, and performed autoethnography during a three year process. Through this project, we have discovered and created performative spaces in which marginalized Black youth and their caregivers can share, analyze, and mobilize (toward change) organic expressions of our lived experiences. Within these spaces, we have generated and enacted intentional performance-centered practices that have facilitated the creation and public presentation of diverse modalities of cultural performance like theater, spoken word, music, rap,

written poetry, and photography. These practices have empowered us to mobilize the performance process as a route toward reclaiming the inherent dignity and agency of Black youth.

Participatory Action Research

Through a PAR model, which includes a "protocol where both participant and researcher (share) lived experiences and standpoints en route to a shared praxis," and a "continuous process of dialogic practice and reflection" (Parker, Oceguera, Sanchez, 2011, p. 226), this project works with a group of marginalized Black youth in an urban community to explore and develop a praxis of performance-centered story building and storytelling. Hereafter referred to as YPAR, youth PAR treats marginalized youths and their participating community members as collaborators, rather than subjects, whose interests, concerns, and insights drive the direction and outcomes of the research toward activism. Michelle Fine (1994) declares that "a move to activism occurs when research fractures the very ideologies that justify power inequities" (p. 24).

With the direct input of youth participants and their community members, this project mobilizes performance to create spaces wherein our voices are witnessed, paradigms are shifted, and perspectives are transformed. Through the YPAR approach, we collaborate to generate intentional practices that help us to examine, express, and reframe our lived experiences as local experts. Finally, the YPAR approach empowers individual and collective action that generates cross-cultural/racial/generational connections are advocates for the welfare of Black youth.

Critical Pedagogy

I define critical pedagogy as that praxis of pedagogy designed to develop in students and teachers a sense of mutual respect and critical consciousness about the diverse forms of social oppression that they experience, while motivating them toward struggle against that oppression.

Paulo Freire is often referred to as the father of *critical pedagogy*, a school of thought which Henry Giroux (2010) describes as "a way of thinking beyond the seemingly natural or inevitable state of things, about challenging 'common sense.'…a mode of intervention" (p. 1). Such intervention centers on the practice of continual dialogue, which Freire (1970) privileges as "an indispensable component of both learning and knowing" (p. 17). Freire's approach acknowledges an oppressive society's education system as one vestige of a larger oppressive system that may be transformed by the liberation of the oppressed subjects within the system.

Based upon Freire's model of the *Pedagogy of the Oppressed,* Augusto Boal's (1992) *Theatre of the Oppressed* model takes on this transformative approach to pedagogy while privileging "theatre as language" by which this transformation is articulated (p. 10). My approach incorporates the methodology of both scholars. *Pipelines to Pathways* is Freirean, in that it is centered on generating and facilitating critical dialogue with, by, and for Black youth around the issues that threaten their lives, agency, and dignity. I apply Boal's approach to performance-centered critical pedagogy by facilitating theatrical activities that challenge and empower students (collaborators) and teacher (primary investigator) to honor our bodies and embodied interaction as means of teaching, learning, and transforming self and society.

Limitations

The *My Life Matters* component of this project was constantly challenged by sporadic attendance and scheduling conflicts. These challenges were generally based upon limitations in transportation, time, energy, and other resources that tend to be delimited by poverty, trauma, fatigue, varying levels of emotional maturity, and other mitigating factors. This made it difficult, and, at times, impossible to work consistently with the same students or collaborators for the duration of the project or to adhere to strictly established research protocols. For example, my

collaborators and I designed the project to engage all participating youth with at least one workshop lasting 60 to 120 minutes each week, and the Photovoice model requires at least six consistent sessions of photography demonstration and analysis. These protocols demand consistent attendance, which was rarely possible for our participants. You will find that, due to these circumstances, my execution and reporting of these protocols, their corresponding data and results are necessarily fluid, flexible, and, at times fragmented.

Also, FAF's mission is to modify the behavior of marginalized youth by focusing on the endogenic forces that *pull* youth into the School to Prison Pipeline. Thus, my examination of the exogenic forces that push youth toward the School to Prison Pipeline may, at times, conflict with this approach. For example, my discussion of structural causes and systemic implications of the School to Prison Pipeline did not receive as much support from the FAF staff as my discussions of positive life choices, accountability, and resilience. At times, it appeared that my more comprehensive approach to the pushes and pulls of the School to Prison Pipeline countered, or complicated, the standard FAF approach. Furthermore, as I gathered data via surveys and focus group (workshop) observations, I had to reckon with the extent to which these practices might reify notions of intellectual hierarchy, normalization, and commodification of collaborators. Furthermore, I noticed a positive attribution bias in surveys. Survey respondants had just experienced the emotional high of performance and their survey responses often read as an extension of the applause. As a result survey responses very rarely included critical or negative reactions that could have sharpened the efficacy and ethical acumen of this project.

Performances were limited to the venues and host agencies that exhibited the capacity and unique desire for them. This generally included agencies and initiatives interested in racial equity and youth empowerment. Audiences consisted, by and large, of those community

members who were interested in these particular performances, performers, and/or the issues they address. We have had limited access to audiences that are resistant to critical conversations around racial equity and youth empowerment.

With regard to the performance and performed ethnography produced by this project, my focus is on the impact that the performances have on audience members of all demographic specifications. I measured this with post-performance surveys and talk-back sessions. Audience members may opt to indicate their age, race, and nationality on the survey. However, because the survey and these data are optional, I have not placed primacy on the demographics of audience members in my analysis. Also, due to IRB restrictions, I was only able to survey adults. Some minors did participate anonymously in post-performance talk-back sessions. One minor emailed me after a performance. Thus, I was only able to capture the perspectives and thoughts of minor audience members if they participate in the post-show talk-backs or contacted me directly.

Scope and Delimitations

The research and performance work for this project was conducted over the course of three years, from 2016 to 2019. The PAR component of this project was named the *My Life Matters* project by my collaborators and me. *My Life Matters* includes qualitative data and a performance repertoire generated from three consecutive summers in the field at Fayetteville Urban Ministry's Find-A-Friend youth program's six-week Summer Achievement Camp in Fayetteville, North Carolina. During these summers (2016-2018), I served as a volunteer artist in residence, conducing self-expression workshops that simultaneously functioned as focus groups where 75 youth between the ages of eight and 18 joined me in exploring and expressing our understandings of self and society through public performances and collaboratively writing a book of poetry and a theatrical script. While, I worked with several children between the ages of

eight and 11, for this project, I focused on adolescent (ages 12 to 18) participants only. I analyzed qualitative data generated by self-expression workshops, performances, post-performance surveys, and co-performative witnessing with 35 adolescent participants. I was also able to develop methods of performance-centered critical pedagogy in practice while conducting self-expression workshops, Photovoice[34] sessions, rehearsals, and public performances with the *My Life Matters* team. Together, we produced two works of performance ethnography, including one live performance and a poetry book entitled *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* (APPENDIX B), which includes the poetry that we wrote over the course of three summers and the photographs that we produced through the Photovoice process in 2017. This book is a spiral bound document that we distributed to collaborators and to local community members We also produced a work of performed ethnography in the form of a script for a full-length drama called *Our 'Ville* that we drafted and rehearsed in 2017.

The performed autoethnography portion of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project is based upon approximately two years of developing and enacting an autobiographical theatrical piece entitled *The Talk. The Talk* is an 80-minute one-person performance that brings to the public stage a combination of my research around the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth and my personal experiences as a parent, teacher, and mentor of Black youth. This performance piece includes original autobiographical prose and poetry as well as oral histories and texts from historical archives and literature. It also incorporates curate photography and music. I conducted 23 performances and post-performance talk-backs between March 2018 and February 2019 in Fayetteville, Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina, which

[34] The PAR method of Photovoice (also known as "Photo Novella") is a qualitative research method by which participants express their observations through critical analysis fused with original photography. (Castleden, Garvin, &Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008, Wang & Burris, 1994).

generated over 400 post-performance surveys. I conducted a critical performance ethnographic analysis of the process, performance, public discourse, and survey feedback.

While my collaborators and I have implemented a theoretically layered approach in the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, we have centered our focus on the play between critical race theory, theories of performance, and theories of communication. This project does not attempt to establish, or expound, expert knowledge on the psychological or emotional impacts or implications of identity formation for Black youth. The insights that my collaborators and I gained about ourselves, our struggles, and solutions to the forces that threaten our sense of positivity, dignity, and agency may be helpful for theorists in the fields of pedagogy, psychology, or psychiatry, but they are not clinically conclusive or therapeutic.

This project does propose some effective performance-centered approaches to pedagogy, interpersonal communication, and public dialogue. However, it does not offer a comprehensive method of performance-centered pedagogy, community building, counseling, or therapy, such as is evident in more comprehensive methods like the *Theatre of the Oppressed,* InterPlay[35], psychodrama and play therapy. The performance-centered pedagogical methods used here are strictly utilized in the service of seeking, examining, and sharing our individual and collective stories that reveal deeper insight into the impacts that racist structures of domination like the School to Prison Pipeline, and modes of communication like "The Talk," have on the identities and subjectivities of Black youth and their caregivers. *Pipelines to Pathways* surveys the dilemma of disparities between Black youth outcomes and White youth outcomes in both the education and criminal justice systems in an effort to name some of the roots and routes of the

[35] InterPlay is an embodied performance-centered approach to community building and activism, as well as social and personal change. Founded in 1989 by Dance Scholars Cynthia Winton-Henry and Phil Porter, InterPlay is a practice and philosophy that combines "dance, theater, music, comedy, improvisation, ritual, and spirit" to help participants to draw on "deep body wisdom" to grow, learn, heal, coach, and connect as individuals and communities (http://www.interplay.org/pdfs/InterPlayCoFounders.pdf)

historical dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth in America. However, this project does not offer an extensive examination of the American education or criminal justice systems. Finally, while the intent of this work is to stand as an act of performance-centered antiracist activism and to incite future antiracist activism, it does not include a comprehensive review of historical or modern antiracist movements.

Performing Positionality and Standpoint as a Researcher

My work with the youth at FAF began in 2001 when I became a volunteer mentor for marginalized Black boys. I served as an employee of FAF as the Mentor Program Coordinator from 2002 to 2004. Over the next 15 years, I went on to work as a youth pastor, youth intervention program director, and volunteer with youth-serving agencies in North Carolina and Texas. Today, as a member of the Fayetteville, North Carolina community, I have a profound personal vested interest in the work of empowering Black youth and my fellow community members to countenance and counter the School to Prison Pipeline. I have seen how structural processes of dehumanization and criminalization mesh with cultural and individual experiences of identity formation and social isolation to *push* and *pull* these kids toward trouble with school discipline and law enforcement. As an actor, writer, and director, since 1998, I have experienced the power of embodied performance to effectively inform and transform the perspectives, self-concept, self-efficacy, and self-production of performers and audience members alike.

In 2016, I was inspired by the story of 19-year-old Ravon Jordan's 2014 address of the Fayetteville City Council. In honor of his slain friend, Ravon stood before the power brokers of his city and spoke truth. I was moved by his courageous public assertion of his own positive self-concept, dignity, and agency. Challenged by his untimely death, I began to focus on ways to counter the rampant destruction of young Black lives and identities through public performance.

As a Black parent, godparent, uncle, youth pastor, and youth advocate, raising two Black sons in the American South, I am acutely aware of our Black identities. In this sense, I operate and think as an "insider" with regard to my interactions with Black youth. As a college-educated, able-bodied, heterosexual male who was raised in a relatively safe and functional middle class two-parent household, I understand that my life experiences and opportunities differ dramatically from those of the overwhelming majority of the youth with whom I work. Most of them are from single parent or non-traditional caregiver households that reside at or below the poverty line. The severe and chronic levels of violence, neglect, abuse, trauma, and general precarity that many of my collaborators have faced throughout their short lives are specters that I have never personally experienced, but that haunt them, and our interactions, daily. In this sense, I operate and think as an "outsider" among the Black youth with whom I work.

As the primary investigator for the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, I wear multiple hats and bear diverse, sometimes competing, responsibilities, and emergent response-abilities to myself, my family, my collaborators, my students, my colleagues, my audience members, and my community. Balancing the ethical, professional, artistic, and intellectual load of this ambitious multi-sited project has required constant reflection, reframing, and re-calibration of my perspectives, methods, and goals. At times I feel like I have the world in common with my collaborators, co-performers, and/or audience members. At other times, I find that my uniquely fluid position and standpoint can be confusing, frustrating, and even intimidating to myself and others. To grapple with these forces, I have learned to dynamically (but never perfectly) apply Victor Rios' tactic of "frame switching" between "subjective close-ups" and "wide-angle insights", between "outsider" and "insider;" between the boy I was and the man I am, between

father and son, teacher and student, performer and witness, researcher and researched (Vigil, 2017, p. vii).

As my mind and body have played and practiced within and without these multiple worlds and roles, they have continually produced new understandings and experiences of excess. I have experienced what Michelle Fine (1994) explains as the result of researchers listening closely to "each other and our informants" – "we are surprised, and our intellectual work is transformed. We keep each other honest to forces of difference, divergence, and contradiction" (p. 31). Throughout this project I have been beset with excess - excess data, excess emotion, excess experiences, and excess material – the processing of which exceeds mere descriptive text. Yet, like María Lugones (1987), I am compelled to write of my experiences in a manner that invites readers to travel with me to, and through, multiple worlds as playful, imaginative, inclusive, loving perceivers of each other. I invite the reader to join me as we grapple with the struggles that my collaborators and I have endured, in search of artistic expression, answers, and action.

To this end, I employ what Della Pollock (1998) refers to as "performative writing" as a means of artfully and playfully processing this excess while "expanding the realm of scholarly representation" (Pollock, p. 80). Pollock (1998) notes:

> Performative, evocative writing confounds normative distinctions between critical and creative (hard and soft, true and false, masculine and feminine), allying itself with logics of possibility rather than of validity or causality, the scientific principles underlying positivist distinctions between 'true' and 'false'. It shifts the operative social paradigm from the scientific 'what if' (what *then?*) to its performative counterpart, 'as if' (what *now?*), drawing the reader into a projected im/mediacy that never (mimetically) forgets its own genealogy in performance (p. 81).

I am compelled to write performatively and to persistently and playfully perform writing as I push and pull my/our stories to the fore, driven by my faith in the belief that we may all become

more dignified in the performing, witnessing, engaging, and re-engaging of these – our - stories. This performative style is as much a means for me to process the excess that overwhelms my sentience, soul, and scholarly scope, as it is a means for me to properly invite the reader into the worlds revealed by, and through, that excess.

Just as the performance scripts for *The Talk* and *Our 'Ville* stand as examples of scholarship in APPENDICES C & A, respectively, and in Chapter 4; - as *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* appears in APPENDIX B and Chapter 4 of this dissertation - I frame my work with this performative style throughout the dissertation. The reader will notice my natural poetic tendencies to use alliteration, rhyme, flow, metaphor, rhythm and repetition interspersed with more traditional scholarly language, syntax, and grammar. I claim that right as a performative writer. I also commit to a thoughtful and critical treatment of the material at hand that may help us all to build emergent frameworks that lend us a more clear view of the excess we seek to examine, explore, and express. Perhaps this writing style will render the reader occasionally de-centered and disoriented. My hope is that even in those moments, it will serve to orient the reader to the voices of Black youth and their advocates and into a response-ability that empowers us all to do the work of writing/performing/imagining/talking/turning pipelines into pathways.

Narrative Chapter Outline

> You tell a story
> To a specific audience
> For a specific reason
> In a specific format
> Always within the context
> Of your […] on-going story (O'Halloran, 2014, p. 24)

Chapter 2: *A Theoretical Framework for Reframing and Reclaiming Black Youth Identities* articulates and examines historical, socio-economic, and discursive the roots and routes

of the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth and the School to Prison Pipeline in America. In this chapter, I apply a theoretical framework, based on CRT, CTI, CIPCT, and performance studies to research in the fields of critical pedagogy, youth empowerment, poetic inquiry, and psychiatry. I articulate the ways in which these threads have interwoven to form the theoretical foundation of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project and praxis. The result is a critical performance-centered praxis of antiracist pedagogy, YPAR, ethnography and autoethnography.

Chapter 3: *Pathways to Reframing and Reclaiming Black Youth Identities*: *Methodology* introduces my methodology, articulating the particular critical modes of performance and perform*ed* ethnography/autoethnography, performance-centered PAR, and critical pedagogy I/we utilize to reframe and reclaim Black youth identity. I examine the process by which my collaborators and I procured, produced, and presented concealed, resistance, and transforming/emerging stories that countenance and counter extant stock stories that frame and claim to explain Black youth identities. I outline the specific ethnographic methods that I employ, including interviews, focus groups (workshops), surveys, field notes, coding, and co-performative witnessing. I explain the performance-centered method of critical pedagogy and autoethnography that I use in my efforts to empower marginalized Black youth, their caregivers, and communities to voice concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming stories that challenge the dominant narratives about Black youth. I then explain the means by which I collect, analyze, and secure the data harvested.

Chapter 4: *Case Study #1: My Life Matters* discusses in detail the results of three summers in the field conducting the *My Life Matters* PAR project with 35 adolescent participants in a youth serving agency's summer camp. In particular, I examine how performance-centered approaches to pedagogy and community engagement can lift the voices of Black youth and

engage them in the praxis of response-ability in ways that empower Black youth identities. I employ a critical race theory lens to Julia Moore's (2017, 2017a) critical interpersonal communication theory framework, Michael Hecht's (1993) communication theory of identity, and Erving Goffman's (1954) dramaturgy model of communication to analyze the racialized elements of identity, relationships, and power at play in this work. I also examine some of the poetry and photography that this PAR project produced (see APPENDIX B) as performance-centered analysis of self, society, and solutions from the positionalities and perspectives of Black youth.

Chapter 5: *Case Study #2: Talking The Talk* examines the impact that the writing, developing, performing, producing, and touring of my original authoethnographic performance *The Talk* has had on audience members and me. I present *The Talk* as a performance-centered approach to Critical Race Theory analysis. Through field notes, script review, and self-reflection, I trace the journey of *The Talk* from life experience, to critical research, to dramaturgy, and on to facilitating critical public dialogue in the form of post-performance talk-backs. I articulate this particular performance-centered approach to antiracist storytelling as activism using Lee Ann Bell's CRT-based *Storytelling for Social Justice* model. As a critical performance of self and society, *The Talk* also privileges Michael Hecht's (1993) communication theory of identity to examine the personal, enacted, relational, and communal layers (or frames) of identity at play for me in the process of receiving, giving, performing, and discussing "The Talk" as a genre of intracultural communication. I posit *The Talk* as a composite enactment of Diasporic Spidering, performative writing and poetic inquiry, narrative resistance, and public dialogue. I examine the extent to which *The Talk* experience was able to reframe and reclaim Black youth identities by

creating spaces for coming to voice and response-ability, generating intentional practices of coming to voice, and empowering participants to engage in antiracist dialogue and action.

Chapter 6: *Pipelines to Pathways: Conclusion and Recommendations* explicates my conclusions based upon a comprehensive critical performance-centered analysis of the forces and factors that can delimit or empower Black youth subjectivity. I summarize my assessment of the efficacy, impact, and shortfalls of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project using Sandra Faulkner's (2016) *ars poetica* ("poetic criteria for evaluating research poetry") as an organizing principle (p. 88). Finally, I compile the data collected throughout the *Pipelines to Pathways* project that speaks to its impact on the world. This chapter explores the power and possibilities for antiracist public performance to incite antiracist transformation at the personal, institutional, and communal levels. From audience reports of future action to reports of funds, volunteers, and action that was generated by this project, I outlined the evidence that antiracist performance can indeed serve as a source of hope and an act of activism.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview

In this chapter, I will examine the roots and routes of the extant state of chronic dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth in America. I will also propose a performance-centered approach to resisting and confronting this dehumanization and criminalization, thereby reframing and reclaiming positive agential Black youth identities for, and with, Black youth and their caregivers. Based upon practices and theories in the fields of performance studies, communication, pedagogy, and psychology, I propose a poetic and playful performance-centered approach to this problem in the *Pipelines to Pathways* project. This aesthetic approach promises to confront and counter the dominant stock story about Black youth in order to reframe and reclaim the positivity, dignity, and agency inherent in Black youth identities.

I define and examine the School to Prison Pipeline as a structure of domination that violently and persistently imposes itself on the bodies, minds, and identities/subjectivities of Black youth and their caregivers. I argue that the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth are historically, socio-economically, and discursively rooted in America's colonial past, racist foundations, and anti-youth tendencies. These roots intertwine to form an imbricated dominant stock story that frames Black youth identities in the American imaginary as a dehumanized and criminalized biotrope. I contend that this dominant stock story permits and perpetuates a violent anti-Black youth sentiment that is systematically routed to, and through, the bodies and lives of Black youth. Furthermore, I identify certain neoliberal norms, biopolitical

practices, and discursive frameworks that form, facilitate, and foment the School to Prison Pipeline.

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project is rooted in my desire to address the disproportionate dehumanization and criminalization experienced by Black youth in America. Over the past two decades, I have worked closely with Black youth in an effort to forge creative routes of self-expression. In that time, I have noted that experiences with negative school discipline and incarceration loom ominously in the every-day lives of many Black youth and their caregivers. The persistently high potential for experiencing school suspension, expulsion, and eventual incarceration haunt our social interactions and threaten our ambitions. We daily confront a chronic precarity as we struggle with the internal and external elements that tend to dehumanize and criminalize us in a racialized America. The School Prison Pipeline is a structural manifestation of this precarity. As such, it has emerged as a discursive target for this work.

Defining the School to Prison Pipeline

> The United States of America is not a level playing field for all children and our nation does not value and protect all children's lives equally (Wright Edelman in Cass & Curry, 2007, p. 3).

The School to Prison Pipeline refers to the grossly disproportionate rate at which Black, Latinx, low-wealth, and other marginalized youth experience disproportionate rates of negative school discipline and eventual incarceration in the U.S. (Alexander, 2010; Cass & Curry, 2007; Morris, 2017). While this abiding trend has historically been routed through the modern education and criminal justice systems, it finds its roots in a pervasive dilemma of disparities that has existed especially between Black and White youth in America for centuries (Kharem, 2006). The multiple vectors of this dilemma accumulate to form and facilitate what Children's Defense Fund researchers Julia Cass and Connie Curry (2007) refer to as the *Cradle to Prison Pipeline®*

- often referred to as the School to Prison Pipeline - that directly links marginalized Black youth to the highest rates of incarceration in the nation. The School to Prison Pipeline is commonly discussed and deliberated over by politicians, pundits, pedagogues, and other public figures, but rarely ever presented through, or from, the perspectives of the Black youth or their caregivers.

While there is no clear consensus on the exact causes of the pipeline, its effects are pervasive and profound. For example, Black youth in America are four times more likely to be suspended from school, and five times more likely to end up incarcerated than their White counterparts (Sentencing Project, 2019). This de facto systemic sacrifice of young poor Black bodies echoes the dystopian imagination as articulated by 18th century philosopher Jonathan Swift's (1779) "modest proposal" – a satirical response to the common prejudicial belief among many Irish landed elite that poor people and their children were the cause of moral, civic, and economic decline in the nation state of Ireland. Swift ironically proposed that the babies of poor Irish mothers be put to good use as sources of food (meat) and clothing (hide). Over 200 years later, Swift's ironic proposal still stings true in the American psyche as it struggles to deny and obfuscate its White supremacist, elitist, and often anti-youth proclivities. To answer a seemingly incessant and insatiable call for human life blood, America's systems of education and criminal justice have complied with a modern day modest proposal for the sacrifice of young, low-wealth, and Black bodies. The challenge is that this proposal persists in a manner that is ominously unspoken and deadly serious, directly impacting the lived reality of millions of Black youth and their families.

Black youth in America are born into a dilemma of disparities whereby they are, on average, chronically rendered underserved and deficient in the areas of income, literacy, academic achievement, health, abuse, and incarceration rates (CDF, 2012/2014/2014c). In fact,

the children with the least access to education, resources, and opportunities in the U.S. are the 14.9 million poor children (Children's Defense Fund (CDF), 2016). Of those children, Black children are the poorest in the U.S., at 39%, although they represent between 12% and 13% of the population (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2018; U.S. Census, 2017; CDF, 2014c, 2015). Black children are "over three times as likely to be poor as White children" (CDF, 2014c). While rates of incarceration for Black youth are troubling, "black-on-black" crime, homicide, and suicide rates continue to soar above those of their White counterparts, especially in urban areas in the U.S. (Bridge, 2018; Kann et al, 2017). The fact that Black children are twice as likely to suffer from child abuse as their White counterparts is evidence of the fact that Black lives, especially young Black lives, exist in the persistently precarious cross hairs of inequity, violence, dehumanization, and criminalization (Braga & Brunson, 2015).

The particularly profound impact that the School to Prison Pipeline has had on Black youth is a systemic extension of the disproportionate historical, psychosocial, and discursive marginalization, dehumanization, and criminalization that youth of color have experienced in the U.S. (Alexander, 2010; Cass & Curry, 2007; Grossberg, 2005; Morris, 2017; Rios, 2011; Rios & Vigil, 2017). The dehumanizing evils of slavery and the criminalizing controls of Jim Crow are manifestations of America's long history of delimiting, disparaging, and dehumanizing Black youth identities. From the 1955 lynching of 14 year-old Emmett Till[36] in Money, Mississippi, to the 2012 killing of 17 year-old Trayvon Martin[37] by a community watch patroller in Sanford,

[36] In August of 1955, Emmett Louis Till, a 14-year-old Chicago native who was visiting family members in Money, MS was beaten and murdered - his body, tossed into the Tallahatchie River by Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam – two angry white men who merely suspected that Emmett had flirted with a white woman - Roy's wife, Carolyn. After Roy and J.W. were found not guilty by a jury of their peers, they openly admitted to the murder.

[37] On Sunday, February 26th, 2012, in Sanford, FL, a 17-year-old black boy named Trayvon Martin was stopped by a man named George Zimmerman, a community watch patroller who *merely suspected* that Trayvon was a criminal. Armed with only a bag of Skittles and a can of Arizona Tea he'd just purchased from a convenience store, Trayvon

Florida, highly publicized evidence of the disproportionate rate at which Black youth are punished, imprisoned, and killed with practical impunity in this country is startling. This evinces a dysfunctional pattern by which Black youth identities are axiologically drained, epistemologically framed, ontologically claimed, and physiologically slain or constrained by the School to Prison Pipeline and the systems that support it.

The result is that marginalized Black youth are often trapped between dominant systems of authority that seek to control them and dangerous communities and environments that seek to misuse, abuse, and kill them. Meanwhile, the national conversation around Black crime, criminalization, school discipline and incarceration often espouses traditional top-down, deficit-based approaches to pedagogy and youth intervention that have served to reify and perpetuate the School to Prison Pipeline (Braga & Brunson, 2015; Gorski, 2013; Morris, 2017; Tough, 2016). More progressive conversations (also top-down) tend to aim at dismantling structural racism, systemic oppression, and inequitable public policies, often disregarding the voices and lived experiences of Black youth **(**Dei, et al., 1997; Rios, 2011, 2017**)**. These top-down approaches fail to consider the perspectives of the people who experience the impact of the School to Prison Pipeline most intimately. In doing so, they often perpetuate dominant narratives that elide or silence the wisdom, insight, and persuasive truths that live in the voices of Black youth and their caregivers. Here, I present an immodest proposal: that stakeholders sacrifice their own comfortable sense of self-righteous narrative integrity in order to lean in and listen closely to these younger, darker voices.

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was stopped, shot, and killed that night. The following year, George Zimmerman was found not guilty of Trayvon's death in a court of law.

Black Youth in School

> [I]n spite of the goodwill expressed in institutional ideals, commonly insidious[…] ideological elements embedded in a White supremacist, patriarchal, capitalist society […] are routinely mirrored and maintained in educational contexts (hooks, 1998, p. 1).

The "School" component of the School to Prison Pipeline is marked by stark racial disparities in academic achievement, suspension, expulsion, and dropout rates between Black and White students that pervade all grade levels. Black students tend to exhibit significantly lower proficiency levels in all academic subjects, lower promotion rates, and higher drop-out rates than their White counterparts. (Children's Defense Fund (CDF), 2014, 2015, 2016). Further, the manner in which the U.S. educational system tends to discipline the bodies of Black students reveals persistent and glaring disparities in school discipline practices that have been well recorded nationally over the past several decades (Smith & Harper, 2015).

In reports published since 2000, the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction has warned that suspensions, expulsions, and dropouts are directly correlated to "increases in crime and delinquency problems" (Hardin, 2015). Consequently, if you drill down to Cumberland County, North Carolina, the site of the *My Life Matters* component of this project, Black youth in Cumberland County Schools are four times more likely to be suspended from school (Barnes, 2016) and three times more likely to end up in juvenile detention than their White peers (Hardin, 2015). What we see in Cumberland County is a reflection of what is happening in diverse communities – rural and urban; big and small - across the country (Cass & Curry, 2007; CDF, 2012/2014/2014c; Smith & Harper, 2015).

Black Youth Crime and Punishment

> While black youth are policed and disciplined in and out of the nation's schools, conservative and liberal educators define education through the ethically limp discourses of privatization, national standards, and global competitiveness (Giroux, 1998, p. x).

According to the U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention (OJJDP), in 2018 "Non-Hispanic white youth accounted for 52% of the 2018 youth population, non-Hispanic black youth accounted for 15%, and Hispanic youth accounted for one-fourth (25%)." Of the 700 arrests made of youth in 2017, 35% were arrests of Black youth. Of those arrests, Black youth represented 61% and 67%, respectively, of those youth arrested for robbery and "nonnegligent" manslaughter (OJJDP, 2019). In North Carolina, Black students also exhibited the highest rates of school crimes throughout the state during the 2017-2018 school year (Public Schools of North Carolina State Board of Education Department of Public Instruction Report to the North Carolina General Assembly, 2019). These numbers reveal a consistent chronic correlation between Black youth and negative experiences with education and criminal justice systems. The North Carolina Department of Public Safety (2019) refers to this particular manifestation of the dilemma of disparities as "Disproportionate Minority Contact."

Meanwhile, Black youth are more often labeled "at risk," "troubled," or "behaviorally challenged" – terms that tend to pathologize the people labeled (Farmer, 2010; Ginwright, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Morris, 2017; Rios, 2011, 2017). Victor Rios' (2011) ethnographic work with marginalized Black and Latinx youth revealed that they experience a "ubiquitous criminalization" that effectively forms a "youth control complex" which he refers to as a "system in which schools, police, probation officers, families, community centers, the media, businesses, and other institutions systematically treat young people's everyday behaviors," dress, and movements as "deviant, threatening, risky, and criminal" (p. xiv). This "hypercriminalization" facilitates a drastic increase in the probability of negative interaction with law enforcement.

For example, a 2014 *Propublica* study of the 1,217 mortal police shootings captured in federal database between 2010 and 2012 revealed that Black males between the ages of 15 and

19 were 21 times more likely to be killed by police than White males that age (Gabrielson, Sagara & Grochowski, 2014). In fact, *NY Times* writer Roxane Gay (2015) felt compelled to pose the question, "Where are Black Children Safe?" as the title to her article that addresses a school police officer's brutal assault on a black high school student who peaceably refused to relinquish her cell phone. This event in Columbia, South Carolina is one of a plethora of violent incidents that have exposed the fact the bodies of Black children are often the target of normalizing violence inside and outside American schools. Highly publicized cases like the killing of unarmed 17 year old Trayvon Martin in Sanford, Florida in 2012 by a neighborhood watch vigilante, the fatal police shooting of unarmed 18 year old Mike Brown in Ferguson, Missouri in 2014, and the fatal police shooting of 12 year old Tamir Rice who brandished a toy gun in a park in Cleveland, Ohio in 2014, are merely signposts of the mortal threat that society's tendency to disproportionately discipline and eliminate Black bodies imposes upon Black youth.

Black Youth Interrupted

> What if I want more? Not just a locked door.
> What if I want knowledge? What if I want to go to college?
> What if I want more?
> (Misunderstood & Big Smoke, "What if I Want More?" in APPENDIX C)

America's criminal justice system operates as a voracious deity of discipline and punishment,[38] demanding a regular sacrifice of fungible young Black bodies to be funneled into its pipeline of discipline, detention, and death. The Pipeline is what it is. There is no argument about its existence. The controversy arises when we seek to discover and address its root causes, and routes to addressing them. While some argue that anti-social and pathological elements of Black (or "urban") culture and individual proclivities of Black youth *pull* them

[38] Here I use Victor Rios' unique definition of punishment based upon his empirical study of the lived experiences and perspectives of criminalized Black and Latinx youth. He defines punishment as "the process by which individuals come to feel stigmatized, outcast, shamed, defeated, or hopeless as a result of negative interactions and sanctions imposed by individuals who represent institutions of social control" (p. xv).

into the pipeline, others argue that structural White supremacy and socio-economic marginalization inevitably *push* Black youth into this pipeline. Meanwhile, the perspectives of the youth who experience this particularly pernicious plight are rarely voiced or countered in the dominant discourse. To deal honestly with the School to Prison Pipeline is to acknowledge its complex often paradoxical racist roots and routes, forged amidst a dynamic dialectic of human agency and interaction versus structural hierarchy and systemic oppression.

Colonial and Racist Roots of the School to Prison Pipeline

> The especially crude and reductive notions of culture that form the substance of racial politics today are clearly associated with an older discourse of racial and ethnic difference which is everywhere entangled in the history of the idea of culture in the modern West (Gilroy, 1993, p. 7).

Post colonial and cultural studies scholars like Stuart Hall, Frantz Fanon, Aimé Césaire, Paul Gilroy and others, recognize the fact that racism, as we know it in the Western world is a social construct that dates back to colonial conquest. In fact Aimé Césaire (2000) traces the roots of modern day racial hierarchy in the Western world to White colonizer's systematic "thingification" of the Black and colored colonized peoples. In other words, in order to justify the extreme violence, violation, and exploitation that the Western colonization process imposed upon non-White bodies, the White colonizer dehumanized the non-White colonized people by conceiving of them as "uncivilized" and "animal-like"; and, thus in need, and even deserving, of violent control (Daut, 2016; Fanon, 1967, 2004*;* Césaire, 2000). In order for Whiteness to be constructed as the pure and perfect dominant race, Blackness had to be deconstructed from mere phenotypical features and reconstructed into an abject evil threat to humanity.

Frantz Fanon (2004) notes that the person of African descent in the Western world has undergone a process of "endo-colonization," wherein the institutions of slavery and Jim Crow laws allowed the White colonizers to enact a more intimate and nationalistic version of

colonization upon the Black peoples whom they imported to America. Fanon (1967) refers to the "crushing objecthood" that Black people have historically experienced in the U.S., where "The body is surrounded by an atmosphere of certain uncertainty" of facing violently marginalizing forces (p. 110-111). He describes a "real dialectic between the body and the world" that demands that the Black man adhere to a "racial-epidermal schema," based upon the historico-racial expectations of him in a White supremacist society that claims that "[s]in is Negro, as virtue is white" (p. 139). Gilroy (2010) observes that the violence of enslavement and colonization enacted "bio-political processes which systematically produced infra-humanity, for the explicit benefit of the killers, torturers, and abusers." Césaire (2000) observes that, as a result of these processes American domination has emerged historically as "the only domination from which one never recovers […] unscarred" (p. 77).

Whether he likes it or not, and regardless of his skin tone, the child who has been identified as Black in this country has been born with a congenital condition that Frantz Fanon calls "epidermalization," whereby they are discursively, legally, and socially reduced from their complex agential and dignified humanity to their skin color, phenotype, and patterns of language movement. Thus forces racialized identities upon the bearers of Black bodies. Those racialized identities are then confronted with a Western world that has historically devalued, disparaged and dehumanized Blackness (Nasir, 2012). Rapper Ice Cube (1993) articulates the looming threat of epidermalization in his song "My Skin is My Sin":

> […] they think I'm Khadafi
> Rolling in a six-tre jalopy
> They want to give me ten in the pen cause I'm smelling like Hen
> My skin is my sin
> My S-K-I-N is my S-I-N (Burning our black skin)
> My S-K-I-N is my S-I-N (Burning our black skin)

Paul Gilroy (2000) calls this "dermo-politics." It is this involuntary and persistent process by which existing prejudices, fears, and hatreds felt toward Black bodies are inevitably and continually projected onto the fragile frames of Black people from childhood.

Anti-Youth Roots of the School to Prison Pipeline

> We live, for at least part of the time, in a rhetorically constructed picture of kids out of control, an enemy hiding within our most intimate spaces. The responses- zero tolerance, criminalization and imprisonment, psychotropic drugs and psychiatric confinement- suggest not only that we have abandoned the current generation of kids but that we think of them as a threat that has to be contained, punished, and only in some instances, recruited to our side (Grossberg, 2005, p. 36).

In a similar manner, since the latter half of the 20th century, especially, American society has imposed a process of "thingification" on its young by forming a discursive régime that positions children and teens as threats to the quality of life and safety of American adults (Grossberg, 2005). Grossberg (2005) notes, "It has become common to think of kids as a threat to the existing social order and for kids to be blamed for the problems they experience" (p. 16). In his critical cultural analysis of the transition of the U.S. from a kid nurturing society in the 1950's, to a kid targeting society by the turn of the century, Grossberg (2005) observes that "youth comes not only to represent everything that has gone wrong in this country but in the end to be the cause of it" (p. 18). He argues that this perspective has discursively reduced American kids to "uncivilized animals who have to be domesticated" (p. 21), much in the same way that colonization has dehumanized non-White colonized peoples as uncivilized and animal-like.

While anti-youth sentiment has expressed itself saliently in western society for centuries, it has re-emerged in the discursive criminalization of youth in the media, zero tolerance and inequitable discipline policies in schools, age profiling by police, and strict parole violation policies and curfews in America (Farmer, 2010). These anti-youth expressions have assembled in a manner that that has led to increasing, and significantly high, rates of youth involvement in the

criminal justice system (Grossberg, 2005, CDF, 2007, Okonofua, J. A., & Eberhardt, J. L., 2015, Rios, 2011, 2017; Stasio, 2015, Equal Justice Initiative, 2016). For example, Lawrence Grossberg (2005) notes the fact that zero tolerance policies and placing police personnel in schools, which began nationwide in the 1990's, caused a drastic increase in the criminalization and adjudication of behavior that previously would have been handled at the school level. Sarah

Farmer (2010) notes that the convergence of chronic systemic inequity, racism, and anti-youth sentiment have resulted in a "moral panic," whereby the Black youth, in particular, is framed as a threat that must be regularly surveilled, corrected, and contained. Fueled by this panic, the School to Prison Pipeline has arisen as a "moral epidemic" in America (Farmer, 2010, p. 366).

Structural, Neoliberal, Biopolitical, and Discursive Routes of the School to Prison Pipeline

> One needs to know how different racial and ethnic groups were inserted historically, and the relations which have tended to erode and transform, or to preserve these distinctions through time - not simply as residues and traces of previous modes, but as active structuring principles of the present organization of society (Hall, 2002, p. 54).

The extant Prison Industrial Complex and School to Prison Pipeline in America are systemic manifestations of particular "structures of domination" based upon this nation's uniquely anti-low-wealth, anti-Black, and anti-youth discourses, policies, and social protocols (Alexander, 2010; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, Wacquant, 2001). These structures of domination acutely threaten human justice and life, particularly for Black youth in the U.S. To clarify, going forward, I will apply sociologist Anthony Giddens' (1979) definition of a "structure" as the "rules [and] resources recursively implicated in the reproduction of social systems" (p. 64). Here, the word "structure" refers to "structuring property" that provides the "binding of time and space in social systems". These "systems" are "reproduced relations between actors or collectivities organised as regular social practices" (sic., p. 64). I utilize

sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's term "structures of domination" to refer to those structures that enact a certain "symbolic violence" - that is the use of symbols, such as physiological features, discourse, or images, to threaten, enact and justify violence against another human being, or group of human beings with, or without their complicity, with the end of reifying and sustaining symbolic dominance of a hegemonic force. Symbolic violence is applied to subjugate certain collectives of people under the power of a particular hegemonic dominance (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

This violence is enacted through an insidious and effective force that Pierre Bourdieu calls *misrecognition* – "the fact of recognizing a violence which is wielded precisely inasmuch as one does not perceive it as such" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 168). Misrecognition is an invisible doing that interpolates marginalized peoples into a system of dominance by assigning them values and meanings that perpetuate the existing social hierarchy. Through racist misrecognition, Black bodies are inscribed with notions of criminality, animality, and fungibility, such that the presence or appearance of any particular Black body is coded upon arrival (Young, 2010). Within racist structures of domination, Black bodies perform by merely showing up. The very appearance of a Black body in the dominant field of vision is rendered "troubling" (Fleetwood, 2011).

Thus, Black bodies take on, what Nicole Fleetwood (2011) calls an *iconicity*. Fleetwood defines iconicity as the social process by which "singular images or signs come to represent a whole host of historical occurrences and processes" (p. 2). Thus, without the necessary permission or recognition of the seer or the seen, structures of domination impose symbolic violence through the misrecognizing gaze. One need only reflect upon the defense used by police officers and authority figures who have been acquitted for gunning down the unarmed Black

bodies of Tamir Rice, Trayvon Martin, Mike Brown, Terrence Crutcher, and several others. In every case, the armed authority figure fired because he/she recognized an imminent "threat" to their lives in the form of a Black body.

Here, it is useful to consider Michel Foucault's (2004) concept of *biopolitics* - a structural mechanism that determines what people (or, types of people) get to survive and thrive in any given society. In his discussion of biopolitics, Foucault (2004) often uses the term "race" to refer to unique people groups who war against other groups for genetic purity, survival and access to resources. He states, "It is no longer: 'We have to defend ourselves against society,' but 'We have to defend society against all the biological threats posed by the other race, the subrace, the counterrace'" (Foucault, 2004, p. 61-62).

Thus, for Foucault (2004), racism is a form of biopolitics that serves as "primarily a way of introducing a break into the domain of life that is under power's control: the break between what must live and what must die." (p. 254). Hence, for Foucault the race war is based upon *biopower* – the power to kill or let live. For him, race is any separation of people where there is a norm versus a threat to the norm. In this way, Foucault uses race to get at the naturalness of power dynamics and human tribalism. Jardine (2005) applies a biopolitical lens to the modern Western educational system when she observes, "Those things – knowledges, bodily actions and desires, and so on – that do not lend themselves to the production of high grades on published standardized test results are exposed as redundant," and thus, they become targets for marginalization and elimination (p. 36). Thus, Foucault's conceptualization of race provides us with a deeper understanding of how biopolitical technologies inherent in structures of domination, like the School to Prison Pipeline, have come to pose a persistent threat to the lives Black youth.

Here, it is useful to consider Subhabrata Bobby Banerjee's (2008) definition of *necrocapitalism*- **"**contemporary forms of organizational accumulation that involve dispossession and the subjugation of life to the power of death." Necrocapitalism is a post-colonialist economic application of Michel Foucault's biopolitics, which "makes large numbers of people invisible, mainly the poor, the disinherited, and the dispossessed" (p. 1559). Thus, the chronic elision in dominant discourses around the uniquely systemic marginalization that Black youth experience in U.S. tends to tacitly condone their continued marginalization, dehumanization, criminalization, incarceration, and ultimate extermination.

To Be Young, Casted, and Black

> [T]he state had not abandoned the poor; it had reorganized itself, placing priority on its punitive institutions, such as police, and embedding crime-control discourses and practices into welfare institutions, such as schools (Rios, p. 17, 2011).

The dominant oppressive structures of U.S. society have historically placed a large portion of Black youth into systems that incarcerate them, kill them, or relegate them to what Wacquant (2001) has referred to as the "black subprolitariat." I argue that poor Black youth in America have emerged as a racialized sub-class, or, in the words of Michelle Alexander (2015), a "racial subcaste." Alexander (2010) defines "racial caste" as "a stigmatized racial group locked into an inferior position by law and custom" (p. 12). It follows that, when these children get involved with the court system as "offenders," they are further, and oftentimes permanently, relegated to a lower *subcaste* – poor Black criminal. Alexander (2010) notes that a person deemed a "criminal" in the U.S. today has "scarcely more rights, and arguably less respect, than a Black man living in Alabama at the height of Jim Crow." In other words, "We have not ended racial caste in America; we have merely redesignated it" (p. 2). This is a modern-day echo of W.E.B. Du Bois' (2014) observation, "to be a poor man is hard, but to be a poor race in a land of

dollars is the very bottom of hardships." (p. 13). I will utilize Alexander's term *subcaste* to explicate the positonalities of marginalized Black youth, rooted and routed in the coalescence of the historico-social designations of socio-economic class, race, age and criminal status.

Framed and Claimed by Criminalization, Responsibilization, and Animalization

> One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder (Du Bois, 204, p. 5).

As American political theorist Wendy Brown (2015) observes, under the current neoliberal regime the market has become the site of ultimate "veridiction." In other words, if you can't clearly quantify the economic impact of a program, policy or person, you cannot justify their existence. Thus, the neoliberal subject "is so profoundly integrated into and hence subordinated to the supervening goal of macroeconomic growth that its own well-being is easily sacrificed to these larger purposes" (p. 83). So, the criminalized Black youth, deemed less profitable than his White counterparts, is rendered fungible in this system. The same "neoliberal subject" whose very humanity depends upon her perceived economic impact is also faced with the pressure of what Brown calls "responsibilization": "…forcing the subject to become a responsible self-investor and self-provider" (p. 84). Thus, the stories that we tell about a person's surviving or thriving in this country become framed by stock notions of that person's singular responsibility for their own rise or demise.

Take for example the fact that the current U.S. presidential administration has drafted a budget that cuts $1.2 billion in federal funding from after-school programs that currently offer free and reduce-rate programming and services to some 1.6 million youths who are disproportionately non-White, living in, or near, poverty across the country (Brown, E., 2017). Yet, when charged to justify this sizeable cut in the infrastructure of intervention programs that

offer safety, community, health and nutrition services, psycho-social, and academic support to marginalized youth, the administration retorted that the academic and economic impact of these programs have not been proven. In other words, only that which can be economized according to neoliberal norms is valued by the dominant system. As Wendy Brown (2015) observes, under the current neoliberal regime the market has become the site of ultimate "veridiction." In other words, if you can't clearly quantify the economic impact of a program, policy or person, you cannot justify its existence. Thus, the neoliberal subject "is so profoundly integrated into and hence subordinated to the supervening goal of macroeconomic growth that its own well-being is easily sacrificed to these larger purposes" (p. 83).

So, according to this framework, a low wealth, Black child and her family are automatically vilified whenever it appears that they are not carrying out their responsibility of preparing her to be useful *human capital* for exchange on the free market. Consider the fact that this same presidential administration that proposed to cut funds to support poor and disproportionately non-White youth, strongly advocates for stop-and-frisk policies that often lead to increased criminalization, via racial profiling, of residents in poor, predominately Black neighborhoods - under the auspices of enforcing "law and order" and getting crime off the streets (Dwyer, 2016).

This system renders all humans as "human capital" (Brown, 2015) via a particular discursive process. This same process identifies certain bodies as threat to productivity and profit, thereby further criminalizing them and their communities with a demand for law and order by means of biopolitical "securitization" (Silva, 2016). In this manner "Blackness" becomes what Kumarini Silva (2016) refers to as "an identificatory strategy" mobilized to impose a "subjugated essentialism" on people identified as "at-risk," "dangerous," or "criminal"

– terms disproportionately used to refer to Black bodies in the U.S. The words of Hero, a recently “freed” slave in Susan Lori-Parks’ (2015) play *Father Comes Home from Wars,* set over 150 years ago, continue to ring relevant today: "Seems like the worth of a Colored man, once he's made free, is less than his worth when he's a slave." This dehumanizing pathological mentality persists today when marginalized youth themselves often internalize it, thereby reinforcing racial and socio-economic hierarchy by playing up tropes of criminality, delinquency, and ignorance, or by simply lowering their own expectations for themselves and their peers (Camilleri, 2007; Ginwright, 2010, 2016; Rios, 2011).

However, how do these structures of domination find expression in a country where “colorblindness,” meritocracy, and a universal nationalist identity are integral elements of the dominant narrative circulated by many politicians, pundits, pedagogues, and policy makers? French philosopher Étienne Balibar’s (1991) response is, “In all these universals we can see the persistent presence of the same 'question': that of the difference between humanity and animality, the problematic character of which is re-utilized to interpret the conflicts within society and history” (p. 57). So, when racial disparities arise, the culture of universals responds with a vehement denial of any existing social hierarchy. Instead, it blames the victims of that hierarchy for refusing to assimilate or to accept accountability for their own shortcomings. In turn, those at the bottom of the hierarchy are barraged with messages that reify their perceived inferiority and inherent malignancy.

Obstacles of Obfuscation

> The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist (Singer, 1995).

Thus, our culture grants permission to politicians, pundits and professional experts to further objectify marginalized youth by re-framing systemic inequity as a question of “cultural

deficits" (Gorski, 2013; Rios, 2011, 2017; Morris 2017). In this way, the focus on the roots, routes, and resolution to the School to Prison Pipeline is deflected from racial hierarchy and economization of lives, and routed back upon the responsibilized individual and her cultural deficits. Unlike colonialism, this newer, more insidious form of racial designation is complex, obfuscated and difficult to resist directly, while its tendency to dehumanize and exact violence on non-White bodies is just as imminent and more effective.

This phenomenon is rendered more salient by increasingly popular statements, mostly from the political right, that counter increasing accusations of racial and class inequity with a steadfast insistence upon the veracity of America's myth of meritocracy. Consider the statements made by Kathy Miller, one of then-candidate Donald Trump's county campaign chairs in Ohio, wherein she declared that racism does not exist in America. She followed with, "If you're black and you haven't been successful in the last 50 years, it's your own fault. You've had every opportunity, it was given to you" (Lewis, 2016). Furthermore, in the face of the spate of publicly reported incidents of police brutality against Black bodies over the past decade, especially, she referred to one of the grass roots organizing efforts that was designed to address this ill, the Black Lives Matter movement, as "a stupid waste of time." Finally, Miller credits President Barak Obama himself for creating a racism that did not exist before he entered the presidency. It is important to note here, that Ms. Miller, like President Donald Trump and many other prominent opponents of the Black Lives Matter movement, is less concerned with the politics of the movement, and more concerned with what she perceives to be the futility for any anti-racist action in a "colorblind" society.

In fact, recent research in social psychology has confirmed the fact that pervasive implicit racial bias and discrimination against Blacks is indeed alive, well, and pervasive in the U.S.

These studies repeatedly expose evidence that people from diverse racial and socio-economic backgrounds tend to make subconscious connections between phenotypically Black people and crime, culpability (especially for youth offenders) and animalistic behavior (Eberhardt, et al., 2004; Eberhardt, et al., 2005; Goff, et al., 2008; Goff, et al., 2014). Such research also reveals the fact that implicit bias causes agents in authority within systems of education and criminal justice to perceive higher levels of maturity and culpability in Black especially (Hetey & Eberhardt, 2014; Okonofua & Eberhardt, 2015; Rattan, et al., 2012). In one study, law enforcement officers and college students tended to add three to five years of age the Black youth that they observed, as opposed to the Whites (Rattan, et al., 2012). The result is the "adultification" of Black youth, whereby authority figures tend to hold them to a higher standard of maturity than is appropriate for their age (Rockett, 2019). Because these anti-Black youth biases are implicit, they often go undetected. Meanwhile, the stock stories that feed and reify these biases are deep seated in the America's narrative landscape.

In fact, Americans tend to perceive less essential difference between a Black child and a Black adult (Eberhardt, et al., "Seeing Black"; Goff, et al., "The Essence of Innocence) As a matter of fact, in one particular study, Black boys in a criminal justice setting were consistently perceived by police officers and college students in a large urban area as up to 4.5 years older than they actually were. That is to say that authority figures may tend to perceive Black children as young as 13 years of age as adults (Goff, et al., "The Essence of Innocence"). These same biases of adult essentialism and age miscalculation did not apply to White boys in the same study. Here, we see the insidious nature of a White supremacist racialized assemblage, catalyzed by economic "responsibilization" and magnified with regard to Black youth in the context of criminal justice. During the tenuous adolescent years when youth's identities are particularly

volatile and vulnerable, mistakes, social transgressions, and indiscretions are common (Camilleri, 2007; Walsh, 2004). However, for Black youth the stakes are particularly high.

Sociology and cultural studies scholar Stanley Aronowitz (2003) observes that a certain "American exceptionalism" manifests itself as a "class denial that is woven into the fabric of American life" (p 15). Cornel West cites "the very discourse of colorblindness" as a creation of "neoconservatives and neoliberals in order to trivialize and disguise the depths of black suffering" (Alexander, 2015, p. x). West indicts the whole of American society for its "long slumber of indifference to the poor and vulnerable. This indifference […] leaves too many well-adjusted to injustice" (Alexander, 2015, p. ix). Here, we see that, in order to address this problem, we must first overcome the discourses of denial and acknowledge the *subcaste* dilemma by developing what Freire (1970) refers to as "critical consciousness" of the forces that are at play in maintaining America's *undercaste.* Freire proposes critical dialogue as the vehicle to achieve this critical consciousness.

Robin DiAngelo (2018) accentuates the need for these critical conversations: "nothing in mainstream US culture gives us the information we need to have the nuanced understanding of arguably the most complex and enduring social dynamic of the last several hundred years" (p. 8). The obfuscating forces of individualism ("holds that we are each unique and stand apart from others") and objectivity (the belief that "it is possible to be free of all bias") tend to disparage racialized identity and deny systemic oppression (p. 9). DiAngelo (2018) observes that we are all swimming in the water of racism and "we are actors in a shared culture" (p. 9). However, because White people are the dominant people group in the racial hierarchy, and are rarely compelled to confront racism, and their roll it its perpetuation, they are often dangerously ignorant of racism's threat. When racism is addressed, they often perceive the discussion as a

direct affront to their own worldviews and ethics. This perception often triggers emotions like anger, fear, and guilt in White people. These emotional responses often result in counter-dialogic behaviors such as social distancing, denial, defensiveness, or debate. DiAngelo (2018, p. 2) refers to this process of obliviousness, to offense, to obfuscation as "White Fragility." It is a particularly affective route of effectively silencing antiracist discourse and dialogue.

Kendi (2019) observes that "Denial is the heartbeat of racism" (p. 9). He argues that we must see the term "racist" as descriptive and not as pejorative. In other words, racism can be defined by actions and policies that perpetuate racism and racially inequitable outcomes. Kendi (2019) defines racism as "the marriage of racist policies and racist ideas that produces and normalizes racial inequities" (p. 18). Furthermore, "Racism itself is institutional, structural, and systemic" (p. 18). Thus, a racist is one who supports or enacts racism by action or inaction. This term does not define a person, but rather, it articulates their position in a given context. Thus, racism cannot be dismantled by pointing fingers and naming individual racists, but by identifying and naming racism and racist actions and attitudes as they present themselves. This must be done with the understanding that racism is rooted systemic mechanisms of racialized control (cf. Foucault's "biopolitics"). The routes of racism, however, are supported and driven by self-interest (i.e. a desire to be comfortable and to enjoy maximal privilege with minimal cognitive dissonance). To dismantle racism, we must first deal with it. To deal with racism, we must name it. To name it, we must be willing to articulate it and witness it, and the routes by which it haunts the everyday interpersonal interactions of Black youth.

Reclaiming Black Youth Identities through a Performance-Centered Approach

> *Re*-claiming does not require that we erase the past and script a new one. The prefix tells us this. To reclaim is to take something back. It is to possess something in the present while knowing that it has only recently been back in your possession. It is to remain aware of the previous 'claims' even as you articulate your own. It is to know the past in the present as you work toward creating a future (Young, 2010, p. 225).

For centuries Black youth identities have been claimed by exogenous White supremacist structures, systems and norms that have dehumanized and criminalized them. Likewise an internalized sense of inferiority and/or alienation has delimited our capacity and propensity for self-production. Nina Wallerstein (1994), for example, notes that the discrepancies between the "American Dream" and the "American Reality" lived by marginalized youth may cause the marginalized to "blame themselves for their lack of opportunities and develop low self-esteem and feelings of powerlessness" (p. 155). To address this self-misrecognition, Wallerstein (1994) calls for a critical turn in pedagogy and research that "draw[s] on the personal and cultural strengths of youth that can promote resiliency and growth for individuals and communities" (p. 155). She challenges educators and public health practitioners to explore the "underlying emotional, social or structural issues" that lie at the root of many of the challenges that marginalized youth face today. She notes, "these underlying issues can be thought of as 'hidden voices,' which can either block learning, or, if they become a central focus, can unleash learning and motivation to change" (Wallerstein, 1994, p. 156). We return to the power of voice.

In the context of Lee Ann Bell's (2010) *Storytelling for Social Justice* model, unchecked, dominant discourses tend to perpetuate status quo-reinforcing stock stories and silence the voices of subjugated discourses. Bell applies a CRT lens to storytelling as she seeks to unearth and amplify the concealed stories that lift the local knowledges of marginalized people, juxtaposing them with stock stories in a manner that generates critical consciousness around them. She also

celebrates resistance stories that mark and articulate the efforts of subjugated peoples and their allies to challenge the very hegemonic structures that generate and sustain stock stories. Bell's work is committed to the CRT's goal of mobilizing this resistance to move toward constructing new emerging and transforming stories that inform and facilitate action toward deconstructing oppressive structures and reconstructing more equitable and just ones (Bell, 2010; Ladson-Billings, 1998). *The Pipelines to Pathways* project shares this commitment.

Bell's often performative application of CRT to critical pedagogy and public discourse reveals that the art of individual and collaborative storytelling can help marginalized people to develop a deeper understanding of the self and group members. Based upon over a decade of conducting critical ethnography and activism with marginalized youth, community members, and teachers, Bell (2010) observes, "the Storytelling Project Model can be used to help teachers understand racial positionality, think more critically about their practice, and develop curriculum that engages students as social critics and actors" (p. 6). She has observed that arts-based interventions with marginalized youth are creative modes of storytelling that can "play an important role in building a community where risks can be taken and shared, and new norms established for acting against racism" (p. 110). While storytelling can be written, spoken, I have opted for what dramatist Peter Brook (1996) calls "the vehicle of drama" – that is embodied theatrical performance based upon "flesh and blood" where dynamic laws of human connection, entertainment, and engagement are simultaneously at work (p. 17).

The performance work that this project does also applies what Performance Studies Scholar Nadine George-Graves (2014) calls "Diasporic Spidering." George-Graves (2014) and I consider "black identity as an active process" of seeking to define and re-define one's sense of self as she explores the myriad roots and routes that traverse the body of Black identity (pp. 35-

36). George-Graves endeavors to “rechart the schematic of black identity” through this process she calls “Diasporic Spidering” (p. 36). Diasporic Spidering entails “The multidirectional process by which people of African descent define their lives. The lifelong ontological gathering of information by going out into the world and coming back to the self” (p. 33). *The Pipelines to Pathways* project utilizes Diasporic Spidering is a means of empowering individuals to engage in the dynamic process of self-production through story building and storytelling.

Anthropologist Clifford Geertz accentuates the power of this process to create meaning when he observes that “[…] man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun (Clifford Geertz, 1973, p. 5). As a scholar, I explore and interpret these webs spun by my collaborators and me to publically reframe and reclaim the very meaning of self. When a marginalized Black youth knows who he is and doesn't allow society to tell him who he is, then there is a disruption of the biotrope and a transformation of the subjugated self object upon which the power of the School to Prison Pipeline is based. This disruption and transformation is rooted in positive self-concept and self-efficacy and routed through self-production and critical consciousness that empower us to reclaim and reframe of our own identities.

This concept presents significant promises for the fields of pedagogy and performance. Education scholar Shawn Ginwright (2010) exhibited the deep impact that this process can have on marginalized youth when he challenged a group of Black youth in Oakland, CA to critically analyze their sense of self through reflexive self-inquiry, study of history, and a group trip to West Africa. Youth emerged from the process with an increased sense of self-efficacy, more positive self-concept, and a greater commitment to civic engagement. Furthermore, performance studies scholar Derrek Goldman’s (2006) account of a theatrical adaptation of a novel with Black students at a predominately White institution, he found that the performance “process was a

living reminder that origins are not fixed, singular points of departure but are rather like veins, bloodlines that run through bodies, spinning out from the center to produce sweat, blood, and motion" (p. 367).

Derrek Goldman's (2006) example of a collaborative adaptation project that unified, educated, and motivated university students, faculty, and community members toward action. Madison (2010) has also demonstrated this generative method of collaborative performance when she directed a performance about women's rights featuring her college students in Ghana. As an instructor in courses where I have prepared students to work collaboratively to adapt literature to staged performances that incorporate the students' own perspectives and embodied experiences, I have seen first-hand how "…adaptation may be a crucial means of dismantling and reinventing power structures" (Goldman, 2006, p. 377).

I have found that when we empower youth to trace, embrace, and embody the stories that construct their sense of self and society, we enhance the self-productive powers of storytelling. We also empower these subjugated voices to impact the dominant narratives that frame the perceptions, positionalities, and lived experiences of those in dominant people groups. For example, DiAnglo (2018) argues that when White people, as the dominant racial group in America, do not spend much time living, speaking, and thinking with people of color, the usually lack the "racial stamina" that is required to talk honestly about race and racism without becoming offended or defensive. The stakes for developing racial stamina in White people are high. Without unpacking the race talk, we cannot achieve a collective understanding of the interest convergence connected with antiracism. As DiAngelo (2018) admonishes, we cannot impact the "racial status quo" unless we get comfort in discomfort by embodying "racial humility" and developing "racial stamina." For, "we will not move forward in race relations if

we remain comfortable" (p. 14). The goal is to move from naming racism to imagining and enacting antiracism.

A Poetic Approach to Reclaiming Our Positive, Dignified, Agential Selves

> Poetry in research is a way to tap into universality and radical subjectivity; the poet uses personal experience and research to create something form the particular, which becomes universal when the audience relates to, embodies, and/or experiences the work as if it were their own (Faulkner, 2017, p. 210).

Poetry is the fluid language of dynamic identity formation and free expression. For this reason, it has emerged as vital and ubiquitous element of this project. Poetry as a practice and as literary form is difficult to define in absolute terms. A singular static definition of poetry is impossibly elusive, because poetry, like performance, lives in the liminal. It is itself a form of expression that is adept at expressing and exploring excess. It is a form of expression that dates back to the first ambitious human attempt to embody words, movements, and vocalics to express that which heretofore had exceeded the capacity of mere literal verbal explanation. Today, I use the term poetry to describe a particular form of written and/or spoken expression that incorporates fluid and uniquely formed patterns of alliteration, rhyme, repetition, cadence, meter, musicality, metaphor, simile, syntax, improvisation, and other forms of evocative expression. As the poet modulates and presses into these elements in an attempt to work with, and through, the excess that bursts forth from lived experience, overwhelming emotion, and collective consciousness, they can reach a more profound sense of clarity, understanding, and inspiration. Poetry is a means of formulating and fashioning words for expression and embodiment toward empowerment.

Poetry is a particularly powerful method of truth seeking, framing, and claiming, because, as June Jordan's Poetry for the People Collective declares, it "names what has been silenced and allows us to understand and articulate our connections to one another and to the world we

inhabit" (Muller & the Poetry for the People Collective, 1995; p. 17). Sandra Faulkner (2020) argues, "Poetry is about showing, not telling, our (in)humanity and all of its mysteries" (p. 11).

In every component of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, I apply what Sandra Faulkner (2020) defines Poetic inquiry: "the use of poetry crafted from research endeavors, either before a project analysis, as a project analysis, and/or poetry that is part of or that constitutes an entire research project" (pp. 3-4). Faulkner (2020) uses Poetic inquiry to express research results, engage in aesthetic activism, and to teach (p. 16).

With regard to this project, I privilege poetry, as a form of performance that has the capacity to simultaneously operate as an episteme, method, and product of research. Poetry bears a unique capacity to delve into the psychic, corporeal, and emotive aspects of lived experience. Poetry makes them legible to the conscious inquisitive mind. As scholar and poet Elisabeth Lewis Corley notes, "What do we ask poetry to do? We ask poetry to help us pay attention in a different way" (Corley, 2019). Like water, poetry operates as a universal solvent, troubling our fixed notions of self and society and lifting new understandings.

Faulkner (2020) observes: "Poetry embodies experience to show truths that are not usually evident. For example, our deeply ingrained ideas about gender and culture and class and race, the seemingly natural ways of being are easier to unravel in verse" (p. 17). Thus, the poetic rendering of research can deconstruct dominant narratives. It can also be expressed to larger publics in a way that is more accessible, engaging, and interesting than traditional scholarship. All of this allows poetry to resist and rupture tropes and static stories while enlivening critical stories in a widely accessible format that can incite social change.

Poetic inquiry is also an effective approach to critical pedagogy and self-expression work. Psychologist and Music Therapy practitioner Vanessa Camilleri (2007) celebrates the

therapeutic benefits of poetry writing. In her work, with inner city children, she conducts song writing workshops. These songs, which are just poetry combined with music, operate as "transitional objects" that can "absorb and communicate dangerous things" for traumatized youth. In this way, poetry can serve as a safety valve and a venting place (p. 77). She notes that having youth speak or sing their poetry provides a safe place for them to communicate with others and express themselves in a controlled environment where they can reframe and reconsider the issues that concern them most. Furthermore, Camilleri (2007) reports that when youth complete the process of writing a song they feel a sense of accomplishment. When they are able to perform their work for others – especially adults – they tend to feel affirmed (Camilleri, 2007).

Prisoner advocate and intervention practitioner Stephen John Hartnett (2003) has employed Poetic inquiry along with critical ethnography, autobiography, and historical research to develop *investigative poetry*. He argues that the goal of investigative poetry is to engage in "a version of synecdoche in which grand claims can be supported only through micrological analyses based on deep historical scholarship" (Hartnett & Engels, 2005, p. 1051). Particularly pertinent to the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, Hartnett's work with prisoners "emphasizes the transformative power of poetry through cultural political critique and research *with* and *for* those populations" (Faulkner, 2020, p. 29). Hartnett's work combines the affective intensity of poetry with facts and insights gleaned from archival research to make a profoundly compelling and scholarly case against the U.S. Prison Industrial Complex (Faulkner, 2020; Hartnett 2003; Hartnett & Engels, 2005).

Faulkner (2020) observes, "The act of listening to a poem can bring in the audience through the non-linear expression, the rhythm and cadence, in ways that traditional social science

writing with its 'mumbling, passive voice, and long sentences' cannot" (p. 30). It is in this spirit that the great scholar activist W.E.B. Du Bois laced each chapter of his seminal commentary on the condition of Black people in America (*The Souls of Black Folk*), near the turn of the 20th century, with poetry. Du Bois (2007) notes, "Before each chapter, as now printed, stands a bar of the Sorrow Songs - some echo, a haunting melody from the only American music which welled up from the black souls in the dark past" (p. 1). Likewise, the production, and performance of poetry in this project persistently appear as means of expressing and engaging with qualitative research and historical analysis in order to more profoundly and poignantly discover, discuss, display, and dialogue about lived experiences, positionalities, and perspectives with Black youth and their larger communities. I will refer to this layered praxis as *performative poetic inquiry*.

A Playful Approach to Reclaiming Our Positive, Dignified, Agential Selves

> Play, the natural language of the child, is often the easiest way for children to express troubling thoughts and feelings that are both conscious and unconscious (Schaefer & Drewes, 2014, p. 9).

The spirit of playfulness facilitated by poetic and performance-centered approach of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project helps Black youth and their community members to reclaim our permission to examine and express our positive, dignified, agential selves. For example, Sandra Faulkner (2020) celebrates the capacity of poetry to serve as an effective mode of conducting and presenting qualitative research "precisely because of its slipperiness and ambiguity, its precision and distinctiveness, its joyfulness and playfulness" (p. 12). Dutch historian and cultural theorist Johan Huizinga (1949) offers a theoretical framework that articulates the prominent place of play in human interaction. He argues that play is a ubiquitous, essential element of human interaction, but it is also primordial, in that it precedes culture, reason and human ingenuity. As Fisher (1987) marks the power of narrative by referring to humans as *homo*

narrans, Huizinga (1949) marks the power of play by referring to humans as *homo ludens*[39]. He uses the work of anthropologists and ethnographers to explore play as a socially informed activity that permeates all human civilizations. It cannot be faked and it can be perceived and performed by the players along a spectrum that ranges from fun and frivolous to profound and sanctified. Play itself is superfluous in human life, but becomes urgent when players feel the need for it. Huizinga privileges the phenomenon of play as not only an antecedent to more complex sociological activities, but also as a critical criteria for human activity.

Huizinga (1949) makes the case that play, for humans is the highest order of being. He argues that play for play's sake is sufficiently valid. He defines play with specific criteria that include freedom, supraordinariness, specific temporal and spatial imitations, strict rules, voluntariness, tension to be resolved by play and cohesion among the players. By these standards, play includes child's play, artistic performance and religious ritual. He argues that all three of these can be profoundly serious, while the latter two may also be frivolous and fun. His point is that play is humanity's way of skating the line between what is understood to be real and what is understood to be make-believe or imaginary. In that luminal space, Huizinga argues that humans get as close as they can to encountering the sublime. He states, "Now in myth and ritual the great instinctive forces of civilized life have their origin: law and order, commerce and profit, craft and art, poetry, wisdom and science. All are rooted in the primeval soil of play" (p. 5).

As I consider critical performance as a form of play, it is useful to consider Performance Studies and Feminist Studies Scholar, María Lugones' (1987) notion of play as one that is based upon an attitude that is interrogative, imaginative, and improvisational. Lugones challenges us to travel to each others' worlds (live spaces and lived experiences) with a playful sense of wonder

[39] The Latin word *"ludens"* is the present active participle of the verb *ludere* which means to "play, mock, tease, [or] trick" (Latdict, 2019).

and inclusion. She states, “travelling to each other's 'worlds' would enable us to *be* through *loving* each other" (p. 8). She notes:

> We are fully dependent on each other for the possibility of being understood and without this understanding we are not intelligible, we do not make sense, we are not solid, visible, integrated, we are lacking. So travelling to each other’s ‘worlds’ would enable us to *be* through playfully exploring and *loving* each other (p. 8).

When a person performs their stories of self and society, they are traveling into an unfamiliar world of public discourse and inviting the public into her own world of lived experience, creative imagination, and love.

For several decades now psychotherapy scholars have been exploring and expressing the unique capacity of play to produce “therapeutic change” by activating the crucial elements of agency, belonging, purpose, safety, relationship, self-actualization, and self-expression. In fact, in his 1993 seminal text on play therapy, *Therapeutic Powers of Play*, psychotherapist Charles Shchaefer listed some “major therapeutic powers of play, including self-expression, relationship enhancement, abreaction[40], and attachment formation” (Schaefer & Drewes, 2014, p. 1). While the work of *Pipelines to Pathways* is by no means psychiatric therapy, the language and conceptualizations offered by this field and the fruitful research that it bears are helpful for me to articulate what I see in classrooms and stages when play is incorporated with the work of performance-centered self-expression.

Schaefer and Drewes (2014) refer to the “therapeutic powers of play” as “specific change agents in which play initiates, facilitates, or strengthens their therapeutic effect” (p. 2). Based upon over two decades of practice and research, they observe that play therapy can operate as a

[40] Abreaction refers to one’s ability to re-play, re-imagine, and safely deal with traumatic or negative experiences.

dynamic agent of change by facilitating communication[41], fostering emotional wellness[42], enhancing social relationships[43], and increasing personal strengths[44]. Psychotherapists Mary Morrison Bennett and Stephanie Eberts (2014) articulate the power of play with regard to self-expression:

> Children may have a greater need for a safe, accepting, and inviting relationship due to their limited development, limited sense of self, self-efficacy, and confidence in their ability to express themselves. Children's expression is often limited; there are few times children are allowed to fully communicate their feelings. Adults often limit children's expression because their feelings are displayed through their behavior, which may be inappropriate by adult standards (p. 13).

The power of play, especially with regard to working with youth, is its capacity to provide an imaginative space where youth and adults are permitted to dance in the flux of agency, identity, positionality, and possibility.

Whether writing poetry, role playing, or engaging in an acting game, play allows (indeed, often requires) participants to release themselves from their unconscious and consciously perceived limitations, concerns, and traumas in a manner that allows them to re-conceptualize

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[41] Play connects to children in a manner that helps them to better understand themselves and their situations, and to find ways to express this understanding. Play also tends to facilitate a more enjoyable and effective teaching-learning process, whereby children are more ready and willing to learn new skills and information (Schaefer & Drewes, 2014). Furthermore, psychotherapists David Crenshaw and Kathleen Tillman (2014) note: "When children are able through play to make the unconscious conscious or to bring into awareness the motives, the feelings, the conflicts, the maladaptive, defenses, or the trauma experiences that were previously outside of awareness, they can enjoy a greater sense of personal agency because they can consciously choose a course of action and make informed decisions" (p. 37). Thus, participation in play can help players to name and express the previously ineffable.

[42] Psychotherapists Morrison Bennett and Eberts (2014) note: "Various forms of therapeutic play help clients develop better awareness of and control over distressing feelings. Moreover, the many positive affects experienced while playing strengthen the emotional health and well-being of clients" (2014, p. 69). These positive effects include dopamine release, "which provides a sense of enjoyment, focus, and drive to complete tasks," and positive attention and interaction from peers and adults (p. 15).

[43] Schaefer and Drewes (2014) observe: "Beginning in infancy, the stages of sensory-motor, construction, pretend, and game play promote social development by triggering feelings of attachment, warmth, empathy, and respect for others" (p. 155). Furthermore, psychotherapists William F. Whelan and Anne L. Stewart (2014) observed from their 15 years of clinical practice and observation "Interactive play that fosters mutual smiling, laughing, and delights between caregiver and child is a particularly powerful source of emotional bonding" (p. 181).

[44] Research and practice in the field of psychotherapy have revealed that "play can boost a client's development, self-control, self-esteem, creativity, and resiliency" (*ibid*, p. 211).

their understanding of, and interaction with themselves, their peers, and society. Through play, participants are able to modulate their understanding of the definitive "what is," confront it with the subjunctive, "What if," and emerge with an emboldened interrogative, "Why not?!"

Furthermore, psychiatrist Stuart Brown (2016), the founder of the National Institute of Play has found that the activity of play is a crucial element in the process of problem solving and of equalizing power differentials. He observes that the "state of play" is an "altered state" that allows participants to "explore the possible" beyond the extant material reality they face. *Pipelines to Pathways* facilitates multiple routes through which marginalized individuals are empowered to "play" and re-script their lives through the arts. Thus, it mobilizes play in a way that prepares us to transcend the identity delimiting forces of dehumanization, criminalization, incarceration and school discipline. Perhaps performance can empower us to write new scripts, wherein we may mobilize our activity toward positive change in ourselves and our communities.

A Pedagogical Approach to Reclaiming Our Positive, Dignified, Agential Selves

> Without community dialogue and participation in decision-making around problem definition and solutions, policy changes- whether they are socioeconomic or specific risk factor reductions- cannot contribute to community empowerment (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994, p. 144).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* approach to performance-centered critical pedagogy is based upon a robust body of research on performance-centered youth intervention programming argues that telling our stories publicly can generate a powerful sense of critical consciousness, belonging, and hope, especially among marginalized youth (Cohen & Palidofsky, 2016; Conrad, 2013; Conrad et al, 2015; Fine, 2003; Madison, 2010; Palidofsky & Stolbach, 2012). Performance-centered pedagogy practitioner Diane Conrad works with "high risk youth"[45] to

[45] Conrad and the youth whom she serves prefer not to use the term "high risk", as its use performs a normalizing function that tends to stigmatize these particular youth. However, based upon funding and the need to use terms that can be readily accessed in the current discursive régime, she used this timer to refer to those youth who have been

engage in "theater, storytelling, creative writing, poetry, rap, visual and digital arts, as well as drawing on content from youth's experiences, as ways of engaging them to express and analyze issues that they identified as relevant" (Conrad et al, 2015, p. 26). This approach allows practitioners and students to imaginatively explore what they think they *know*, to endeavor to *grow*, and to plan for where they want to *go* in life. Actively and innovatively incorporating the students' lived experiences with the learning process has also shown to be a crucial means of engaging them – including family involvement, openly discussing issues of diversity, stereotyping and discrimination, and other culturally relevant opportunities by which the students are encouraged to articulate and reflect upon their own respective and collective relationships to the material and the agency that they wield in their own *transformation* process (Dewey, 1916, hooks, 1994, 1998, Murrell, 2002, Edwards, et al., 2010, Smith, 2010, Souto-Manning, 2010, Nasir, 2012, Gorski, 2013).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project incorporates a Critical Pedagogy Scholar Paolo Freire's approach to pedagogy and social liberation. Freire's (1970) philosophy of critical pedagogy and social activism acknowledges systems of oppression while empowering the oppressed to actively partake in a struggle to "liberate" themselves and their larger society, via a "cultural revolution" (p. 158). Freire's (1970) work seeks to bring a new critical consciousness (*conscientization*[46]) to the oppressed student whereby the student works in solidarity with other students, teachers, and their larger community to achieve collective freedom from oppression. Freedom is achieved in this model through a process of continuous critical dialogue between the students and teachers first, and the oppressors later.

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exposed to, or shown a high propensity toward poverty, homelessness, incarceration, abuse, school discipline, substance abuse, or a number of other measures of risk.

[46] Translated from the Portuguese *conscientização.*

The goal of the critical pedagogy that I practice in this project is to address the dehumanization of the oppressed subject by empowering the oppressed to "perceive the reality of oppression" and to actualize their inherent power to "transform" the situation (Freire, 1970, p. 48-49). In Freire's (1970) model, the oppressed subject has been systematically lulled into compliance based on a conviction that struggle and desire for change are futile. Thus, they misrecognize themselves and their power to "overcome the situations which limit [them]" (p. 99). In this way, the oppressed student finds themselves trapped in what Freire refers to as a "limit-situation" – one that projects the illusion of insurmountability and dissuades the oppressed person from resisting the status quo or struggling toward liberation (Freire, 1970, p. 99). Freire (1970) challenges teachers and students to work collaboratively toward experiencing conscientization - a "decoding process," whereby the mind of the oppressed is freed from the illusion of limit-situations. Freire (1970) calls this process the "decodification" of limit-situations: "In order for the oppressed to be able to wage the struggle for their liberation, they must perceive the reality of oppression not as a closed world from which there is no exit, but as a limit- situation which they can transform" (p. 49). Through *Pipelines to Pathways*, I teach modes of performance that help my collaborators and me to decode our limit-situations and to express our critical consciousness of them. In turn, through public performance, we teach/learn modes of being, perceiving, and acting to ourselves and larger audiences.

Freire (1970) declares that "the object of dialogic action is to make it possible for the oppressed […] to opt to transform an unjust reality" (p. 174). Likewise, in the realm of theater Augusto Boal (1979) demands that "all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society [to] arrive at the *poetics of the oppressed*, the conquest of the means of theatrical production" (p. x). Boal (1979) proposes a conceptualization of theater as "change and not

simple presentation of what exists: it is becoming and not being" (p. 28). Boal (1995) declares that "*The human being not only 'makes' theatre: it 'is' theatre*." He defines theatre here as "this capacity, this human property which allows man to observe himself in action, in activity" (p. 15).

Thus, the person who participates in devised interactive theatre activities activates an intra-intersubjectivity when they become a spect-actor. This not only liberates the spectator to gain a deeper understanding of themselves and their context (as object), but it also gives her permission and space as an actor and witness (subject) to imagine transmutations, transitions and transformation of herself and her context. As Boal (1995) describes it, *aesthetic space* (any space where theatrical performance happens) liberates, in the human mind, the *affective* dimension, which is rooted in memory, as well as the *oneiric* dimension, which is rooted in imagination. Boal (1995) argues that the human being is "tri-dimensional" in her subjectivity – that is, she can simultaneously be the object of performance, the audience to performance, and one who observes and considers the currently nonexistent possibilities for herself, as exhibited, or incited, by the performance (p. 14). It is by tapping into this profoundly reflexive capacity of human nature that embodied theatrical performance activates the imagination toward creation, transformation, and self-production.

Thus, *Pipelines to Pathways* enacts a performance-centered pedagogical model as practice for action and transformation that will occur both inside and outside of the classroom/workshop. The intent of this project resonates with the observations that Laura Soble and Janet K. Long (2007) made after conducting art and drama therapy with inner city youth in three different settings:

> Art and drama therapies are, by their nature, transformative: children become aware, and are able to express, externalize, and transform difficult cognitive and emotional material, which allows them to formulate new approaches and attitudes to life […] The arts as a

> mode of communication, giving students a possibility to express feelings of despair and fear and an opportunity to receive positive feedback about strengths (p. 195).

As Boal (1979) posits in his *Theatre of the Oppressed*, scholars and practitioners have discovered that diverse modes of applying performance-centered pedagogy can lead to Freire's conscientization. When marginalized peoples are allowed to participate in the unsettling of origins, they are further empowered to question the current state of affairs, and to imagine their ability to choose and inform alternate destinations.

To this end *Pipelines to Pathways* incorporates some elements of Boal's work in its effort to empower and engage Black youth. Warren Linds et al. (2015) offered me an example of this approach. They implemented a *Theatre of the Oppressed*-based collaborative research partnership consisting of indigenous and settler youth in Canada. For this project, they conducted workshops that "provide[d] a performance-based theatrical structure for dialogue on significant social, cultural, and health issues... and create[d] imaginative "blueprints" for possible future choices" (p. 4). Linds et al. (2015) discovered that an intervention with marginalized youth "also develop leadership skills: youth begin to question habitual thinking as they become aware that through knowledge they are better equipped to take appropriate independent action..." (p. 4). Research like this has proven that a performance-centered youth intervention programs have mobilized performance as rehearsal for revolution.

Performance-centered critical pedagogy has also been proven to build the social capital of marginalized youth. Kersha Smith (2010) applies a Foucauldian framework to her observation of how the CDF *Freedom Schools* program attempts to foster more empowering and encouraging régimes of truth by carefully constructing an environment of hope and high expectations, wherein the students are referred to as "scholars" and young adult interns are referred to as "servant leaders." This daily performance of referring to the participants (and them referring to

each other accordingly) as “scholars” and “servant leaders” endows them with the authority of valuable experts. Accordingly, in the *Pipelines to Pathways* program, we honor the power of words labels and discourse as we collaborate to create, curate, and communicate our stories.

Troy Harden, et al. (2014) cites a “youth violence prevention and intervention program” in Chicago where adults employed performance-centered practices to facilitate a process of “building social capital and achieving social discipline through participatory learning and decision-making that enables people to restore and build community,” with the goal of “promot[ing] resilience and protective factors for youth” (p. 66). Thus, performance-centered pedagogy helps students to recognize the gifts, talents, and unique perspectives that they currently have, while encouraging them to expand and explore new insights and skill sets.

From acting games to live performances with audiences, performance-centered critical pedagogy produces a repertoire of cultural performances that find their aesthetic space both inside and outside the classroom setting. Linds et al. (2015) observes: "Through games we find the balance between freedom and control, which is necessary to help people discover and explore the different facets of their personalities" (p. 12). Embodied games that challenge students to express themselves in new and embodied ways. These games facilitate a process by which students are empowered to play their way into new understandings of self and society, dignity and agency (Boal, 1995; Gruwell, 2009; Rohd, 1998). Harden, et al. (2014) call for further research in this area, which would include a “rigorous re-application” and a “standardized trauma-informed youth oriented curriculum” that is “flexible and adapt[s] to particular social and cultural context in which they are carried out” (Harden, et al.., 2014, p. 77). Developing such a curriculum requires the discovery of tactics, processes, and spaces of liberty.

The performance-centered critical pedagogy enacted by *Pipelines to Pathways* is committed to meeting students where they are while honoring and making space for them to process and express their unique life experiences and positionalities. I designed this project based upon my understanding that many of the marginalized youth with whom I work "have lived much of their lives in high risk and abusive situations, suffering physical, mental, sexual abuse or neglect, or otherwise negative domestic environments involving violence, crime and substance use" (Conrad, 2013, p. 7). The overwhelming majority of my collaborators have experienced pervasive and persistent forms of trauma. For this reason, this project had to address the existence of trauma, as it pervaded our interactions and expressions of identities. I have learned from Meade Palidofsky's work, which spans over 25 years of actively applying performance-centered pedagogy with often highly traumatized incarcerated teens through Chicago's Storycatchers program, that providing consistent empathic witness, establishing a safe place for the witnessing and sharing of trauma, setting shared goals. The work of programs like Storycatchers and *My Life Matters* forms a community wherein discussion of traumatic experience is de-stigmatized and a collaborative artistic approach to creating a theatrical product that expresses trauma performatively, can help youth to cope and work through past trauma.

A recurring theme that arises among contemporary thinkers in critical pedagogy and critical race studies is the necessity of a supportive, confirmatory, culturally relevant dialogic environment. When communities, educators, and students work together dialogically to construct such an environment, learners are intentionally encouraged to partake in a constantly evolving and open process of "becoming" that transcends their existing limit-situation and connects them to positive notions of their own racialized identities and to the learning process (Ginwright, 2010, 2016, Nasir, 2012). Freire (1970) declares that "the object of dialogic action is to make it

possible for the oppressed […] to opt to transform an unjust reality" (p. 174). This process often incorporates innovative and unorthodox elements across multiple disciplines such as performance/theater, contemporary music, group activities, art, movement, civic engagement, social activism, as well as setting high academic standards *with* students' input (Ginwright, 2010, 2016, Ladson-Billings, 1998, Nasir, 2012, Payne, 2008).

With regard to racially conscious critical pedagogy, Na'hila Suad Nasir (2012) stresses the importance of what she calls "teaching for identity-building" in order to effectively support and empower Black students in the U.S. Her research has revealed that environments that help Black students to succeed must first understand that their identities have been "racialized" by systemic White supremacy. These "racialized identities" inform students' learning patterns as well as their perceptions, and attitudes toward self and education (Ginwright, 2010, 2016; Nasir, 2012). Nasir (2012) suggests that educators interested in addressing this issue create environments for students that include the following five crucial elements: (1) "Caring relationships among members of the school community"; (2) "Spaces where students are cared about as whole people; (3) "Access to material resources for all students; "(4) "Culturally relevant practices;" and (5) "Explicit conversations about race and managing discrimination" (p. 163). Furthermore, establishing a supportive, student-centered and democratic environment focused on liberation and *transformation* of the students has been shown to improve student academic performance, self-image, and self-concept (Ladson-Billings, 1994, Cooper &Simonds, 2007, Shor, 1996). Rios (2011) concludes that "the more rehabilitative, reintegrative, and positive their interactions with authority figures, the more the boys believed in themselves and understood themselves to have a better future" (p. 23). This research reveals the great influence that authority figures have on the self-concept and lived experience of marginalized youth. For

this project, I examine my roles and interactions as teacher/leader/performer who works with Black youth in this context.

A Participatory Approach to Reclaiming Our Positive, Dignified, Agential Selves

> [A] move to activism occurs when research fractures the very ideologies that justify power inequities (Fine, 1994, p. 24).

The *My Life Matters* project is heavily informed by the extensive research done in the field of YPAR, which reveals an empowering model for effecting liberation and social change with youth. The YPAR model generally focuses on building relationships, establishing a safe space, working through collective trauma caused by poverty, marginalization, and violence, building cultural knowledge and pride, and facilitating civic engagement for youth (Irizarry, 2009). This model, executed in diverse communities through diverse modalities has been shown to effectively improve the self-esteem, sense of self-efficacy, and the tendency to make positive life choices for youth participants (Conrad, 2015; Fine, 2009; Harden et al., 2014, Irizarry, 2009). Irizarry (2009) cites multiple examples where YPAR has engaged youth and equipped them to become activists "in the struggle for social justice and educational equity" that has "positively shape[d] their life trajectories, while simultaneously challenging the multiple forms of oppression that delimit them and reproduce social inequality" (p. 195-196).

Performance-centered YPAR practitioner Diane Conrad and her colleagues observe that "what is really needed is research that works towards concrete improvements in the lives of youth" (Conrad et al., 2015 p. 21). Their "Uncensored" project is an example of how performance ethnography can fulfill its commitment to action through a PAR model. In addition to playing acting games, writing and conducting staged performances, the "Uncensored" group produced and implemented youth-designed and youth-lead workshops for adult educators and youth service providers in their community. The Art works that the youth developed were used

to start conversations about the relevant issues at hand, moving toward collaborative solutions with community stakeholders. Just as Conquergood (2013) admonishes ethnographers to avoid "art for art's sake," YPAR practitioners resist the urge to seek knowledge for knowledge's sake. The desired product of YPAR is "reflective, invited, practical knowledge that helps people to name, and consequently, to change their world" (Conrad et al., 2015, p. 26). YPAR seeks new understandings and perspectives based upon local embodied knowledges.

The Photovoice method, implemented through the *My Life Matters* project, represents an effective blending of photography, ethnography, and performance/arts-based YPAR. For over three decades now, the process of Photovoice (also known as "Photo Novella") has been used by PAR practitioners to explore the**ir** perspectives through photography, and to garner a larger audience for local marginalized populations (Castleden, Garvin, & Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008, Wang & Burris, 1994). Photovoice works by generating photographs as expressions of the participants' lived experiences, perspectives, and positionalities with regard to a particular social issue. Participants meet regularly to share and discuss their photographs, then they collaboratively curate a public sharing of some of the photographs. By presenting the photographs and photographers in the same space, the Photovoice method facilitates a process of critical embodied storytelling. Wang and Burris (1994) note that "photographs serve as one kind of 'code' that reflect the community back upon itself, mirroring the everyday social and political realities" (p. 172). Photovoice has been most extensively used in the field of public health, but also has implications for the social sciences in general (Rudd, Comfort, Manzilo, & Zani, 1994, Wallerstein, 1994).

Photovoice has proven to be an effective participatory research tool that equips and engages diverse marginalized populations toward the end of achieving social justice and civic

engagement around a myriad of social issues (Wang & Burris, 1994, Rudd et al.., 1994, Wallerstein, 1994). Successful Photovoice projects have served diverse communities by producing formative research, pilot studies, case studies, community needs/assets assessments, policy/advocacy, and program evaluation (Lightfoot, 2014). Photovoice has been used effectively to examine and address diverse social issues as well, like Latinx youth's perceptions of medical communication, living with HIV, homelessness, and racial identity's interaction with adolescent health and education (Catalani & Winkler, 2010). Such projects have generated new community relationships and organizations, as well as public forums and leadership opportunities for participants to engage with stakeholders and policy makers who can impact these issues directly. Thus the Photovoice method offers a proven means of generating a performative praxis and repertoire that can be mobilized to serve as analysis, artistry, and activism for social transformation.

A Performance Approach to Reclaiming Our Positive, Dignified, Agential Selves

> 'We' is a political and intellectual stance; a wish worth aspiring toward; a fantasy never coherently achieved. 'Our' work is a montage, and it is anything but intellectually independent (Fine, 1994, p. 30).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project enacts performance-centered mode of critical ethnography that includes performance ethnography, performed ethnography, and performed autoethnography. I have found ethnography to be a particularly fertile mode for processing and generating critical theory and analysis because it counters the traditional positivist and elitist tendencies of scientific research that form and fortify many master narratives in the Western world. Conquergood (1991) observes that critical ethnography unsettles the status quo of scholarship in four ways. First, it calls for a "return to the body" by privileging embodied knowledge as valid expert knowledge. Second, its preoccupation with "boundaries and

borderlands" launches ethnographers out of the social centers to connect and build bridges with those marginalized people who exist on the periphery. In this way, critical ethnography has the tendency to bring marginalized people to the center of the social and scholarly gaze. Third, critical ethnography has ushered in "the rise of performance," which, as a dramaturgical lens, lends itself to the analysis of the embodied social and cultural performances that unfold in the ethnographic field. The ethnographer's gaze includes, and transcends language and written text, thereby allowing it to interact with, and take in, the sundry forms of extra-textual and extra-lingual human performances that reveal our practices, passions and priorities. Fourth, critical ethnography is grounded in "rhetorical reflexivity" – an understanding that the writings of the ethnographer re-present the ethnographer's subjects to others in a way that reveals the ethnographer's own biases and positionality with respect to the subject and intended audience.

Performance ethnography, as practiced in *Pipelines to Pathways,* is what happens when the critical ethnographic process of study is applied to the cultural performances observed and created in the field. Madison (2012) argues that performance ethnography ought to focus on generating "intersubjectivity" whereby performance ethnographers ask "the audience to travel empathically to the world of the subjects and to feel and know some of what they feel and know, two life-worlds meet and the domain of outsider and insider are simultaneously demarcated and fused" (p. 194) (cf. Lugones' (2010) "world travel"). She charges critical ethnographers to demand of their work reflexivity, collaboration, ethical other-centeredness, and a drive toward "equity, freedom, and justice" (p. 5). To this end, the performance ethnography enacted by *Pipelines to Pathways* is aimed at creating public critical consciousness, conversations, and courses of action that positively reclaim and reframe the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities.

Performed ethnography is what happens when the research is staged and presented for a public audience. The researcher(s) take(s) to the stage to embody their findings before a witness of audience members. The embodied performance of these findings takes the place of oral or written reports. Critical performed ethnography commits the researcher/performer to putting skin in the game and holding themselves accountable to being an agent of the social transformation that they seek.

Performed autoethnography combines autobiography and performed ethnography to push the researcher into the embodied expression of their critical reflexivity (Madison, 2012). The result is that the researcher now steps into the roles of ethnographer, autobiographer, performative writer, and performer all at once. A new entity arises from this coalescence – what Tami Spry (2006) refers to as the *performative-I.* This entity coalesces data collection and critical reflection with data expression by drawing from, and empathically digesting, diverse forms of text, social interaction, and embodied experience (cf. Conquergood's "co-performative witnessing"). The performative-I is charged with expressing the intellectual, empathic, and embodied processes and products that arise through the field experience. Sandra Faulkner (2020) articulates the particularly poignant practice of poetic inquiry as a method of her own autoethnography:

> I show that poetry as/in/for research offers scholars , teachers, and practitioners a means of doing, showing, and teaching embodiment and reflexivity, a way to refuse the mind-body dialectic, a form of ethnography and qualitative research, and a catalyst for social agitation and change (p. 2).

The result is a performative practice that simultaneously analyzes social issues and the researcher/performer's unique positionality, standpoint, and biases with respect to these issues.

In the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, these performance-centered modes of critical ethnography generate both practices and products of analysis, artistry, and activism. Madison

(2010) notes that performance ethnographers recreate "'templates of sociality,' decoding [their] field data in order to record it 'beautifully' for the stage event" (p. 13). The result is a performative repertoire that *does* things in the real world. For Diana Taylor (2004), this repertoire is that significant body of knowledge that is actualized in a "nonarchival system of [embodied] transfer" of knowledge (p. xvii). In this way, performance and performed ethnography help us to explore, examine, and engaging both the archive (scripts, records, writings, etc.) and the repertoire (live performances, visual arts, photography, etc.) to uncover the truth that is rooted deep beneath the complex routes that cut across our diverse lived experiences.

Performing Our Way from Pipeline to Pathways

> hurt people ~~hurt~~ help people (A collaborative poetic rendering of the lesson of forgiveness and resilience created with youth participants in a self-expression workshop, 2017).

Performance studies offers us a praxis for pulling our identities up, and into, frames of positivity, dignity, and agency that racism denies or delimits. People are constantly performing their identities on a stage of dynamically shifting and overlapping frames of identity. In America, these everyday performances are scripted by racialized norms and expectations. With specific regard to race, Judith Butler (1993) explains that "'race' is partially constructed as an effect of the history of racism, that its boundaries and meanings are constructed over time not only in the service of racism, but also in the service of the contestation of racism" (p. 18). She argues that, even while faced with racialized, sexed and gendered norms of subjectification, the individual has agency to play with - or modify - these norms by "rearticulating" them. She notes that there are spaces of "ambivalence which [open] up the possibility of reworking of the very terms by which subjectification proceeds—and fails to proceed" (p. 124). The performance process, with its requirement of energy, courage, and imagination, offers such spaces of ambivalence

(Conquergood, 2013). In this revolutionary/liberatory/therapeutic space, teachers/learners/spect-actors may be empowered to "decode" and deconstruct their lived experiences and begin to pursue a Freirean liberation - "both 'freedom from' internal and external forms of oppression and 'freedom to' pursue dreams, wellness, peace and a better quality of life" for themselves and others (Freire, 1970, p. 17).

Julia Moore (2017) critically explores this notion of performative liberation by applying a Foucauldian *Power/Knowledge* analytic, along with Judith Butler's theory of performativity to Goffman's dramaturgy model to develop a "Performative Face Theory" (PFT) (Foucault, 1980). PFT is a mode of CIPCT that reveals "how identity work relates to broader materializations of power" (p. 259). By grappling with Goffman's concept of "face threats" (existential challenges to a person's face in the context of a particular social interaction), Moore (2017) highlights the power dynamics that are exhibited by the resulting "face work" (a person's efforts to maintain a desired or expected front to counter or resist a given face threat) (p. 261). With PFT, Moore is able to criticize the patriarchal and heteronormative structures that pressure women to comply with a collective representation of motherhood.

This process of developing a critical consciousness of the self object may also help members of dominant people groups to critically consider, and transform, their own part in perpetuating structures and systems of oppression. Similar to the symbolic interactionist conceptualization of the "generalized other," DiAngelo (2018) observes, "We gain our understanding of group meaning collectively through aspects of the society around us that are shared and unavoidable: television, movies, news items, song lyrics, magazines, textbooks, schools, religion, literature, stories, jokes, traditions, and practices, history, and so on" (p. 11). These are the texts that frame our identities. She clarifies, "Our understanding of ourselves is

necessarily based on our comparisons with others" (p. 11). When, we playfully examine this process and refuse to frame our own sense of positivity, dignity, and agency as mutually exclusive with the positivity, dignity, and agency held by others, we begin to experience the transformative power of mutual response-ability and interest convergence. We are able to come to voice, witness, love, and stand with one another in ways that save face while drawing us toward critical social transformation.

Ultimately the very work of critical performance is connection. This work connects people to their stories, and their stories to other peoples' stories, and these collective stories to social change. The literature reveals that when we come to voice by performing our lived experiences for a witness, we are able to generate a profound response-ability in both performer and witness. This response-ability facilitates the responsibility that compels us to act ethically toward the other. As Glenister Roberts (2004) observes of storytelling: "Creating the story of one's life and becoming embedded in it – becoming a person rather than an 'individual' – informs one's ethical decision and binds one in a moral duty to other persons in the narrative" (p. 131). This chain reaction – this fission of agential subject from individual self object - can explode into transformation. Oliver (2001) suggests that humans pursue subjectivity as "the result of a process of witnessing that connects us through the tissues of language and gestures" and supersedes the senses of sight and sound (p. 223). We do this by putting skin into the game, and performance facilitates this act of revolution.

The power of performance is that it not only communicates revolution, but, it also wields the capacity to embody revolution. Communication Scholar John Durham Peters (1999) warns us of the persistent limitations of human connection via mere communication: "One must often sacrifice the dream of fidelity in representing one's own feelings and thoughts in order to evoke

the truest image of them for the other," he observes (p. 266). Peters conceptualizes the persistent perpetual divide between one's self and the "other" as a gaping chasm that lies open between subjects. He observes that this chasm can never quite be completely bridged by the process of communication. We will never fully get the drift of others with whom we interact. Perfect communicative fidelity is impossible. In fact, racism widens that chasm. As Patricia Williams (1997) declares, racism

> is a gaze that insists upon the power to make others conform, to perform endlessly in the prison of prior expectation, circling repetitively back upon the expired utility of the entirely known. Our rescue, our deliverance perhaps, lies in the possibility of listening across that great divide, of being surprised by the Unknown, by the unknowable (p. 74).

Peters (1999) postulates that "presence becomes the closest thing there is to a guarantee of a bridge across the chasm" (p.271). Ultimately, the live and embodied human interactions that emerge from doing the work to build those bridges promise possibilities for lasting, meaningful, and generative – albeit imperfect and incomplete – human connection that transcends race.

The fact is that "one" and "the other" dwell, move, feel and signify in and through material bodies. Thus, Peters (1999) concludes, "Touch and time, the two nonreproducible things we can share, are our only guarantees of sincerity" (p. 271). Peters' ultimate goal – along with Conquergood, Boal, Freire, Madison, Lugones, Oliver, and others cited here - though lofty and metaphysical, seems noble and useful to me - love. How can human beings show sincere love – life changing, difference making, and hope inspiring love - to one another? It must be embodied, because we are embodied. Performance is an embodied mode of art-making, analyzing, and activating that allows us, as scholars to "go" to each other. As we perform for and with one another, we commit our bodies and minds to the connective act of going into the chasm – boldly taking the breach – world traveling. We become connective tissue. Performance studies is about putting skin in the game, knowing that we will never fully understand the essential "other," but

we can understand each other better. The better we understand each other, and our experiences navigating diverse social ills, the more equipped we are to develop emergent narratives that address those ills together.

As a researcher, dramatist, and caregiver to Black youth, I have embarked upon this risky venture of performance-centered praxis in order dredge up roots of racialized pipelines and drive toward routes of antiracist pathways. It is through this process of performatively coming to voice that my collaborators and I call others into empathy and solidarity with our lived experience. I draw on hooks' (2015) example of actively and strategically placing the voice of the Black woman at the center of her work – not as "an action to exclude others but rather as an invitation, a challenge to those who would hear us speak, to shift paradigms rather than appropriate, to have all readers listen to the voice of a black woman speaking a subject and not an underprivileged other" (p. 16). My collaborators and I engage in acts of performance that are centered around our performative writing that boldly claims the positivity, dignity, and agency endowed to us by the Creator. As Della Pollock (1998) explains, "performative writing enters into the arena of contest to which it appeals with the affective investment of one who has been there and will be there at the end, who has a stake in the outcome of the exchange" (p. 96). With this in mind, this project performatively centers the voices of Black youth and their caregivers to call community members into critical conversations about how we can do better for our children.

Through this ambitious performance-centered approach my collaborators and I confront the School to Prison Pipeline by reclaiming our right to participate in sincere, active, embodied acts of love for ourselves, each other, and our communities. bell hooks' (2015) notion of reclaiming ourselves (or "self recovery") is particularly relevant and salient in my execution of the *My Life Matters* YPAR project and in my development and performance of *The Talk.* By

examining the parlayance between the experiences of the pushes and pulls of the School to Prison Pipeline and empirical evidence, my youth collaborators and I discover new pathways to voice that all at once call us into response-ability and challenge us with the responsibility for antiracist action. In exploring the roots of racism, colorism, Black suffering, and struggle that forged the route that I instinctually followed in administering "The Talk" with my son, I am able to put together and "reunite the fragments of being, to recover our history" (hooks, 2015, p. 31).

My immodest proposal here is that those with institutionalized privilege and agency in our society sacrifice the bliss of ignorance and disconnectedness to make spaces in their hearts, minds, and spheres of influence where they will hear our voices and witness our stories. Together we will deconstruct stock stories, dismantle biotropes, decode limit-situations, transcend misrecognition, and disrupt the forces that push and pull Black youth toward the School to Prison Pipeline. Our embodied storytelling will poetically and playfully reframe and reclaim from the sacrificial altar our inherent right to our positive, dignified, agential identities.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Overview

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project employs two distinct components aimed at learning from, and with, Black youth and their caregivers, the impacts that a performance-centered approach to critical pedagogy, critical ethnography, and Participatory Action Research (PAR) can have on efforts to empower and encourage Black youth and their community members to countenance and counter the School to Prison Pipeline. The *My Life Matters* collaborators and I developed, dramatized, demonstrated, and dialogued with subaltern narratives derived from our own perspectives and lived experiences. With *The Talk,* I perform a critical autoethnography tracing my own understanding of, and experience with, the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth from the standpoint of a Black caregiver. These subaltern narratives counter extant dominant narratives in order to disrupt the historical, psycho-social, socio-economic, and discursive processes that form, foster, and frame the School to Prison Pipeline and the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth.

The primary data collected includes poetry, prose, photography, theatrical scripts, and field notes generated by my collaborators and me. This data is supplemented by archival data, surveys, and transcripts from interviews, self-expression workshops, performances, and post-performance talk-backs. I analyzed the data collected to measure the capacity for the two components of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project to impact both performers' and audience members' perceptions of self, society, racial inequity, and our own capacity and propensity to counter that inequity.

The *My Life Matters* project is the PAR component of *Pipelines to Pathways.* This approach to engaged scholarship is based upon "an epistemology that assumes knowledge is rooted in social relations and most powerful when produced collaboratively through action" (Fine, 2004, p. 173). *My Life Matters* activates Lee Ann Bell's (2010) *Storytelling for Social Justice* model by curating and publicly performing *concealed*, *resistance*, and *emerging/ transforming* stories with Black youth participants in order to counter and contextualize the dominant discourses that form the extant *stock* stories of the School to Prison Pipeline. *My Life Matters* was conducted in collaboration with the Find-A-Friend youth program of Fayetteville Urban Ministry (FAF), during a six-week summer camp spanning three summers (2016 – 2018). Participants included 36 youth between the ages of 12 and 18, eight adult staff members, two adult summer camp volunteers, and 50 audience members.

The critical pedagogy component of *Pipelines to Pathways* is centered in my observations and praxis, conducting self-expression workshops with Black youth during *My Life Matters.* These workshops aimed to performatively explore, express and empower the positive, dignified, agential selves within each co-learner. During these workshops, I utilized pedagogical tactics and concepts from Paulo Freire's (1970) *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* model, Augusto Boal's (1979) *Theater of the Oppressed* model, and Shawn Ginwright's (2010) *Radical Healing* model. I also employed pedagogical and performative practices that I gleaned from African and African American storytelling traditions as well as some of those outlined in Michael Rohd's (1998) *Theatre for Community, Conflict & Dialogue,* Augusto Boal's (2002) *Games for Actors and Non-Actors* (2002), Susan E. Carrell's (2004) *Group Exercises for Adolescents,* and Erin Gruwell and The Freedom Writers Foundation (2007) *The Freedom Writers Diary Teacher's Guide.*

Inspired by my experience as a parent, family member, community member, mentor, teacher, and friend of Black youth, and heavily informed by my work with the youth of *My Life Matters*, *The Talk* has emerged as a work of critical performed autoethnography that has helped me to both reframe and reclaim Black youth identity before public audiences. I wrote and developed *The Talk* as a one-person performance between April 2015 and March 2018. I performed it four times as a student project as part of the University of North Carolina (UNC) Chapel Hill's Communication Department in March 2018. Between July 2018 and February 2019, I performed *The Talk*, as directed by UNC Chapel Hill performance professor Joseph Megel, 19 times for audiences in Fayetteville, Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I have performed *The Talk* at churches, community centers, and theaters. Audiences ranged in size from 15 to 200 people. With every performance of *The Talk*, I facilitate or participated in a post-performance talk-back. Participants included 15 classmates in Professor Joseph Megel's course, Communication 660 Advanced Projects in Performance Studies, which I took to develop the piece dramaturgically during the fall 2016 and fall 2017 semesters. The March 2018 production included five production team members and approximately 200 audience members total. The seven performances that I did between July and December of 2018 included production teams ranging from two to three people and approximately 300 audience members in total. The January-February, 2019 production included a production team of nine theater professionals, and over 1,000 audience members total.

To provide context and foundation, I comprehensively surveyed the archive of public databases regarding crime, racial equity and incarceration, such as the Anne E. Casey Foundation, the Children's Defense Fund, the Equal Justice Initiative, the NAACP, and the Sentencing Project. I have accessed public archives and newspapers such as the North Carolina

Department of Public Instruction, the North Carolina Department of Juvenile Justice, the U.S Census, *The Fayetteville Observer,* and national news to develop foundational understanding of the statistical parameters of racial inequity, social perceptions of Black youth, and the School to Prison Pipeline. I have also incorporated insights and ideas from literary exemplars like W.E. Du Bois, Te-Nehisi Coates, James Baldwin, Langston Hughes, and Howard L. Craft to help to frame this conversation. I have reviewed multiple texts, journal articles, films, and online videos pertaining to Black youth, critical performance, performance-centered youth interventions, critical pedagogy, sociology, PAR, Youth PAR, racial equity, Critical Race Theory (CRT), the School to Prison Pipeline, and "The Talk" (as a genre).

Critical Dialogic Performance-Centered Modes of Discovery and Dialogue

> Diasporic Spidering allows for many different points of intersection and modes of passage to be woven together around a central core—the individual searcher/journeyer. Rather than describing a fixed moment in time, African diaspora (and black identity) in this sense becomes also a contemporary active process—an act, a performative (George-Graves, 2014, p. 37).

My approach to analyzing and addressing the School to Prison Pipeline and the marginalization and criminalization of Black youth is a particularly critical and dialogic one. When I say that my analysis is a critical one, I mean that it is ontologically based in "historical realism" – the understanding that we live in - and perceive ourselves and society through - our experiences. These experiences are embedded within a "virtual reality shaped by social, political, cultural, economic, ethnic, and gender values [that have] crystallized over time" (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 98). In other words, no social problem can be effectively and honestly engaged without attending to the historical, psycho-social, socio-economic, and discursive roots that have formed, fostered, and framed it. Epistemologically, my critical approach to research both acknowledges and honors the inherently "transactional,"

"subjectivist," and "value-mediated"/value-laden process of communicating, meaning making, teaching, and learning truth. Axiologically, I am committed to a praxis that honors the positivity, dignity, and agency of my collaborators while always seeking to leverage the research in ways that will benefit them in real life and forge routes of antiracist action toward equity and liberation for us all (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011, p. 98).

To achieve this, the *Pipelines to Pathways* project employs the following research methods:

(1) Participatory Action Research (PAR) is that research that acquires new information *with* and *for* local communities, as opposed to *on* or *from* them. The praxis of performance-centered PAR consists of collaborative acts of creative expression, storytelling, performance making, and the collective analysis thereof. I applied a uniquely performance-centered approach to Nina Wallerstein and Edward Bernstein's (1994) use of PAR for problem naming *and* problem solving.

(2) Performance ethnography helps me to examine the historical, social, and cultural context in which my collaborators and I are co-performing and co-creating performance.

(3) Performed ethnography is enacted when the *My Life Matters* participants share our performative repertoire and when I perform *The Talk* for public audiences.

A Critical Performance-Centered Approach to Pedagogy and PAR

> [W]e must not stand on stage as solitary beings basking in borrowed light. No lasting good will come of it. We must instead be light-bearers, letting the collective amplify the light of the individual and allowing the shared responsibility and glow if it to change us (Renée Alexander Craft, *When the Devil Knocks*, 2015, p. xiii).

I utilize critical performance-centered pedagogy and PAR because they have addressed the top-down failure of popular analysis mentioned above while offering invaluable insight into the lived experiences of marginalized youth (Conrad et al., 2015; *Ginwright, 2010; Irizarry, 2009; Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1994).* They lend themselves to a Foucauldian approach to critical social and cultural analysis, studying power at its extremities, "in its ultimate destinations, with those points where it becomes capillary, that is, in its more regional and local forms and institutions" (Foucault, 1980, p. 96). Here, I focus my analysis on a unique group of 35 adolescents on the fringe of society, experiencing the push and pull of the School to Prison Pipeline in Cumberland County, North Carolina.

I engage Black youth identity at the capillary level, with small groups of two to 35 youth at a time. I conduct performance-centered self-expression workshops through which I have developed the *3D* model of performance-centered youth engagement. First, I/we *demonstrate* a creative performative form of self-expression (a poem, a theatrical performance, a photograph, a song, etc.). Next, I facilitate a *dialogue* with my co-learners around the demonstrated bit of self-expression. Finally, we systematically *develop* individual and collective creative performative expressions of our own experiences, perspectives and understandings. What the performance work we develop is informed and inspired by the preceding demonstration and dialogue. Through the 3D process, my collaborators and I produce a performative repertoire.

The PAR method of Photovoice (also known as "Photo Novella" - a qualitative research method by which participants express their observations through critical analysis fused with original photography) expands this repertoire to include photography that explores the perspectives of local marginalized populations (Castleden, Garvin, &Huu-ay-aht First Nation, 2008, Wang & Burris, 1994). My performative approach to Photovoice includes a modified form

of Photovoice that encourages youth participants to create and analyze original poetry and prose alongside their interpretations and analysis of their photography. The Photovoice process as employed in the *Pipelines to Pathways* project serves as a particularly puissant complement to the 3D model for performance-centered youth engagement. It includes an iterative line of inquiry based upon the SHOWED method of inquiry that my collaborators and I apply to photography, poetry, music, embodied performances, and other texts. SHOWED is a systematic method of decoding limit-situations toward critical consciousness and liberation. The steps of SHOWED are: (1) What do you SEE in this photograph/performance? (2) What is really HAPPENING in this photograph/performance? (3) How does this relate to OUR lives? (4) WHY does this issue exist? (5) How can we become EMPOWERED by our new understanding? (6) What can we DO about this? (Lightfoot, 2014; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Critical Performed Ethnography in Action

> [M]an is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law, but an interpretive one in search of meaning (Clifford Geertz, 1973, p. 5).

In this project I qualitatively examine how the adaptation and performance of literature can be as much an artistic practice as it is an act of analysis and activism. By applying this approach, I am expanding on their work of performance scholars like Goldman and Madison to examine the capacity of a collaborative adaptation of a collaboratively devised original performance repertoire to incite critical consciousness, conversations and courses of action for diverse performers and audiences. The *Pipelines to Pathways* project combines critical perform*ed*/performance ethnography and PAR to examine the critical creative expressions of marginalized Black youth and their caregivers with the end of inspiring critical conversation and

courses of action around the School to Prison Pipeline and the marginalization and criminalization of Black youth.

The Talk project seeks to present a performative repertoire of truth which includes live theatrical performance, oral histories, my own personal and intellectual musings, and recorded historical observations (Taylor, 2004). In this way *The Talk* also reveals the fact that, "…the archive and the repertoire are parallel and overlapping realms" (Cole, p. 29). Moving beyond the mere statistics and policy which dominate the existing archive, *The Talk* presents performed autoethnography that expresses the truth of the lived experiences of real people that I know (including myself), and our local and embodied understanding of the pernicious, painful and pressing issues surrounding America's racialized social hierarchy. I performatively mobilize this force in my effort to reframe our societal understanding of Black youth and their caregivers, and to reclaim our right to our positive, dignified, agential selves. Simultaneously, by performing narratives that explore the trauma of marginalization and oppression that racism inflicts on human bodies and minds, I invite audience members to experience with me what Boal (1995) calls "the therapeutic stage," where we are all encouraged to imagine new possibilities together.

Decolonizing the Research

> Scholarship on school reform, racism, community life, violence against women, reproductive freedom…sits at the messy nexus of theory, research and organizing. The *raison d'être* of such research is to unsettle questions, texts, and collective struggles; to challenge what is, incite what could be, and help imagine a world that is not yet imagined (Michelle Fine, 1994, p. 30).

I approach this research from a decolonized/decolonizing motivation. To clarify, I will first establish a working definition of "colonization," and an understanding of the looming threat that it poses to the methodology of this project and the performance of collaborative social engagement. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) defines colonized research as that in which the

researcher acts upon the "researched" (hereafter referred to in this context as "indigenous," "youths," "co-learners," "community members," or "collaborators") as a representative of an imperialist hegemon that seeks to expand its influence over the indigenous in a manner that further subjugates the indigenous knowledge and establishes the superiority and universality of the imperialist perspective and hegemonic influence. She notes that colonized research is "embedded in imperial expansionism and colonization and institutionalized in academic disciplines, schools, curricula, universities and power" (p. x).

In a typically Eurocentric paradigm, colonized research presents an image of the proverbial indigenous back to the Western world as the lesser "other," thereby dehumanizing her and reifying existing racial, ethnic, and socio-economic hierarchies. It reinforces and reiterates limit-situations and misrecognitions by repeating and re-performing the "rules and codes which frame in the broadest sense what is possible and what is impossible" (Smith, 2012, p. 8). I find this indigenous-centered framework useful for work with Black youth in the U.S. because "[s]lavery was as much a system of imperialism as was the claiming of other peoples' territories" (Smith, 2012, p. 28).

With regard to the material of the research, Smith (2012) uses the term "sharing knowledge" rather than "reporting back information." First, reporting back implies that the "ivory tower" of academia is the ultimate keeper of knowledge. Secondly, she feels that "the responsibility of researchers and academics is not simply to share surface information […] but to share the theories and analyses which inform the way knowledge and information are constructed and represented" (p. 17). To maintain the integrity of the "sharing knowledge" model, the *Pipelines to Pathways* project has included regular check-ins with the youth participants and community in a manner that enacts a sharing, rather than merely a collecting

(colonized ethnography that Conquergood (1998) counters with his academic, aesthetic and activist approach to the process of collaboration) or teaching (banking system style pedagogy that Freire (1970) counters with his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* model of liberation). Throughout the activities of this project, I have sought to share knowledge, insight, wonder, and love with my collaborators, colleagues and audience members.

Service and struggle are two actions that must be collaboratively pursued in framework that puts the researcher on equal footing as the collaborators. For the researcher to enter the community of collaborators in order to create or lead a struggle is inherently imperialist, in that it perpetuates the sentiment that the researcher is a broker of universal truth and justice by virtue of his "expert" position. An example of this de-centering of the imperialist expert can be seen in the Sangtin Writers Collective (2006) works, which presents a "collective methodology" that expands the archive of credible evidence, or data, to autobiographical writings of the people. This expansion of the cannon provides a more vivid and grounded understanding of what is actually happening in the community of study. This equips the researcher to actively influence the "politics of power" by re-defining "knowledge production" (154). To this end, I present non-traditional texts in the form of performance scripts, poetry, and the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* anthology of self-expression as scholarship (see CHAPTER 4).

Performative and Poetic Inquiry

> Qualitative researchers use poetry in their work precisely because of its slipperiness and ambiguity, its precision and distinctiveness, its joyfulness and playfulness (Sandra L. Faulkner *Poetic Inquiry: Craft, Method and Practice*, 2nd ed., 2020).

By placing our pain, joy, fear, hope, frustration, and meditations into acts of performance we (Black youth and their caregivers) are able to reflexively decode, discover, and demonstrate our deeper understanding of the roots and routes of the Black youth criminalization,

dehumanization, and the School to Prison Pipeline. By placing our lived experiences into the arena of performance, we have committed to what D. Soyini Madison calls "acts of activism." These acts not only reveal to us the multiple layers beneath the surface of things, but also the myriad possibilities and pathways that can be posited and pursued once we transcend the status quo of things.

This work actively employs Sandra Faulkner's (2020) method of poetic inquiry wherein my collaborators and I have employed poetry as both an episteme and as a method. In both components of *Pipelines to Pathways* I have facilitated, written, witnessed and analyzed poetry as a means of engaging and learning from, and with, my collaborators, audiences, and self. I implement poetic inquiry throughout this project. For example, I teach and facilitate workshops where students and I write simple poetry like haiku, which helps us to start conversations, focus group discussions, and to distill and clarify our more intimate and complex thoughts and feelings. My collaborators and I work together to write collaborative poetry as we actively and dialogically seek to express our lived experiences and ever-expanding understanding of them to each other and to larger audiences.

My research is often expressed in a creatively patterned and performed collage of analysis, data, and creative musings, as seen throughout the scripts of *Our 'Ville* and *The Talk*. The poetry of this dissertation, as well as the scripts and poetic works produced by both components of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, allow my collaborators and I to engage, examine, educate, empower, and explore ourselves and society with a greater sense of fluidity, freedom, accessibility, and activation. I assess and analyze this performative poetic work using Sandra Faulkner's (2009) rubric of poetic criteria: artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery/surprise, conditionality, narrative truth, and transformation.

The *My Life Matters* Project

My Life Matters Research Design

The *My Life Matters* project is centered in Fayetteville, North Carolina, the county seat of Cumberland County, North Carolina (population over 330,000) (U.S. Census Bureau, 2017). The majority of the project's activities occurred during a six-week period between June and August each summer (2016, 2017, and 2018) as part of the programming offered by FAF. Since its inception in 1982, FAF has consistently reported improvements in the self-esteem, behavior, court involvement, and academic achievement of its participants. Today, FAF boasts a 90% success rate at keeping kids out of trouble and successful in school (fayurbmin.org). FAF's mission is "to deter youth ages 6-18 from adjudication or further court involvement by improving behavior, enhancing academic achievements, and building positive relationships within the community" (www.fayurbmin.org). FAF youth participants have had some negative social experience with school discipline, the criminal justice system, community members, or peers. The youth were referred to the agency by school officials, court counselors, judges, parents and other concerned community members. FAF serves approximately 200 youth each year with mentoring, tutoring, group sessions, and interpersonal skills workshops. This includes the 70 – 80 youth that FAF serves with field trips, activities, physical activity, and arts workshops during its six-week Summer Achievement Camp. This project focuses only on Summer Achievement Camp programming. I do not examine the year-round programming that FAF conducts, but I do make note of several performative and communicative elements of FAF's culture and methodology that spill over into my interactions with the youth and staff during Summer Achievement Camp.

I began laying the foundation for the *My Life Matters* portion of this project in the summer of 2015 when I conducted two artistic self-expression workshops for 30 Summer Achievement Camp participants. I returned during the summers of 2016, 2017, and 2018 as Primary Investigator, artist in residence, PAR collaborator, and camp counselor. Operating in these capacities, I actively engage with the youth and staff throughout for four days a week each week. I co-performatively witnessed, as the summer camp participants and I interacted and collaborated. I also partook in the dynamic process of performative writing whereby my field notes regarding social and cultural performances in which I participated and observed, are particularly vulnerable, invested, and reflexive (Pollock, 1998). Here is where I actively and reflexively partake in and observe (i.e. co-performatively witness) processes of cultural, social, and identity performances to create critical performance and performed ethnography that examines the historical, cultural, socio-economic, and personal contexts and patterns at play in this project.

All *My Life Matters* collaborators were initially contacted in person by me or a representative of FAF at the Summer Achievement Camp orientation meetings that occurred in late May and early June each year. Those who could not attend the orientation meetings were approached in person upon their next visit to the FAF site or at summer camp. I recruited participants by offering this project as one option for the youth to participate in during the FAF Summer Achievement Camp. The FAF program serves women and minorities with no limitations based upon race, ethnicity, socio-economic background, gender, religion or national origin. Youth are referred to FAF, and accepted into FAF, based upon their need for positive intervention to prevent future negative actions and experiences.

All youth who participate in FAF's Summer Achievement Camp were invited to participate in this research project, but their participation in the *My Life Matters* project had no impact upon their access to all Summer Achievement Camp activities or enrollment. Youth who chose not to participate were offered alternative activities by FAF Summer Achievement Camp staff and volunteers. Participation in this project is entirely voluntary, and participants were informed that they had permission to drop out from participation at any time. Disruptive, illegal or otherwise counter-productive behavior was grounds for dismissal from the project. The FAF Staff reviewed each case with me and we followed FAF protocols for handling such behavior.

While I conducted performance workshops with 75 students from ages eight to 18 as part of my commitment to the youth and the agency, my focus for this project was on 35 adolescent (ages 12 to 18) participants, because this is the age when marginalized youths tend to experience significantly higher rates of school suspension and incarceration (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2018, p. 18). Participants in workshops were 100% Black (with two students being Afro-Latina and another being a self-described mixed race person of partial African descent). While I interacted with younger children, and adolescents who opted not to participate in the PAR project, only 35 adolescents participated as collaborators in the *My Life Matters* PAR process.

During FAF's Summer Achievement Camp, I conducted one-to-two weekly hour-to-two-hour performance-centered workshops with 3 to 35 youth at a time. These workshops included acting games, storytelling, playwriting, poetry, photography (using the Photovoice method in 2017), music, dance, and other forms of creative self-expression. Through workshops and co-performative witnessing with the youth and eight adult staff members of the agency, I qualitatively measured the capacity of this process to generate stories (and performances of

stories) that inspire and articulate subjugated narratives of the positive, dignified, agential Black youth. I also examined the process by which this project produced a repertoire of diverse creative expressions of our collective and individual understandings of self, society, the School to Prison Pipeline, and the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth. The repertoire includes an anthology of photography, prose and poetry entitled *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project*, an original collaboratively written script of a full-length play entitled *Our 'Ville*, and two live public performances. I submit these elements as rich sources of expert data that can be extended far beyond their capillary origins by means of performance.

I reviewed field notes from co-performative witnessing to contextualize our experience of the performance process from workshops, to rehearsals, to performance. I analyzed this data to examine the project's capacity to help performers to develop critical consciousness, procure and publicly present critical stories, participate in critical conversations, and consider critical courses of action to address the forces and processes of dehumanization and criminalization that form, foment, and enforce the School to Prison Pipeline.

I administered post-program paper surveys to youth participants to measure the impact that the program has had on their attitudes about themselves, their peers, society, and their willingness/ability to express themselves. I administered post-performance paper surveys to audience members to assess the perceived relevance and impact of the performance. Using a critical performance ethnography approach, I analyzed this data to examine the project's capacity to help performers to express themselves clearly and creatively in public.

My Life Matters Data Collected

- Demographic information on 35 adolescent participants collected from FAF staff
  - Age, gender, grade in school

- Free/reduced lunch qualification (yes or no)
- Household make-up (non-traditional, single parent, both parents)
- Referral source (court/court counselor, parent, school, other)
- School suspension in the last school year (yes or no)
- School expulsion in the last school year (yes or no)
- Past court involvement (yes or no)
- Relations with incarceration (self, parent, sibling, extended family, none)
- Violence Experienced (defined as assault with any weapon) (self, parents, sibling, extended family, friend, none)
- Death Experienced (parent, sibling, extended family, friend, none)

- 14 self-expression workshops conducted by the primary investigator (60 to 120 minutes; 1,000 minutes of audio recorded transcribed by the primary investigator)
- One public performance of 14 youth and the primary investigator for 50 community audience members (August 5, 2016)
- 15 post-performance surveys for performers (2016)
- 22 post-performance surveys for audience members (2016)
- One public performance of three youth participants at the Fayetteville City Council meeting (September 12, 2016)
- One post-performance talk-back after a performance of *The Talk* (July 18, 2018)
- 80 pages of field notes hand written and transcribed by the primary investigator (single spaced 12-point Times New Romans font)

During the summers of 2016 and 2017, I conducted weekly 60 to 120 minute performative self-expression workshops with 5 to 35 youth participants at a time for the duration of the six-week camp. Due to logistical limitations, I was only able to conduct two sessions during the summer of 2018. I performed my autoethnography, *The Talk* for 27 youth on July 18, 2018 and conducted a 60 minute talk-back with them. During the six-week summer camp experience, I engaged this group of youth with games and warm up activities in order to help participants to honor their bodies as communicative instruments, and to release them to embodied expression and play. I followed these games and activities with facilitated dialogue in which we discursively and performatively expressed, examined, and embodied our truths through prose, poetry, dramaturgy, music, movement, photography, and other forms of creative expression that emerged during our workshops. This work has culminated in a performative repertoire that we analyzed and organized for placement in a book (*The Ravon Jordan My Life Maters Project*), and for future live community performances that will articulate our local understandings and experiences with self, society, and the School to Prison Pipeline. I worked with the youth to devise public performances of – and critical conversations around - this repertoire as a form of critical perform*ed* ethnography.

Over the course of three summers in the field at FAF's Summer Achievement Camp, I have observed that the regular programming that FAF provides to FAF youth throughout the year often becomes a salient topic of discussion, reflection, and application for both youth participants and FAF staff. Inside jokes, shared stories, and a wide array of social norms established during the school year appeared to have formed and fueled a unique culture and mentality among FAF staff and youth significantly impacted the dynamics of the *My Life Matters* project. The FAF culture and protocols comprised an important backdrop and context for the dynamics and flow of

the *My Life Matters* project. To better respect and account for this context, I have observed how these elements impacted the performance process.

The Photovoice protocol requires a limit of 12 participants and a minimum of 6 sessions to collectively select themes, present photography, discuss photography, and to collectively select the photographs that best capture the themes. Due to the large number of *My Life Matters* participants during the summer of 2016 and the scheduling conflicts during the summer of 2018, we were only able to conduct a successful Photovoice project during the summer of 2017. During the summer of 2017, 11 adolescents volunteered to participate in the Photovoice project. Workshops included a creative self-expression component offered to all 35 adolescents, and separate Photovoice workshops offered only to the 11 volunteers. Photovoice volunteers were assigned disposable cameras to take home to capture pictures based upon our agreed upon themes related to violence during the first two weeks. Because this became too costly, we decided to invest in digital cameras that the youth participants were assigned to take home throughout the week to complete photography assignments.

The Photovoice project enacted during the summer of 2017 included 11 youth participants and followed the following protocol:

Week 1 Session – Introduction to the concept and practice with cameras

Week 2 Session – Review photographs on the theme of "violence"

Week 3 Session – Review photographs on the theme of "causes of violence"

Week 4 Session - Review photographs on the theme of "effects of violence"

Week 5 Session - Review photographs on the theme of "solutions for violence"

Week 6 Session – Review all selected photographs and apply the 3D model of performance-centered youth engagement. As the Primary Investigator, I also examined the

performance-making process and its impact on our sense of self-concept, self-efficacy, self-production, and self-actualization. I rehearsed and performed with my collaborators. I partook in co-performative witnessing throughout this process. I also analyzed archived data and field notes derived from co-performative witnessing.

Changes in camp schedules due to weather, funding, youth behavior, and other unforeseen issues caused considerable uncertainty with the research schedule each summer. This uncertainty also prevented consistent contact with all of the youth participants each week. For example, we were not able to perform at all in 2017 and I was only able to conduct two workshops and one performance of *The Talk* with the youth during the 2018 Summer Achievement Camp.

The most robust sources of data were field notes from co-performative witnessing of the performance process and the performative repertoire. (See APPENDIX G for example lesson plan). During the summer of 2017, my collaborators and I decided to curate an anthology of their prose, poetry and photography. We also collaborated on a script for a play entitled *Our 'Ville* – a dramatic reflection of their lived experiences and perceptions around the struggles that they face daily. We developed the script and rehearsed over the course of Summer Achievement Camp. Due to venue limitations and scheduling conflicts, we were not able to produce a performance of *Our 'Ville* during the summer. We scheduled an October performance, but this date also fell through. Due to turnover of staff and youth participants, as well as scheduling conflicts, we were never able to produce a public performance of our work in 2017 or 2018.

Summer of 2018 was particularly challenging due to personnel shifts in the FAF organizations and unforeseen scheduling conflicts. The activities and commitments scheduled by the FAF organization precluded the regular six workshops. I served as a camp counselor for the

duration of the camp, conducting only two self-expression workshops and one performance of *The Talk* for 27 adolescents in July of 2018. Three youth participants from the previous two years rose to serve as my audiovisual technicians for the performance of *The Talk.* These same three youth participants went on to serve as the audio visual technicians for two public performances at the Fayetteville, Cumberland County Arts Council on October 14th. They also served as active panelists as I facilitated the post-performance talk-back. Some of their feedback and insight will appear in my analysis and articulation of the data associated with *The Talk* component of this project.

One of the final products of this process is an anthology of our creative self-expression work produced over the course of *My Life Matters.* The book, entitled *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project,* was completed in the spring of 2019 (see Chapter 4). This book is a brief anthology of some of the prose, poetry, and photography that the youth chose to publish. The *My Life Matters* anthology represents a critical performance approach to expressing our perceptions and experiences of self, society, and the School to Prison Pipeline. In the collaborative spirit of PAR, the *My Life Matters* anthology book and the *Our 'Ville* script are available to community members and youth to incite larger conversations around the issues that disproportionately impact the lives of marginalized Black youth in Cumberland County, North Carolina, and to position the youths themselves as local experts on these issues. They have been distributed to youth participants, and are available at the FAF location.

***The Talk* Project**

The Talk Research Design

The Talk project is the culmination of my work as a practitioner, performer, and a parent of Black youth, analyzing the genre of "The Talk." This social phenomenon is the conversation

that caregivers of Black youth in America often feel compelled to have in order to warn these youth of the slings and arrows of racism that they may face in the world. I examine the process by which I researched, wrote, rehearsed, performed, and publicly discussed and analyzed this piece of performed ethnography and autoethnography with youth, scholars, and community audiences between April, 2015 and February, 2019. My data includes observations from field notes, transcripts from post-performance talk-backs, published reviews, post-performance surveys administered to volunteer adult audience members, and oral history interviews.

I conducted these oral history interviews as an effort to "draw (historical) fact(storied) symbol into the precarious, creative process of memory-making" in the context of writing and performing *The Talk* (Pollock, 2006, p. 88). As I conducted these oral history interviews, I engaged in an interview method that Della Pollock (2006) calls "listening out loud" – whereby the interviewer listens with their heart, in deep humility and gratitude toward their interlocutors. This praxis is based upon a mindset that allows the interviewer to engage with their interlocutors at a deeper level than is normally allowed in everyday life. Pollock (2006) states:

> Begun in the spirit of preservation that drives much oral history practice - the desire to save stories from both political obscurity and the ravages of mortality, listening out loud sets fire to the thing saved: through the course of conversational interviews, improvised retellings, scenic description, poetic transcription, and public rehearsal, the story as a historical artifact goes up in the flames of committed understanding, becoming the molten energy of re-creation (p. 89).

Rather than recording the interviews, I focused more on spending time with each individual parent, listening "body to body, heart to heart, not so much recording as absorbing the other person's story" (Pollock, 2006, p. 89). By listening "hard," I learned my parents' perspectives and experiences with race by "heart." I attended to their words, vocalics, affect and embodiment as they spoke to me. I then spent a few hours writing narratives as storytelling script. I returned to each parent and performed my embodied interpretation of the stories they told me. The goal

was not to achieve perfect fidelity in characterization and interpretation (which is impossible). The goal was to capture and project through my body the spirit of their stories in a way that they felt was satisfactory.

In this way, I operated as what Kelly Oliver (2001) refers to as a loving witness. As I embody my parents' stories as a teller, I am able to experience the deeper impact that listening out loud avails where the teller

> feels *for, with, on behalf of,* and *in response to* her friend. This isn't a mimesis of feeling in the sense of a direct copy. The performer isn't feeling-and doesn't pretend to feel-what her friend felt. But the friend's-or first performer's-feelings are doubled, and doubled again-one body to ·another, and past to present. Both the primary teller and the listener/teller are moved in corresponding but markedly different ways" (Pollock, 2006, p. 92).

During interviews the primary tellers (each parent) and the teller (I) laughed, cried, and expressed gratitude for the gracious sharing of, and the humble and genuinely inquisitive, listening to their stories.

I, in turn, brought this curious, loving, gracious energy to the public performance of these stories – thus setting them on fire in my bones[47]. Through embodied performance, I pass this fire on to audience members. Pollock (2006) articulates the power of this recurrent flow of exchange to preserve what was, name what is, and to imagine the emerging/transforming possibilities of what will be:

> The interviewer is herself a symbolic presence, invoking not only other, unseen audiences but promising - as if by bodily contract alone - that what is heard will be incorporated into public memory and acted on in some way, that it will make a difference. Oral histories thus write the past into the present on the promise of an as yet unimagined, even unimaginable future. They *dream* the past-performing *what happened* as an image of *what might happen.* Entwining *what is* with the normative claims of what *might be,* oral histories tell the past in order to tell the future - not to predict, to reveal, or foreclose on it but to catch it in ethical threads drawn in the act of telling (p. 88).

[47] Here I allude to a Bible scripture wherein the prophet Jeremiah declares that God's word "was in mine heart as a burning fire shut up in my bones; and I was weary with forbearing, and I could not hold back" (Jeremiah 20:9).

It is with this mindset that I embody and poetically interpret oral histories, public record, literature, and my own memories in *The Talk.* This performance is designed to drive performer and audience member playfully and purposefully on a voyage through what racism was and what it is – with a hopeful eye toward the antiracist future that could be.

I performed in Raleigh, Durham, Fayetteville, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I participated in 23 post-show talk-back sessions that lasted between 15 and 60 minutes each. I collected and analyzed 374 qualitative post-performance surveys administered to volunteer adult audience members at 19 performances between June, 2018 and February, 2019. I also gained insight and information from the perspectives of several audience members, my production teams, classmates, colleagues, and community stakeholders via email or voluntary one-on-one feedback throughout this process. With this data, I examined the capacity of *The Talk* performance to facilitate critical conversations and critical consciousness around Black youth and the School to Prison Pipeline that will lead to future conversations and actions to resist and counter racial inequity and negative biotropes of Black youth. Paper surveys were available to audience members at all 19 performances.

The Talk is the manifestation of my compulsion as a scholar and performer to *do* something with my writing. To this end, *The Talk* itself and my writing about it are ventures in performative writing as described by Della Pollock (1998):

> As performance, as writing that stipulates its own performativity, performative writing enters into the arena of contest to which it appeal with the affective investment of one who has been there and will be there at the end, who has a stake in the outcome of the exchange. The writing/subject puts his/her own status on the line…in the name of mobilizing *praxis*, breaking the discursive limits of the emperor's stage, and invigorating the dynamics of democratic contest in which the emperor and his new clothes (or lack thereof) are now continually refigured (Pollock, 1998, p.96).

This performative style of writing is all at once evocative, metonymic, subjective, citational, and consequential (Pollock, 1998, pp. 81-94). I practice performative writing here as a method of writing pathways out of pipelines for and with Black youth.

The Talk Data Collected

- Four hours of one-on-one oral history interviews conducted by the primary investigator with Berry and Jo Kelly (the parents of Sonny Kelly)
- One 5-minute interview conducted by the primary investigator with Sterling and Langston Kelly using the post-performance survey questions
- 24 post-performance talk-back sessions (20 to 60 min each; 729 minutes of audio recorded talk-back sessions transcribed by the primary investigator)
- 375 post-performance surveys (185 from eight performances conducted June – December 2018 performances and 190 from 16 performances conducted January – February 2019)
- 50 pages of field notes (single spaced 12-point Times New Romans font)
- 12 pages of single-spaced email feedback from six community stakeholders, to include a 16-year-old youth who attended a performance of *The Talk* with her church group in March, 2018 (March 14, 2018), Lloyd Kramer (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill Professor of History) (March 9, 2018), Xin He (Cumberland County Schools Chinese immersion teacher) (November 8, 2018), Barbara Smalley-McMahan (Raleigh Police Accountability Task Force volunteer and Board Chair) (January 15, 2019), Sonia Frischemeier (Boomerang Youth, Inc., Director of Operations) (November 2, 2019), and Michael MacGovern (Broughton High School, Raleigh, North Carolina, Assistant Principal) (November 15, 2019).

- 30 minute phone conversation with Michael MacGovern to receive feedback on the October 9, 2019 Broughton High School performance (October 18, 2020). The primary investigator took notes by hand.
- 45 minute conversation with Sonia Frishemeier at the Boomerang Youth, Inc. site on October 30, 2020. I typed notes into a laptop during her report oral report.

Field notes were based upon three years of development, dramaturgy, rehearsal, performance and post-performance talk-backs. This includes two fall semester sessions of Joseph Megel's Communication 660 (Advanced Projects in Performance Studies) at UNC Chapel Hill from early August through mid-December in 2016 and 2017. Oral history interviews were conducted one-on-one with my father, Berry C. Kelly, and my mother Jo. D. Kelly. I conducted a total of two hour-long face-to-face interviews, and one 30 minute telephone interview with Berry C. Kelly to learn about his personal experiences growing up as a Black youth in the segregated South, as well as his personal experiences giving and receiving "The Talk." I conducted one telephone interview with Jo D. Kelly for approximately one hour and 30 minutes to learn about her experience growing up as a self-identified Black youth in the Los Angeles area of California during the 1950's, through the 1970's.

I performed an early version of *The Talk* as a student showcase production with UNC Chapel Hill's Communication Department at Swain Hall on the campus of UNC Chapel Hill, March 8 – 11. Admission for these performances was a suggested donation of $10. I facilitated talk-backs (which included the director Joseph Megel) after each of these four performances and recorded some feedback from audience members. Depending on the time available at each venue and the amount of time that it took me to prepare myself and return to the stage, talk-back sessions ranged from 15 to 60 minutes long.

I facilitated all but four post-performance talk-backs conducted in 2018 and 2019. One performance in Cary on October 22 was facilitated by communication consultant and community organizer Tru Pettigrew. The November 1st performance at Smith Middle School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina was facilitated by playwright, poet, and scholar Howard L. Craft. Performances on January 25 and February 8, 2019 at the Durham Fruit Co. (The Fruit) were facilitated by Renée Alexander Craft, PhD.

The eight community performances that took place from June 26 through December 1, 2018 were coordinated with agencies, organizations in Chapel Hill, Raleigh, Durham, and Fayetteville. These performances included approximately 435 audience members, 185 of whom submitted surveys. The 16 performances that occurred between January 24 and February 17, 2019 were part of a professional production produced by Street Signs Center of Performance and Literature, Bulldog Theater Ensemble, and the UNC Chapel Hill Department of Communication. These performances included approximately 1,810 audience members, 190 of whom submitted surveys. In total 25 community leaders in law enforcement, activism, education, politics and entertainment participated as panelists after one or more of the 19 performances. (See APPENDIX K for a list of performance dates, venues, host organizations, and panel participants).

I voice recorded all 24 talk-backs with a hand recorder, accumulating 720 minutes of digital audio recording. I played these recordings back and transcribed them into a Word document. I reviewed these transcriptions and coded them as I observed emergent themes and phenomena that countered, confirmed, or coalesced with my theoretical framework. I synthesized these codes and analyzed them alongside my field notes and post-performance surveys in my quest to answer my research questions.

I distributed post-performance surveys after each of the 24 performances that occurred between June 26, 2018 and February 17, 2019. The six of the eight performances that occurred between June 26, 2018 and December 1, 2018 in Cary, Chapel Hill, and Fayetteville, North Carolina were free and open to the public. The November 1, 2018 performance at Smith Middle School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina was a fundraiser and awareness raiser for Boomerang Youth, Inc. and admission was $10 per person. The December 1, 2018 performance at Redeemed Christian Church in Fayetteville, North Carolina was a fundraiser for the church family's family reunion and admission was $10 per person. For six of these performances (October 14 through December 1, 2018), I used a three-question paper survey for adult audience members with the following questions: (1) What did you find most memorable, striking, or interesting about this show? (2) How did *The Talk* impact your thoughts about society and your place in it? (3) How did *The Talk* impact your thoughts about Black youth in America? This survey was designed to help me to learn what elements of the performance were most compelling and to gain a qualitative measure of the extent to which the performance was able to foment or foster critical thinking and a shift of attitudes toward Black youth and racial equity. Due to printing limitations, this survey was limited to only two questions on June 26, 2018 performance at the Chapel Hill Public Library: (1) What did you find most memorable, striking, or interesting about this show? (2) How did *The Talk* impact your thoughts about your society and your place in it? All of the surveys for these seven shows displayed optional fields for age, race(s), nationality(ies), and general comments.

Survey questions for the eight performances conducted in Fayetteville, Cary, and Chapel Hill, North Carolina between June and December, 2018 included the following:

- What did you find most memorable, striking, or interesting about this show?

- How did *The Talk* impact your thoughts about our society and your place in it?
- How did *The Talk* impact your thoughts about Black youth in America? (not included in on the June 26, 2018 performance survey)16 performances conducted in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina in 2019 included the following questions:
- How did the event impact your understanding of society and your place in it?
- In what ways will this experience impact your future conversations and actions?

Of the 16 performances conducted between January and February 2019, the first 12 performances took place at the Durham Fruit performance space. The final four performances took place at UNC Chapel Hill's Historic Playmakers Theater. Admission for these performances was priced as follows: Thursday performances cost $15. Fridays, Saturdays, and Sundays, tickets were $20.00, with $2.00 discounts available for Active Duty Military, Veterans, and Seniors. Tickets were $10 for all patrons under 35 to all shows. UNC Students, Faculty, and University Staff receive $10 tickets for all Chapel Hill shows. Paper surveys were distributed with the programs for each of these 16 performances and a web site was announced and distributed on the surveys for people to submit their feedback online. These 190 surveys were based upon StreetSigns' standard post-performance survey format and protocol, and included demographic information (age, gender, racial/ethnic background, education, and how they learned about the event).

This survey contained the following questions: (1) Did the event encourage and stimulate you to think critically about the subject matter? (2) Did the event place the subject matter in a larger cultural, historical, and analytical framework? (3) How did the event impact your understanding of society and your place in it? (4) In what ways will this experience impact your future conversations and actions? This survey also includes an open field for "General

Comments, Feedback, and Suggestions" (See APPENDICES H and I for iterations of post-performance surveys).

To accurately place this project in the fields of communication, performance studies, critical pedagogy, CRT, and PAR, I examined published materials, books, pamphlets, and web sites. I also audited current and historical approaches to performance-centered pedagogy, youth intervention, PAR, performance ethnography, and perform*ed* ethnography. For statistical data I examined databases from sources like the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction, Department of Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention, NAACP, U.S. Census Bureau, U.S. Department of Education, and other agencies that collect information about youth. I have combined all of these data to create ethnographic products such as reports, articles, anthologies, presentations, and embodied performances. Thus, our work will add to the embodied, uttered, written, and otherwise creatively expressed perspectives of local youth experts to the existing canon of transferable knowledge regarding the School to Prison Pipeline and the marginalization and criminalization of Black youth. In this way, our work is generating an expanding the archive of textualized research findings that overlaps with a repertoire of emergent and devised performance.

Data Analysis

I reviewed and coded the performative repertoire produced by the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, as well as all field notes, post-performance survey comments, and transcripts of interviews, workshops, and post-performance talk-backs. I personally transcribed 1,000 minutes of self-expression workshop recordings (*My Life Matters*) and 729 minutes of recorded talk-backs (*The Talk*). I examined the themes that arose from the data to analyze and articulate the function and impact of each component of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project on participants and

community members. I analyzed the routes through which - this performance-centered process created spaces where the positionalities and perspective of Black youth and their caregivers could be examined, expressed, affirmed, and witnessed; to generate intentional practices for Black youth and their community members that allow them to examine, express, and reframe their lived experiences; and to empower participants to reclaim the inherent dignity and agency of Black youth. I framed this analysis using language and concepts rooted in critical race theory, the communication theory of identity, and theories of performance.

In the creation of *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* poetry and photography, and the of scripts for *Our 'Ville* and *The Talk*, my collaborators and I conducted a performative poetic inquiry into Black youth identities, their dehumanization, and criminalization. Through public performance, our voices rise to express our expert knowledge and critical analysis of the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth. Using Faulkner's *ars poetica* as a rubric, I examine the aesthetic and intellectual routes by which this repertoire can serve as both a practice of expression and a space for expression. This rubric is based upon the elements of artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery/surprise, conditionality, narrative truth, and transformation.

I conducted co-performative witnessing during self-expression workshops, rehearsals, and performances, recording my experiences and observations by hand in field notes. I transcribed those field notes to an 81-page single spaced Microsoft Word document. I also engaged in 24 post-performance talk-backs for *The Talk.* For each talk-back, I used a digital voice recorder to capture a total of 729 minutes of group discussion. I then transcribed each of these recordings into a 65-page single spaced Microsoft Word document. I took note of the factors that facilitated or hampered antiracist dialogue in each of these social encounters. I also

analyzed some environmental, demographic, discursive, interpersonal, pedagogical, and aesthetic factors that can inform the formulation of intentional practices whereby Black youth and their community members can examine, express, and reframe their lived experiences.

Finally, I combined these observations with post-performance surveys, as well as in-person and e-mailed reports from community stakeholders that articulated the impact of this process. I reviewed 12 single-spaced pages of emails and took note of two conversations with stakeholders in which they reported funds and support raised by performances, as well as antiracist actions and attitudes that they attributed to the performances. I took hand written and typed notes of these conversations.

Limitations

Due to inconsistent attendance and participation with the *My Life Matters* project, my coding and conclusions are by no means comprehensive or entirely definitive. They do however offer a rich tapestry of insight into the process of effectively performatively reframing and reclaiming our positive, dignified, agential selves while disrupting the discursive regimes that form, foster, and facilitate the School to Prison Pipeline.

The genre of the post-performance talk-back is a common occurrence in contemporary theaters. The talk-back is usually presented as a special opportunity for audience members to directly address the performing artists with their questions and thoughts. It is largely presented as a means of further appreciating the performance – an extension of the applause. Because the primary investigator has designed the talk-backs that follow *The Talk* to engage audiences in critical antiracist dialogue, this genre has served as a challenge. Because the talk-backs only last 15 to 60 minutes, most of the feedback and dialogue (especially early in the talk-back) for this project were positive affirmations of the performance (i.e. extensions of the applause). It was

often difficult to channel the audience's energy and focus toward antiracist dialogue until they were given some time to comment on, and show appreciation for the aesthetic, and emotional elements that they found most salient. I advised each audience that I would be recording each talk-back session and including the information shared there in my dissertation. Thus, the space for honest and generative antiracist dialogue was limited during the talk-backs. The longer talk-backs afforded the audience and performer more of this space.

Furthermore, post-performance surveys and talk-backs served as my primary form of feedback for the live performances generated by the *Pipelines to Pathways* project. Because these channels delivered immediate feedback, they were helpful to examine the immediate responses that this work elicited from audience members. However, due to the short answers and timeline, responses were not as well thought out or critical as they might have been if the survey respondents had been afforded more time to reflect on their experiences. Surveys and talk-back comments were, more often than not, positive and celebratory. The fact that they took place in the wake of applause may have limited skewed audience members' responses and participation toward more positive and less critical feedback.

The Plan for Monitoring and Protecting the Data

All demographic data files for youth collaborators and participants have remained in my personal control on a password-protected laptop. Any specific data that this project uses from such files will be aggregate and anonymously reported. Data that is collected via observation, workshop/focus group or one-on-one interview has been stored on my password-protected laptop and secured in my possession. Any publication of this data has been aggregated and/or disassociated from any identifiable information associated with the youth participants and collaborators of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project. This data has been made anonymous or made

unidentifiable by name changes and appropriate changes in story details so as to prevent unwanted identification of subjects before publication. The FAF staff and youth collaborators reviewed all performance and publication materials for approval before they were made public.

All focus group observations were recorded as anonymous and collective responses. Video and audio recordings of performances, workshops, and interviews were secured in my possession and on my password protected laptop. They will not be published without the permission of subjects, parents, guardians and FAF leadership. All reports from the transcripts of one-on-one and group interviews and focus groups will be reported anonymously, or with pseudonyms. Authorship of all published materials will be ascribed to pseudonyms chosen by the collaborators. Any pseudonyms used will be coded, and such codes will remain secured with the files maintained by me, and in separate files on my password protected laptop.

Care for Collaborators

Procedures for Subjects in Need of Medical or Psychological Follow Up

Personal stories shared may embarrass or affect the reputations, livelihoods or psychological health of some. To protect participants, any information that they shared with me was reported as coming from an anonymous source and never associated with their name or personal data or details that could identify the child. The public performance will include some personal experiences and perspectives of participants. Participants were afforded the option to exclude their personal experiences, words or perspectives from the production and the process. They were also allowed to choose to change details of the performances so as to prevent identification or embarrassment. Parents, guardians, and FAF staff were afforded access to, and the right to delete or edit, any information that could possibly cause emotional distress,

embarrassment or breach of confidentiality prior to the public performance or publication of the performative repertoire.

The public performances were photographed and audio/video recorded. The images and videos produced from the public performances were shared in publications, public meetings, and on the Internet. However, participants' input from workshops and performances will not be associated with their image or voice as portrayed in these recordings or photographs. Any other audio/video recordings, or photographs recorded or taken beyond these public performances, that may identify participants or their immediate family, will not be published.

Traumatic or negative feelings may arise as participants discuss how The School to Prison Pipeline and the marginalization and criminalization of Black youth has (and does) affect us. Participation in workshops or performances may cause participants to remember (or trigger) past or present trauma. In addition to having trained seasoned youth program practitioners on site at all times, the FAF youth intervention program has clear guidelines that indicate the process by which they will refer any participant in need of medical follow-up or psychological counseling to the most appropriate sources of professional help.

Additional Protections for Children

All interviews with minors were conducted during FAF business hours with another adult in the immediate area who was approved by FAF staff and/or the legal guardian of the minor. Youth names will not be associated with any demographic or statistical data. All interview and focus group observations of minors will be reported as anonymous or using pseudonyms. Measurements of program impact will be reported collectively, and any individualized data will be reported anonymously. Participation in the *My Life Matters* program and any other activity pertaining to this program (to include focus groups and performances) are completely voluntary,

and require parental/guardian consent for participating youth, consent for adult collaborators, and assent of minor collaborators. Participants were permitted to share their personal information and perspectives, with approval of parents/guardians, in conjunction with their presentation of embodied performance or public speaking at public performances and presentations. For example, three youths addressed the Fayetteville City Council in September of 2016, and they voluntarily identified themselves, their ages, and their grades before they performed a poem and song sharing their perspectives and aspirations.

CHAPTER 4: CASE STUDY #1: MY LIFE MATTERS

Overview

> What moved this research from merely collaborative to Afrocentric is that each participant agreed that the African American child and community were the *subjects* and not the *objects* of study. The approach throughout was to ask what could be learned from African American students and their teachers that maintains the integrity of their culture and their world view (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 180).

Figure 1. *My Life Matters* performance, 2016

Figure 2. *My LiFe Matters* performance, 2016

Find-A-Friend is located in a two story building nestled on a hill in the historic part of Fayetteville. The large square brick building used to be the Lions Club building. A faded Lions' Club sign is still displayed above the front door upstairs. As I pulled up, and turned off my vehicle, the pleasant summer sun that was shining on my face as I drove, soon became a dazzling brilliant ball of fire in the absence of my AC blowing cool air in my face. I noticed that the playground outside the Find-A-Friend program was full of elementary school aged children screaming, jumping, running, chasing, and frolicking. The heat did not seem to faze them one bit" (Excerpt from September 9, 2015 field notes, initial site visit for *My Life Matters* project).

In this chapter I apply critical race theory (CRT), the communication theory of identity (CTI), and critical race interpersonal communication theory (CRIPCT) to examine how performance-centered interventions and embodied performance can (1) create spaces where Black youth can come to voice and be affirmed and witnessed; (2) generate intentional practices to examine, voice, and reframe their lived experiences; and (3) empower all participants to engage in antiracist attitudes and actions that claim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth. This work culminates in performances and performative practices that actively resist the criminalization and dehumanization of Black youth.

This chapter is the product of three summers (2016-2018) in the field conducting the *My Life Matters* youth participatory action research (YPAR) project with 35 adolescent participants in Fayetteville Urban Ministry's Find-A-Friend (FAF) program's Summer Achievement Camp in Fayetteville, North Carolina. I also worked closely with Shauna Hopkins, the FAF Director, and eight of her staff members. The focus of our YPAR work was to develop new skills to: (1) critically assess the threats to the lives and positive self-concept of Black youth, (2) develop creative modes of self-expression based upon our assessments, and (3) to demonstrate and distribute this self-expression in the form of public performance, written poetry, a theatrical play, and photography. The products of this YPAR include a public performance held on August 5, 2016, a book of poetry that was written and developed over the course of the three summers entitled *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* (See APPENDIX B), and a full script for a collaboratively written play called *Our 'Ville* (See APPENDIX A).

Through self-expression workshops, performative writing, rehearsal, and public performance, my collaborators and I created spaces to build trusting and affirming relationships with one another and our witnesses. Through the performance process, we also generated

intentional practices that helped us to examine, express, and reframe our own identities. In the act of performing our stories for public witness, we experienced and shared the power to reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth.

We achieved this by confronting the extant criminalizing and dehumanizing stock stories around Black youth identities and informing – even altering – them through the performance of embodied storytelling. This process finds its roots in - and forges new routes through - the perspectives, lived experiences, and creative expressions of Black youth and their communities. As a result, Black youth and their communities effectively emerge as public counter-storytellers who discover and demonstrate their own concealed stories, resistance stories, and emerging/transforming stories. We frame and present these stories in such a way that they empower performers and witnesses to reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth.

For the course of this project, 35 Black youth, eight adult volunteers and FAF staff members, and I collaborated on the *My Life Matters* project to qualitatively examine and articulate our perspectives of the School to Prison Pipeline through prose, poetry, playwriting and photography. These youth, between the ages of 12 and 18, had been referred to FAF's services by a family member, school counselor, juvenile court counselor, or other community member, due to negative interactions with peers, school discipline, juvenile courts, or community members. 40% (14) of the participants were male and 60% (21) were female. 20% (7) of the youth had experienced some court involvement (criminal justice contact such as arrest, adjudication, and/or sentencing). 40% (14) had been suspended from school within the past year of their participation. All of the youth had some experience with incarceration: 14% (5) had been incarcerated, 34% (12) had experienced a parent being incarcerated, and 52% (18) had

experienced the incarceration of an extended family member. All had personal experiences with the death of loved ones, but 86% (30) had experienced the death of a peer. All of the youth came from low-wealth households and qualified for free or reduced rates lunch based upon the Federal Income Eligibility Guidelines (See APPENDIX F for demographic charts).

These youth are caught in a dilemma of disparities that is evident across North Carolina's education and criminal systems. Black youth in North Carolina experience significantly disproportionate rates of suspension, expulsion, and dropouts (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2019). With regard to suspension rates, Black students have had the highest suspension rates of all other groups (over 14 times those of Asians, four times those of Whites and Pacific Islanders, three times those of Hispanics, approximately twice those of Multi Racial students, and approximately 1.2 times those of Native Americans every year between 2013 and 2018 (p. 29). Between the 2013-2014 school year and the 2017-2018 school year, Black students' rates of long-term suspension and expulsion continued to soar above other groups (pp. 38, 47). These numbers correlate to significantly higher rates of campus arrests and incarceration (Hard, 2015; OJJDP, 2019).

Thus, the School to Prison Pipeline poses a real and present danger to the positivity, dignity, and agency of the identities of these Black youth. Throughout the course of the *My Life Matters* project, my collaborators and I worked together to investigate and articulate our struggles with what we perceived to be the threats to our positive, dignified, agential, conceptualizations of self. My collaborators and I met for one to two hour weekly self-expression workshops over the course of three six-week Summer Achievement Camp sessions (2016-2018). These workshops functioned as focus groups, where we demonstrated, dialogued around, and developed poetry, prose, and photography that articulated our experiences with

criminalization, violence, and the School to Prison Pipeline. To this end, we employed Photovoice and a collaborative mode of poetic inquiry to make sense of our feelings, experiences, and observations.

Through this process, the *My Life Matters* team created spaces where the power in our voices was activated, affirmed, and witnessed. Through performance, my collaborators and I activated what June Jordan (1995) articulates as the unique power of poetry praxis to reclaim identity: "Poetry means taking control of the language of your life" (p. 3). She privileges the poetry writing and sharing process as a basic building block for "true community; a fearless democratic society" (p. 3). She posits that "poetry is the medium for telling the truth" (p. 8). I have observed, as Jordan (1995) did with the Poetry for the People youth education and poetry project, that "within the tenuous experiment of a poetry workshop: of a beloved community, these young American men and women devise their individual trajectories into non-violent, but verifiable power" (p. 9).

In these spaces, we generated intentional practices for examining, expressing, and reframing our lived experiences. For example, in the self-expression workshops, I developed and implemented the "3-D" (Demonstrate, Dialogue, Develop) method of facilitating creative performance-based analysis, artistry, and activism with, and for, marginalized youth. In this chapter, I examine the capacity of this particularly dialogic performance-centered approach to engage participants, create critical consciousness, and to develop and perform stories that inspire positive self-concept, self-production, critical consciousness, and response-ability among performers and audience members.

Through a critical performance-centered pedagogical process of demonstrating the performances of stories, dialoguing about those stories, and developing new performances for

public presentation, my collaborators and I have found new spaces and practices to love ourselves and each other. We have playfully traveled to, and through, each other's worlds as we alternated between the roles of storyteller and loving witness (Lugones, 1987). During self-expression workshops and rehearsals, we traveled to each others' respective worlds of unique lived experiences, lending each other a playful attitude of inclusion, imagination, and loving perception (Lugones, 1987). We then turned our efforts to producing public performances of poetry, storytelling, and theater that invite audience members and performers into inquisitive reflection and critical conversations around self and society.

The act of continued, iterative, and critical dialogue among collaborators was crucial element of creating spaces where we could explore, examine and express our multiple frames of identities. Through the performance process, we engaged in self-production. Incorporating elements of critical dialogue into all of our activities allowed us to experience the dignity and agency that comes from sharing our perspectives as experts on the topic and on our own experience. Dialoguing in small groups and in public performance spaces empowered us to claim our own stories as well as our rightful share in the stories of others with whom we had come to empathize.

We generated the modified SHOWED and 3D methods as intentional practices for examining, expressing, and reframing our understanding of self and society. These practices emerged as excellent methods of enacting critical dialogue and the coalescence of interpersonal and intrapersonal tensiveness. We also produced and analyzed original photography, wrote a play, and wrote haikus and collaborative poetry to explore our deeper understanding of our own identities. These practices facilitated a continual process of critical dialogue and engagement that established a modus vivendi of mutually assured construction. As such, participants were

empowered to confront the dehumanizing and criminalizing gaze of the generalized other (a gaze that we often experienced in daily life) with a positive, dignified, and agential counter-voice. We then created spaces of liberation where that powerful voice could be humanized, magnified, and affirmed by a loving collective witness.

The result is a performance process that empowers its participants to reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities. This process fortified our sense of self-efficacy and expanded our capacity for self-production. The two integral elements of this performance-centered process off empowerment are the actor (performer, storyteller, poet) and the audience member (witness). Kelly Oliver (2001) proposes that having another person willingly and lovingly witness one's story can be incredibly encouraging, especially for marginalized peoples, who are regularly "othered" and effectively silenced by structural racism, violence and inequity. Oliver (2001) suggests that mere recognition as it is typically conceptualized, is an illusion that perpetuates the propensity of the recognizer to dominate and objectify the "other," thereby stunting humans' capacity to love one another, and overcome existing systems of oppression. Prison theater practitioner Jonathan Shailor (2011) puts this phenomenon in the context of performance-based prison programs when he observes that "prisoners develop their capacity for empathy, through repeated opportunities to explore others' perspectives through the medium of theatre" (p. 26). Through this repeated process of performing and witnessing, students are encouraged in their own growth, as they encourage others in theirs. This sort of mutually assured construction defies the dehumanizing and criminalizing deleterious effects of mass incarceration violence, poverty, and racism.

Points of Engagement between YPAR, CIPCT, and CRT in *My Life Matters*

> The complexities faced by inner city children are overwhelming when taken as larger societal issues, but are extremely basic when broken down into the individual needs of each child: to be fed, loved, and heard (Camilleri, 2007).

Through the course of this YPAR project, my collaborators and I critically examined and expressed our perceptions of the threats and challenges facing Black youth in America today. By definition, the PAR model includes a "protocol where both participant and researcher (share) lived experiences and standpoints en route to a shared praxis," and a "continuous process of dialogic practice and reflection" (Parker, Oceguera, Sanchez, 2011, p. 226). The PAR approach required my collaborators and me to engage the key elements of CIPCT as articulated by Moore (2017a): *identity, relationships,* and *power.* Through co-performative witnessing, poetic inquiry, and survey analysis, I examined how these elements were at play in the execution of the *My Life Matters* project. I applied CRT to this framework to account for the particularly racialized context within these Black youth and I were living.

The YPAR method lent itself to a deeper understanding of how these elements of critical interpersonal communication complement, collide, and coalesce in the lives of my youth collaborators and me. We repeatedly expressed and examined these elements in focus groups, Photovoice sessions, rehearsals and performances. Furthermore, my collaborators and I observed multiple vectors through which these key elements are routed through interpersonal interactions with peers, pedagogues, police officials, and publics.

YPAR treats marginalized youth and their participating community members as collaborators, rather than subjects, whose interests, concerns and insights drive the direction and outcomes of the research. It thus, requires close attention to identity, interpersonal political power dynamics, as well as the roles and expectations we have of ourselves and others in

relationship as collaborators. YPAR also requires author reflexivity - a constant inventorying of researchers' biases and purpose as collaborators seek to share power and expertise in the quest for a deeper understanding of self and society. Furthermore, scholar and PAR practitioner Michelle Fine (1994) calls activist research that "fractures the very ideologies that justify power inequities" (p. 24). In this way, YPAR is committed to empowering social transformation.

My method of performance-centered YPAR is profoundly informed by my commitment to what performance-centered critical pedagogy practitioner Diane Conrad (2013) articulates as three prerequisites for effective "transformative drama with incarcerated youth": "see them as valuable," be "respectful of their views," "[give] them a voice in the process, and [take] their interests and experiences into account" (p. 10). Guided by these prerequisites, I served as an artist teacher/learner in the *My Life Matters* project, collaborating with 35 beautiful and brilliant Black youth to lift, voice, and examine our concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming stories. I simultaneously operated as the primary investigator for the overarching *Pipelines to Pathways* project, wherein I attended to the critical elements of identity, relationships, and power at play in this work.

Identity: Reclaiming Positivity, Dignity, and Agency

> The most important thing that happened to me was […] that I found myself surrounded by people […] who kept pushing me to see more than what was directly in front of me, to see the boundless possibilities of the wider world and the unexplored possibilities within myself. People who taught me that no accident of birth – not being black or relatively poor, being from Baltimore or the Bronx or fatherless – would ever define or limit me. In other words, they helped me to discover what it means to be free (Moore, 2010, p. 179).

This project attends to Black youth identities as a means of articulating the dynamic subjectivity, positivity, dignity, and agency that are the birthright of every human. Julia Moore's (2017a) CIPCT framework privileges subjectivity (a dynamic sense of identity that is continually constructing and being constructed itself based upon an array of "historical and cultural

process”) over a static sense of identity (Moore, 2017a, p 7). Furthermore, CRT’s intersectional approach to the identity construction process opens our understanding of the concept of an “individual” to the myriad of pressures and meaning-making processes that simultaneously operate on one person or group of persons at any given moment. An intersectional approach expands the notion of George Herbert Mead’s (1934) “I”/”me” binary from a singular subject/object, into a plural and fluid unit that operates along a wide spectrum of socially and historically positioned and conditioned roles, labels and, meaning-making processes. Michael Hecht’s (2012) CTI articulates this dynamic as the four frames of identity: personal, enacted, relational, and communal.

For example, during the summer of 2016, I found myself challenged with a particularly angry adolescent boy. Before we could begin our first self-expression workshop, he was pointed out to me by an elementary school girl who informed me that he had been calling her names and bullying her. When I approached him, he stood before me with clenched fists and a steel eyed gaze that seemed to look right through me. I called him by his name and attempted to hear his side of the story. Tears in his eyes, he paced back and forth explaining how he had not had a chance to play on the swing all day, and that this little girl was “hogging” it. Besides, several of the boys had been picking on him, and he was able to “handle it.” After admonishing him about name calling and bullying, and advising him to inform adults whenever he felt bullied, I took this time to ask the boy about his hygiene. I knew it was a problem, because several other camp counselors and some youth had noted a smell of urine and body odor. When I asked him about the odor, he froze. I assured him that there was no shame in having problems like this. In fact, I was a bed wetter until my teen years. He opened up about the fact that his mother, who was an addict, had been on a binge for the past week, and he had no way of cleaning his clothes. After

conferring with the program director, another volunteer and I took this boy to the store to get some fresh clothing. Just a few pair of jeans and couple of clean t-shirts later, this young man was ready to engage and participate in a positive and inclusive way.

This experience taught me that, at any given moment, our intersections may collide to frame others' sense of our identity and to claim our own agency. Had I not taken the time to learn from this boy – the expert on his own lived experiences – the intersections of poverty, low self-efficacy, gender norms, and familial positionality at which he lived, I might have misrecognized him (c.f. Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). I might have allowed myself to define him by the iconicity of his brown body and shabby dress (the typical image that I'd seen in the media and community as the representation of the "at risk", "antisocial," "unruly," "dangerous," Black boy). I might have allowed my perceptions of his actions, attitude, and intentions to totalize him and thereby interpolate him into a cycle of further marginalization and punishment. I might have punished him for bullying and moved on to the next child. However, by actively listening, sharing my own vulnerability with him, and working together to seek a solution, he and I both pursued a route from victimized and marginalized self object to positive, agential, dignified subject. I charged him that day, "Now you feel better. I want you to always try to make other people feel better. You have that gift. Use it." He nodded and smiled. He later became one of the most outspoken performers at the 2016 *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* public performance, and one of only two 6th graders to participate in the 2017 *Our 'Ville* rehearsal.

The *My Life Matters* project is replete with examples of identity transformation from frames of misrecognition, criminalization, and dehumanization to frames of positivity, dignity, and agency. On the morning of June 27, 2017, before our official *My Life Matters* workshop began, I was met shortly after my arrival by a little girl who has survived her mother's substance

abuse and being forced into sex trafficking herself. She was only nine years old. She handed me a picture that said “To Mr. Sunie” at the top. She drew a smiling sun in the top right, shining down on a rainbow. Beneath that rainbow was a smiling cloud that she said was her. She was raining down on the plants below. I told her that I loved this art so much, because it made me feel special, and it reminded me that we need each other to grow and do good things. The plants need the sun and the water to grow, so she and I work together to make things better. She beamed at this. I told her that I would cherish this artwork for life. Ironically, it’s all in black pencil, but, in our eyes it burst with imaginative color as if it were painted with the most extravagant of oil paint pallets.

Michael Hecht’s CTI conceptualizes identity as a composite of four frames: the personal self, the enacted self, the relational self, and the communal self. Depending on the context and the focal point, Hecht (1993) argues that any one, or combination, of these frames can prove to be more salient and relevant for our analysis of identity. A CRT approach to CTI keeps us mindful of the systemic and persistent nature of racism in America, which fixes a racialized communal frame of identity over the interactions and shifts of the other frames. We are reminded that people can change their careers, social status, criminal records, religions, and names, but race in America is an indelible permanent marker that informs every other aspect of our lives for racially marginalized people. Chapter 2 examined the myriad and pervasive routes by which racism colors every aspect of racially marginalized people’s existence through implicit bias, internalized inferiority complexes, media portrayals, and the circulation of racist stock stories.

A CRIPCT approach, based on CTI reveals the process by which stories of resistance or transformation can be procured, produced, distributed, received, and digested by the public. This is reflected in the poem “They vs. We,” performed for a public community audience (to include

the Mayor of Fayetteville) in August of 2016 by *My Life Matters* youth participant, Poetess. In this public poetic declaration Poetess resists the racializing gaze of the generalized other that would pit Blacks ("We") against Whites ("They"). She acknowledges and names the all encompassing racialized communal frame of identity that deemed her as a "We" at birth. She also challenges They (White people) to critically consider their own positionalities in a White supremacist society, where they are rarely ever challenged to confront their racialized communal frame of identity:

> We are born mourning our already lost souls that are already sold to They and our lost lives We can't even touch 'cause They have it in the palm of their hands
> But every time We try to confront another problem it seems to make matters worse. Just when We think it's getting better They and We go and mess it up
> They say we're free but do We really believe that?
> Do They really believe that we think we are safe in this world
> When all we see is hatred in their eyes?
> But They say We are free and that might just be but not as long as THEY keep fighting with WE.
> But They say We are free and that might just be but not as long as THEY keep fighting with WE.

This poem serves as a concealed story that taps into a deeper understanding of the systemic nature of racism that can precariously supersede individual identity and choice. Here, Poetess articulates how racism operates at the capillary level, in the mind of a youth, and manifests itself as fear, self-doubt, hopelessness, and "anti-social behavior." We begin to see the powerfully delimiting factor that racial identification can play in the interpersonal interactions of Black youth. Trapped in the agonistic dialectic pipeline of "They vs. We," Black youth often find it tremendously challenging to conceive of unfettered pathways to possibilities promised by the "American Dream." Yet, this poem is also a call for antiracist transformation. Poetess calls for the agents of they and we to work toward peaceful possibilities.

Crenshaw (2012) notes, for example, that the neoliberal "crisis narrative" around marginalized peoples posits that the root of the issues that "at risk" Black youth face resides within their homes and communities – *not* in the structures and systems of racism that condition and contextualize their behavior, mindset, and social trajectory. In this manner "Blackness" becomes what Kumarini Silva (2016) refers to as "an identificatory strategy" mobilized to impose a "subjugated essentialism" on people identified as "at-risk," "dangerous," or "criminal" – terms disproportionately used to refer to people identified as members of the "Black" race in the U.S. This process reifies negative biotropes and the static stories that circulate them. Furthermore, the iconicity of the young Black body marks it as a site of continual misrecognition just as soon as that body enters the gaze of the generalized other (Fleetwood, 2011).

This complicated web of symbolic interaction and fixed communal framing is one reason why my collaborators and I named the research project *My Life Matters* in contrast to the popularly racialized and politicized moniker of "Black Lives Matter." This title was also chosen by my collaborators because my original title: *Trauma-Informed Performance-Based Youth Participatory Action Research on the School to Prison Pipeline* was simply "too complicated" and focused on the negative. *My Life Matters* is affirming and declarative in a way that speaks to the positivity, dignity, and agency of it participants all at once. Throughout the process, we challenged each other to keep asking and answering the pointed question: "Why does my life matter?" This was a means of building positive self-concept as much as it was a means of resisting the multivariate mechanisms of subjugated essentialism that systemic racism tends to impose upon marginalized Black youth. Furthermore, opting for a term that is not racialized or politicized allows for broader public appeal, presenting potential pathways for interest convergence with non-Black participants.

In 2016 *My Life Matters* was more of a free style self-expression project, where youth endeavored simply to answer the question “Why does my life matter?” The youth and I returned in 2017 to dig deeper into what we feel threatens our positive self-concept, dignity, and agency. The question that arose from our self-expression workshops was, “What makes you feel like your life doesn’t matter?” By sharing in open discussion, then applying the Photovoice method of SHOWED (see Chapter 2), as applied to poetry and music and photographs, we decoded some of the limit-situations that threatened our lives, positivity, dignity, and agency. Of note, we identified the primary sources of violence in our lives in the following descending order: gender stereotypes, racism, suicide/self-harm, bullying, gun/domestic violence, and drugs/gangs.

All of these themes are addressed in the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* poetry book in APPENDIX B, however, the notion of gender stereotypes as the primary source of violence requires some fleshing out. First, this element was most vociferously championed by the females

in the room, who comprised 60% of my youth collaborators. Secondly, the males did not disagree, however, their reflections on gender stereotypes as a source of violence differed.

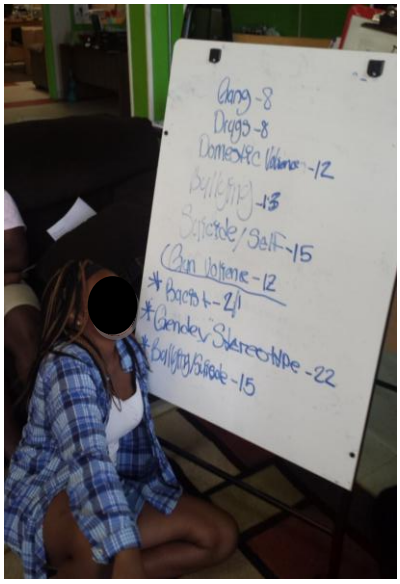

Figure 3. Causes of violence

The group decided to watch the music video for Beyoncé's 2013 song "Pretty Hurts." In this video, we see several women preparing back stage for a beauty pageant. In the first minute of this roughly seven minute video, the viewer witnesses the painstaking steps that these women take to be accepted by the audience. Disappointed gazes in the mirror, in-fighting among the ladies for beauty supplies, constant comparison to each other, and, even a brief nod to bulimia as Beyoncé exits a bathroom stall wiping her mouth, with a suspicious look on her face. Beyoncé's character, a self-conscious and nervous contestant who embodies a far cry from the femme fatal that she normally portrays as a fierce performer in the public eye, quietly begins the song in *a capella*:

> Pretty hurts
> We shine the light on whatever's worst
> Perfection is a disease of a nation
> Pretty hurts
> We shine the light on whatever's worst
> Try to fix something
> But, you can't fix what you can't see,
> It's the soul that needs the surgery

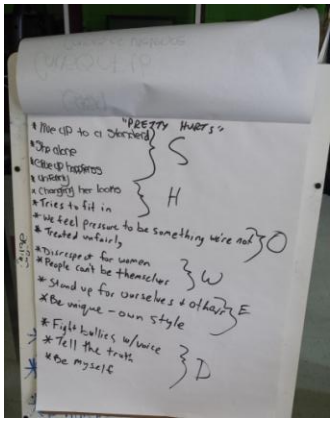

Figure 4. "Pretty Hurts" SHOWED

The first part of the video depicts the concealed story of the suffering caused by gender stereotyping and body shaming. However, toward the end of the video Beyoncé's character decides to rage against the machine, destroying beauty pageant trophies, wiping off make up, and doffing her wig. In doing so, she actively resists the prescribed iconicity of the Black female body. This dramatized resistance story also serves as an emerging/transforming story of what we might do to reject the pipelines and limit-situations that gender stereotypes impose upon our bodies and minds.

After watching the video and listening to the lyrics, we analyzed its message and relevance to our lives using the Photovoice SHOWED method. Based upon this analysis, we were able to decode the limit-situation that gender-based violence presented to us. We learned that the pressure to be something that you're not was the true violence of gender stereotypes. Many females noted that they often feel treated like their bodies and looks are all that matters. They also observed that this pressure is the root of much unwanted competition and in-fighting with other females (See the photograph "Girlfight" in *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* poetry book, APPENDIX B). Some of the males argued that homophobia threatens their lives. One young man stated, "Some places, I can't be who I am, or I might get hurt." Other males agreed with the fact that sometimes they feel the need to act violently because of the expectations set upon them by peers and society. Phrases like, "naw, I can't go out like that," and "I ain't no punk" were stated and many young men and women nodded their heads in agreement with these sentiments. One young man, in an attempt to keep the discussion inclusive, tilted his head toward the young man who showed concern about homophobia and clarified, "It ain't a gay thing or nothin'. It's just about respect." We all agreed that we could be empowered

by this video and this discussion by being ourselves whenever possible, defending others from gender biased bullies with "voice," and telling the truth.

See Figure 4 for a photograph of this SHOWED session (indicating what we Saw, what was Happening, how this affects Our lives, Why we thought it was happening, how this new insight/information could Empower us; and what we could/planned to Do about it). While a deeper dive into gender performativity, heteronormativity, homophobia, and gender-based violence would be useful here, they are not within the scope of this project. Suffice it to say that it appears that dealing with gender expectations and stereotypes is a crucial element to be attended to when doing the work to reframe and reclaim Black youth identity. The field notes excerpt below indicates how this process facilitated a coming to voice of individuals and the group. It also fit the flow of our performance making process:

> So, after deciding on the 3 top causes of violence, we moved on to watch Beyoncé's "Pretty Hurts," one of Demetrius' suggestions. I decided to conduct a SHOWED on this video. This was a good change of pace for the kids after a very in depth conversation about violence. Shauna Hopkins, printed out lyrics for "Pretty Hurts," "Free," "Black," and "If I Were a Boy".
> What did you **SEE**? Girls trying to live up to a standard. Woman isolated for being herself. She's trying to be something that she's not by putting something on and make her appearance better. She's alone. She's willing to give up her happiness just to make society feel better.
> What was **HAPPENING?** She was giving up her happiness. She was being treated unfairly and differently than the other people. She was being pressured to change.
> How does this affect **OUR** lives? Little girls feel like, "Oh, well maybe I need to do this to fit in too."
> **WHY** does this happen? The media and society. People see on TV all these fashion models…their looks and everybody else, so they can impress somebody.
> How can we be **EMPOWERED?** WE can choose to not follow what's trending. Be ourselves.
> What can we **DO?** Stand up for ourselves and others. Prove them wrong. Be the best you can be.
> Tina felt inspired to share her speech from her pageant. The question she answered is "What makes you unique." She wanted me to read it for her, but I asked her to stand up and speak her own. Question is "What Makes You Unique and Why" – Answer: "I said, what makes me unique is my ability to keep pushing despite having *myasthenia gravis.* Sometimes I want to quit. I keep pushing through. Being proud of what I have and keep

> running to get to where I want to me. [Sonny: Now explain to them what *myasthenia gravis* is, 'cause you explained it to me, but I want them to know]. *Myasthenia gravis* is a muscle disease I got when I was younger and it's. It's like something else. It starts from my head, down; and I got surgery a month ago on it, so I could see straight, because I couldn't see straight before. [Sonny: Thank you for sharing that with us. So, now you are educating us as well. Round of applause for Tina. Thank you, Sister! (the whole group claps their hands and Tina coyly returns to her seat with a trace of a smile on her face). So, Tina's body doesn't work the same way that everybody body works, but she can still stand strong and be confident and choose to be unique and liver her life the way she wants to live. I thank God for a place like Find-A-Friend, 'cause this is the place where we can stand up and do that. You can't do that everywhere else, right? (several nods and audible responses of "That's right" in the group). So, one thing we can do is create safe spaces where people can stand up and be themselves and not judged, not bullied, not be a part of the naysayers and the nonsense out there. Jared responded: I like how she did that. I replied, "Tell Tina". He looked her in the eyes and said, "I like how you did that." Sonny added, "I like how you did that too, Tina. We broke into 3 groups of about 5 to 8 kids each (Justin led the Gender Stereotyping group, Dina led Bullying/Suicide and Dre led Racism (2017, June 27).

Here is an example among countless examples produced by *My Life Matters* workshops of how performative inquiry leads to a deeper, more reflexive understanding of ourselves and empowers us to express it to others.

This empowering re-claiming of the self is evident in the original autobiographical poetry that we produced. At a Photovoice session in June, 2017, in response to the prompt, "What are the causes and effects of violence in your life?," one of the *My Life Matters* project collaborators presented a picture of himself as seen through the reflection of a shattered rear view mirror. Shortly after submitting this photograph entitled "Shattered" he shared a poem lamenting his negative sense of self and corresponding sense of hopelessness, his struggle against suicidality, based, at least partly upon his past incarceration and negative interactions with educators, law enforcement, peers, and family members. In focus groups, many of the youth were able to relate to this sentiment. To dig deeper into the intersections of identity as developed through symbolic interaction, consider the fact that the youth who produced the photo "Shattered" was struggling with his understanding of self based upon his own criminal record, bi-racialness, academic

challenges, and self-reported fatherlessness, among a host of other identificatory intersections (expressed and unexpressed). These intersections, among others, left him feeling that there was a definitive futility to making positive, healthy, forward looking choices within his social context.

One young man noted that one teacher constantly reminded him of who he was before he "started making changes" in his life. She continued to sit him in the back of the class, disregarding his protests, because that's where she traditionally seated the "trouble makers." This notion of being a reflection of one's negative past has shown to operate as a violent delimiting factor in the self-production of many of my collaborators. These youth tend to internalize the racism that is attached to them through action, and re-attached to them through their own re-action and re-interpretation self (Camilleri, 2007; hooks, 1998; Rios, 2011, 2017). Author W.E.B. Du Bois (2014) refers to this phenomenon as "double consciousness": "One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (p. 5).

Trapped in this marginalized self-concept, a youth learns to define herself as a unique "self object" called "at-risk," "thug," "troubled," "problemed," "convict," "delinquent," or "inmate," in an environment that constantly presents her with objects and relationships, the meanings of which are conditioned by a uniquely toxic and punitive state of regular racism and criminalization. For example, in one 2017 Photovoice session, inspired by a photograph of a cemetery that contained a large headstone engraved with the word "BLACK," one young man lamented, "Sometimes it feels like it's just no use. We only have three options: college, court [negative contact with criminal justice system], or the cemetery [death]." CRT demands that we

as scholars and citizens consider these mechanisms in our work, and consider how our work will address them.

Accordingly, in the *My Life Matters* project, we resist essentializing labels. As FAF Director, Shauna Hopkins declared to me at my initial site visit on September 9, 2015, "We need to look beyond the labels!" Through creative expression of poetry, prose, and photography, we took to unpacking the labels placed upon us and creatively analyzing, naming, and sharing our own lived experiences. By creatively telling our stories, we reframed ourselves and reclaimed our rights to our positive, dignified, agential selves. Consider the 2017 poem entitled "I Want More":

> What if I want to stop bangin' and slangin'…
> Stopped by cops for how my pants are hangin'?
> What if I want more?
> What if I want to stop being profiled for my past?
> Write a *new* play, with a *new* cast.
> What if I want more?

In this poem, two poets (Misunderstood and Big Smoke) collaborated to share their collective experience of naming the misrecognition and criminalization they experience based upon their communal frame of identity as Black youth. This poem is also delivered by ANDRE in the play *Our 'Ville,* as a direct address to the audience just after he is stopped and frisked by a police officer on stage. In this way, it serves as an emerging/transforming story from one Black youth who calls the audience in to imagine with him the possibility of wanting more. This "more" is metonymic expression for his will and desire to move toward a plethora of positive possibilities of identity formation and transformation that can transcend racialized and criminalized tropes through aspirations and actions. The poets substitute the term "more" for their desire to do more with their lives, in the enacted frame of identity. The term "more" also names their desire to be more in the personal frame of identity.

After her experience sharing her poetry publicly for the first time with the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters* performance in 2016, Poetess reflected on this experience of coming to voice, and the liberatory impact of this process on her own sense of self in her poem, "Help" ("He" refers to here is the facilitator of the self-expression workshops):

> He helped me through the pain
> And let my express myself to heal this migraine
> He let me be myself
> When I didn't even know what that was
> He heard me
> And had others hear me too
> With the help of staff
> They all helped me to laugh
> He told us that we matter and we're all meant to be heard

This is a reflective poem that she wrote shortly after the August 5, 2016 public *Rayon Jordan My Life Matters* performance.

In the interest of pursing this work reflexively, I must admit to having felt the confident prideful swelling of my chest as I read this poem. However, I understand that a savior mentality is not what any of us need to effectively address the deep seated issues of racist dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth. While, I am thrilled that this collaborator recognized my loving witness as a source of empowerment, I hope for this research to challenge us all to seek regular opportunities to create and maintain spaces of affirmation and witness where we can encourage Black youth to come to voice and empower them to reclaim and reframe their positive, dignified, agential selves.

<u>Relationships: Creating Affirming Spaces</u>

> Only by witnessing the process of witnessing itself, the unseen in vision, the unsaid in language, can we begin to reconstruct our relationships by imagining ourselves together (Oliver, 2001, p. 223).

The success of the *My Life Matters* program depended on trusting and affirming relationships between collaborators for its success. As collaborators, we sought and express concealed stories that often make us feel vulnerable, angry, afraid, and uncertain about ourselves and the society we live in. This kind of work can only be executed in spaces that facilitate resilience, courage, and a bold coming to voice. Relationships are the bedrock of this space.

In fact, my journey into the worlds of Black youth identities through the *My Life Matters* project was almost cancelled before it began. This had everything to do with the sanctity of relationships. It all began with a phone call in April of 2016. I was preparing an Institutional Review Board application to begin my research with a group of Black youth and I had personally chosen the FAF program as my primary potential site due to my own history with the program and its leadership. I had already named the project the *Trauma-Informed Performance Based Youth Participatory Action Research on the School to Prison Pipeline.* I called my colleague and friend, Shauna Hopkins, the Director of FAF and pitched this idea to her. With over 16 years of experience serving marginalized youth through the FAF program, Shauna was a valuable community expert in youth intervention. I assured her that it would be simple, and that I would provide a service to her summer camp participants by conducting free creative self-expression workshops. I had conducted such workshops for the FAF youth during the summer of 2015 to help her to meet the requirement for a grant from the Fayetteville, Cumberland County Arts Council, so we had some history with this kind of work. In light of our past experience and mutually supportive relationship, Shauna agreed whole heartedly to allow me to conduct my research project and creative self-expression workshops with FAF during the summer of 2016.

Due to a challenging graduate school course load and Shauna's ever demanding workload, serving 150 to 200 youth a year with after-school programming and case management,

we didn't touch base again on this project for over a month. However, I was confident that all would run smoothly. I had a history with the organization and the staff, dating back to the time when I was the Director of FAF, and Shauna's supervisor, from January 2012 through June of 2015. From June of 2012 through my July of 2015, I served as the Director of Operations for Fayetteville Urban Ministry (the mother agency of FAF), where I continued to serve as Shauna's supervisor. Frankly, I had developed a three year pattern of managing and leading Shauna. Now, that I was a YPAR researcher, I was stepping into a new season of collaboration with Shauna, her staff, and the FAF youth that was supposed to honor their desires, plans, and needs as commensurate with my own. The shift in our enacted frames of identity (i.e. my shift from enacting supervision over Shauna and her work to enacting collaborative work with her, her team, and the youth, where she would now enact supervision over me) collided with our relational frames of identity, as two very close friends and former co-workers.

By mid-May, 2016, I knew that I had to finalize my research plans for that summer and I was not able to get in contact with Shauna to plan and confirm the research. Instead of enacting my role as collaborator and reaching out to her to seek solutions, I enacted my previous role of supervisor, and I reached out to her administrative assistant. On May 23, 2016, I defied the collaborative principals of YPAR and the trust of my relationship with Shauna when I enacted a forcing of my own agenda ahead of the needs, desires, and protocols of my collaborators. I e-mailed Shauna's administrative assistant directly and asked him to share with me statistics about the demographics of FAF youth and details about the upcoming parent meetings where I had planned to present the research to parents and distribute forms of consent and assent to parents and youth. I courtesy copied Shauna in the e-mail, and she responded with silent anger.

For several days neither she, nor her administrative assistant, returned my e-mails or calls. On May 26, 2016, I pressed the issue and called her repeatedly on her personal cell phone, Shauna responded with a cold and distant demeanor. She asked me what I thought I was doing and she questioned my motives with this research project. She expressed to me that she didn't understand that I would be doing "research" this summer, and that when she agreed to let me participate in summer camp, she didn't understand what all that my participation entailed. This put me into a panic.

My enacted frame of identity (i.e. the primary investigator role) was in peril. Likewise, her enacted role as the Director and leader of FAF was being compromised by my act of directly tasking her employees and imposing new protocols without prior approval from her. This, in turn placed a tremendous amount of tension on our relational frames of identity. I was being a thoughtless and selfish friend. She felt betrayed and dooped by me. This dynamic, in turn, collided with our personal frames of identity. She expressed that she felt that she was playing the fool and I was playing the manipulator. I, in turn, felt that I was just being the pragmatist that I am, and she was being overly sensitive. I had enacted a trespass that resulted in a domino effect wherein our enacted, relational, and personal frames of identity collided painfully.

Add to this tension the fact that I had just sat in on a Photovoice workshop with Dr. Alexandra Lightfoot at UNC's Gillings School of Public Health, where I learned that this process would require me to be organized and clear with my collaborators about my expectations, needs, and protocols. I would need to find some way to extract from the 70, or so summer camp participants a group of 12 or less for a Photovoice team. Secondly, I would need to purchase cameras and possibly bring in assistants who were better versed at photography than me. These were just more detailed impositions to Shauna's summer camp plans.

When, Shauna, a person whom I treat and treasure like a sister to me, told me that she felt dooped and betrayed by me, my personal frame of identity was shattered. Guilt turned to shame, and I understood that I indeed had valued my academic career over her authority, buy-in, and true collaboration. I was treating her like I was still her supervisor. In that moment, my YPAR training reminded me to share power, to insist upon iterative and clear communication, and to ensure that the research was of true and lasting benefit to all parties involved. In that moment, I placed my research on the sacrificial altar of relationship and self-concept preservation. I offered to conduct the weekly creative self-expression workshops and do no research.

I apologized for overstepping my boundaries and for not checking in to clarify with Shauna along the way. My miscommunication and disregard for the dynamics of identity, relationships, and power at play in this process had broken trust with my key collaborator and community expert. Because I thought I had a verbal agreement with Shauna in April, I did not submit to her a lay summary. She had no way of reviewing or offering feedback to my plan and protocols. Disarmed by my offer and emotional show of contrition, Shauna agreed to allow me time to draft and submit to her a lay summary for the project.

On June 7, 2016, I sat down with Shauna for a two-hour meeting. I led with a heartfelt apology and an open-ended offer for her to say “yay” or “nay” to the research. She was very receptive and agreed to allow me to do the research as long as I did it in a way that was, first and foremost, healthy and beneficial to FAF and the youth. I covered the two page lay summary with her and showed her the parent permission form, youth assent form, and adult participant form. Shauna agreed to participate and challenged me to follow her lead, as she was much better acquainted with each of my future youth collaborators and their parents. She started by challenging me to change the title of the project. Beside the fact that she found the title “wordy”

and "complicated," Shauna suggested that overtly tackling the School to Prison Pipeline was too complicated, and not necessarily relevant to the youth. In addition to simplifying the project by suspending the Photovoice project in 2016, Shauna suggested that we name the project "My Life Matters." In my field notes, I recorded her justification:

> [*My Life Matters]* looks like kids across the country taking ownership of their lives, their communities, their futures. Kids saying, 'You know what? Let me take care of me.' It's adults taking care of young people, young people taking care of each other, and most importantly young people taking care of themselves. The most important thing that adults can do is listen and be supportive.

Thus, the title *My Life Matters* serves as more than a functional title. It is also a driving force for the YPAR work and a signpost of the mending and strengthening of the relationship between friends, colleagues, and collaborators.

The power of relationships served as a poignant cornerstone for the *My Life Matters* project for the entire three years. During that time the theme of belonging was continually expressed as a vital element of creating spaces of resilience and courage where Black youth could be empowered to confront and resist the delimiting forces of dehumanization and criminalization. We learned that a gradual, careful, and playful process of self-expression was a vital prerequisite for establishing a sense of belonging. As a facilitator I employed performance-centered pedagogical practices that I gleaned from African and African American storytelling traditions and the arts-centered approaches of Lee Ann Bell, Augusto Boal, Erin Gruwell, and Michael Rohd. These activities focus more on play, creative expression, and embodiment than on direct inquiry or self-disclosure.

By encouraging participants to explore the enacted frame of identity in the context of aesthetic creation, we were able broaden and reinforce the relational frame of identity. Through the act of loving witness, and courageous trusting performance, we grew closer to one another and we learned more about one another. In other words, our communal and personal frames of

identity also began to coalesce. It was that that we were becoming one, as much as we were becoming a diverse community marked by mutual love, respect, and response-ability.

Because adolescents tend to struggle disproportionately with self-doubt and negative self-concept, participation in the performance process can be a rewarding and encouraging means for them to garner a sense of belonging and solidarity with others (Walsh, 2004). However, the CRT lens reminds us of the hypervigilance and hyperdiscipline that many Black youth experience at their respective intersections of social positionality in their communities and schools (Crenshaw, 2012; Ginwright, 2010, 2016; Ladson-Billings, 1998; Rios, 2011, 2017). These factors are persistent threats to the positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities. They also limit the level of vulnerability and self-disclosure that many marginalized Black youth are willing and able to partake in (Gruwell & The Freedom Writers Foundation, 2007; Rios 2011).

I have found that it is best for the facilitator of the performance-centered process to lead by sharing his own sensitive information and self-expression first. This leading by example is an act of putting skin in the game that tends to facilitate a process whereby students are encouraged share gradually and collectively at their own pace. As a teacher/learner, I learned to tread lightly on questions and issues that might require more time and trust (e.g. participants' exposure to violence, abuse, or incarceration). The goal is to draw all participants naturally and safely into a place of deeper belonging, intersubjectivity, and mutual response-ability.

I observed that through the mechanisms of call and response, bodily interaction, and co-performative witnessing[48], participants entered the performance process on their own terms, maintaining a sense of safety, positivity, dignity, and agency. For example, every session begins with a round of an activity that we call "I hear you." I ask every participant to sit in a circle. Each

[48] Co-performative witnessing is a reflexive witnessing of self and other from within a mutually shared experience of meaning making and performance (Conquergood, 2013). This framework empowered all participants to clearly conceptualize their dually vital roles of witness/audience/collaborator and performer/player.

individual takes a turn standing (to embody the act of standing in your truth, standing for what you believe in, and claiming your space and right to be witnessed), saying their name, saying how they are feeling today, and embodying how they are feeling today. The other participants are to "listen with their eyes and ears" and respond with similar energy and movements. In an act of performative reflection, the other participants mirror the speaker's movement and tone to the best of their ability, while uttering the simple phrase "I hear you." The leader reminds them that making these movements and saying "I hear you" is not a means of making fun of the speaker, nor is it merely an attempt to empathize or sympathize with them. It is simply a holding of space to say that "I love and respect you enough to stay in the room with you and to pay attention to you." I remind them that "love" here simply means, "I want the best for you and I hope that you want the best for me." "Respect" means, "I think you have the right to be here and to be heard." This is a daily practice of witnessing. It is an embodied enactment of response-ability.

This simple and repetitive routine is an extremely abridged adaptation of Della Pollock's (1998) listening out loud method of collecting oral histories, whereby the teller

> feels *for, with, on behalf of,* and *in response to* her friend. This isn't a mimesis of feeling in the sense of a direct copy. The performer isn't feeling-and doesn't pretend to feel-what her friend felt. But the friend's-or first performer's-feelings are doubled, and doubled again-one body to ·another, and past to present. Both the primary teller and the listener/teller are moved in corresponding but markedly different ways (p. 92).
> We are all encouraged to disclose in our own way, to a depth that we feel comfortable.

This exercise helps us to practice self-expression and loving witness. Thus, it simultaneously enacts our personal, relational, communal, and enacted frames of identity as it challenges us to stand out from the crowd and express what is inside each of us to the crowd of loving and respectful witnesses. Together, we come to voice, declaring, "Who I am and what I have to say matters." We also commit to witness, declaring, "Who you are and what you have to say matters."

The embodied action of standing and speaking our truth activates the enacted frame of identity as we come to voice – "I am one who stands up and speaks up to claim my identities." When we stand in our truth and express our own perceptions and positionalities, we activate the personal frame of identity. Because we are all mutually witnessing and sharing with love and respect, we develop and honor rhythms collaboratively in relationship to one another, activating the relationship frame of identity. We are declaring, "I am one who chooses to be a part of this team/ensemble/family." Finally, as Black youth, we are generating a space of courage and creativity that is shaped by our Black bodies and informed by our unique stories and positive sense of communal identities – "I am a representative of a larger community of which I am proud and knowledgeable." In this, our communal frame of identity is activated. All of this comes together in a mantra that we often shared in groups throughout the three year project – "My name is (state your name), and my life matters." This statement performs at once as a personal statement that enacts the claiming positivity, dignity, and agency and as a communal statement declaring that you are a participant in the *My Life Matters* program. All of this began with relationship between the person coming to voice and her loving, respectful witness.

After we complete one round of "I hear you," we take about five minutes to write free style in our journals any thoughts or feelings we have in the moment. I often use this quiet writing times to lead students in writing haiku poetry – a simple three line poem consisting of five syllables, seven syllables, and five syllables. This poetry style helps new poets, especially to distill their most poignant thoughts into just a few words. The simplicity of this poetry style also allows those who are insecure about their writing to save face by avoiding the typical challenges of syntax and grammar. If students find haiku constricting, I offer them the option of freestyle

writing or "Hype-ku" (5 words, 7 words, 5 words) answering prompts like: Reflect on a time when you felt that your life did not matter/a time when you felt that your life mattered.

Some youth participated actively and wrote feverishly, others drew pictures, and still others closed their journals and their mouths, seeming to exhibit no interest. Regardless of the youth participants' immediate response, I found, that, over time this simple pattern of behavior creates a regular rhythm that seems to build trust with the youth, as well as a sense of positivity, dignity, and agency. Pastor Chad Pullins, who facilitates the All Pro Dad (father-child bonding) program at my son's school often says that "simple, repeatable, consistent rhythms cause children to develop a sense of significance." The "I hear you" rhythm has become such a staple with the *My Life Matters* program that the youth have stopped me and reminded me to do it whenever I jumped directly into a self-expression session due to time limitations or my own thoughtlessness. In 2017 and 2018 some of the youth themselves led this warm up process. Through this regular occurrence, I have observed Michael Rohd's assessment that "emphasis on caring and self-expression throughout the group process allows individuals to safely be heard in unique and supported says" (p. 3).

After "I hear you" and journaling, we move into some physical activity to honor the embodied nature of interpersonal communication and performance. I conduct these warm up activities with three goals in mind: "to get a group of people playing together in a safe space, to energize that space, and to create a sense of comfort in the collective doing of specific and structured activities" (Rohd, 1998, p. 4). Furthermore, I applied Boal's (1995) *Theatre of the Oppressed* methodology as "a system of physical exercises, aesthetic games, image techniques and special improvisations whose goal is to safeguard, develop and reshape this human vocation, by turning the practice of theatre into an effective tool for the comprehension of social and

personal problems and the search for their solutions" (p. 15). Embodied warm ups and acting games empower us to give permission to our bodies to play and express. We are warming up our, bodies, hearts, and minds to share and to receive. Thus, introductions and warms ups served to connect mind, body, and soul to the struggle for power, building of relationships, and transformation of identity.

Of the many warm up games that I have employed, the most popular is one that I picked up while visiting the Shakespeare Behind Bars[49] program at the Audubon Youth Development Center in Louisville, Kentucky in April of 2016. This game is called "Zip, Zap, Zop," and it requires participants to look at, listen to, and anticipate the movements of their collaborators. One participant starts the pattern by sending consistent eye contact, a clap of their hands and the word, "Zip!" to another person standing across the circle. That person, in turn, executes the same actions toward another person, now shouting, "Zap!" The third person must repeat the behavior in relation to another person, yelling "Zop!" The participants continue to send this rally of "Zip! Zap! Zop!," one person at a time, around the circle. At first, we did not play it competitively. However, as trust and depth of relationships were built, the students preferred to play this game competitively. Any hesitation or mis-articulation would disqualify a participant from the game, and require them to sit outside the circle. By the end of the game, two people are feverishly passing "Zips," "Zaps," and "Zops" back and forth at super speed as everyone else cheered them on. As fun and light hearted as this seems, "Zip, Zap, Zop" is simply another simple repeatable rhythm that helped us to grow closer to one another. I have found that allowing yourself to risk

[49] Funded by the Fayetteville Cumberland County Arts Council, I spent five days observing the Shakespeare Behind Bars program in Louisveille, Kentucky in April, 2016. I was able to participate in the final week of a 10-week program where a group of 13 to 16-year-old male inmates voluntarily rehearsed four hours a week and presented a public reading of an abridged version of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar.*

defeat in front of a group of people develops a deeper level of relational intimacy, especially for youth who spend so much time trying to appear strong, independent, and without vulnerability.

After "I hear you" and the warm up exercise, we got into the substance of the creative self-expression workshop. We discussed identities, society, safety, and other topics in the context of analyzing or creating artistic expression. For my first session on June 14, 2016, I led the group in Erin Gruwell & the Freedom Writers Foundation (1997) "Line Game," which helped us to explore what hurts and joys we all have in common through a process of controlled, but escalating self-disclosure. The questions started out shallow and gradually went deeper. For example, I started by asking participants to step onto line in the middle of the floor if they liked Cheerios more than Life cereal, or if they had ever left the state. As our level of relational truth deepened and students seemed engaged and comfortable with the lines of inquiry presented, my questions graduated to "Have you experienced the death of a loved one?", "Have you ever been in love or 'deep like'?", "Has anyone ever told you that you were bad or that you wouldn't succeed in life?", "Have you ever been suspended?" Nearly every youth stepped on the line together at the following questions, "Have you lost a friend to violent death?"; "Do you have at least one family member who is incarcerated?"; and "Did you grow up without father?" As a practical matter, I also asked who considered themselves an artist of the 10 or so people in the room (including 3 young summer interns/volunteers), at least two admitted to being poets, one was a musician and rapper, one was a singer and actor, and all were open to the idea of producing their own creative works. This was a particularly courageous act of self-disclosure, as the youth knew that I was preparing us for a performance later in the summer. Admitting your capacity for artistry was nearly tantamount to admitting your willingness to perform your artistry

publically. As we penetrated each others' frames of identity, we grew closer as collaborators, and, as a teacher and facilitator, I got a clearer view of what I was working with.

Once, we had established a working knowledge of each other's proclivities, patterns, and personalities through this performance-centered process, we moved to the place of collectively witnessing examples of performance. This step of demonstration is the first step in the 3D model of performance-centered youth engagement. When we witness demonstrations of public performance carried out by people who look like us, we are encouraged to face our fears and grab the proverbial mic ourselves. I began this demonstration at the very first *My Life Matters* workshop on Tuesday, June 14, 2016 by playing the YouTube video of Ravon Jordon, a FAF alumnus, speaking to the Fayetteville City Council, as well as the report of his shooting, just a few months after this address, in 2014. This demonstration seemed to grab my collaborators' attention every time I played it. Many of them either knew Ravon as FAF participants or classmates, or they knew of him. Ravon was a FAF participant when he went to speak to the City Council. Two of the Summer Achievement Camp interns, Fayetteville State University students and FAF graduates knew Ravon Jordan. They cried at the sight of his video, and shared some of their feelings. Allowing the trusted adult interns to share their emotional vulnerability and personal experience with death was certainly a strategic enactment of self-expression that helped to encourage other youth to participate.

Figure 5. Ravon Jordan addresses Fayetteville City Council, May 12, 2014

I told them that Ravon was an example of a young person "who looks like us" using his words to impact his community. He stood alone at a microphone, this sleek darker-than-most native son, clad in white T, jeans and sneakers, commanding the attention of a primarily White and non-Black audience. Although he was not invited to this meeting, Ravon stood and spoke – not perfectly. He stood and spoke – not articulately. He stood and spoke courageously, poetically, passionately, and a silent crowd of suits and church shoes sat and listened. I could see the eyes of my youth collaborators light up. They were inspired.

We then engaged in a dialogue for about 20 minutes about what we saw guided by the SHOWED method. We reflected on how serious a problem gun violence is in our communities. We cried and lamented the loss of one of our own, as well as the memories other personal losses that Ravon's story triggered in some of us. We talked about neighborhoods where we have experienced late night gun shots and gang activity. Individuals shared their own stories of loss

and fear. I noted the elements of metaphor, simile, vocalic modulation, eye contact, and embodiment that Ravon employed to emphasize and articulate his point effectively. We agreed that what Ravon did mattered because "nobody else is saying anything," "they listened to him!," and we were "proud of him for stepping up for his friends and family." By enacting this form of courageous public self-expression, Ravon was honoring his relational frame of identity, as a friend of a young woman who was gunned down in his neighborhood.

The final step of the SHOWED method challenged us all to consider what we would do about what we had just witnessed. We all agreed that we should find a way to remember and honor Ravon and his activism. One of us suggested that we do the summer performance in August in Ravon's honor. We all agreed that this was a good idea. We then brainstormed about what else we could do. Ideas like doing motivational speaking to kids in schools, peer-to-peer mentoring, and going back to City Hall to address gun violence arose as options. Here, we were beginning to develop the emerging/transforming stories of a community that is committed to changing the oppressive status quo. I asked my collaborators to keep writing their thoughts and feelings in their journals. These would become the poems that we now read and share proudly in the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* book of poetry (APPENDIX B).

To bring the 3D process closer to home, and into the room, I performed "Sterling's Story," an eight minute autobiographical story about how I had to explain race and racism to my oldest son Sterling when he was only seven-years-old. In the performing of the story, I enact a dramatic restoration of the behavior I enacted when I had "The Talk" about race with Sterling. There is a point in the story where I replay the day Sterling was born. When I perform the behavior of picking him up for the first time, tears naturally well up in my eyes. This really grabbed their attention. After having led by example, I found that the youth were by and large

ready and willing to offer thoughtful and detailed responses to these prompts. This leveraging of embodied theatrical performance of the relational frame of identity as a means of putting skin in the game to begin (or expand) the performative self-expression process proved to be quite effective. We dialogued around the "talks" that we had all received from our caregivers and our mutual experiences of being Black in America. Their development assignment was to go and answer for themselves the questions "Why does my life matter?" and "Do I feel that my life matters?"

From these experiences, I developed my 3D or 3T Model (Demonstrate, Dialogue, Develop or Tell, Talk, Transform) of performance-centered youth engagement. First, the facilitator presents some performance work of his own, or via a guest artist. The goal is to Demonstrate/Tell a compelling concealed or resistance story to help the participants to develop a deeper, more critical understanding of the larger issues at hand. We spent most of our time together on the second step in this model – the Dialogue/Talk portion - which is as it should be. The youth felt comfortable sharing some deep hurts and insights that they could personally see reflected in the performance that was demonstrated. We fleshed out all of this by applying the SHOWED method to each work of creative expression that was demonstrated, or told. Finally, the Develop/Transfer step was where I saw youth applying what they had observed and discussed to create their own work. All of the poems and conversations referred to in this chapter and evidenced in APPENDIX B were generated by this step. We were also able to write the play *Our 'Ville* based upon the stories, perceptions, and insights that we Developed/Transformed into artistic and direct open expression.

For example, for our second session on June 21 of 2016 (and every year thereafter), we began with "I hear you," followed by a series of movement games, such as Zip!Zap!Zop!, Boal's

(2002) Columbian Hypnotist or Slowest Race, Rohd's (1998) Circle Dash or Cover the Space, or Gruwell's & The Freedom Writers Foundation (2007) Line Game or Free Writing. Next, we witnessed and analyzed a poem together. During the second session each year, that poem was Donovan Livingston's "Lift Off."

This poem was part of a 2016 address at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education and stood for us as a powerful exampled performed poetry that would garner a standing ovation, national recognition, and eventual publication in a short book (Pritchard, 2016. This poem, and its context stand as resistance stories from a native son of Fayetteville. Donavan, a Black man, was a graduate of one of our local public schools, Jack Britt High School, in 2005. At his May 25, 2016 graduation from Harvard University, he was selected to deliver the keynote address. In this address he recalled a moment during his high school graduation when a teacher prohibited him from sharing poetry at his public address. Now, at Harvard University, before the eyes of the world, he would "go savage and spit fiya"[50]. The poem includes the empowering narrative of a Black boy who was once labeled "Disruptive. Talkative. A distraction" in the 7th grade, until he met the right teacher, Susan Parker, a speech coach who helped him to come to voice through oratory. He recounts in the poem:

> I was in the 7th grade, when Ms. Parker told me,
> "Donovan, we can put your excess energy to good use!"
> And she introduced me to the sound of my own voice.
> She gave me a stage. A platform
> She told me that our stories are ladders
> That make it easier for us to touch the stars (Pritchard, 2016)

As he closes the poem, Livingston also calls educators to follow Ms. Parker's example of emerging/transforming action:

[50] This compound colloquialism, taught to me by my youth collaborators is a way of saying that in Donavan's poem, he expressed strong and assertive resistance through a particularly puissant parlayance of poetic prowess.

> As educators, rather than raising your voices
> Over the rustling of our chains,
> Take them off. Un-cuff us.

After we watched a YoutTube video of Livingston's performance of "Lift Off," we dialogued about what we thought was most relevant and memorable. This exchange allowed us to share our personal and collective thoughts and feelings about our own experiences with racism and education through a piece of art.

We engaged in generative a d*isidentification.* Disidentification helps us to articulate and analyze our feelings more deeply and courageously via two routes of entry: *differentiation* and *misrecognition.* Pollock (2006) defines differentiation as "the delineation of identity boundaries" (p. 91). As we sat and watched Donovan Livingston tell his story, we were stricken by the fact that he was not us, yet his experience gave voice to many of our own yearnings, pains, concerns, and life experiences. I recall the lyrics to Roberta Flack's 1973 R & B hit, "Killing Me Softly" where she reflects upon an experience where a singer's lyrics and melody coalesced with her own lived experience, giving public voice to her very private feelings:

> Strumming my pain with his fingers
> Singing my life with his words
> Killing me softly with his song
> Killing me softly with his song
> Telling my whole life with his words
> Killing me softly with his song

Differentiation causes a generative Brechtian distance to have a person who is different from the teller to tell the story in first person. The absurdity causes rupture and gives rise to critical consciousness.

Pollock (2006) defines misrecognition as "the dialectics of identity play and replay" that she likens to the phenomenon of "seeing one's self in a kind of fun house mirror with painful clarity and/or pleasurable curiosity" (pp. 91, 92). This allows for heightened *reflexivity* and *re-*

creativity in the teller and the re-teller. The teller (Livingston, in this case) is caught in the luminal space between "not me" and "me" – the "not not me." The self (*My Life Matters* participants' identities) is not originally defined but lost in "mimetic replay" (p. 93).

As we dialogue about the poem, we are able to tap into our own personal experiences as reflected through the poem and refracted through our sharing and collective witnessing in the group. Totally empathy with Livingston or with the other participants is impossible, however, as Pollock (2006) observes with her listening out loud technique, "The distances provoked by disidentification help to shift the I/you, self/other relationship with which the participants typically begin into a tentative I/thou ethic of respect and appreciation (p. 93). Thus the poem "Lift Off" served our group discussions as a launching pad for deeper, more loving and respectful interactions and relationships among the participants. This process allows us to self-express some of our own closely held opinions and experiences with negative school experiences by empathizing with and examining Livingston's work through the SHOWED method.

This led us to the Development/Transformation phase of the 3D model of performance-centered youth engagement. We agreed that the most salient themes that arose for us in the poem were the threat of violence from the expectations of others (especially in the form of gender stereotyping and racism) and the internalization of negative expectations that impact our own mindsets. We considered holding another *My Life Matters* public performance in 2017, but the youth suggested one ensemble performance this time. They wanted to tell one clear story that would touch on all of these issues so that people could "follow it" and "really get it." We agreed that I would be the playwright and that the group would act as an active dramaturgical collective. Throughout the summer, I would incorporate our poetry and transcripts from our workshops into the play. We would continually workshop the script until it was a piece that we all felt

comfortable presenting to a larger public. That public would be adults that needed to "know what we go through" as well as youth that could be "inspired" and encouraged "to know that they're not alone." Thus the concept of *Our 'Ville* was born of the 3D method of performance-centered youth engagement. Although we did not get to perform *Our 'Ville* publicly, we continued to edit and embody its spirit throughout the rehearsal process that spanned from June 2017 through December 2017.

Besides facilitating games, self-expression workshops, and rehearsals, my consistent presence at the Summer Achievement Camp as a camp counselor was a crucial element of the relational trust and intimacy that I developed with my collaborators. As we learned the rhythms of every day camp life together, the kids and I learned each other, and our level of self-expression and response-ability would grow in depth and breadth at unexpected times. For example, on June 13, 2017, I started chatting about life in general with two *My Life Matters* teens at the playground. Somehow, the conversation turned to violence and incarceration. The female teen talked about how being sexually abused as a 10 year old continues to affect her as a 15 year old, as she has to repeatedly testify and go to court so that the assailant will have to face justice. She was frustrated because she has to relive this trauma repeatedly, and the assailant oftentimes doesn't even show up to court. She said, "Now, I don't know if I want to be gay or not, and part of that is because I'm dealing with all this." She was able to channel some of this pain and confusion into her poetry and theatrical performance with *My Life Matters.*

The teen male recalled being "locked up." He had recently completed a youth education and employment program called Tar Heel Challenge. He argues that he achieved this in spite of his time in juvenile detention. He felt strongly that being locked up did not help kids. "It just made me worse. I learned how to not get caught," he said. In addition to revealing and reframing

biotropes, the process of reframing Black youth identity also requires that we address the psychosocial experience of criminalization and marginalization that frame and condition the lived experiences of Black youth. Psychiatrist James Gilligan (2001), who served prisoners in the Massachusetts penal system for 25 years, has observed that shame caused by societal inequity and marginalization breeds violence. He describes prison as a place where punishment begets shame, which produces a "'pure culture' of violence" (p. 13).

These acts of vulnerable self-expression not only drew us closer as collaborators, but they also empowered the youth by allowing them to name their struggles and begin to imagine solutions and modes of resistance. Sharing our collective trauma interpersonally and finding ways to express it publicly through poetry and theater helped us to engage that enacted frame of identity in a way that transformed our personal, relational, and communal senses of self. When my collaborators and I examined what we perceived to be the solutions to the criminalization, racism, and violence that we had experienced, developing a sense of belonging emerged as the most salient solution. Participants agreed that building positive relationships with peers and trusted adults was a crucial help to making positive life choices and to coping with experiences of racism and disproportionate negative experiences in education or criminal justice.

You can see this in the closing scene of our play *Our 'Ville.* The title indicates a collective claiming of a place (Fayetteville) as home and a collective naming of this place with a commonly used colloquialism ("The 'Ville"). The play follows four friends as they struggle to survive and thrive amidst a myriad of threats to their existence. JOSEPH, an effeminate boy who loves to dance and dress colorfully must confront his homophobic father, his inherited bully tendencies, substance abuse, and suicidality. SABRINA, a strong athletic female character, must confront the bullying that often comes from resisting gender norms, as well as an estranged

relationship with her father whom she only sees on summers when she has to compete with her step mother for attention. ANDRE is recovering from a past of incarceration and criminality. He must confront negative interactions with police officers and educators who don't recognize that he has changed. He also struggles with finding belonging in a world where his father has been "locked up" since his infancy. TIANA struggles to apply herself to school work while protecting her younger siblings from poverty, the violence in her neighborhood, and the chronic absence of their substance addicted mother. All of them find a lasting sense of solace in their friendship and in their time at FAF. This play is centered around relationships, and may best be summed up by one youth's reflection on what he liked most about FAF: "It's like we all got the same problems. It's like we all belong here. We family" (July 2016 workshop)

When asked to submit photographs that articulated solutions to criminalization and violence during the summer of 2017, several participants gravitated to a picture titled "Bond for Life" showing some of the participants sitting close together and laughing. All of the participants agreed that they found this particular peer group to be a source of healing, coping, and hope in the face of life's trials. Participating in the process of creating and sharing artistic expression for critical analysis allowed the youth to experience the joy and encouragement that comes from the reciprocal process of coming to voice and witnessing as both artist/performers and audience members/witnesses/researchers.

To achieve this level of collective consciousness and connection it is also crucial to develop a sense of community whereby individual collaborators' respective communal frames of identity coalesce around some focal point. CRT theorist Patricia Williams (1998) reminds us to beware of "premature community" – a false sense of community that neglects or oversimplifies the diverse oppressive forces present. To avoid such a pitfall, consider the power of storytelling

to develop a deeper understanding of the self and group members. As Lee Ann Bell (2010) observes, “the Storytelling Project Model can be used to help teachers understand racial positionality, think more critically about their practice, and develop curriculum that engages students as social critics and actors” (p. 6). She observes that arts-based interventions are creative modes of storytelling that “play an important role in building a community where risks can be taken and shared, and new norms established for acting against racism” (p. 110). Thus a CRIPCT approach to performance-centered youth engagement reveals the power of the coming to voice and witnessing process to develop relationships and activism, while keeping researchers accountable and reflexive.

I have found that when students feel cared for and significant, they operate from a place of positivity, dignity, and agency to participate in driving and directing the process going forward. Here we see how the enacted frame of identity is activated when we conceptualize ourselves as *My Life Matters* participants when we partake in its/our rhythms and patterns that require us to enact love and respect in relation to ourselves and one another. This enacted frame can shift the personal frame toward a positive, dignified, and agential sense of self as we learn to share, give loving witness, and expect loving witness form others. All the while, the relational frame of identity, which is based upon our sense of connectedness, positionality, and comparison to others, unites us and drives us to hold each other accountable and to operate with purpose. This dynamic frame work, in turn, shatters the stigmatizing forces of racism, as we see our potential as a collective of thinkers, poets, and storytellers. In this way, the performance process begins to transmute the communal frame from a racialized one to a poeticized one – form pipelines to pathways.

Power: Coming to Power by Coming to Voice

> I have also witnessed how they employ performance as a means of communication and as a subversive tactic to win hearts and minds in their efforts toward a more humane and democratic society (Madison, 2010, p. 1).

In the spirit of CRT's call to storytelling and social transformation, *Pipelines to Pathways'* performance-centered processes of identity framing and claiming combines critical pedagogy, creative self-expression, and storytelling to help communities to build affirming relationships while developing empowered counter-storytelling communities that confront and resist the racist status quo (Bell, 2010, p. 111). Power plays a crucial role throughout this process. It is the product of our coming to voice, the source of our response-ability, and the force that drives the enactment of our social responsibility to antiracist transformation. My collaborators and I found that attention to personal and collective power dynamics helped us to more clearly examine the impact that our stories have on our identities.

For example, during one the June 21, 2017 focus group, 35 Black youth and I discussed how we had experienced violence in our daily lives, and what we thought about its causes, effects, and possible solutions. As collaborators, we shared our personal opinions and insights. Meanwhile, I wrote them on a white board for the group to view and revise. When I asked my collaborators what they feared most, one young man responded, "More than anything, I'm scared of getting' stole' on[51]!" A rumble of assenting nods, moans, sighs, and grunts rolled around the room. After I petitioned my collaborators to expand upon this sentiment, I learned that the overwhelming majority of these Black youth were more concerned about experiencing daily, unsolicited violence from their peers than from any other source. One collaborator lamented the fact that kids in her neighborhood were not allowed to play outside that summer because of

[51] This term, derived from "stolen," refers to being physically attacked by another person without warning.

"beef[52]" between two prominent gang members. We agreed that we collectively perceived that the most clear and present danger to our lives came from peers and those who live in our own communities.

In other words, expanding from two of our collaborators' personal stories, we expressed, as a group, our persistent experiences with the endogenic forces (within our communities and personal spaces) that pull us toward violence and violent experiences. One story was told by a 16-year-old young man who felt that he had to get into a fight at school to prevent one of his peers from attacking him first. The other story was told by a 15-year-old girl who felt trapped in her home all summer due to the threat of gang violence from her own community members. We further analyzed these stories by applying the SHOWED method. Our responses to the "What can we Do about this?" step ranged from preemptive violence (e.g. "Steal on them first" or "You could join a gang") to avoidance ("Just stay home and don't bother nobody") and self harm ("this kind of thing makes some people kill theyself"). We agreed that all of these options delimited our sense of agency, and made us feel, in some ways, "powerless," with regard to reducing violence in our lives. In fact, most of my youth collaborators expressed that they experienced an abiding intrapersonal endogenic pull toward violence as a means of self-defense and saving face.

However, with regard to the exogenic pushes of violence in our lives, we named racism, gender stereotypes, bullying (which is inextricably bound with suicide in our perception), and drugs (which is inextricably bound with gangs and general substance abuse in our perception). I wrote these on the board and we voted on the exogenic sources of violence that we thought were most pressings. Racism, gender stereotypes, and bullying/suicide rose as the top three exogenic sources of violence. We then, agreed to create a series of linked haikus from these statements

[52] Abiding conflict that demands a resolution before the conflicting parties can re-engage peaceably.

that soon morphed into a song that traced our perceptions of the pushes and pulls of violence in our lives. One collaborator created a beat on a small djembe drum while others of us swayed and chanted. We sang out the lines of the haikus in turn, sometimes as rap, sometimes as song, and at other times as chant. We were overcome by a euphoric sense of communitas. We collaborated to write and perform the poem "Violence Makes Me Feel" (or "Powerless") – a combination of song, chant, rap and dance that names the impact that violence has had on us while allowing us to voice our resistance to it. Our experience confirmed Camilleri's (2007) observation of collaborative song writing with youth:

> the process of group songwriting is an excellent way to develop self-esteem and social skills such as group cohesiveness, social interaction, communication, problem-solving, listening, and respect. Songwriting is an active process that requires a responsive and energetic interplay between the people engaged in the process (p. 78)

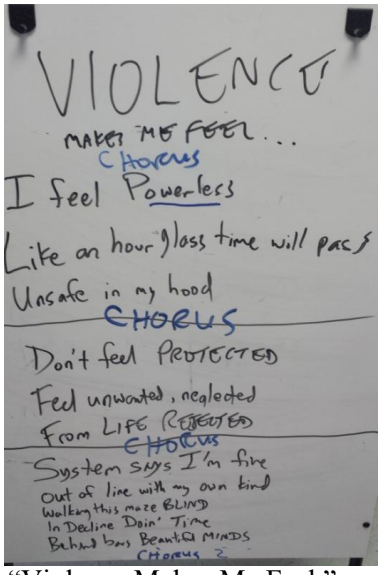

Figure 6. "Violence Makes Me Feel," summer 2017

Thus by attending to the various intersections of lived experiences and modes of expression in the room and turning them into a poetic rendering of a collective story, we were able to penetrate into a much deeper level of mutual understanding, belonging, and critical awareness than we had before we began. We were also empowered to navigate the tensiveness that exists between the pushes and pulls of violence in our lives. My field notes from this experience express the deeper understanding that I personally gained from this practice of collaborative performative writing:

> I see here that the effects of violence in these kids lives are powerlessness (lack of self-efficacy), a certain rushedness about life (time can be taken and moves fast regardless of their input or needs), loneliness, feeling of rejection and neglect, they feel like they are losing precious time and that incarceration takes potentially smart and strong people from their community ("beautiful minds").

We later published this collective poem in *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* (APPENDIX B). We also incorporated the two original stories that began this process into the *Our 'Ville* (APPENDIX A) script. This poem was one of many other poems and selected Photovoice photographs that empowered us to voice our perspectives and positionalities, and to make a public call for antiracist action on behalf of marginalized youth. In the words of the song, we transformed from "powerless" to "powerful."

The process by which one might build and tell her own stories and thereby transform her own self-concept as an act of resistance to "collective representation" is an intrinsically communicative one, informed by the CTI framework and played out in Erving Goffman's dramaturgical framework. Here, Hecht's (2002) four frames of identity coalesce with Goffman's (1959) "front." If the front defines and frames the situation for those who observe, perhaps *positive front management* (reframing our stories and how they are told) and *performative face modulation* (claiming our right to come to voice and share our stories from our own perspectives

and through our own modes, moods, and media) are variables accessible to individual youth that will empower them to resist the powerlessness and inferiority complex that structures of domination impose. When you consider Goffman's (1959) contention that all humans are constantly performing for other humans, it appears that there is a deep disconnect in the audience-performer dynamic that is exhibited in the relationship between the criminalized Black youth and authority figures in the educational and criminal justice systems in the U.S. What Goffman would refer to as incidents or "performance disruptions" have become the norm for many marginalized youth.

Reducing face threats and minimizing required face work through a model of intentional positive front management is one way to minimize performance disruptions and to maximize positive interactions between marginalized youth, their peers and authority figures. This research reveals the great influence that interactions with authority figures and peers have on the self-concept, self-expression, and lived experience of marginalized youth. In the *My Life Matters* project, this conclusion was enacted on August 5, 2016 when 14 of my collaborators and I performed our poetry and prose in a public forum for an audience of 50 diverse audience members, which included parents, family members, friends, the city mayor, and other community stakeholders.

The collaborative mode of poetic inquiry that *My Life Matters* often employed helped my collaborators and me to collectively and individually frame and claim our faces, as we shared responsibility for writing, and, eventually embodying and voicing the poems and stories that we collectively created. The play *Our 'Ville* is a prime example of this. In addition to its inclusion of a collection of individual and collaborative poetry, this play depicts four characters that stand as composites of many *My Life Matters* participants.

For example, at the June 29, 2017 focus group, my collaborators took a moment to talk about incarcerated parents. One of the leaders, a 17 year old young man who normally appears to be confident, broke down in tears as he recalled how his father addressed him with disdain from prison. This young man rarely ever heard from his father, except for the rare cases when he called to discipline him. This young man declared, "How you gonna tell me how to live? You ain't even here! It's like you only care about me when I'm doing wrong." Tears flowed from the eyes of several of us around the room. Hands shot up around the room as multiple collaborators asked for an opportunity to share their own frustrations, hurts, and struggles with absent fathers and parents. I conducted a poll in the room and learned that, of the 29 participants in the workshop that day, 24 of us had experienced the incarceration of an immediate family member, 24 came from single family households, 25 had no contact with their father, and only 13 had a positive male role model in their home. We decided to include these many faces of fatherlessness and negative experiences with absent, incarcerated, or substance-addicted parents into the lives of the four fictional characters in the play. By presenting these real life situations in the bodies of fictional characters, we were all empowered to express our true examination of our "daddy issues" without risking any individual's face publically. Furthermore, we were empowered to share these stories to publics in hopes of generating social transformation. One collaborator declared, "Parents need to know this stuff. We need to do this play for them to see!"

We learned that the performance process can be even more empowering than the performance products. For example, we often wrote poetry collaboratively, so as to decentralize power and to share face threats. This process usually included a conglomeration of pre-existing poems like "Violence Makes Me Feel," which is a combination of multiple individual and collaborative haikus. At times, two or three poets would get together and dialogue back and forth

as they developed original work together, as Big Smoke and Misunderstood did with "I Want More." Still, at other times, I would play the facilitator by talking people through a difficult experience or a painful truth, and asking the group to help me to "poeticize" the experience by putting it into verse and applying poetic devices. This playful process functioned like what psychotherapists David Crenshaw and Kathleen Tillman (2014) refer to as play therapy:

> Play therapy offers unique opportunities for the emotional side of the brain (right hemisphere) to be expressed because play is the language of the symbolic, artistic, creative, intuitive, and holistic, the language of the right hemisphere. Through play the implicit memories, inaccessible by verbal language, can be expressed, reworked, and transformed through reenactments in a contained, safe, and symbolic realm into a coherent, cohesive narrative that facilitates the conversation to explicit memories (p. 37).

This form of collaborative playful poetic inquiry proved to be very helpful for individuals who found it difficult to publicly own and share some of their stories. After the July 20, 2016 workshop, one youth poetess expressed the fact that, though her shyness normally kept her from expressing her thoughts in public, finding friends at FAF and telling stories in our *My Life Matters* workshops helped her to find the courage to "put myself out there."

In this excerpt from my field notes, dated July 26, 2017, we see how collaborative poetic inquiry can be a form of power sharing that can also help to sharpen the artistry and performative flow of our work:

> I just sat with Dina to do a few minor re-writes on a previously untitled poem. She said that she wrote the poem in freestyle, but it has a lot of natural rhyme. So, we tweaked it a bit to capitalize on the rhyme, alliteration and imagery that she had already established. Of note, her original line 11 was: "My name may be tattooed on your arm but it doesn't make up for what you did." Her original final line was: "Your here now, but your seeing someone, You constantly complain that you don't like her, She must have you tied to a thread cause you have yet to leave.

The finalized verses to this poem entitled "Daddy's Little Girl," by Quiet Storm are below

> My name may be tattooed on your arm
> But it doesn't heal my scars from the harm

You’re here now, but you’re seeing someone
Yet you constantly complain that she’s not “the one”
She must have you tied to a thread, cause you have yet to leave
Hanging like a disco ball in my head, whose light I never see

This poem appears in *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* poetry book (APPENDIX B), and was later performed by one of my UNC Chapel Hill undergraduate students as a tribute to Quiet Storm. The undergraduate student has also struggled to cope with an estranged relationship with her father, and opted to perform “Daddy’s Little Girl” as part of her final project in a class about performing literature. When Quiet Storm learned that her poem was both a personal and artistic inspiration to a young woman in college she beamed with pride and contentment. “That’s what’s up!”[53] she exclaimed. She understood that her own story and creative work had the power to coalesce in with bodies and minds of others – even “educated” adults!

This mode of collaborative poetic inquiry also helped those collaborators who weren’t sure of how to express themselves in a way that could be understood by others. In other words this process facilitated a mode of performative face modulation that rendered the selected face more intelligible to the performer and to their selected audience. For example, in 2017, one young man reflected upon a bad break up with a girlfriend who was verbally and physically abusive to him. He wanted to leave her, but he felt compelled to take care of her at the same time. She had threatened to hurt or kill herself, and he felt responsible for her safety; yet her physical and verbal abuse were wearing him down. His relational frame of identity clashed with his personal frame, because he began to define himself as her boyfriend, although he knew the relationship wasn’t healthy for him. It also clashed with his enacted frame of identity, as the mental control that she seemed to hold over him prevented him from enacting healthy self-care

[53] This is a modern colloquial term among youth in our community that celebrates a positive occurrence or revelation. It can mean everything from “I totally agree” to “That is really good news!”

or an escape from the relationship. In fact, he began to define himself as her “savior” because he was the one that would always be there to bail her out of trouble or to comfort her when she was in distress. His relational frame of identity depended on his interactions with his girlfriend, and it seemed to dominate his self-concept. As he began to share this story of his own scars and experiences with violence, he often hesitated, self-conscious and unsure of whether or not he could afford the face threat of telling his story.

One female collaborator volunteered to help him to write the poem about his experience, and I asked his permission to go to the board to be the scribe and muse for this process. My asking was a nod to his dignity, reaffirming my commitment to his personhood and privacy. It was also an empowering moment that activated his sense of agency. We would only write the poem, if he agreed. Over the course of the next ten minutes, this small group of four people free styled, rhymed, brainstormed, and collaborated our way to a beautiful untitled poem that was only finished when the young man agreed that it clearly expressed what he was feeling:

> Conflict lit conflagration
> Temptation to leave my station
> My relaxation was taken by migration
> Migraine. How can I release this pain?

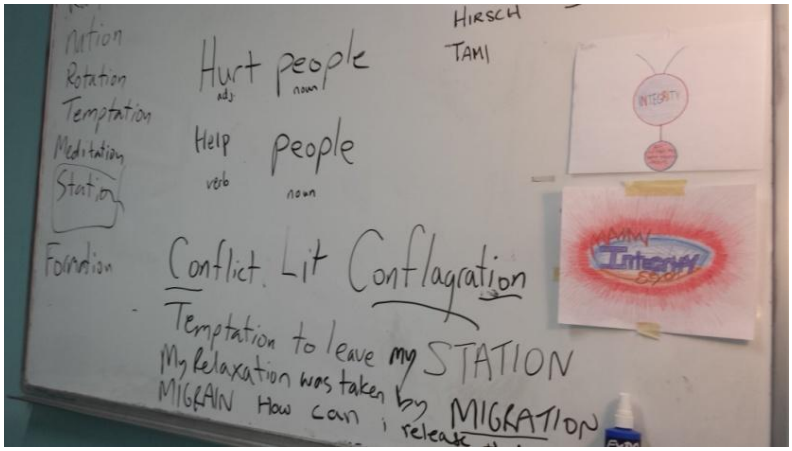

Figure 7. Collaborative Poem, summer 2017

After I dramatically read the poem out loud to him, he chuckled nervously and clapped. Ironically, my embodiment of his/our poem, allowed him to remove himself enough from the experience to enjoy the artistry of its expression. This process of poetic inquiry lent him a deeper understanding of his own frames of identity and their interactions with one another.

In this example, we saw confirmation of psychotherapist Aideen Taylor De Faoite's (2014) argument that play can be an effective form of "indirect teaching" - facilitating discovery with participants by presenting information in the form of "images, metaphor, and stories" (p. 52). She notes:

> In the same way as food has to be chewed and digested to be of any good for the body, feelings and emotions need to be thought about and processed to ensure well-being. The story, picture, or metaphor offers a digestive system for understanding the issues […providing] a means of processing confusing feelings and experiences in the language of imagination (p. 52).

By playfully jaunting through the poetry writing process, this young man and his collaborators were able to work through a traumatic experience en route to creating a compelling work of art. As we stood back from the board to marvel at this beauty that had risen from the ashes of his experience, he smiled and said, almost triumphantly, "Yeah! That's it!" I responded, "That's you! You wrote that!" He responded, "Naw. *We* wrote that. But that *is* me!"

In turn, this young man was able to examine and express the enacted routes through which his own personal and relational scars and trauma might be used to help others. He found power through poeticizing his pain. When I asked him what he could do with this new understanding, he speculated that he could choose to be more positive and attentive to his little brother. He found himself often bullying his brother, and he didn't know why. He recalled one morning when he complimented his little brother on a shirt he wore, and how much his brother's face lit up upon receiving a passing glance and a few words of affirmation from his big brother.

In that moment, I was drawn back to the little brother that I grew up being – always desperate to be seen and affirmed by my bullying big brothers.

Emotionally touched and teary eyed, I thanked this young man for allowing his story to connect me to a place of trauma that I needed to express as well. I had yielded my legitimate power as adult self-expression workshop facilitator and followed my youth collaborators' lead into the world of his lived experience. I noted that, since my big brother Brent's suicide in 2002, I had no place to put these feelings – no way to reconcile them in the flesh; but in this performative moment, I stood face-to-face (in finite space, time, and body) with this young man. I (as a adult-teacher-learner-little brother) met him (as youth-learner-teacher-big brother) on the therapeutic stage. Our respective life stories and frames of identity faced off interpersonally and intrapersonally. They presented us with an ostensible tensiveness that demanded a reckoning. Through this process of collaborative poetic inquiry our seemingly incongruous life stories and frames of identity coalesced and complemented one another at once. In that magical moment, the alchemy of performance transferred us into each others' worlds. This young man was young enough to be my son, but in that moment, I looked into his eyes "as if" he were my big brother. In that moment, the dots connected, the webs were spun, and I understood what Black mama and African American Studies Scholar Imani Perry (2019) meant when she wrote, "memory is a time machine. You don't just recall; you conjure in it" (p. 7). As spect-actors, we entered a time machine that spelunked the depths of our respective stores of traumatic memory, and we emerged ready and willing to conjure new possibilities together. We shared a performative space, within which we shared a particularly poignant moment for reclaiming our powerful roles as positive, dignified agents in our lives and lives of others.

The *My Life Matters* collaborators and I also observed that, while we perceived that racism did not threaten our bodies with violence as imminently and persistently as violence from our peers and community members did, it did pose a persistent face threat to us in our everyday interpersonal interactions. We found that the bodily appearance of Blackness and youth foisted upon Black youth an inevitable iconicity that often encumbered their interpersonal interactions. For example, during one of our early focus group sessions in 2016, the conversation became centered on one participant's evocative question, "Why do they hate us?" By "they" here, the youth meant that he felt perpetually hated and/or feared by White people and authority figures. Several of my collaborators nodded, grunted, and sighed in agreement. Two girls had noticed a White woman with her children on the playground that same day. When a group of Black youth entered the play area, they sensed a tension come over the White woman – "She started looking at us all crazy and grabbing her kids up." The White woman left the playground abruptly and moved on. The Black youth were left with a painful reminder of how their Blackness performs in public spaces where they have no control over the fronts they bring to that sphere.

Later, in the July 18, 2017 Photovoice session, the same young man who asked "Why do they hate us?" a year ago, presented his original photograph of a "Wanted, Dead or Alive" sign. He asked, "Why?! Why would you want somebody dead?" On one hand, he felt despised by White people and authority figures. On the other hand, he felt like his body stood in the crosshairs of their targeting systems of punishment, incarceration, and violence. The overwhelming majority of my collaborators felt a deep resonance with this sentiment. We began to share story after story of ways in which we perceived that we had been persistently racially alienated, attacked, or targeted based upon our Blackness. We were articulating the persistent

precarity that we felt due to the racialized fronts that we carried around with us into every social situation every day.

Our public performance and book of poetry allowed us to confront and resist this persistent face threat publicly, on our own terms, with our own poetic self-expression. By selecting the pieces we would perform, the perspectives we would embody, and the performative methods we would employ to embody them, we engaged in performative face modulation. As performers and producers of our own performance and performative product, we were able to claim the faces we put forth and frame them accordingly. We were also able to select our target audience, space, and timing. I refer to this empowering performative experience as positive front management.

Through these experiences, we generated intentional practices of performative face modulation, and positive front management. We found that these practices empower youth to share their stories and to hope that they will make a difference for themselves and their peers. To articulate the impact of performance-centered positive front management, I recall the words of one young lady who performed with two of her collaborators their inspirational poem and dance at a city council meeting, on September 12, 2016. She exclaimed, “I feel like I can fly!” She went on to dive playfully into a more deeply oneiric expression of her experience: “I feel like I could launch into space and take off my helmet and breathe anyway!” Speaking up and being heard as she stood, expressing her own words in poetry, song, and movement, in front of a willing audience of community power brokers endowed this young lady with a profound sense of voice and power that transcended the atmosphere of racialized identities and social conditions.

Another young man remarked how affirmed and capable he felt when he persuaded his Biology teacher to allow him to perform the poem “I Want More” for his entire classroom. By

choosing the poem and style of performance, he engaged in performative face modulation. By choosing the space and audience where he would perform, he engaged in positive front management. With a huge smile, he declared to me, "Mr. Sonny, I went savage!"[54] He fondly recalled feeling respected and recognized when his teacher and peers responded to his passionate performance with applause and kudos. Later, he went on to perform the poem in English class and the teacher actually gave a pop quiz based upon the poem. This is a kid who told me that he had stage fright and no desire to perform on stage back in early August of 2017. Through the performance process, he had grappled with the tensiveness that existed between self and story, performer and audience, biotrope and positive, dignified, agential identities. He was able to achieve a level of coalescence between these seemingly divergent binaries to become something new: a performer, a poet, a spokesman, and an activist. He would later expand these roles when he served as the audio technician and a panelist for 2018 and 2019 productions of *The Talk.*

In the *My Life Matters* project, the writing, performing, and co-performative witnessing of storytelling, playwriting, acting, poetry, and rapping among participants emerged as a dynamic means of performative face modulation. We claimed the power to select the modes, moods, and media that would frame our expressions of our identities. Performers were able to choose the poetry they performed and exactly how they performed it at our August 5, 2016 performance.

Additionally, positively framed our performance with positive front management. We did so by including some of our own simple repeatable rhythms, like "I hear you!" and "Ago/Ame." The event was held in the FAF building, on our own turf, and we invited the community stakeholders that we wanted to invite. All of these elements combined to empower us

[54] This is a colloquialism used by many of my collaborators to refer to the particularly savvy, excellent, or dominant execution of a task. (cf. "spitting fiya," footnote 4)

to create space for expression, affirmation, and witnessing. Within this space, we positioned ourselves in stations of power and respect as griots, co-learners, and community leaders. This performance also allowed us to share our own stories, at our own pace, and in our own ways with the hopes of penetrating the hearts and minds of our audience members. By placing our stories in a space and format full of rhythms that we had set ourselves, we engaged in a sort of positive front management that protected us from the racialized face threats that tended to plague our interpersonal interactions.

Trained in the West African tradition of oral storytelling, I learned many years ago that storytellers in Ghana manage multiple faces and fronts at once. In addition to voicing multiple characters in the stories they tell, these storytellers perform simultaneously as teachers, historians, spiritual leaders, and motivational speakers. They often begin a story by calling out "Ago" (a word in the Twi language of Ghana, pronounced "Aahgoh"). Spoken with the authority of a command "ago" might translate to "Listen up!", but from the mouth of a dialogic teacher and storyteller like me, it translates to "Are you listening?" It is a public address that calls for, even empowers, a response. The expected response, "Ame" means, "I will listen to you." The storyteller yields the floor for a moment to away the response of "Ame" from the audience. He empowers them to choose to respond with loving respectful witness.

I opened every performance of storytelling or poetry in the workshop setting with this Ago/Ame exchange. In turn, I challenged my collaborators to do the same. We also used this call to hold each other accountable whenever one of us did not feel that we were being witnessed with love and respect. This most often occurred when collaborators who were supposed to witnesses allowed themselves to be distracted with side conversations. Each youth performer opened their performance with this call to communal engagement and personal positioning. This

allowed them to claim their power to address the audience and to command the audience's attention. It also shared some of that power with the audience, calling them to the power of responding as an affirming witness. It is response-ability in practice.

In the practice of "Ago/Ame", relational, communal, personal frames of identities merge as the enactment frame is activated through call and response. At the beginning of the presentation, we had one youth explain to adults audience members that the proper response to "Ago!" was, "Ame!" (the Twi word for, "I am listening," or "I am willing to learn", pronounced, "Ahmay"). This restored behavior allowed us to bring crucial elements of our workshop and rehearsal experiences to the public sphere. In other words, we were able to positively design an element of our front to restore certain affirming and empowering behavior. We reproduced the simple repeatable rhythms wherein we originally came to voice, established belonging, and became empowered to witness in the self-expression workshops. Schechner (1985) reflects upon the ever-present power of the rehearsal of restored behavior:

> The work of restoration is carried on in rehearsals and/or in the transmission of behavior from master to novice. Understanding what happens during training, rehearsals, and workshops— investigating the subjunctive mood that is the medium of these operations— is the surest way to link aesthetic and ritual performance. Restored behavior is 'out there,' distant from 'me.' It is separate and therefore can be 'worked on,' changed, even though it has 'already happened' (p. 36)

With this simple call and response, we have initiated the critical, challenging, sometimes contentious process of sharing power in order to better listen, learn, and grow together.

We also asked the audience members to respond with a resounding call of "I hear you" after each performance. This carryover from the simple repeatable rhythms we developed in our private workshops served as both an affirmation of the face that the performer chose to present, and as an extension of the rhythm of love and joy that pervaded our workshops all summer. Additionally, finger snaps, chants, and grunts of affirmation were encouraged and common

during our workshops, and at the performance. They were received with gratitude from those sharing their work, and shared liberally by those who witnessed. Again, these rhythms formed cornerstones of the front that framed the public performance experience. In my field notes that day, I observed, “Having an audience put wind under the kids’ wings. Shyness melted away. Boldness and surety slowly rose. Smiles sparked and eyes wide open captured the reflection of love and respect” (2016, August 5).

After the performance, youth participants told me that they felt “heard,” “powerful,” “respected,” “loved,” and like their lives mattered. Meanwhile adult audience members reported feeling “hopeful,” “proud of the kids,” “impressed,” and “grateful” to have experienced the performance. This performance-centered process of self-discovery, self-disclosure, and front management generated a deeper sense of understanding, connection, and response-ability among us all. Here, we see how CRIPCT research that engages Goffman’s dramaturgy can generate social transformation from the inside out.

In a post-performance conversation, one collaborator observed, “I learned how to love and respect and be proud of who I am.” Another said, “I feel really better at being myself.” Several students’ feedback echoed the words of one student who reported, “I liked how I found other people that feel the same way I do.” Again, we see how empowering the enacted frame of identity (i.e. “I am a performer because I perform for witnesses”) can also lift the other frames: personal frame (“I have a story. I am able to share it. I am worthy of being witnessed”); relational frame (I am part of this *My Life Matters* family where we support one another in love and respect, and we expect others to show us love and respect); and the communal frame (“I am a Black youth who is connected to a larger community that is worth listening too”).

Sadly, we never performed the 2017 play *Our 'Ville* and we never performed our poetry or exhibited our photography at a public performance as planned that year. Interpersonal power dynamics played a central role in this. While I began the summer with a plan to produce a similar performance to the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance of 2016, my youth collaborators expressed a desire to produce a single full-length play that would express our stories to the entire community. This would require us to expand our stage from the multi-purpose room where we performed in 2016 to a facility with lights, sound, and ample seating.

Furthermore, Shauna and her staff were adamant about including song and dance in the performance. She assigned two of her young adult staff members with the task of choosing songs and choreographing dances. Meanwhile, she would recruit, train, and select singers to sing three to four songs. I found this to be too complicated and stressful for the participants. Shauna and her appointees often corrected the students during rehearsals and workshops, demanding higher levels of performative acumen than some of the youth felt comfortable exhibiting. What I had designed to be a process that created spaces, generated practices, and empowered youth toward liberation, was becoming a "talent show" before my eyes. The FAF staff and youth had put on talent shows in past summers and they remembered them fondly. My challenge was that a talent show did not quite match with my lines of inquiry or with my youth collaborators' expressed desire to produce a single play.

I recalled the initial conflict that rose between Shauna and me back in the spring of 2016. Because that conflict had threatened our relationship and the viability of the research project, I was very reserved about imposing my own plans or opinions on her or my collaborators. In an effort to share power with the youth and to yield to Shauna's legitimate power as the supervisor of summer camp, I tried to prepare the team for a performance that was both a full-length play

and an exhibition of our dancing and singing talents. The consequences were detrimental to the 2017 production. Because of limited resources and inconsistent attendance, we did not have the time or space to cast, rehearse, and produce the play along with the dance and vocal selections.

These circumstances generated an unexpected scarcity of time and energy that dogged my collaborators and me throughout the process. It appeared that both the research and the community performance were in peril. Having completed only four of the six sessions required by the Photovoice protocol, my collaborators and I were less than one month away from the end of camp, and I was not sure if we could complete it. I began to feel powerless and frustrated. This perfect storm of agonistic power dynamics gave rise to another flash point between Shauna and me, as displayed in my field notes on July 18, 2017:

> So, this morning was exhausting because we were doing a lot. I did a modified Photovoice session and discussion with the teens for about an hour. It was a bit chaotic, and they were not very interested. Meanwhile, Shauna kept pulling singers to audition and prepare them for the play. Shauna warned me that I needed to wrap up this Photovoice project because it was now time to focus on rehearsing for the play. I was very frustrated because I only wanted my Photovoice team [11 youth], but we have limited space. […] I told Shauna that I just needed two more sessions. She is clearly annoyed by this. After all of the rehearsing and auditioning this morning, she stressed how tired the kids were. I want her to know that part of the fatigue is from all of her back and forth with the singers. The audition was easy! When kids weren't auditioning, they were just chilling on the couch. She is the one making the singing part all intense. My goal of helping kids to find their voice and express themselves freely is not in agreement with this intense focus on "the show." Here is where our goals diverge in a counter-productive way. So, Shauna sent the kids off to play video games at an arcade around 2pm. When they came back at 4:30pm, I pulled all of the remaining Photovoice kids to do a quick session outside (Shauna was counseling someone inside, and I honestly did not feel like hearing her complaints about me 'working the kids too hard'). She doesn't understand that the kids actually have a lot to say in these sessions. I need more space, more freedom and fewer kids. […] What she does not realize is that I only have a few days with these kids, and that I have got to finish the process according to my research outline. She has very little understanding of the research part of this, in spite of my regular check-ins, lay summary submitted in May, and clearly repeated descriptions.

After this encounter, Shauna pulled me aside and informed me that by forcing my research agenda on the kids that afternoon I had undermined her authority, abused my youth

collaborators' trust, and offended many of the parents. I was so focused on the rushed Photovoice session that I had not noticed that several of my collaborators' parents had been waiting for 10 to 15 minutes to pick them up. Although they were fatigued and felt an allegiance to Shauna and their parents, my Photovoice collaborators also desired to please me as their mentor and leader. By pressuring them to finish the session at an inappropriate time, I had abused my power over them. I was wrong, and I apologized to Shauna, the youth, and their parents. The lesson that I learned here was that when we are conducting YPAR, we must keep power dynamics at the fore. The power and empowerment of our collaborators should always supersede the research protocol.

Because of the tenuous power dialectic that had emerged between Shauna and me, we began to engage in counterproductive faceplay. For example, by late July of 2017, Shauna and I both recognized that a summer production was untenable, but in the interest of saving face for ourselves and each other, we never mentioned that concern. We later expressed our regret for not downsizing and streamlining the production sooner. As I reflect upon the power dynamics of this situation, I see that Shauna and I both showed excessive deference toward our perceptions of the other's intentions and aspirations. Furthermore, in the enacted frame, my simultaneous enactment of multiple roles diffused the power of my efforts. As a collaborator, I yielded to my youth collaborators' desires to produce a full play. As the artist/teacher in-residence at a host organization, I yielded to the Director's administrative authority. So, I channeled my time, talent, and treasure into three disparate directions, hoping that it would all work out. Later, Shauna expressed to me that as the Director, she was yielding to my artistic expertise. She drove the kids to perform with excellence because she wanted us to produce a show that would please me and meet my needs. We both secretly wished we had simply produced another *Ravon Jordan My Life*

Matters Project performance in 2017, but we were afraid of infringing upon the authority of the other. The result was that we continued to enact a plan that met none of our needs.

It appears that Shauna and I were too careful with one another because we wanted to enact actions that would honor the perceived power dynamics at play and we wanted to preserve our relationship. We both knew that our youth collaborators trusted us and looked forward to the performance experience. We understood that a successful performance would affirm their self-concepts and ours. Furthermore, a successful public performance would empower us to publicly reframe and reclaim our communal identities as Black youth and caregivers.

With regard to the personal frame of identity, we were, perhaps too ambitious, because we remembered the accolades and celebrations that the kids, FAF, and we received individually from audience members at the 2016 performance. A failure to produce another successful performance in 2017 posed a clear and present face threat to us both. In the communal frame of identity, we felt a profound sense of duty to lift the stories and voices of the youth in our community. We failed to produce the expected outcome because we spread our resources and power too thin. Our respective frames of identity crashed and shattered. To honor the project and my collaborators, it was incumbent upon me to be assertive and clear about my own expectations and assessments of the feasibility of the project. As a result, I felt that I had let my collaborators down when we announced to them in October that we simply could not produce a public performance.

The unexpected lesson learned here is that even without a successful public performance, the performance process itself has the power to create spaces for self-expression, affirmation, and witness; to generate intentional practices of examining, expressing, and reframing our identities; and to empower youth to engage in antiracist attitudes and actions that reclaim their

inherent positivity, dignity and agency. The silver lining around this crisis of power was that in all of the rehearsing, workshopping, auditioning, writing, and re-writing, the youth continued to operate in their enacted identities as creators, team members, artists, and voices. While they expressed some lamentation over the fact that we would not perform publicly, their greatest lamentation was "letting down" Shauna and me and "wasting our time." When we assured them that we were not disappointed in them, and that they had not lost face with us, the youth seemed to rebound instantly. They all expressed their desire to perform again in the future, but they also expressed how much they enjoyed creating, writing and rehearsing throughout the summer together.

Final Thoughts from *My Life Matters*

> My Heart
> By the color of my skin by the love in my heart
> No matter what people say I know I will make a mark
> When I stop and look around I see tears and shattered hearts
> It makes me wonder why life has to be so hard
> I have been brought to light so I stand on my feet
> And say what God has asked me to speak
> Knowing it might change a life is what means so much more to me.
> So I say let the world shine in joy and laughter
> And that is why my life matters.
> (Heartfelt in *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* book*)*

Through the *My Life Matters* project, my collaborators and I have learned that the process of producing creative, public, embodied performance has the unique capacity to create spaces, generate intentional practices, and empower Black youth toward the formation, expression, and ownership of their positive, dignified, and agential identities. The performance process enabled my collaborators and me to recognize and name the sundry, seemingly divergent, or

incongruous, elements of identity, relationships, and power that are at play in our lived experience with violence, dehumanization, and criminalization. The performative work we have done here has allowed these elements to converse and coalesce - if only for a fleeting moment on stage or in a self-expression workshop or rehearsal - in the bodies of the performers and, to some degree, their witnesses.

Through a CRIPCT handling of CTI and Goffman's dramaturgical model, this analysis revealed some of the ways in which *My Life Matters* has empowered Black youth to overcome face threats in order to express their hearts and minds more clearly, while critically reflecting on their own frames of identity. This analysis has revealed that this performance-centered methodology offers effective routes for Black youth to examine and express their persons, perspectives, and positionalities. Through the performance process, we have empowered ourselves and others to come to voice, engage in response-ability, and take on responsibility for antiracist attitudes and actions that reclaim and reframe Black youth identities.

The *My Life Matters* project has exhibited that thoughtful performance-centered programming can facilitate the process of identity "re-creation" (Shailor, 2010). The *My Life Matters* project offers evidence that interventions informed by CRIPCT analysis can create spaces and generate practices that empower marginalized youth to literally and figuratively write new scripts for their lives. It can prepare marginalized youth to transcend the limit-situations and delimited self-concept framed by chronic dehumanization and criminalization. Through the critical performance process, the *My Life Matters* youth have actively mobilized their positive self-concept, dignity, and agency toward creative, hopeful, and empowered acts of social transformation.

CHAPTER 5: CASE STUDY #2: TALKING THE TALK

Overview

> We must meet people where they are – not where we want them to be. We must love people for whom they are – not whom we want them to be. Only then, can we lead them to where we need to go (Tru Pettigrew, founder of Building Bridges and moderator of October 22, 2018 *The Talk* talk-back).

If *My Life Matters* exemplifies an effective performance-centered approach to empowering Black youth to reframe and reclaim their positive, dignified, agential selves, then *The Talk* is my own reflexive autobiographical extension of that work. With *The Talk,* I have taken on the challenge that I proposed to my youth collaborators – to honestly dig up, digest, and display our own stories for larger publics. I developed *The Talk* as an autoethnographical performative analysis and expression of the issues of identity, relationships, and power that are bound up in my own experience as a caregiver of, ally of, and advocate for, Black youth. I have included the full text of *The Talk* script in APPENDIX C. My goal is to connect my performance of *The Talk* to diverse audience members (witnesses) in order to publicly affirm and claim the validity of the experiences of Black youth and their caregivers, and to incite critical consciousness that reframes our collective understanding of Black youth identities. I employ post-performance talk-backs to connect this critical consciousness to critical public dialogue around race and racism. I propose that this performance-centered process can empower audience members to claim their own responsibility to engage in antiracist action that resists the chronic and systemic dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth in America.

Through *The Talk*, I critically analyze the biotrope of the criminalized Black youth via the vehicle of live public performance. This analysis begins with my study of "The Talk" as a genre of intracultural communication made public through public discourse, literature, film, and online videos. I critically analyze the racialized roots and routes of "The Talk" through a layered lens of CRT and critical cultural studies. I then examine the capacity of online video portrayals of "The Talk" to endow voice to Black youth and their caregivers. By engaging in performative writing and applying performative poetic inquiry, I explore the four communicative frames of identity, in my own experience as a Black youth and adult (personal frame), a giver, analyzer, and dramatizer of "The Talk" (enacted frame), father to Black youth and son to Black caregivers (relational frame), and a member of the Black American community (communal frame) (Hecht 1993; Hecht et al., 2002). I layer the CRT framework over this application of CTI and theories of performance in order to articulate and analyze the processes by which performer and audience members engage in deeper dialogic critical understandings of themselves and others, and the racialized society within which we live.

The Roots and Routes of My Talk

> You live in some worlds that are more white than Black. And so, you learn, early on, that the aversion to Blackness can turn perfectly lovely people grotesque (Perry, 2018, p. 9).

The Talk was born of a painful conversation that I had to have with my first son, Sterling, upon confronting the fact that he faces a world that frequently condones and enacts violence against Black bodies like his. It took me a week or two after having this short, awkward conversation to consciously acknowledge the anguish that it caused me. After an appointment in downtown Fayetteville, North Carolina, I found myself walking the streets on a sunny day – my mind racing – tears streaming down my face - my fingers feverishly typing on my cell phone screen, groping for the thoughts, feelings and words that went through me on that day. The result

was “Sterling’s Story” – an 8 to 10-minute personal narrative about my love for my son and the despair that I felt in having to inform him that he lived in a world where some people – important people who wield the power to harm him – would not value his life as I did.

Within a few months after that spring day in 2015, I had worked the story over and over in my head. I had shared it at storytelling festivals and other performance venues, as part of my personal performance repertoire. In a little over a year, “Sterling’s Story” became an old standby for me. When I learned that “Sterling’s Story” was part of a larger phenomenon known as “The Talk,” I knew that I had to do more with it. I knew that it could begin to humanize the racialized politics of issues like “stop and frisk” and the School to Prison Pipeline. To do so, I had to transform it from a short story into a play – one that operates more as an *experience* than a mere theatrical performance.

In order to process the deep seated bitter roots of “The Talk” experience in my life, I turned performative writing. Della Pollock’s (1998) conceptualization of performative writing allows me to articulate the routes by which “The Talk” performs in our skins, guts and ones through the circuitous routes of metonymy, subjectivity, nervousness, citationality, and consequence. By bringing my own personal experience to script and stage, *The Talk* has created what Augusto Boal (2002) calls “*spaces of liberty* where people can free their memories, emotions, imaginations, thinking of their past, in the present, and where they can invent their future instead of waiting for it” (p. 5). While Boal’s work is usually applied to communal improvisational and collaborative theater, I have found that, when I allow myself to open up about how I have struggled to digest “The Talk” I had with my son, and that my father had with me, I create a compassionate and courageous space for voicing diverse perspectives, Diasporic

Spidering, performative writing and poetic inquiry, narrative resistance, public dialogue, and antiracist action.

Defining "The Talk"

> But the fear is not the heart of the thing. The fear is what comes because your preciousness collides with the ways of the world (Perry, 2019, p. 8).

In the last decade the particular "Talk" that caregivers of Black American children have had with them about the realities of American racial hierarchy, and the threat of racially motivated violence against Black bodies, has emerged as a proper noun, popularly referred to as "The Talk" (Amber, 2013; Block, 2014; Burnett, 2012; Fine & Johnson, 2014; Franke-Ruta, 2013; Glanton, 2012; Green, 2012; Hart, 2017; Heath, 2013; Jubilee Project, 2016; Lemon; Martinez, et al., 2014; Murray, 2014; PBS News Hour, 2015**;** Patton, 2015; Person, 2013; Robert, 2013; Smith, 2015 C.; Sultan, 2014; Thomas, 2013; Whitaker and Snell, 2016**).** "The Talk" is one discursive apparatus of the larger system of cultural communication that has served Black people as a "vehicle for the creation and maintenance of culture and the mechanism to 'deal with' European America" (Hecht, et al., 2002, p. 25). "The Talk" is a conversation – a pattern of words and behaviors - that parents and elders have historically shared with Black children and adolescents about how to navigate America's systems of White supremacy and how to survive confrontations with authority figures operating within those systems (Whitaker & Snell, 2016).

As such, "The Talk" has emerged as a sort of undesired discursive heirloom that Black adults feel obligated to reluctantly pass on to their Black children, in hopes that it will somehow serve as a beacon to guide them safely to shore when they find themselves tossed and turned on the violent high seas of bigotry and discrimination. The typical elements of "The Talk" include an explanation to the Black youth that they live in a racially hostile world where the scales are

tipped against them. This is followed by an admonition that their disadvantaged condition (based upon a racial hierarchy that was been carefully constructed and enforced by brutal violence) makes the world potentially and unpredictably dangerous to their Black bodies. Therefore, the child is advised that it is imperative that they learn the rules of this world and adjust their mannerisms, attitudes and actions so as to minimize the damage that this world may inflict on their fragile frame (Hart, 2017).

As a result, Black parents often feel compelled to engage in "The Talk," as an act protection. Meanwhile, White parents often avoid or ignore these details in their talks with White children (Underhill, 2018). Although the ultimate goal of both sets of parents is to protect their children, this self-perpetuating dialectic continuously delimits self-concept and self-production for Black youth, while delimiting responsibility and antiracist consciousness for White youth. Perhaps Ta-Nehisi Coates (2015) says it best when he reflects upon the talks that White parents have with their children compared to those that Black parents, like him, must have with theirs: "The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs" (p. 89). Meanwhile, many White Americans state that they rarely consider issues of racial inequity because of ignorance, misunderstanding, or personal discomfort (Bell, 2010; Campt, 2018; DiAngelo, 2018; Strasser, 2016; Underhill, 2018). Conversely, many Black Americans feel a sense of futility and enervating frustration at the thought of embarking upon conversations about race with people who may not offer empathic witness (Bell, 2010; Coates, 2015; Ladson-Billings, 2009, 2018). This oppressive self-sustaining dialectic of silence in the public sphere profoundly delimits the coming to voice of Black youth and their caregivers.

"The Talk" as Genre

> That talk – that fear – is very different from what 'The Talk' in *your* community is (Police Chief, John Letteney, Apex Police Department, distinguishing between the "talks" that White people give to their White children compared to those that caregivers of Black youth must give to their Black children) (October 22, 2018 talk-back).

A practice that spans the last four centuries, "The Talk" has emerged as a genre of intra-racial discourse that is rooted in the biotrope of the dehumanized and criminalized young Black body[55]. According to Eric King Watts (2017), "Trope and genre serve as modes of analysis that enable an examination" of the discourses and practices that generate, obfuscate, and perpetuate racism in America (p. 3). To begin this analysis, I will define genre as the composite product of patterned discourses constitutive of what Marlene Daut (2016) refers to as *tropological assemblages*. The repetitive intense public circulation of these assemblages form genres. The reach and frequency of this circulation is directly dependent upon the affective energy that the genre is able to generate.[56]

Understanding genre as the amalgamation of patterned portrayals of tropes that repeat themselves and are felt intensely in an *affective* manner, I posit "The Talk" as a genre that, when publicly portrayed, serves as a concealed story that can expose and unsettle the extant stock stories that perpetuate the biotrope of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth in America. The typical genre of stock stories rooted in the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth biotrope include frequent news coverage of Black crime and violence, as well as regular

[55] I associate "The Talk" with the inception of the *biotrope* of the threatening, fungible Black body that was posited by the founders of Western colonialism and White supremacy. With the *biotrope* comes the inextricable persistent and precarious threat to Black bodies and an exigency for caregivers to protect the young from this threat.

[56] Eric King Watts ("Postracial Fantasies") argues that the relatively popularity of the Apocalyptic Zombie genre is the response of the Western imaginary to the perceived threat of a takeover of western civilization by the Black "bio-threat body", as heralded primarily by the Presidency of Barack Obama.

depictions of Black crime, violence, and vice as accentuated in films, music, and other forms of media (Farmer, 2010; Morris, 2017; Rios, 2011, 2017). “The Talk,” on the other hand, when shared repeatedly and publicly, has the potential to reframe and reclaim the humanity, vulnerability, and capacity for love shared by Black youth and their caregivers.

Today, in the bloody emotionally charged wake of the tragedies of Trayvon Martin, Michael Brown, Sandra Bland, Tamir Rice, Freddie Gray, Eric Garner, Kalief Browder, Philando Castille, Alton Sterling, and countless other Black bodies that were killed by people with power and pistols, “The Talk”, has emerged as a robust resounding epidemic in America’s communities of color (Franke-Ruta, 2013; Glanton, 2012; Green, 2014; Robert, 2013; Thomas, 2013). For example, in 2013, the year after Trayvon Martin, a 17 year old unarmed black boy, was shot to death by an armed community watch patroller named George Zimmerman in Sanford, Florida, United States Attorney General, Eric Holder addressed the NAACP and explained why he engaged his own 15 year-old son in “The Talk”:

> Trayvon's death last spring caused me to sit down to have a conversation with my own 15 year old son, like my dad did with me. This was a father-son tradition I hoped would not need to be handed down. But as a father who loves his son and who is more knowing in the ways of the world, I had to do this to protect my boy (Franke-Ruta, 2013).

Thus, we see this genre of a traditionally intra-racial communication practice being increasingly portrayed in the public eye.

While “The Talk” genre has increased in public circulation, it has also emerged as the subject of critical analysis. For example, Social Work Scholars Tracy Whitaker and Cudore Snell (2016) lament the fact that “[p]arents cannot get through this conversation without acknowledging their own powerlessness and indicting their own impotence at creating a better, safer world for their children” (p. 305). Sadly, as several critical scholars have noted, “The Talk” is often accompanied by harsh threats and application of corporal punishment that further

conditions the biotrope of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth as an animalistic being that requires violent management (Coates, 2015; Hart, 2017; Patton, 2015; Whitaker and Snell, 2016). Many cite the example of the Baltimore mother, Toya Graham, who was lauded on social media and on such mainstream television outlets as CNN for violently attacking her teen son in public when she found him assembled with protestors and rioters during the Baltimore uprising set off by the death of Freddie Gray[57] in 2015 (Patton, 2015). In this regard, Multimedia Journalism Scholar Stacey Patton (2015) warns that the persistence of "The Talk" genre is a painful reminder of the fact that "[t]he only Black power that society sanctions is the power to assist in our own pain and genocide." Other critics of this genre argue that because it does not address the White supremacist roots of the problem, "The Talk" is, at best futile, and, at worst, counter-productive to any effort of humanizing the signifiers of Black youth (Hart, 2017; Heath, 2013; Robert, 2013).

In his blog post, "Why Post-Trayvon Martin Talk Turns Kids into a Pathology," lawyer Pascal Robert (2013) argues, "Brainwashed Black folks subject their children to the sick ritual of 'The Talk,'" to instill in them the "the necessity to attenuate their behavior to the expectations of a racist society." His solution? "We should give our children the intellectual armor to call out this injustice instead of kowtowing to it." Journalist Benji Hart (2017) observes that Trayvon Martin's death from a surprise encounter with a community watch patroller is compelling evidence for the futility of "The Talk." To his point, viewing the police "dash cam" of Philando Castille's killing by police officer Jeronimo Yanez depicts a calm and respectful Castille who seemed to follow all of the rules, to include clearly articulating to Officer Yanez that he had a

[57] On April 12th, 2015 an unarmed 25-year-old black man named Freddie Gray was arrested by the Baltimore police for running from police officers. By April 18th Gray was in a coma induced by injuries that he sustained while in police custody. On April 19th Freddie Gray died, due presumably to injuries sustained while in the custody of Baltimore police. Between April 18th and May 6th the Baltimore Uprising ("Riots") set the streets of West Baltimore ablaze, costing the City of Baltimore more than $20 million! (Marbella, 2015; Wenger, 2015)

licensed weapon in the vehicle (CBS News, 2017). The viewer is hard pressed to imagine what Castille could have done or said better so as to preserve his own life.

Voicing "The Talk"

> It is our responsibility collectively and individually to distinguish between mere speaking that is about self-aggrandizement, exploitation of the exotic 'other,' and that coming to voice which is a gesture of resistance, an affirmation of struggle (hooks, 2015, p. 18).

I argue that the strategic public circulation of "The Talk" genre – in all of its pathology, tragedy, and irony – can bring larger audiences to a level of response-ability where we collectively address and analyze the routes through which our own standpoints and positonalities are rooted and routed through it. Publicly voicing "The Talk" can be a tool for Black caregivers to reframe and reclaim positive, dignified, and agential Black youth identities. I use the term "voice" to refer to a particular ethically bound, emotionally valent public *happening* (Watts, 2001), whereby the thoughts, concerns and humanity of actual bodies are willingly witnessed by other bodies in the *polis*. I argue that the public dramatized portrayal of "The Talk" genre may access voice in increasingly productive ways. By "productive" here, I mean that which generates or facilitates actions and frameworks that empower us to address the roots of the criminalized Black youth biotrope and to pursue new routes toward dismantling that biotrope and enacting antiracist action.

The very utterance of voice and the act of endowing it by giving it attention are bound up in affect, as well as the social construction of identity. That is, voice is a happening in human interaction that plays a vital role in the process by which identities are mutually constructed for the utterer, the one who attends to their utterance, and their new social (public and relational) being together. Watts (2001) posits a notion of voice "that is constitutive of the public acknowledgement of the ethical and emotional dimensions of public discourse" (p. 179). Further,

he argues that "…'voice is the enunciation and the acknowledgement of the obligations and anxieties of living in community with others" (p. 180). Watts' conceptualization of voice requires an ethical unction to witness the utterer, an affective valence whereby their utterances can engage and impact the witness, and a publicity that provides the channel(s) by which others can attend to (witness) the utterances.

In his 1962 "Letter to my Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation," James Baldwin intentionally brought voice to "The Talk" to the public sphere on the centennial of the 1862 signing of the Emancipation Proclamation. Baldwin drafted a poetic, heart-felt, and powerfully poignant letter to his 15-year-old nephew. Published in *The Progressive* magazine in 1962, this letter is an actual literary enactment of "The Talk." In it, Baldwin challenges his nephew to claim his own rightful sense of positive self-concept, dignity, and agency. He challenges his nephew to actively resist White supremacy in order to "make America what America must become" (Baldwin, 1962). This letter poetically juxtaposes the noble aspirations of the renowned civil rights activist, with the grounded tender affection of an uncle. As moving and compelling as Baldwin's letter is to read, its circulation never achieved the circulation necessary for the American imaginary to critically consider the genre of "The Talk" on a national scale.

Perhaps, the seeming futility and mundanity of "The Talk" is to blame for its lack of larger affective appeal and circulation. Although the genre of "The Talk" dates back centuries to racialized assemblages generated and enforced by colonialism and slavery in America, it has only relatively recently gained traction as a site for generating public voice for Black caregivers and Black youth. This traction is marked by the increased awareness of the brutalization and criminalization of Black youth that emerged after the national coverage of the fatal shooting of

Trayvon Martin in 2012, and the acquittal of his killer, George Zimmerman, in 2013. Since Trayvon Martin's death, public performative portrayals of "The Talk," such as Mike Wiley's 2013 dramatization of Mamie Till's "Talk" with Emmett in the riveting film *Dar He: The Lynching of Emmett Till* have seen some limited public circulation.

It wasn't until the summer of 2015, when journalist Ta-Nehisi Coates released his Bestselling memoir *Between the World and Me* that an aesthetic approach to "The Talk" became widely legible and circulatory on a national, and international scale. Ironically inspired by his reading of James Baldwin's *Fire Next Time* (which contains "A Letter to my Nephew…"), *Between the World and Me* is a short but poignant read that narrates Coates' coming of age as a Black man from a low-wealth background in a White supremacist America. This heart touching, often gut-wrenching direct address to his own teen son is perhaps the most puissant literary addition to the genre of "The Talk" to date. It is certainly the most circulated. Not only did Coates win the Book of the Year Award for Non-Fiction, but he also became an internationally renowned scholar whose writing and public appearances have been endowed with the gravitas of one deemed by many to be the new voice of America's Black Intellect (DeLeón, 2017; McClurg, 2015). In fact, on the very jacket of the book, Toni Morrison and dubs Coates as the scholar for whom she has been waiting to fill the "intellectual void" left by the great James Baldwin after his death in 1987 (Coates, 2015). Despite his renown, the circulation of *Between the World and Me* has been limited to the readers of Coates' work.

Since Coates published *Between the World and Me,* writers like Angie Thomas (*The Hate You Give,* 2017) and Imani Perry (*Breathe: A Letter to My Sons,* 2019) have written popular books that further expand the circulation of "The Talk" genre from the Black female perspective. The popular television show "Blackish" even dedicated an entire episode to "The Talk" in 2018

(Hawkins, 2018). The relatively recent advent of films like *The Hate You Give* (2018), *Time: The Kalief Browder Story* (2017), *Rest in Power: The Trayvon Martin Story* (2018), *When They See Us* (2019), and *American Son* (2016 play, 2019 film), as well as web-based videos depicting and exploring "The Talk," and its deeper meaning for American society, have expanded the scope and impact of the genre, garnering millions of viewers. Each of these examples - some dramatized, and some documentary - depicts caregivers of Black youth giving them "The Talk" or reflecting on the experience of giving (or having to give) "The Talk."

These performative framings of "The Talk" have expanded and enhanced its circulation in the public sphere through routes that can engage larger publics that may never read the literature of Coates or Baldwin, Thomas, or Perry. To this end, this project attends to performative portrayals of "The Talk," its implications and contexts, as compelling routes of voicing the genre in ways that can more effectively resist and trouble the biotrope of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth. I argue that public performative portrayals of "The Talk" can also help audience members take on/in the emotional, logical, and political excesses that "The Talk" presents to the contemporary western psyche. "The Talk" itself is marked by excess. It is both personal experience and publicly portrayed genre. It is all at once strategic and compulsory, premeditated and seemingly instinctual. In this excess the personal becomes political and the intellectual coalesces with the emotional. Add to this excess the fact that publics and individuals are perpetually limited by space and time. Our desire to visit and explore the worlds of which we speak exceeds our capacity to actually go there and spend the time there.

As I considered how a performative approach to the genre of "The Talk" can garner and magnify voice for Black youth and their caregivers, I discovered several online video portrayals of the genre that began to appear on popular online video platform YouTube in 2015. Because of

their unparalleled accessibility, online video presentations of "The Talk" have the potential to facilitate voice for Black youth and their caregivers in a manner that exceeds ethical, emotional and public reach of textual portrayals of the genre. I explored this notion by analyzing five popular uniquely formatted web-based portrayals of "The Talk": (1)"How to Raise a Black Son in America" TED Talk (Smith, C., 2015); (2) "My Black is Beautiful" corporate campaign video (Procter and Gamble, 2017); (3) "How to Deal with the Police: Parents Explain" short documentary (Cut, 2017); (4) "TalkAboutTheTalk" public service announcement (Brotherhood/Sister Sol, 2016); and (5) "Dear Child – When Black Parents Have to Give 'The Talk'" (Jubilee Project, 2016), a short documentary video. I have observed that these video portrayals operate as digitized public performances that can effectively tap into Watts' ethical, affective and public requirements of voice.

The Ethics of Voicing "The Talk"

Watts (2001) notes that "…'voice' is energized by public reflections on the ethics of speech" (p. 192). In other words, voice happens when there is a rupture in existing discourse that challenges all participants to question the ethics behind the selection of those allowed/disallowed to speak, and the messages they are allowed/disallowed to utter. While the very publications of Baldwin's' (1962) and Coates' (2015) respective "talks" do incite such reflection, their approaches present limitations to voice. For example, while Baldwin's "talk" challenges his nephew to "force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it," it does not directly compel the reader to acknowledge "The Talk" itself as another manifestation of the oppressive reality that Black youth must face.

Coates' (2015) "talk," on the other hand seems to have foreclosed on the possibility of reconciliation or collaboration with Whites due to the constraints of the White Supremacist

structure within which America functions. By so doing, Coates also forecloses on Black agency with regard to effecting the social change needed to shift negative biotropes and destroy structural racism. For Coates (2015) the powerful social construct of White Supremacy cannot be deconstructed until "people who think they are white" autonomously decide to dismantle it (p. 151). Assuming the ethical position of the White Supremacist structure one of negation and silencing, Coates (2015) urges his son to "struggle. Struggle for the memory of your ancestors…The Dreamers will have to learn to struggle themselves, to understand that the field for their Dream, the stage where they have painted themselves white, is the deathbed of us all" (p. 151).

By consistently referring to Whites in this "othering" language (i.e. "Dreamers" and "people who think they are white") throughout the text, and by assuming that the Black parents and youth have no choice but to leave it up to Whites to "struggle themselves," Coates (2015) limits the possibilities for the imagination of an ideal public space where Black voice can (and should) be heard. Furthermore, Baldwin's letter and Coates' book have emerged as popular texts amongst people who are largely already "woke," or well on their way to achieving critical consciousness of race relations in America. How might "The Talk" be thrust into the milieu of existing discourse in such a manner that it's reverberations cause rupture in reigning regimes of truth and modulations in master narratives?

I have found three particular online performances based on "The Talk" ("How to Raise a Black Son in America," "TalkAboutTheTalk," and "My Black is Beautiful") uniquely accentuate what Watts (2001) calls the "ethics of voice."For example, in his TED Talk, "How to Raise a Black Son in America," Clint Smith (2015) explicitly uses a five-minute spoken word piece to expose "The Talk" as a conversation that all of his friends of color received growing up. He

articulates “The Talk” as parents’ means of helping Black youth “to understand that our bodies weren’t meant for the backside of a bullet, but for flying kites and for jumping rope, and laughing until our stomachs burst…” This language confronts the violence that “The Talk” enacts by “stripping” the innocence from Black kids in the name of protection from the threats that Black parents fear most. Confronting the fear that fuels circulates through “The Talk”, Smith argues, “we must affirm that we are worthy of existing without fear when so many things tell us we are not”.

Produced by the Brotherhood/Sister Sol (2016) youth intervention and advocacy organization in New York, “TalkAboutTheTalk” is a quick 45 second PSA that depicts the glaring difference between “the talk” as conducted in Black households versus White ones. Through the course of the first 26 seconds of this PSA, viewers see several actors portraying Black parents who are instructing their teen Black boys in how careful, respectful and mindful of their appearance they should be whenever they encounter a police officer. In stark contrast to these in-depth lectures, a White man sends his teen son out the door with a, “And, hey, if you ever feel like you’re in trouble just reach out for the police. They’re there to help.” The viewer is left to witness in silence, the caption: “Do we want one America or two?”; then, “Let’s change the conversation at TalkAboutTheTalk.org.” After a beat, the viewer sees the quotation marks at the beginning and at the end of this phrase (one is black and the other white) float to the center to form the image of one unified composite heart. Not only does this final caption call on the ethics of this disparity of experience, but it also calls viewers to join a larger public conversation about the ethics of speech. Accordingly, Khary Lazarre-White, The Brotherhood/Sister Sol cofounder, refers to this PSA as “a light shined on an issue all of Americans need to confront” (Bravo, 2014).

Procter & Gamble's 2017 ad campaign, "My Black is Beautiful" is, on one hand, a corporate ploy to win the hearts and minds of Black and progressive customers. On the other hand, it is an compelling call to the ethics of "The Talk." In this two-minute, eight-second video actors dramatize the talk from the 1950's through the modern day. Viewers see and hear Black parents trying to encourage and admonish Black youths with such often cited "Talk" phrases like, "Remember, you can do anything they can. You just got to work twice as hard and be twice as smart," and "You are not pretty for a Black girl. You are beautiful period." In a sobering moment toward the end of the video, a mother of a teen boy asks him to carry his ID before he goes out. Then, a concerned mother finishes a driving lesson with her daughter by addressing curbside etiquette to be used "when" she is pulled over by police: "Baby, this isn't about you getting a ticket. This is about you not getting home." Suddenly, sensing the gravity of the situation, the previously cheery daughter soberly asks her mother, "I'm going to be ok, right?" The final caption reads: "Let's talk about 'The Talk,' so we can end the need to have it." This ad has been lambasted from the political right and left for everything from corporate cultural appropriation to race baiting, but what cannot be denied is its compelling call for the American public to confront the ethical dilemma of "The Talk's" very existence (Bell, 2017; Martin, 2017).

The Affect of Voicing "The Talk"

In addition to the ethical aspect of voice, according to Watts (2001), "…'voice' is cultivated through shared emotions." He notes that, "[e]motions can incite our imaginations about the possibilities of communion. It is this shared affective space that cultivates 'voice'" (p. 188). "Affective intensity" is a measure of the reach and force of the impact of an experiential encounter (Watts, 2012, p. 14). Watts observes that affect does not reside in the signified nor in the signifier, but in the "space between them." Thus, affect, and the meaning ascribed to it, is

born of interaction. While affect is not defined by the emotions it incites, it is indeed what Watts refers to as a "live wire" whose wavelengths and circuits can be traced by the markers of emotion that gives birth to action. While all of the videos selected for this analysis engage the viewers emotionally, two of them present particularly puissant emotional triggers: "Dear Child – When Black Parents Have to Give 'The Talk'" and "How to Deal with the Police: Parents Explain."

"Dear Child" is a 3-minute, 5-second documentary video depicting Black parents giving a mock "Talk" directly into a camera lens. Produced by the Jubilee Project (2016), a digital media company, the explicit goal of the makers of this video is to "inspire understanding and empathy from those who have never needed to have such a talk" and to ignite "compassion and dialogue" around the genre of "The Talk." The video begins with silence and tight close-ups on individual adults who sit directly in front of the camera with a neutral backdrop behind them. Each face peers into the camera lens as if they are looking into the viewer's eyes. As soft, sentimental piano music plays, adult begins a unique monologue with "Dear child…" The first adult, a young woman, apologetically utters, "Dear child, the reason we have to have this talk is because you are a black child in America…" On that sobering note, the piano music takes over and the camera zooms in to tight close ups of each adult, especially drawing the viewers to their eyes - as if to say, "There are no words for the profound anguish that this experience causes." A caption on the screen reads, "For generations, black parents have had to have 'the talk' with their children." Behind this caption, the wide open large brown eyes of a young woman lock-in, prepared to undertake this difficult task. Then, the video cuts to a wide shot of a woman wearing a long dress and hijab, her head slightly tilted, deep concern expressed in her furrowed brow. A

new caption reads, “We asked parents and young adults to give ‘the talk’ on camera.” What follows is a series of awkward, painful impromptu attempts at “The Talk.”

Tentatively, a young woman starts, “I won’t lie to you. You’re going to see some things that…” She breaks eye contact and seems to be searching for words on the ground. She continues, “…are going to break you down. It’s going to hurt,” her head shaking side to side in resignation. In candid desperation a mother, beseeches the imaginary Black youth in front of her, “So, I need you to always be prepared and always be on your guard…” As one young woman begins to emotionally digest the seeming futility of this “talk” (perhaps considering the imminent threat of police violence and discrimination), she regretfully shares, “It’s sad to say, *that* may not work. Sometimes…It may not work at all…” She has to stop and collect herself. Tears well up in her eyes. She musters the strength to finish her duty to her child and simply closes with “…I’m sorry.” The “Dear Child” video manages to evoke in its viewers a gambit of emotions from frustration to deep sorrow, in just a few minutes.

The “How to Deal with the Police: Parents Explain” video, produced by Cut (2017), also taps into the live wire of affect by portraying candid real-life attempts at “The Talk.” In this example, parents are actually seated next to their children while the viewers are invited to peek in on “The Talk” in progress. This format allows for the viewers to see firsthand the affection and relationship that these particular parents feel and express for their children. The children represent a wide range of school ages, and different genders, while they sit calmly listening to “The Talk.” This phenomenon alone unsettles the existing biotropes of the negligent, violent, absent Black parent and the violent, willfully ignorant, attention deficit having criminalized Black youth. The video opens with a father in his mid-twenties sitting on a stool in front of a white backdrop, opposite, what appears to be, his 5 or 6 year-old daughter. She is a smiling little toffee skinned girl with bouncy

curly hair, a pink long-sleeve shirt, denim vest, blue jeans and snow boots. Her wardrobe signifies the fact that it must be winter, and her caregivers have carefully dressed her to protect her from the elements. Her father's words are the first we here in this video:

> FATHER: We actually have a line that we do at our house. We practice this thing. What is it? [Instantly the little girl raises her hands and faces the camera]
>
> GIRL: I'm Ariel Sky Williams. I'm eight years old. I'm unarmed, and I have nothing that can hurt you." [Ariel drops her hands, content, as if she has just recited her ABC's]

Later, when Ariel's father Antjuan explains a time when the police stopped and frisked him "I got tazed that time. That time they tazed me because they said I wasn't complying" - Ariel appears tense, her fingers clasped and legs crossed; her gaze locked on her daddy's face, she is beginning to lose her composure. Off camera, the interviewer asks, "Ariel, are you okay?" Antjuan asks tenderly, "What's wrong, Baby?" The interview stops as a caring father who just saw fear and sorrow overwhelm his daughter, reaches his hand out to her, and invites her into his embrace. Ariel breaks into tears, sobbing into her father's arms. The tape stops. We revisit the pair as Antjuan is holding his daughter on his lap in front of him. Facing her, forehead-to-forehead, he assures her, "I'm okay. I'm alive, right?" Ariel, still sobbing, nods her head. Antjuan continues in *soto voce*, "Every day I get to see you; I get to do this…" He hugs his daughter tightly. His calmness, like the uncanny calm in the voice of Diamond Reynolds as she addressed a clearly panicked officer Jeronimo Yanez who had just shot her boyfriend, Philando Castile to death in front of her and her 4 year old daughter (CBS News, 2017). Suddenly the affective intensity of this scene transcends the genre of "The Talk" and all of the tropes associated with Black people and Black families. This live wire plunges viewers into the familiar world of the powerful emotional exchange that happens between children and their caregivers

when they face crisis. Now, the viewer has a deeper understanding of the crisis that is at once marked and embodied by "The Talk."

The Publicity of Voicing "The Talk"

Finally, Watts (2001) argues that "…'voice' is actualized by public acknowledgement" (p. 192). He observes that without public acknowledgement, voice is rendered inert and ineffective. For, only by public witness can voice be "actualized" (p. 190). Voice cannot exist without a witness who is willing to hear. In other words, in order for voice to exist there must exist some *other* with the power to endow voice to the utterer by its very attention to their utterance. Watts (2012) refers to voice as "an approach to publicity" (17). Online video portrayals of "The Talk" have not only garnered more public acknowledgement of "The Talk" than ever, they have also engaged this larger public in an ongoing dialogue that is happening in the virtual public now.

First, let's consider the reach of these web-based videos. The videos I selected for this analysis are some of the more popular videos, but they do not represent the entirety of the canon of online videos that address "The Talk." First, while all of these videos were produced by diverse agencies and organizations, they are all available on the popular online video streaming platform YouTube. In other words, you can find these videos on the web pages of their originators (where applicable) *and* on the *YouTube* web site. This fact alone expands the public for these videos, as YouTube (2019) boasts a viewership of over two billion people (over 1/4 of the world population), and over one billion hours of daily video streaming.

YouTube measures the circulation and popularity of each video by calculating "views" for these videos. Every time a particular video is accessed on the site, that access is counted as a "view." As of January 14, 2020, the videos selected for this analysis have collectively garnered

over 4 million views. Compare this to the estimated 1.5 million copies of Coates' *Between the World and Me* that have sold between its publication in the summer 2015 and November of 2017 (DeLeón, 2017). Meanwhile, consider the fact that one, of these videos just over ten months old at the writing of this paper, has already reached 1,773,400 views[58]. This does not include the number of times that this popular video has been downloaded, shared on other platforms, or cited in virtual and live settings across the globe.

Secondly, online videos about social issues are much more accessible to the masses than books. Even in this age of the e-book, audio book, and online periodicals, it is much more convenient to watch a two-to-five-minute online film than it is to read an article or book. Finally, each of these online videos was ostensibly created with the aim of generating dynamic public conversation around "The Talk." Perusing them on *YouTube,* viewers will find a long list of comments about the videos, and, threads that include comments to those comments. Furthermore, at least two of the videos offer hash tags, which increase the visibility of the genre and allows curious viewers and supporters to search within social media and across the web to learn more about the world-wide dialogue regarding "The Talk."[59]

Examining these videos of embodied performance helped me to expand my understanding of the unique capacity that performance has to reach and teach large publics with compelling voices that can reframe master narratives and reclaim positive, dignified, agential selves for those who are coming to voice. Ultimately, with regard to "The Talk" genre, online videos have answered Watts' (2011) call for rhetoricians to "find new ways to 'keep it real' in a fast-approaching virtual-reality" (p. 192). Whether funded by multi-billion-dollar corporations,

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[58] "How to Deal with the Police: Parents Explain"),

[59] Procter & Gamble's "My Black is Beautiful" campaign advertises the "hash tag" #TalkAboutBias. Brotherhood/Sister Sol's PSA "TalkAboutTheTalk" advertises the "hash tag" #TalkAboutTheTalk

independent social activists, or non-profit organizations, online depictions of "The Talk" are facilitating the endowment of voice to Black youth and their caregivers in a more expansive and impactful way than ever. In terms of their potential capacity to transform mindsets in the real world, communication scholar Michael Humphrey's (2018) research with online video narratives argues that "verbal and non-verbal cues" as presented in online videos have the potential to "create a sense of narrative fidelity" that directly impacts the offline attitudes and beliefs of viewers (p. 231).

However, mediated performative portrayals of "The Talk," whether written, filmed, or posted online, lack the capacity for engaged dialogue that only the "holiness" of embodied presence can facilitate (Peters, 1999). If Watts (2001) argues that voice "is the *sound* of specific experiential *encounters* in civic life," online videos of embodied performances around "The Talk" have expanded voice to become the *sight* and *sound* of social experiences and interactions in the modern western world (p. 185). But, what about the feel? Online audience members can just as easily click or swipe to escape the discomfort of confronting "The Talk" genre. Those who are offended may dislike or troll the videos. Others may like or comment on the videos as an act of "clicktivism." Regardless of their response, there is no way to ensure connection without having people in the room to engage and dialogue around the issues at hand. To this end, I have devised a live embodied performance of "The Talk" genre. I have seen live embodied performances further expand Watt's notion of voice to become the *sight, sound,* and *feel* of those specific experiences and encounters that Black youth and their caregivers have with "The Talk."

Performing "The Talk" Publicly

I think solo theater is important because what happens is that the audience is reminded that with just one person they can be completely transformed. Their souls can be transformed.

Their hearts can be transformed. Hopefully their minds will be transformed, and in a small little way, their lives can be transformed in just one moment, and just maybe one hour, witnessing one person; and, in a way that feels like God's work (Sun, 2012).For this project, I will refer to my experience performing my one-person performed autoethnography, *The Talk*, and conducting post-performance talk-backs and surveys 24 times between June of 2018 and February of 2019. Talk-backs included public conversations between the audience and me. They often included panelists who were experts in fields such as education, law enforcement, civic engagement, parenting, and the arts. I have performed this 60-to-80-minute performance piece live for over 4,000 people across the U.S. since March, 2018.

The Talk, as a work of embodied autoethnographic performance (aesthetic production, analysis, and activism) is expanding the scope and impact of "The Talk" genre in a way that troubles, and resists the biotrope of the criminalized Black youth. To this end I privilege the perspectives and positionalities of the caregivers of Black youth and the archives of literature, history, oral history, original poetry, memory, and familial discourse as vital sources of valid expert knowledge on the subject. By embodying these perspectives and positionalities in a live performance, I am internalizing and owning W.E.B. Du Bois' declaration, "I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with beauty and for beauty to set the world right"[60] (p. 2).

Moving beyond the mere statistics, policy, and theoretical framing which dominate the existing archive, *The Talk* presents a *performative repertoire* that expresses the truth of the lived experiences of real people and our local and embodied understandings of the persistently painful and pressing issues rooted in America's unique brand of racism (Taylor, 2004). By performing narratives that explore the trauma of marginalization and oppression that racism inflicts on

[60] Du Bois (2014) spoke these words at the annual NAACP conference in 1926 as an effort to charge "Negro artists" to mobilize their aesthetic production toward justice, equity, and the humanization of Black people.

human bodies and minds, I invite audience members to experience with me what Boal (1995) calls "the therapeutic stage," where we are all encouraged to name oppression and imagine new possibilities together.

This project embodies and enlivens the voices of Black youth and their caregivers through a live performative poetic inquiry into "The Talk" genre. Informed by Lee Ann Bell's (2010) *Storytelling for Social Justice* Model, *The Talk* presents live the concealed stories that are often overshadowed and silenced by dominant stock stories. It also introduces to live audiences some resistance stories that celebrate those actions, thoughts, and narratives that have caused ruptures, fissures, and breaks in oppressive dominant narratives. Through *The Talk,* I engaged the performance process as a means of procuring and presenting creative critical expressions of the concealed and resistance stories that I have woven together to develop a deeper understanding of myself and my society. In post-performance talk-backs audience members and performer share thoughts, feelings, and more stories to develop, together, new emerging/transforming antiracist stories and ways of being. As I navigate through these stories, I consider the salient elements of CRT and CTI at play in this process of performatively reframing and reclaiming Black youth identities through *The Talk.*

This echoes Boal's (1995) conclusion, based upon decades of applying his *Theatre of the Oppressed* model to the liberation efforts of diverse marginalized peoples across the globe, that "theatre is a therapy into which one enters body and soul, soma and psyche…[It] is a mirror which we can penetrate to modify our image!" (p. 28-29). *The Talk* also applies Boal's(1995) notion of a "metaxis"[61] wherein the performer becomes conscious of a different self within herself ("the protagonist-actor" dichotomy), and is able to more clearly explore diverse ways of

[61] Boal (1995) refers to *metaxis* as "the state of belonging completely and simultaneously to two different autonomous worlds: the image of reality and the reality of the image" (p. 43). He borrows it from Plato's use of the term to articulate a state of being in between divinity and humanity.

being, an expanded sense of agency, and the ability to "concretize" and "reify" her desires for transformation and self-actualization.

The elements of call and response and audience interaction that have woven themselves into my performance of this piece do pull the audience into the story, as it pushes my personal anguish and love outward. This recalls Peter Brooks' take on, what he calls "The Immediate Theatre": "This is how I understand a necessary theatre: one in which there is only a practical difference between actor and audience, not a fundamental one" (p. 134). This limanalizing of traditional roles has become a theme of *The Talk*. The audience and performer engage emotionally and intellectually while the multiple frames of my/our own identities coalesce and collide to generate a deeper understanding of "The Talk" and the racialized criminalization and dehumanization that have formed and fomented it.

As a performance-centered handling of the America's anti-Black youth proclivities, *The Talk* is a public framing and claiming of what performance studies scholar Richard Schechner (1985) calls "restored behavior." Schechner (1985, 2013) theorizes restored behavior as the most basic element of any performance. He uses the metaphor of film editing to explain this process, whereby the storyteller arranges and rearranges memories of behavior like strips of film:

> These strips of behavior can be rearranged or reconstructed; they are independent of the causal systems (social, psychological, technological) that brought them into existence. They have a life of their own. The original 'truth' or 'source' of the behavior may be lost, ignored, or contradicted—even while this truth or source is apparently being honored and observed. How the strip of behavior was made, found, or developed may be unknown or concealed; elaborated; distorted by myth and tradition (Schechner, 1985, p. 35).

I present "The Talk" genre as one such strips of behavior that has been restored anew for every new generation of Black youth born in America since we arrived in the 17th century. By analyzing my own experience practicing this restored behavior (or, rather, the assemblage of

restored behaviors that comprise "The Talk" – the words, the looks, the gestures, the allusions), I am able to performatively restore the behavior, refracted through the prism of my own body, for public witness. With this notion in mind, I mobilize my performance of *The Talk* as a means of transforming "The Talk" from genre of repeated behavior to a theatrical experience, a practice of public dialogue, and as an act of anti-racism

In this process, I have observed that *The Talk* is indeed a complex experience, formed by racism and layered in personal, enacted, relational, and communal elements of identity. I examine the complexity of this experience through critical archival analysis, self reflection, critical performance, oral history, interpersonal communication, public dialogue, and civic engagement. Thus, like my own identity, *The Talk* swims in excess and is all at once an act of Diasporic Spidering, performative writing and inquiry, narrative resistance, and public dialogue.

The Talk as an Act of Diasporic Spidering

> The skillful weaving together of personal experience, multiple characters, images, words from historical figures and music that both highlighted black racial identity and transcended it to bring out the basic human feelings (wants and needs) that connect us - or SHOULD. Relationship building (2018 survey).

The Talk enacts a method of performative poetic inquiry that Performance Studies Scholar Nadine George-Graves refers to as *Diasporic Spidering.* According to George-Graves (2014):

> Diasporic Spidering assumes an individual with agency (though no one has total control over the elements that define him or her) who creates a life based on experiences. It is a performativity in flux as new information is continually incorporated. This articulation allows for the intercultural complexities of ethnic identities, validating the retentions as well as new information. It resists the fatalism of Afro-pessimism, the historical locking of the traditional concept of African Diaspora, and challenges the uncritical glorifications of Afrocentrism (p. 38).

With this definition in mind, *The Talk* mobilizes Diasporic Spidering as a means for Black people to both resist pipelines that paint us as a monolith and to celebrate pathways that that

draw from collective elements of the Black American experience. As Hecht, et al. (2002) observe, “Although African Americans share in the composite American experience, there is still a sociocultural divide that remains in part due to racism, discrimination, and prejudice” (p. 10). Thus, Diasporic Spidering offers Black Americans pathways to actively connect (re-connect) with a sound sense of positive agential identities. It is a performance of claiming self/selves.

By writing and performing *The Talk*, I enacted this process of Diasporic Spidering, and brought audience members with me. As a result, audience members frequently commented on how “compelling,” “powerful,” and “engaging” the act of “weaving” my personal stories into history was for them. In this context, audience members used the terms “weave,” “connect,” “combine,” “layer,” “overlap,” and “tie” over 100 times in surveys, and were mentioned countless times in post performance discussions. One survey respondent wrote, “Beautiful heartfelt - found the weaving of personal stories and literature and history” (2018). Another wrote, “As a white person, I know a lot intellectually about race and the terror war on black people in America. It is not often that I get to experience it emotionally in its rawest form. Sonny's weaving of his own family story into the play really made that happen for me” (2019). Thus, the web I weave through *The Talk* tends to catch and connect to audience members’ own webs of identity, drawing them into my world and drawing us all into response-ability.

My weaving of familial stories was especially impactful to audience members. Many audience members shared that their favorite moments and “characters” during the performance-centered mostly around my portrayals of family members – from my parents, to my grandparents. One audience member explained in a 2019 survey:

> More Family. I would love to have the family members fleshed out a little more, given more time to establish their characters. You, as the actual progenitor or this piece as well as its protagonist, have a history, and a remarkable one, I would venture. Helping us to

> see your roots would be both rewarding and enlightening for the audience. This is present already, but I found myself hungering for more.

Of all of the characters that I portray, I received the most immediate feedback about the dynamism and gravitas that my father (POP) brought with his harrowing recollections of growing up as a Black youth in the segregated south. Audience members seem to hang onto his every word as they laugh, gasp, and lean into his stories and words of advice.

Some audience members found a connection, or an extension, of their own identities in Diasporic Spidering enacted by *The Talk*. For example, One Black mother of a mixed race son responded to a scene where POP proudly recites the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution as. This audience member was reminded of the moment when she and her White husband heard their young son recite the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution. She reflected on how her husband's face "lit up with pride." However, her own response was more contemplative and complicated: "He [her son] said it with such belief - in a way that I knew his father could relate to, but I knew it wouldn't be the reality for my son. And, to hear you say that on stage tonight was just very, very moving, in terms of trying to process how to do this for him (2019, February 15). Here, the respondent is referring to an excerpt of oral history that I perform, wherein my father reminisced on how proud he was to win a speech competition in his newly integrated high school in South Texas. He won by reciting the Preamble. He closes with, "I thought about how beautiful it was to be an American." In the next moment, I respond to myself with the words of W.E.B. Du Bois: "An American. A Negro…" Thus, the webbing of W.E.B. Du Bois' (coincidental spelling of Du

Bois' initials? I don't believe in coincidences) "double consciousness"[62] was lifted in a way that pointed to the systemic nature of racism in America.

In fact, in response to this poignant moment when my POP passionately recites the Preamble to the U.S. Constitution, one audience member emailed:

> I'm excited to connect with you on many levels. You made a mark on my heart and my brain. I want to enlist. Professionally, the fact that you are a US Air Force veteran (your father's service as a US Marine brought tears) create opportunities for me to strategize and synergize on ways to get your message out through channels that I am connected with. Personally, you are a touchstone on a personal development journey of enlightenment and growth. You woke me from passive to activate. As a human, and a brother, your technique of channeling your ancestors but most importantly Sterling made your work breakthrough. We are all growing and learning. My path has had many steps (some backwards and some forward) and you have propelled me forward at escape velocity (January 30, 2020).

This audience member was able to connect the dots (or webs) between my personal military background (which is not written into the script, but was articulated during the talk-back), my father's service, and his own, in order to critically and reflexively engage with the subject matter. I frequently receive this kind of feedback from audience members, reminding me that webs cast by *The Talk* transcend my own identities while connecting me with ever expanding webs of collective consciousness that join me in this work of reclaiming and reframing our identities.

Diasporic Spidering has also helped me to consider how intersectionality operates throughout this process of performatively exploring and examining identity. In George-Graves' (2014) articulation of Diasporic Spidering, she invokes the name of the ancient African trickster, wise man, and clown character – Anansi. This character is ubiquitous in West African storytelling. He often appears as a small spider who possesses supernatural and mystical powers.

[62] The otion that Black people in America live in this torn state of identity wherein we are American humans by birth, but are framed as not fully American or human by the racist logic traditionally espoused by the American generalized other (Du Bois, 2014).

As a spider, Anansi's size and agility allow him to see the concealed stories that are often swept under rugs or polished away by dominant narratives.

When I brought my mother's oral history into *The Talk,* a powerful concealed story was lifted that I found helpful to generate critical conversation around racism's sundry circuitous routes. At one talk-back in February, 2019, a man observed, "If someone asked me what this performance was about, in short hand, I'd say, 'It's about the experience of Black men in America.' But you had that piece about the mother and her experiences as a light skinned Black woman…" This prompt challenged me to trace more closely the gossamer strands of my own diasporic web to consider how my mother's story played into/against my own. My mother is a Black woman who was raised in a Black community in Los Angeles, California. However, she presents as more phenotypically White than Black. Because of America's "One Drop Rule" (which I engage more directly in *The Talk*), the fact that my mother has any Black/African blood in her gene pool has rendered her Black in the American imaginary, regardless of her phenotype. Furthermore, because of historical segregation even White looking Black people have historically had to choose between "passing" and living a life as a White person, or succumbing to the statutory rendering of their identities, based upon bloodline, and living as a Black person. I argue later in *The Talk* that due to the fallacy of the One Drop Rule, it is not even conceivable in American society to use the term "Black looking White person," as I used the term "White looking Black person" above. My mother's concealed story offers us an entry into this conversation which posits race and racism as social constructs whose paradoxes and pathologies cannot be glossed over or denied.

Tapping into this intersection effectively slung a web into the hearts and minds of many audience members who struggled with their own intersections. One mixed race teen who

witnessed the *My Life Matters* performance noted: “I liked the part about your mom’s story. I think it’s a story that the Black community needs to hear.” She noticed that it’s different for men. As long as they “got a little bit of melanin,” they’re accepted, but it’s more complicated for girls. Colorism informs female interactions more saliently. She also stressed the fact that Black women are threatened by police and sexualized violence: “The problems are different, but yet the same […]” in that both feel “threatened” when in the wrong place at the wrong time (July 18, 2018).

Exploring my mother's story has become a way of knowing the profound extent to which the illogics of race can marginalize and arrest self-concept, as I observe in this field note from 2018:

> After the January 26th performance at Chapel Hill public library, a young lady came up to me with her eyes wide open and poised to share a new discovery. I would describe her as an attractive Black teenager. Her wavy hair and lighter skin tone indicate some racial mixing but no details about the extent or origin of that mixing. Earlier I had seen a woman wearing a hijab in the audience sitting near the girl, but had not necessarily made a connection. The girl was excited to share with me the fact that this play gave voice to her lived experience. My mother's story connected to her in such a way that gave her a sense of visibility that she longed for. She said, “Whenever I tell people that I am half Black and half Pakistani they act like they don't believe me! Like, I just have to be Black and that's it. So I feel like I have to deny my mother.” Experiencing *The Talk* gave her a refreshing sense of permission to be fully herself in all of its complicated living color.

Just as my mother’s story creates a jarring cognitive dissonance around racism and colorism for some, it also affirmed others like this young lady, whose arrested self-concept further accentuates the mendacity of the One Drop Rule and other racialized mythos. In other words, my mother’s story helped me to accentuate and further conceptualize the fact that race is truly a social construct, but one with teeth that bites the hands that feed it in ways some of us had never imagined.

In *The Talk* I also weave in the genre of the curbside encounter with police. I play out my first traffic ticket at 16. I was pulled over in a predominately White neighborhood, and I followed

the rules set before me in “The Talk” that my father had give me as part of a driving lesson. I locked my hands at the two o’clock and ten o’clock positions on the wheel, and I kept my license read; registration and insurance were in the glove compartment, on the top, “where you can get to ‘em,” as my father would say. Inspired by this story, a White lawyer recounted the stern conversations that he has with his Black clients about “keeping their noses clean.” Vehicle registration, current insurance, and adequate identification are not options for them, like they are for him. One man recalled using an Uber driver until he could get his tail light fixed because a fear of negative encounters with the police (2019, February 3). To this day, I keep my registration and license in my glove compartment “on the top, where you can get to ‘em.” I check them periodically, because you never know. Sadly, this may or may not matter.

In addition to intersections of identities, literature ,and pop culture, current events were often trapped in my diasporic webs. For example, shortly after I returned to the UNC Chapel Hill campus in the fall of 2018, a group of passionate students and community members surrounded and toppled the confederate statue on campus known as Silent Sam. Since 1913, Silent Sam had stood in a prominent plot at the northernmost part of McCorkle place, facing north toward Franklin Street, as if to fend off the forces of “Northern Aggression.” Upon my arrival to the space for a walk-through in December, 2019, I was shown a map that indicated the fact that this facility stood on the land once owned by Julian Shakespeare Carr. Carr was a prominent business man, Confederate soldier, and Ku Klux Klan supporter who actually delivered one of the inaugural addresses when Silent Sam was erected on July 1, 1913. Judging by the map, the stage where I was performed stood toward the center of the courtyard of Carr’s estate. This new data, clinging to the web of my mind, I had no choice but to close in, devour and digest them. Lloyd Kramer was stricken by the inclusion of Julian Shakespeare Carr in the performance:

> To see it on this campus. That scene, where you give that speech - or some part of that speech, and we are in this space, in this building, which was put up in the time when this campus was for White men only. And you are claiming this space, and narrating another history in this space on this campus. That was very powerful to me. And I appreciate how you take this history from Barack Obama and Robert E. Lee, to your parents, to this campus. And that is an amazing multilayered story of who you are as a person (February 17, 2019).

This metonymic network of webs, layers, and frames continues to play out in the writing, performance, and dialogue generated from *The Talk*.

I was especially inspired by the impact that the Diasporic Spidering had on one FAF Black youth who declared, "I was like 'Wow! He took something that happened years ago and made it his own.' You put your life into history and I felt that was powerful. I felt like, Well, it's not the color of my skin that matters. It's what I do. My actions and my consequences. That's what matters" (2018). Thus, in a number of ways, Diasporic Spidering, or story weaving, has emerged through *The Talk* as an act of reclaiming identity and possibility for Black youth. Performed autoethnography is the embodied vehicle through which this work is accomplished.

The Talk as an Act of Critical Performed Autoethnography

> For something to be a 'world' in my sense it has to be inhabited by some flesh and blood people. That is why it cannot be a utopia. It may also be inhabited by some imaginary people. It may be inhabited by people who are dead or people that the inhabitants of this 'word' met in some other world' and now have in this 'world' in imagination (Lugones, 1987, pp. 9-10).

I use D. Soyini Madison's (2018) definition of performed ethnography: "w*hen performances in the field or performance ethnography is adapted for the stage or communicated through modes of performance it becomes performed ethnography"* (p. xvii). Madison (2010) argues that these kinds of performances become cultural performances that "not only reflect who we are but they also shape and direct who we are and what we can become" (p. 12). For three years, I spelunked into my mind, my personal history, the public archive, media, and oral

histories with my parents to consider what impact "The Talk" has had on who I am and what I can become as a Black caregiver, who was once a Black youth. By embodying this process, I have put my skin in the game to mobilize the power of performed ethnography to unite and educate disparate peoples in the spirit of *ubuntu* and to pull them together for the collective purpose of seeking justice, equity, and mutual benefit, in the spirit of *harambee.*

Recall the crucial element that storytelling plays in the CRT Framework. As Ladson-Billings (1998) puts it, "Stories by people of color can catalyze the necessary cognitive conflict to jar dysconscious racism" (p. 14). The strategy of *The Talk* (and its concomitant talk-backs) is to present concealed and resistance stories generated from lived experience with enough coherence, fidelity, and affective force that they generate a critical consciousness in the psyche of the privileged and the marginalize that will energize us to actively pursue the emergence of more just and equitable lived experiences going forward. To this end, *The Talk* combines autoethnographic study, oral histories, archival research, photography, and theatrical performance to tell stories that both inform and inspire.

In particular, I conducted several oral history interviews with those who gave me "the talk" when I was a Black youth - my mother, Jo D. Kelly, and my father, Berry C. Kelly. By practicing Pollock (2006) Listening Out Loud method, I was able to enliven the interview process through active, iterative listening, poetic transcription, and a realistic acting approach to performing excerpts from the oral histories. I found that this enhanced the A-effect of *The Talk*, as a certain alienation occurs when you tell another person's story in the first person. At the same time this lifts elements of the story, the teller, and the listener, that might not otherwise be understood/seen/sensed.

Thus, when I perform my parents' stories, imperfectly, but lovingly, the audience and I experience a type of *disidentification* - a performative force that defies mere empathy and works on two axes: *differentiation* and *misrecognition* (Pollock, 2006). Pollock (2006) defines differentiation as "the delineation of identity boundaries" (p. 91). In other words, it is clear that I am not my parents and that neither of them is me. This distinction causes generative Brechtian distance to have a person who is different from the teller to tell the story in first person. The absurdity of it causes rupture and gives rise to critical consciousness. Pollock (2006) defines misrecognition as "the dialectics of identity play and replay" (p. 91). She describes this concept metaphorically as the experience of "seeing one's self in a kind of fun house mirror with painful clarity and/or pleasurable curiosity" (p. 92). Misrecognition, as played out in *The Talk* allows for heightened *reflexivity* and *re-creativity* in the teller and the re-teller. As the teller, I am caught in the liminal space (between "not me" and "me" – the "not not me" – the self is not originally defined but lost in "mimetic replay" (p. 93). This alienation is also a reflection on my own sense of alienation from my country (cf. Du Bois' "double consciousness"), myself (consider my manifold frames of identity), and, even my child (am I harming him or protecting him by giving "The Talk"?).

It is important here to recognize that *The Talk* is necessarily an embodied performance. Madison (2010) calls for "tactical and emergent performances [that] encourage an embodied epistemology. They become a transformation of knowledge that literally moves our musculature and the rhythms of our breath and heart, as corporeal knowledge conjoins cognition through enfleshment knowledge" (p. 7). I often refer to this phenomenon as the importance of "putting your skin in the game." Breneé Brown (2015) refers to the power of creativity to"[embed] knowledge so that it can become practice." She cites a maxim of Indonesia's Asaro tribe:

“’Knowledge is only a rumor until it lives in the muscle.’” Thus, as a piece of performed autoethnography, and as an embodied storytelling experience, *The Talk* has become, for me and for many of its witnesses, an experience of self exploration, education, and Lugonesian “world travel.” Through *The Talk*, I have observed the unique capacity of the embodied performance of ethnography to incite the connective and affective forces of liminality, response-ability, and voice that can facilitate a performative manifestation of interracial interest convergence which can encourage generative interracial dialogue, and antiracist action.

Through these multiple routes, the presentation of my unique life experiences allowed my intersections and frames of identity to be woven into the Diasporic Spidering of others, and theirs into mine. As a form of ethnography, it is designed to express the lived experiences, perspectives, and positionalities of Black youth and their caregivers for a witness who doesn’t yet understand them. *The Talk* is especially written in solidarity with Black people for the witness of non-Black people. Ultimately, *The Talk* is a depiction of Black pain that moves audiences and performer toward interest convergence and antiracist thoughts and actions. For example, one White audience member wrote in her survey, “Enhancement & expansion of the actual talk could be a topic, I see now 2 hrs later that 'the 'talk' is a uniting piece for all, both the folks who have to have it and the ones who don't looking at how it should not have to exist -- Bingo!” (Survey, 2019). The goal is always to achieve the sentiment that one White male audience member shared with me after experiencing *The Talk*: “I felt called *in* and not called *out*” (October 18, 2018).

Watts (2001) uses the term “strange fear” to refer to the ambivalent nature of White witness to the voicing of Black pain. The combination of guilt, fear, and a sense of moral obligation makes for an unpredictable, potentially volatile, affective intensity that ultimately

bears out its effects on Black bodies (cf. Robin DiAngelo's "White Fragility"). Based upon feedback I received at the talk-backs, from surveys, and via personal communication, I noticed some trends in the way that the performance impacted audiences from distinct demographics.

People of color (especially Black people) often noted that they felt that their perspectives, identities, and/or ideas were "affirmed," "reinforced," "acknowledged," and/or "related to" by *The Talk* experience. Many audience members of color (especially Black people) expressed gratitude for me uncovering these concealed stories and celebrating their resistance stories. The performance often brought "remembrance" and familiarity to audience members - especially Black mature adults (those who reported be age 40 or over). For example, one Black survey respondent in their mid-40's noted, "The Talk opened up old scars. You try to bury those negative thoughts and focus on all men and women created equal regardless of race but unfortunately our society operates the opposite of this focus" (2018).

Many Black audience members reveled in their connections to my story. For example, one survey respondent wrote, "The line 'get your lesson' was used and I nearly passed out because my grandmother said the same thing to me" (2019). Another Black survey respondent wrote, "The talk was encompassing of all segments of my experience of growing up" (2018). Some Black audience members were enlightened as well. For example, one Black woman expressed her gratitude for my sharing of the Black male perspective. She especially wanted her children to watch and learn from performance. She observed, "as a Black mother I can't tell them things from the perspective of a Black man in America" (February 10, 2019, talk-back).

Many White and non-Black audience members, on the other hand, expressed that they experienced the sting that is part and parcel with experiencing Blackness in America. They often used words like "hurt," "painful," "heartbroken," "embarrassed," and "guilty" in relation to how

they felt about *The Talk* experience. Many of them were hearing about "The Talk" for the first time, and they expressed having their "eyes opened," and the fact that they "learned," "discovered," and were made "aware" of previously unknown truths. Older White audience members (generally those over 60) tended to express anger and pain over the fact that racism continues to plague us as it did in their younger years. Meanwhile, it struck many White audience members with surprise, shock, and dismay to know that these issues really do exist in this country today.

Meanwhile, many of these same White and non-Black audience members expressed gratitude for opening their eyes to see the lived experiences of Black people "behind the veil." One survey respondent stated, "It helped me understand at more of a gut level things I've intellectually known. It really helped tie so many influences together for me" (2018). Another noted, "It has made me consider one more side of a much bigger story than most people realize. It is a very real reality" (2018). Yet another declared, "I have a glimpse into an experience other than my own. I am more understanding and sympathetic and knowledgeable because of Sonny's work (2019)." Thus, I have observed that placing the critical ethnographic analysis of systemic racism into the vessel of a talented performer, within the theatrical framework, disarms White fragility, Black hesitancy, and the paralysis of analysis that stock stories can cause. It pulls people into the research intellectually and emotionally.

The Talk as an Act of Performative Writing and Performative Poetic Inquiry

> [Performative writing is] *for space and time; it is for a truly good laugh, for the boundary, banal pleasures that twine bodies in action; it is for writing, for writing ourselves out of our-selves, for writing our-selves in to what (never) was and may (never)be. It is/is it for love?* (Pollock, 1998, p. 98).

Though *The Talk* began as a personal experience, it has since traversed the routes of my writer mind and my performer body to became a performative text. I have rendered it as such in

response to the fact that it has repeatedly rendered me confused, vulnerable, fearful, hopeful, and traumatized. In the excesses of emotion, intellect, time, and space with which "The Talk" experience presents me, I am rendered overwhelmed, confounded, at a loss. However, placing this excess into the machine of performance – engaging it with the magical "as if" - has allowed me to generate from the midst of excess something playful and poetic, yet intelligible and analytical.

Furthermore, *The Talk* enacts a performative mode of poetic inquiry that aims "(a) to connect social research and poetry, (b) to effect social change through focus on the aesthetic, and (c) to use poetry/poetic inquiry as a pedagogical tool" (Faulkner, 2020, p. 16). *The Talk* script is replete with poetry – found poetry, poetic transcription, and original poetry. The very organization of the material in the script is based upon a flow and structure that generates particular rhythms and rhymes. In this way *The Talk* performs as a sort of epic poem. *The Talk* performance adds to this written text, a poetic rendering of lights, sound, projected images, materials, and movement. This multi-layered approach to performative writing and poetic inquiry begins to harness the power of poetry to unsettle narratives, create critical consciousness, and incite transformation toward social change. According to Della Pollock (1998), the performative mode of writing is all at once *evocative, metonymic, subjective, nervous, citational*, and *consequential* (pp. 80-94).

<u>Evocative Writing</u>

> Although I knew this intellectually before the show, the show helped me to *feel* how all oppressed groups are pitted against each other. For example, as I found myself saying, 'black man' and being asked to 'feel the words in my bones' by Mr. Kelly, I thought of all the messages I had growing up of how, as a white woman, to protect myself (Survey, 2019).

The evocative nature of *The Talk* has created spaces for my collaborators, audience members, and me to express our perspectives and positionalities for an affirming witnesses. Pollock (1998) notes that performative writing is evocative in that "it operates metaphorically to render absence present – to bring the reader into contact with 'other worlds,' to those aspects and dimensions of the world that are other to the text as such by re-marking them" (p. 80). These worlds exist in the realms of "memory, pleasure, sensation, imagination, affect, and in-sight" (p. 80). As I wrote, and now perform, *The Talk,* I dance with and dramatize my own memories, historical accounts, and oral histories. For example, I wrote a poetic monologue to express my experience as a Black teenager going to school in the wake of the famous Rodney King incident in the early 1990's. Throughout this poetic monologue I am dancing to music, and allowing my body to move with the words as I navigated my way through so much uncertainty as a teen. Meanwhile pictures of myself as a teen a pop up on the screen behind me.

Here, you can see how evoking memories (mine and others') of 90's culture, the pleasure of dance and rhyme and the paradox of teen angst mingled with a real and present threat of racialized violence, allow the script to perform by ushering audience members/readers into the world of my 16-year-old self. I have written the script in such a manner that, throughout the performance, I can fully engage with the affective energy that is generated by this deep dive into embodiment and flow. During one talk-back, an audience member applauded what he saw as the evocative power of embodied storytelling to create critical consciousness around racism: "The show effectively synthesized sources with which I am already very familiar. It also lent a personal and emotional context that can sometimes be minimized even with empathetic readings of printed material" (Survey, 2019).

The lighting and video designs for the performance are evoked by the text. In turn, they operate as apparatus of the poetic rendering of the text, evoking emotional, intellectual, and aesthetic responses from audience members and performer. Consider the words of my video designer, Zavier Taylor, after articulating in a talk-back how he was able to create such an evocative video design from mere text. He notes that because “the world's more digital to me than it is for Sonny” that it was important for him to just talk with me about my son and my purpose so that he could "feel" what the show should look like as he worked on digital design (2019, February 8). Another example, a message I sent to the lighting designer, Elizabeth Droessler, of *The Talk* during the proto-performance period in January, 2019:

> Here are the colors that come to mind for me:
> Threats are blue to me (police officer, David Duke, man who touched my dad's hair at the Blue Bar); Pop is orange. Reminds me of the tint I see in old pictures. Mom is magenta. Professor is amber or gold to me. The TALK arcade is a multiple colors (blue, green, purple?)The Talk sessions make me feel purple Death is dark purple Teen Sonny makes me feel bright. Yellow? Riots in Charlottesville and Baltimore feel red.

It is now impossible for me to see these apparent production notes as anything but evocative poems bound up in words, lights, photographs, videos, memories, relationships, and color. It is all at once evocative and metonymic.

The evocative nature of *The Talk* has also surprised me. For example, I selected particularly evocative songs and poems to include in the script. These songs drew me into memories and emotions that helped me to more clearly and poignantly express my own perspective and positionality. One of these songs is Oscar Brown Jr’s song “Brown Baby.” I had originally planned to use two recordings in the performance. One was of Oscar Brown, Jr., and the other was of Nina Simone’s version of the song. During a production planning meaning, my collaborators and I discussed the challenge of paying for the rights to play the recordings during a professional performance. Our Sound Designer, Michael Betts, II, broke through the confusion

and suggested, “Why don’t you just have your wife sing it. She sings, right?” My wife Elenah sings in a rich low tone that slips between tenor and alto. I hadn’t thought of this, but I took Michael up on his offer to record Elenah singing the song. She hesitantly obliged, questioning whether or not the quality of her voice was good enough to be part of a professional production’s sound track. In this case, my vision coalesced with Michael’s and found voice in Elenah.

Michael recorded Elenah’s voice singing “Brown Baby” and played it at a rehearsal. As my eyes welled up with tears, I knew that this was the right decision. When I heard the voice of the love of my life singing this lullaby of longing and hope with such love and tenderness, I was compelled to keep it. Elenah also recorded “Ella’s Song” for the closing of the show at Michael’s suggestion. As a result, the very first voice and the very last voice that we hear in a production of *The Talk,* is the voice of the mother of my brown babies. This perfect book ending was born of Michael Betts’ creative choices that were evoked by his visceral connection to the script and my performance. As a result, this soundscape evokes a deep sense of connection in the performance.

Figure 8. *The Talk* production team, 2019. [Clockwise from front center: Sonny Kelly, Elisabeth Lewis Corley (co-producer, dramaturge), Akiva Fox (co-producer), Elizabeth Droessler (lighting design), Carol Land (stage manager), Joseph Megel (director, co-producer, dramaturge), Michael Betts, II (sound design), Zavier Taylor (video design)]

Metonymic Writing

> KNOWING and FEELING are not the same, and Mr. Kelly invited me to do both and 'be' both simultaneously, and that makes behaving differently obvious (Survey, 2019).

Performative writing is metonymic in that "it is a self-consciously partial or incomplete rendering that takes its pulse from the *difference* rather than the *identity* between the linguistic symbol and the thing it is meant to represent" (Pollock, 1998, pp. 81-82). Throughout *The Talk*, I use metonym to better navigate the sometimes circuitous roots and routes of racism as I have examined them in my own life and scholarship. This aesthetic modulation of metonym recalls W.E.B. Du Bois' perspective on the social relevance of the Black aesthetic (or "Negro art"). Du Bois (1926) observes, "somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect beauty sits above truth and right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable" (p. 3). Metonymic writing serves as a sort of connective tissue between the aesthetic signifier of what is and the emergent conceptualization of what should and could be.

"The Talk" as Metonym

The title of the performance itself performs metonymically as I have stated above. I often refer to *The Talk* experience as "talking "The Talk," and to traveling the show around as "walking "The Talk." In the world, this performance and its title operate, all at once, as a means of naming "The Talk" genre as a race-based social phenomenon, performing (or restoring) "The Talk" behavior theatrically, engaging in critical dialogue around racism, and a call for antiracism. Based upon audience feedback, it appears that there are also three particularly

memorable, or striking, uses of metonymic writing evinced in *The Talk*. The first is my use of the real estate agent cliché, "location, location, location" as a short-hand that names the precarity that diverse locations impose upon the Black youth body. My use of the my son's name Sterling attends to my metaphorical declaration of his intellectual brilliance and great value to me. Metonymically Sterling is a substitute for every precious Black youth in the world. Finally, the words and embodiment that I call "the two and the ten" serve as substitutes for the "curbside etiquette" that is demanded of Black youth bodies whenever they are engaged by law enforcement. These metonyms play throughout the script of *The Talk* as a means of critically reclaiming and reframing Black identity.

"Location, location, location!" as Metonym

Confounded by the "constellation" (the allusion to stars is ubiquitous throughout *The Talk* and the meta-discussions it generates, as you will see below) of contingent factors by which Americans tend to define any given Black man in our field of view, sound, or touch, I use this "location, location, location" cliché to clarify the fact that particular spaces and places can delimit our understanding of, and engagement with, Black bodies. I then list different locations wherein a Black body takes on (performs) different meanings and rolls, depending on the positionality and perspective of the witness: "a theater; a classroom; a city street; a back alley; a prison; a football field." When I say "football field" I have written stage direction that tells me to take a knee (kneel on one knee). Later in the script, I recount the horrifying story of Kalief Browder, a 16-year-old Black boy who was incarcerated for three years after being arrested for a crime he never committed. Kalief was released after three years, but committed suicide two years after his release (Begley, 2015). Overcome with lament, I tearfully reflect upon the fact that Kalief "missed his prom. He missed graduation. He missed driving lessons." As I mention the

driving lessons, I nod to the chair on stage left where I had previously dramatized my father giving me a driving lesson at age 16. In tears, I cry out, “At the age of 22, Kalief Browder was just another dead Black man from the hood, because his Black body was in the wrong place at the wrong time!” A pause. Silence. Sniffles in the audience. We all seem to be collectively waiting to exhale. I step forward and practically whisper to the audience, “Location, location, location.” Thus, I have performatively punctuated a powerful concealed story that I juxtaposed to the stock stories about Black youth criminality and culpability.

This is a layered metonym that allows me to touch on the space-bound precarity of navigating life while Black, as well as the fact that certain body postures take on distinct performative meanings depending upon the bodies that enact them, and the locations where they are enacted. My kneeling on an imaginary football is an allusion to the performative protest that some National Football League players, like San Francisco 49ers quarterback Colin Kaepernick, have practiced on the field during the National Anthem during the 2016 season. While kneeling in protest to anti-Black police brutality across the country they also resisted the stock story that defines patriotism and Americanism as silence toward, and compliance with, systemic racism. Thus, my writing has forged a metonymic route from real estate and sports to delimited self-production and self-efficacy, Black body precarity, and the imminent threat that systemic violence poses to the bodies of Black youth.

This metonymic handling of the issues at hand, in turn grew legs and began to appear as critical dialogue during talk-backs. For example, one Black woman who has a three year old struggled with trying to figure out how to broach "the talk" with her son. She didn’t want to break his spirit, but she also recognized the fact "his spiritedness may not go well, right? Location, location, location. Don't get out of your place. You're stepping out of place." After

seeing the show, she reflected upon the fact that she gives “The Talk” on a regular basis. She works preparing racial minority students for business careers. She found herself constantly teaching her Black and Brown students that they couldn’t get away with the same things that White people could, and that they needed to “perform” (in the sense of being economically productive and ascribing to certain social norms) at all times. I recalled Howard L. Craft's Grandma's admonishment delivered to her Black grandson who was going to a predominately White institution for college, where she was sure he would have “plenty of White friends”: “but the world y'all share ain't the same!" The message becomes assimilation or annihilation (January 31, January 31)

I found that several Black youth received this metonymic approach to location as a teaching device. In this way in transmuted from a message about delimitation, precarity, and threat, to a metonymic enactment of “The Talk” itself. For example, at a talk-back in 2018 a mixed race boy of African and Arabic descent expressed the impact that the performance of this metonymic writing had on him: “I really feel this made a big impact on me because I myself am a minority and I feel like it's very important to have this talk with your kids because you never know, like. Stuff might happen. Like you said in your talk: "Location, location, location" - being at the right place at the right time.” When I asked my own son ten-year-old Sterling what he learned from *The Talk,* he too was drawn to “location, location, location”:

> I learned to be careful and conscious. Careful is not speeding and not talking back to the officer, but conscious is paying attention to the things around you. It's like location, location, location; and what you're doing, and what it might be looking like you're doing. It might not look that way to you, just make sure it might not look that way to them. Like, even White people. They need to be conscious because,]Oh, I might be offending this Black person in this way,’ because they might look at it as ‘this,’ but as ‘that’ (2018).

Thus, the connection of metonym with affect, movement, and poetry made this particular element of my writing so memorable to these youth that they reframed and re-articulated their

own metonymic renderings of the original one. The metonym traveled from real estate, to football, to admonishment, to governmentality[63], to “curbside etiquette” (i.e. interaction with law enforcement), to intercultural/interracial communication practices.

This metonymic approach to location was also an entry point to resistance stories. During the January 25, 2019 talk-back, one White man acknowledged that he was always puzzled by the fact that his Black friends didn't protest traffic tickets:

> I've always been very mouthy to cops. I give it back! I'm in the car with this Black guy I work with, and he got pulled over - driving while Black. He didn't signal a lane change. And, this guy who was such a strong guy, he's quivering in front of this cop, and he does the 'Yes Sir', all this - license, registration and stuff, then gets back in the car. And I said, 'Why'd you put up with that shit?' And he looked at me like, 'You dumb White bastard.' And I had to think about it. You know. It took away something of his.

He paused choked up, then asked "I have a question for you. How do you teach your kids to stand up for themselves?"

My response was that we must choose our battles. I returned to the metonymic well of “Location, location, location” - the law room, the classroom, the stage. Karen Howard, lawyer, Chatham County Commissioner, and mother of six Black youth, added, "We tell them that this is not a chance we're willing to take - for you to stand up in that arena [in the midst of a confrontation with law enforcement]. You have to choose your battles wisely because, you know, it doesn't matter how we trained them, and how polite they are, or how wonderful and perfect they may be. It depends what the person who is stopping them perceives, and that's all that matters in that moment. And since they have no control over that, don't take any chances. Javonia Lewis, a parent advocate in Durham Schools added,

[63] Michel Foucault (2004) uses this term to define the internalization of social norms whereby a subject disciplines and governs themselves accordingly in order to avoid being marginalized or exiled by the dominant culture.

> I organize with parents to take it to the school board, and we always have to show our receipts. What I'm doing is nothing new. Parents have been saying for years, 'My child is being mistreated, is being disciplined disproportionately. My child's not getting the highest academic standards and rigor in their academics and learning.' But, that's a one-on-one conversation. That's all at school level. With PAAC[64], what we're doing is we're sharing information. We're social networking with each other, and then when the issues come up, we're all going to the Board meeting to say, 'This is where we have to have change. These are the policies that continue this racist system.'

When I asked Javonia to clarify the term "show your receipts" she replied,

> Just like when we were enslaved - when Black people were enslaved - and freedom came - it trickled down. You had to show our papers that you were a free Black person. And even now, you're not believed. If you say this happened - a Black person's word against one of authority's word, it's not believed unless you can show proof. In fact, even when you show proof now - things are on video, and 'Oh, that's not how it happened' (2019, January 31).

Here is an example of resistance stories that are inextricably bound to concealed stories. This combination allows the metonymic writing of *The Talk* to resist and disrupt the stock story the American meritocracy, Black mediocrity, and Black anti-socialness.

The "location, location, location" metonym also presented some pathways to possibilities for emerging/transforming stories and futures. For example, one survey respondent from a 2018 performance was a White person who admitted that *The Talk* helped them to better conceptualize the Black American experience of delimitation, precarity, and threat: "All the considerations that must be made. Location, Location, Location - new thought." We see here the emergence of critical consciousness and response-ability.

After a January 2019 performance, Boomerang Youth, Inc. Director, Tami Pfeifer sat on the stage with me and addressed the audience with a call to action. Tami leveraged the "location, location, location" metonym to challenge the audience to think more critically about the unique modalities of identity formation for marginalized youth:

[64] Parents of African American Children – a parent advocacy group in Durham, North Carolina.

> What are the resilient spaces you can create in your interactions and in your places of work in order to give young people a different context of how they see themselves; because, if you are communicated to over and over again that you don't fit here – 'Location, location, location' - Whether it be in your school or in our community, that impacts how you feel when you walk around.

Here the metonym transcended from the affective realm where it pointed to space-bound delimitation, precarity, and threat to the oneric realm where it was transmuted into the possibility of creating liberated "resilient spaces." This is the beginnings of emerging and transforming stories.

In another example Chapel Hill Police Chief, Chris Blue leveraged the "location, location, location" metonym to call citizens to antiracist inclusion in their communities:

> I was struck by Sonny's reference about someone calling police on someone just because they happen to be in the wrong location. And, this is not to let the police off the hook, but we also need to think about what kind of community we want to be and how accepting we want to be of each other. And whether or not the mere fact that somebody who doesn't look like me may be in my neighborhood. (November 1, 2018).[65]

Here we see a compelling picture of how this notion of "location" became an entry point for the talk-back for a critical conversation about the criminalization and policing of Black bodies. Thus, *The Talk* metonymically doubles back on itself in an increasingly generative manner.

This doubling becomes a generative loop of repetition that spins from the body of one Black man, into the bodies of inquisitive audience members and onto the body of a White law enforcement officer. That law enforcement officer, in turn, simultaneously repeats and reframes the metonymic process by sharing a concealed story about neighborhood police calls that generates the emerging/transforming "what if?" What if we got to know our neighbors before we got the police involved? This subjunctive proposition, in turn, performs as a call to antiracist action in the real world.

[65] Chief Blue was responding to an audience member's question about what Chapel Hill Police Department is doing about racism on November 1, 2018 at Smith Middle School in Chapel Hill, North Carolina

“Sterling” as Metonym

The Sterling metonym is rooted in the “star” metaphor that began with my real life claiming of identity through the act of naming my first son. I personally and purposefully chose my son’s name when I met him. It means “little star.” Figuratively, it means “pure and thoroughly excellent." This act of naming my Black son and of likening him to something as bright and high as a star is, for me, a metaphorical approach to framing and claiming the positivity, dignity, and agency of all Black youth. The height of stars points to higher levels of achievement, aspiration, and being. Their brightness metaphorically indicates intelligence, beauty, and good. In an excerpt from the letter he wrote to his nephew that is included in *The Talk* script, James Baldwin (1962) observes, “The black man has functioned in the white man’s world as a fixed star, and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations.” Here we see that claiming the dignity of the Black man counters the framed norms of a White supremacist society. Endowed with all of my love, hopes, and prayers for positivity, dignity, and agency, Sterling emerges as a metonym for all Black youth.

Thus, through the constant allusion to stars, I performatively lift the frame of Black youth identity from the depths of dehumanization and criminalization and claim its inherent brightness, beauty, goodness, and humanity. One thirteen year-old Black girl reflected on how this metonymic use of stars lifted her own sense of self:

> The part with Sterling was very important. Sometimes little boys and little girls don't feel like their important. When you kept saying that, it felt like, 'Yeah, I'm a little star. I can shine as much as the other person shines. I know, I'm not all perfect. I have major problems. I might look perfect to some people [...] sometimes I feel ugly. Sometimes when people say 'I feel ugly' they really mean it. When somebody feels that way, somebody that's over them needs to constantly tell them, you’re a little star. You're perfect. You're shining. You're worth. You feel me? (July 18, 2018 talk-back).

Yes, I feel her. Here the metonym travels from my mouth, to my son's ears, to his birth certificate, to a public performative rendering thereof, to the heart, mind, and self-concept of thirteen year-old Black girl, ten years later.

Conversely, when my writing placed the height, warmth, and brightness of the star in contrast to the deep darkness of racialized criminalization and dehumanization, audiences were able to more acutely detect and examine that darkness. For example, in a February 2019 email, one Black male University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill student reflected on the scene in *The Talk* where SONNY shouts at STERLING for banging his fists on an arcade game that took his quarters. In that moment SONNY panics, realizing that his "little star" could easily and instantly be misrecognized as an "unruly black kid vandalizing their machines." The student notes:

> I think you made people empathize with us. Just that concept alone is something you have to meditate on but its real. We see our Sterlings of the world as the little stars they are but so many others will only look on the surface at first glance and just see a black boy or that "black man". It's so deep. (*sic*)

From the present depths of systemic racism, I prophesy the rise of the stars of positive, dignified, agential Black youth.

"The Two and the Ten" as Metonym

This notion of the "two and the ten" as instructional guidelines for new drivers reverberates throughout *The Talk.* It begins with the first scene, when SONNY hears the radio news report about riots in Baltimore, Maryland. At that gut wrenching moment, SONNY's eyes are glued to the rear view mirror as he agonizes over how he will explain the racial roots of this event to the little Black boy in the back seat. Simultaneously, his hands find themselves glued to the steering wheel, at the two o'clock (right hand) and ten o'clock (left hand position). Later, we see Howard L. Craft's (2016) Grandma warn him, "When you get stopped by the police, put your hands on the wheel and look straight ahead. Don't make no quick movements" (p. 35). Just

a few minutes later I perform my recollection of a driving lesson with my father, where Pop admonishes, “Pay attention now! Listen! Keep your hands on the two o’clock and the ten o’clock! Now, don’t reach for nothing until the officer asks you for it.” These words frame the embodiment that I call the “two and the ten” for the remainder of the performance.

SONNY notes, “But I remember that Pop would teach his students that keeping their hands on the ‘two and the ten’ allowed them to react more quickly and defensively while the vehicle was in motion. But for me, ‘the two and the ten’ was also a lesson in the business of survival whenever the vehicle was stopped” (*The Talk,* p. 6). Later, I perform my recollection of my traffic stop with a police officer who kept referring to my friends and me as “homeboys.” The entire time sixteen-year-old SONNY sits stoic, eyes caged straight ahead, hands locked into place at the “two and the ten.” Likewise, throughout the performance, I return to my car seat, center stage, taking the audience back with me to that April, 2015 morning when I felt compelled to give “The Talk” to Sterling. I find myself gripping the steering wheel in the “two and the ten” position as a sort of anchoring – a grasping for safety and control that I know that I am not authorized to claim.

Audience members largely resonated with this metonymic device. One Black teen who explained that he had personally been wrongfully arrested by police on two occasions before he’d turned 13, saw a connection. During the July 18, 2018 talk-back, he shared, “I like the part where Pop came and where he was like "10 and 2" and when the cop pulled you over on that one way street.” He recalled being stopped by the police when he was running down a street. He was as a boy who was taller and darker than most. His iconicity made him a target for peace officers who were seeking a young Black male who fled the scene of some crime. One of his peers, another Black teen male, observed, “You can get killed anywhere or arrested for nothing. Just

keep your hands on the steering wheel and say "Yes Sir and Yes ma'am". The most important lesson that he took from *The Talk* was "to be careful out there" (July 18, 2018 talk-back).

Several adults registered a profoundly visceral response to the "two and the ten." At a January 2019 talk-back, a White woman in her 50's lamented, "To me, one of the biggest injuries is all of this freagin' energy that has to be used to always be aware of the "10 and the 2" of the "Sir" and the "Ma'am." One educator with the Carolina Public Humanities K12 program noted, "We must acknowledge the 'emotional calculus' that marginalized peoples must perform daily. The more intersectional you find your identity, the more rapid and dynamic code switching you must do. You are constantly seeking the 'two and the ten' for each new encounter."

This metonymic handling of the "two and the ten" gave rise to a moving concealed story shared by Chief Letteney of the Apex Police Department at the October 22, 2018 talk-back in Cary , North Carolina:

> So, that talk became real to me from your perspective a couple of years ago, after we first started talking about 'the talk.' So, I'm driving down the road, minding my own business, going from one meeting to another, and this car comes right up in front of me, going right through a sign that I was pretty sure said, "yield." So, I see this car come by at a rate of speed that I would not consider yield, and I just happen to see three people in the car. Now, I'm in this blue in an unmarked car with a switch on that turns on more blue. So, I said, "We're going to have a chat." So, I pull this car over, not knowing who was in it, what they were doing, but I thought they were probably going to our community center because it was on the road to that. After school hours. I thought they were kind of younger. And I get up to the car, and there's three young black males. Teenagers.
> Shaking uncontrollably, it seemed like.
> Ten and two.
> Hands on the dashboard.
> Hands holding a basketball in the back seat.
> Then it hit me, because I knew about 'The Talk,' and now I knew that 'The Talk' to them was real because I'm standing there next to them, and they don't know what's going to happen. And I said like we all do, I'm so and so with Apex police, do you know why you were stopped?' 'I'm sorry officer. I didn't see the yield sign. We were talking about going to play some basketball and we wanted to get there, 'cause we got to get home later,' and he's going on…
> I said, 'It's ok. It's alright. I'm worried about you because you almost caused a wreck.' *We* could have gotten hurt. That's my concern.'

> Then he calmed down.
> Still had the ten and two.
> But he calmed down.
> Because this was about education, not enforcement.
> It was about safety, not fear…
> And we had a good conversation for a few minutes. In the end they were tossing the basketball around back and forth – front to the back – and they went on to the community center and had a great day. I'm sure they'll remember that, but clearly so do I because that moment of every routine of our lives in law enforcement, that talk became real.
> I have to tell you that, while that interaction helped me understand where a parent in the Black community has to have that talk - well, I always thought, "Well we have to have talks with our kids." But that interaction really put it into perspective where I could empathize with those young men and what they were going through. I didn't expect them to know what I was going through in a traffic stop. They're not trained for that. But, I could adjust my demeanor to bring it down below a notch to the point where it became a casual conversation – which is not normal in a traffic stop, as any of you could probably tell. […]This is what we have to do - we have to not only change the behavior; we have to change the culture. We have to change the outlook […] And we do it by being vulnerable. […]Because when we understand each other - when we see each other as people in our humanity - not in our outward look - then we can understand each other, and we can do things like say, "Okay, I can empathize with where you're coming from, because I'm not there, but I get you're there, so let's work through this together (October 22, 2018 [poetically transcribed]).

Here we see the transformation of a concealed story into an emerging/transforming story. Some eight months later, I interviewed my youngest son, eight-year-old Langston, and I asked him how he felt about police officers. I learned that Langston had allowed Chief Letteney's story to reframe his own understanding of fair policing, and turned it into a transforming story:

> One police officer, my dad said, he saw a whole like Black family in the car driving through a Black neighborhood. They were going a little bit too high on the speed limit.
> And, a White police officer came up to them and said,
> 'You should slow down a little bit because it's illegal.'
> But, he didn't send them to jail. He didn't give them a ticket. He just let them go and said, 'Try to slow down a little bit more.'
> Well, the first thing, when he came up to them, all the Black people were frightened and scared and they put their hands up because they weren't used to a nice White police officer, because normally they heard what normally happens in the world. So, I think most police officers should be like that, to have a change in the world (Langston Kelly, personal communication, June 15, 2019 [poetically transcribed]).

Langston's restoration of this story in his own language and perspective has helped him to reframe his expectations for police officers and to claim the positive possibilities for his future interactions with them.

Here we see how one metonymic device has traveled from performed autoethnography, to the story of a White police officer, to the heart and mind of a Black child, where it sparks hope for trust and positive interactions between Black youth and law enforcement officers. While I cannot say that I predicted such dynamic impacts of my metonymic approach, I must admit that my form of performative writing and inquiry was driven by this purpose. In fact, one audience member felt that the "10 and the 2" indicated that "you were steering this talk. Driving this conversation" (2019, February 10). These experiences have confirmed that, while I could not, and cannot, control the threats to Black youth identities, I can performatively generate effective modes of reframing and reclaiming those identities.

Subjective Writing

> Sonny's one-man dramatic interpretation of "The Talk" is a great exploration of what it means to be a black man in America. This well-staged and technically impressive production explores a remarkable range of complex issues--from personal and family history to the recent murders of black men by the police to the challenges of parenting a black son (A March 9, 2018 email from UNC History Professor Lloyd Kramer urging the 2018-2019 Public Humanities Fellows to experience the first iteration of *The Talk*).

Performative writing is subjective in that it centers the "performative self or subjectivity as the performed relationship between or among subjects, the dynamic engagement of a contingent and contiguous (rather than continuous) relation between the writer and his/her subject(s), subject selves, and/or reader(s)" (Pollock, 1998, p. 86). bell hooks (2015) puts it another way: "To know our audience, to know who listens, we must be in dialogue. We must be speaking with and not just speaking to. In hearing responses, we must come to understand whether our words act to resist, to transform, to move" (p. 16). The fact that I wrote *The Talk*

with full intention of performing it as critical dialogic autoethnography on stage and as critical analysis in academic settings makes its subjectivity all the more salient.

As I prepared to perform of *The Talk,* I found myself constantly melding between the roles of actor, scholar, and caregiver of Black youth. This tensiveness demanded congruence. Being charged to embody this trinity in one body and in one performance space, I had to more intimately engage with the four frames of identity, as postulated by Hecht's (1993) CTI. My personal frame connects and collides with my enacted frame of researcher/writer/teacher/actor. Both frames are quickened by this event that has engaged my relational frame as father/son/grandson/ally. All of these frames operate within the context of my communal frame, marked by my identification with masculinity, Blackness, Christianity, and Americanness. Through the performance process, I pursued a coalescence between these frames, the text of my stories, and the stories of others, and audience members. Achieveing coalescence would empower me to more clearly facilitate a practice of intrapersonal and interpersonal world travel.

As I wrote, workshopped, and rehearsed *The Talk,* I applied the personal frame of identity as I prepared to tell my own story by performing my conceptualizations of my current self, my past self, and the future professor that I aspire to be. I applied the enacted frame of identity to *The Talk* as I prepared to reflect upon, and portray, myself giving "The Talk" to my own son, dramatizing the experiences of others, and giving a lecture to an audience about the roots and routes of "The Talk." The relational identity frame came into play as I considered my multiple roles as a Black youth receiving "The Talk;" as a father faced with the duty of giving "The Talk;" and as a professor charged with teaching "The Talk" to his students. Finally, all three iterations of Sonny – actor, scholar, and caregiver – are imbued with the phenotypical and cultural markings of American Blackness. Thus part of my framing of *The Talk* was to reflect

upon these layered elements of my identity as I prepared to unfold them performatively before my audiences.

An important part of this unfolding of my own subjectivity entailed my embodiment of over 20 different characters, most of whom are people whom I have personally encountered. This approach allowed me to play within the layers of my own identities. It also allowed me to engage diverse audiences with multiple positionalities and perspectives at once. For example, one elderly White man declared, "What I took away from it was learning, and understanding, and beginning to discover ways to talk with myself. To better understand and see both sides me in different ways. And, I think, in a way, that you perform both sides, or three sides, at times (2019, February 15). One audience member expressed that what struck them most about the performance was “The range of characters, the prisms of the different viewpoints coming together” (2018 survey). Another respondent noted that they found most striking, memorable, or interesting, “The way the actor used children characters to get the point across. Everyone can connect with children's experiences” (2018). I am not a child, nor a woman, nor a Confederate veteran; yet, on stage, in *The Talk,* I am. Modulating my voice, language, accent, carriage, and movement allow me to playfully mix and meld subjectivities as smoothly as a skilled musician slides his hands across a card deck. Comedian Trevor Noah (2016) explains how this slippage: "Language - even more than color define(s) who you are to people... I became a chameleon. My color didn't change when I could change your perception of my color... maybe I didn't look like you, but if I spoke like you I was you" (Disk 2). Thus, the power of storytelling to challenge, complicate, and dismantle dominant narratives is enhanced by my doing so through the voicing of multiple storytellers.

Another crucial element of my own subjectivity is my Afrocentric sense of self and practice. I applied a decidedly Afrocentric approach to storytelling and live performance that values the "deep structures" of the traditional African worldview, as articulated by Hecht, et al. (2002):

> (a) Unity between spiritual and material; (b) Centrality of religion; (c) Harmony in nature and the universe, even among opposites; (d) Interdependence of 'I' and 'We' as touch-stone of community building; (e) Respect for time and age; and (f) Call and Response as a means of interactivity among communicators (p. 8).

From this unique standpoint, I reach out to my readers and audience members in a manner that appears to call them into my world. Yet, through this playful and loving Lugonesian "world travel" experience, we all come to understand that my world is really *our* world. We just hadn't noticed it yet. As performance activates the liminal space between seemingly disparate subjectivities, we look up and find ourselves intertwined, connected, and response-able toward (and with) one another.

The Personal Subject

The personal frame of identity posits an individual subject comprised of an amalgamation of "self-cognitions, feelings about self, and/or a spiritual sene of self-being" (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). *The Talk* challenges me to consider who I am and how I have become who I think I am. To do so, I travel to my childhood in an effort to consider my present. I found that the answer to this question is complicated. Certainly, we can argue that, based upon our cognitive complexity and socialization, all humans are complicated. However, this act of performatively exploring my own individual subjectivity has revealed some of the ways in which racialization has further complicated my sense of identity.

I return to that teenager mentioned above. After Rodney King's highly publicized beating at the hands of Los Angeles police officers and the riots that followed it, I recall feeling angry

but safe living in the mostly non-Black suburbs of Orange County, California. While I could see the smoke from a burning city from the freeway near my home, I lived a safe distance away from that turmoil. Or did I? So few of my peers could empathize with my own anger and frustration around the issue of race, and how it constantly invaded my personal frame of identity. As I recollected my own experiences with being racialized, I recall:

> My parents raised me in the suburbs of Orange County, CA, where I always felt safe. My parents had moved here from a mostly black and brown neighborhood in South Central, Los Angeles just before I was born. They said they wanted a better life for my brothers and me (APPENDIX C, *The Talk,* Act I, Scene 3).

This reflection revealed the fact that for my family, laying claim to a positive, agential, dignified sense of self sometimes meant placing ourselves in spaces where Black spaces and faces were framed as unsafe, undesirable, or exotic.

The Enacted Subject

The enacted frame of identity is based upon the fact that "identities are enacted in social interactions through communication and may be defined as those messages" (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). In the context of *The Talk,* I am identified as a person who enacted "The Talk" in situ as well as a person who is studying "The Talk" as a social phenomenon and genre, and as a person who is theatrically performing an autoethnographical portrayal of "The Talk" for witnesses. Thus, as a performer I play SONNY – a subject who is actively peeling back layers of identity in an effort to make sense and success of "The Talk" that he must have with his son, STERLING. I mobilize my performance of my personal enactment of "The Talk" for audiences for the purpose of engaging audiences in order to educate them toward antiracist critical consciousness and antiracist action. While SONNY's enactment of giving, analyzing, and reflecting on "The Talk," form the through line of the script's plot, I bring in 21 other characters to help me to embody this enactment.

I created the PROFESSOR character as one enacted identity that helps me to bear this cross. By putting him on, I am able to operate in a tri-fold identity that allows my approach to be more fluid, engaging, and intimate than most approaches to teaching or performing alone. Boal's (1995) use of the concept metaxis plays out here. Indeed, I am the PROFESSOR (which is both an aspirational sense of my future self with elements of my current graduate instructor self), I am also *not* the PROFESSOR (rather, I am a graduate student and father who created the fictional PROFESSOR character as a dramatic device in this desperate attempt to figure this whole "Talk" thing out), and I am not *not* the PROFESSOR (he is all at once my past creation, my future aspiration, and an adaptation of my current teaching style). Here we see Schechner's restored behavior at play: "Put in personal terms, restored behavior is 'me behaving as if I am someone else' or 'as if I am 'beside myself,' or 'not myself,'' as when in trance. But this 'someone else' may also be "me in another state of feeling/being,' as if there were multiple 'me's' in each person'" (Schechner, 1985, p. 37).

I allow the PROFESSOR to interact with the audience, thereby sharing some of the energy that SONNY is stuck internalizing on stage. Here the collision, coalescing, or layering, of my frames of identity (what Schechner might call, my multiple "not not me's") begin to coalesce in generative ways that engage, educate, and invigorate the audience members. In addition to drawing the audience into the action and into a more critical understanding of racial inequity and injustice in America, the PROFESSOR character also operates as an emotional decompressor for SONNY. When the conversation, and anxiety about the conversation, overcome SONNY, the PROFESSOR steps in to clarify and to intellectualize. Toward the end, even the PROFESSOR must succumb to the emotional excess of racial trauma, at which time SONNY ironically becomes the grounding force and takes the wheel to finish "The Talk" with his son.

At a 2019 talk-back, Joseph Megel recalled how the PROFESSOR was developed in the classroom. He observed:

> It was really sort of stunning how theory could become this active way of coping with this traumatic moment. So many times a graduate student who does performance will bring theory into class, and, believe me, it's really boring. But, in this case, it became active. It meant something. There were stakes to the understanding of that theory, or that scholarship - that it became about life (February 14, 2019).

The challenge that Black parents face in the school system, where all the lenses - as you kept putting on the glasses - the different lenses that they might see your child through, in ways that I never - we never - thought about for our children, is all too real for so many" (April 4, 2019).

The Relational Subject

The relational frame of identity states that "identity emerges in relationships and becomes a property of the relationship because it is jointly negotiated" (Hecht, 1993, p. 79). In the relational realm of identity, I especially explore and embody my relational roles as parent, son, and co-learner/spect-actor. By performing in a manner that expressed my deep commitment to my relational identities of concerned father, reverent son, and dedicated co-learner/spect-actor, I was able to establish a sense of narrative coherence and fidelity with audience members. For example, one 2019 survey respondent observed, "There is a vulnerability in the father/son dynamic in black families that I was vaguely aware of but see more sharply now. It will affect how I interact with black fathers, sons, and men in general in my life. To remember that they carry this vulnerability, this fragile hope in their skin, heart, and soul."

In a 2019 talk-back, one Black elderly woman applauded the way that I worked with "identity as a Black male" and with "intentionality as a Black parent." She noted that the intensity with which I did this work, not only brought tears to my eyes, but also drew audience members to tears and beyond, into a place of inclusion and empathy with me. One father reflects,

"It took me through my family. You know, my grandparents, my parents, and now my three sons. And, I remember all those talks that I've been given, and that I've given" (Survey, 2019). At another talk-back, a middle aged White man noted:

> It was your radio interview with Frank Stasio that got me here. It was a father talking about a hard issue with his son, and I had to get here. And what I want to acknowledge as a man and as a father, what you put forward is just incredible. And it's the bridge. It didn't start the conversation. It didn't start Black White. It started with a father and a son, and it's beautiful. Thank you.

As he stood there with tears running down his face, I responded, "You're welcome. We gonna hug before we leave." The audience then exploded with laughter. In a moment of communitas, they turned toward one another and began hugging each other, before many of them joined me for hugs (February 10, 2019). In just 80 minutes, these two fathers had become family in a way that inspired the entire room.

The relational self is so much a part of "The Talk" experience that it is perhaps the most salient frame of identity that appears in *The Talk.* Playwright, poet, and scholar Howard L. Craft (2016) expresses "The Talk" in the voice of his grandmother who gave it to him before he headed to a predominately White university in the early 1990's: "I know you done heard this a hundred times, but the time you don't heed it, we'll be headed to Greer's funeral home to make arrangements. My heart couldn't take that baby" (p. 35). Craft took a private moment processed it aesthetically, then placed it into public circulation by publishing it in a book of poetry. I found this recounting of "The Talk" so compelling that I included it in the script of *The Talk.* It is a piece that I can feel audiences connecting to. Craft's grandmother melds into my grandmother, Ma who would police her grandchildren's homework by demanding, "Get yo' lesson!" On a personal level, so many of us (especially in the Black community) have been doted on and sternly warned by a strong matriarch like Craft's grandmother.

By exploring and expressing my own familial relations, and by calling the audience into relationship with each other and with me, I am able to create an space of connectivity that generates a collective critical consciousness. Consider an email I received from a Black female audience member on January 30, 2020:

> My husband and I saw The Talk! Thank you. I was especially moved by your use of family, both in your personal experiences and in your invitations to those present. I think the first helps us relate to each other and seed the ground for understanding. We all have important things to say about our parents, grandparents and children. In the second use, asking us to think of you as family and addressing us as family. I'm with you.

This witness draws on the allusion of planting ("seed the ground of understanding"). This allusion is restored in the PROFESSOR's citation of Ecclesiastes 3, when he compares the phrase "a time to plant and a time to pluck what is planted" to the time when SONNY shouts at STERLING out of fear that his typical childish behavior could criminalize him. This allusion also connects to notions of relationship as articulated by metaphors like family trees, racial roots, and children being described as apples that don't fall far from their parental trees. This latter metaphor is particularly salient here where SONNY mentions three times throughout the performance of *The Talk* the striking resemblance that STERLING bears to POP.

This connection of earth and planting is refracted in the chant of those White supremacists who marched on the University of Virginia in Charlottesville on the night of August 11, 2017. As they marched at night, with torches, shouting this phrase made famous by Germany's Nazi Party – "Blood and soil!" – they are performatively declaring their exclusive right to lay claim to national heritage (blood) and homeland (soil) and to deny that same right to others who do not look, live, or love like them. I consider the inclusivity of *The Talk* experience as an act of resistance to this claim – performatively reclaiming our relationships with self, others, nation, and humanity. It performatively reframes *our* blood (the blood of marginalized

people) as dignified and good and it performatively reclaims our right to plant our seeds of hope and progeny in *this* soil. As my electronic interlocutor expresses above, my desire is to transition this performative reclaiming of relationship into real world antiracist action. Inspired by her experience with *The Talk,* she has committed to continually love and connect with these two boys "as if" they are family. In this way, my own relational frame coalesces with, and expands the relational frames of others.

The Communal Subject

The communal frame of identity positions identity as "something held by a group of people which, in turn, bonds the group together. This frame locates identity in the group not the individual or the interaction" (Hecht, 1993, p. 80). The most salient communal identity in *The Talk* is racial identity. I am a *Black* man raising *Black* boys in a White supremacist world. By inviting audience members to become witnesses who will travel into my world, I am inviting them to identify with me, Black youth and their caregivers in a way that helps us all to understand better "*what it is to be them and what it is to be ourselves in their eyes*" (Lugones, 1987, p. 17).

To tackle this issue, I challenge audience members to inventory their own thoughts and feelings about Black bodies by reflecting on my own experience living in one. One Black man from Ghana, who has been in the U.S. for twenty years, observes that, as a Black man "you always feel the burden of your presence. You feel like you're a burden. In all my circles, I have to constantly fight the negative narrative. You need to express them, because when you express them, you can actually do something about them" (2019, February 8). This audience observation Echoes performance theorist Nicole Fleetwood's (2011) postulation of Black bodies serving as a visual rupture in the social field of view. In fact, one of my co-panelists, Bishop Omega, argues

that Black bodies are "disruptive" when they enter the room. Whenever he walks into a room, he is sure to get eye contact, and to go out of his way to be cheerful, with everyone in the room to indicate that he is not a threat (2019, February 15). What I sought to dramatize about the precarious burden of my communal subjectivity, these men were able to articulate clearly from their own unique lived experience. The fact that he spoke from their own experiences, and that one of them spoke as one who was once an outsider to our culture lent these narratives a certain narrative coherence and fidelity that further supported the concealed and resistance stories that I was performing.

The Talk is also an expression of my own pride in being considered Black. I refer to my son's "beautifully brown chocolate skin," our proud heritage of Black ancestors and elders, and how desperately my light skinned mother desired to be endowed with the dignity of acceptance within the Black community. These expressions of my communal frame of identity resonated with Black audience members especially. Surveys from Black audience members often included terms like "proud of you," "honor," "dignity," and "respect."One survey respondent committed to claiming Blackness in a positive, dignified, and agential way: "I think my mixed raceness has given me a type of externalized permission and escape the label of black. But this talk has impressed upon me the importance of talking about blackness not abandoning it but embracing it to deeply understand" (2019). Thus, by writing through the frame of my communal subjectivity, I was able to enact a critical reclaiming and reframing of my racial identity in a way that celebrated and pointed toward the inherently positive, dignified, agential selves of Black people.

Taking the Gilroy's (1993) call for an aesthetic approach to Black culture that supersedes local notions of self and transcends national barriers, I posit *The Talk* as a performative act of communal expansion toward trans-humanism. By insisting upon the fluidity of racial identity,

The Talk voices the fact that "racist, nationalist, or ethnically absolutist discourses orchestrate political relationships" to construct an illusory mutual exclusiveness between the multiplicity subjectivities that one might claim as part of their identities (p. 1). My performative writing here points to the modern preoccupation with nationality, ethnicity, authenticity and cultural integrity as the force that maintains the illogical racialization that perpetuates the exiting racial hierarchy and reifies racial tropologies.

The Afrocentric Subject

I have also tempered the modulation of the four frames of identity by operating within the modalities of Afrocentricity. For example, I allow the PROFESSOR to act as an Afrocentric griot, interacting with the audience and sharing some of the energy that SONNY is stuck internalizing on stage. In this way, he is a spiritual splicing of my personal frame of identity. The PROFESSOR enacts a unity between the spiritual and the material in a few ways. First, by picking up and stacking specific books on stage that represent my critical analysis of "The Talk" he enacts a visible and palpable brickolage of my emotional, intellectual, and spiritual quest to explain to a seven-year-old his all encompassing blackness. Each book is imbued with the spirit of its writer, and some of those writers (like James Baldwin, Ta-Nehisi Coates, Howard L. Craft, and W.E.B. Du Bois) enter the PROFESSOR to be voiced for the audience. Secondly, the PROFESSOR is activated whenever I put on a simple pair of wire rimmed glasses. While he lives in me, the PROFESSOR's spirit finds full voice in the bespectacled me.

The PROFESSOR also operates as a sort of Christian preacher (another element of my own identity as a minister in the Christian church), emphasizing the centrality of religion in the Afrocentric tradition. Even Joseph Megel, a self avowed agnostic ethnic Jewish man, observed that he could clearly see the Christian trinity in my performance of SONNY as the Father,

STERLING as the Son, and the PROFESSOR as the Holy Spirit. The PROFESSOR often handles the *Holy Bible* on stage and recites Biblical scripture to emphasize key points like the importance of being honest with ourselves ("The truth shall set you free," John 8:32) as well as the complexity and precarity of timing with regard to racialized human communication and interaction ("to everything there is a season, a time for every purpose under heaven," Ecclesiastes 3:1). One survey respondent, who is struggling with the prospect of having to give "The Talk" to her mixed race son reflected, "thank you for being. Thank you for reading from my favorite book in the bible. The talk is an answer to my prayers and I believe a necessary experience for everyone" (2019).

I have found that Christianity, in its hybridity, has served well as a fulcrum for voicing the controversial. Finding its origins in the Jewish religion based in the Middle East, the Christian faith is referenced in the Muslim Quran and has found expression on every continent. Historically, Christianity has stood at once as a vestige of colonialism and conservative mores, and as a recipe for revolution and liberation theology. One audience member from the Caribbean noted, "I think the solution lies in the Black church. Yes. Simply because it was segregated by Europeans in America. And, when the church comes together, it's going to be solved. Trust me. Because, you're talking about Corinthians and love. Jesus said, 'How do you call me LORD, and you can't love your brother that you see[66]?'" (February 9, 2019). Substance abuse counselor and talk-back panelist, George O'brient, observed that "it's a matter of the heart." He noted how important spirituality and a belief in God have been for Black people to rise up against and through oppression. He noted that Black people in the U.S. have often relied on God "because man continued to fail them, especially during slavery" (February 15, 2019).

[66] 1John 4:20, *Holy Bible*, The New King James Version

This commitment to voicing my religious frame not only pointed to some roots of historical facts and routes of present day conditions, but also to pathways for hope for expanding community. For example, one Egyptian Muslim approached me after a January 2019 performance and thanked me for recounting the etymology of the name Kalief during the performance ("from the Arabic *calif*, a spiritual and civic leader claiming succession from the Prophet Mohammad"). This small gesture made him feel seen and heard, and drew him into deeper conversation with me and other witnesses. Several Jewish audience members have articulated points of interest convergence between my story and theirs via *The Talk*. For example, one Jewish man was enthralled by what he calls a "very Jewish sensibility" in my writing. He saw in the star metonym a connection to a Bible scripture where God tells Abraham, "I will make your descendants as numerous as the stars" (Genesis 26:4). We see here that, just as the frames of identity overlap and interplay, so do the elements of performative writing. This overlapping has generated unintended inter-subjectivities between writer, performer, and audience members.

With regard to the Afrocentric element of harmony in the universe, even among opposites, the PROFESSOR intentionally taps into the paradoxes of racism as he traces the pseudo-biological roots of colorism and the One Drop Rule. Later, he refers to devout anti-Black White supremacists like James Alex Fields, David Duke, and Julian Shakespeare Carr as "fellow Americans of mine" – forcing a discursive harmony where none exists in the natural realm. Perhaps the most powerful display of this element of Afrocentricity is the closing moment of *The Talk*. After analyzing and agonizing over the racist roots and routes of "The Talk" for more than an hour, SONNY locks eyes with STERLING and asks, "Sterling, do you understand what I'm saying?" STERLING, in turn responds, almost nonchalantly, "Can I go now?" In this moment,

my witnesses and I delight in the fact that I haven't broken him. I haven't allowed racism to claim his innocence. Amidst the turmoil, I am committed to holding on to hope for harmony in the universe.

The Afrocentric commitment to the interdependence of "I" and "We," as articulated by the concept of *ubuntu* ("I am because you are") is also evident in the text and embodiment of *The Talk*. Desmond Tutu, the chair of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission often refers to as *ubuntu.* Ubuntu is a word in the Nguni Bantu language spoken in Southern Africa, that simply means "humanity." However, Tutu argues that the performance of this word is an embodied recognition, participation, and communion between human beings that reveals the eternal truth that "we are people through other people" (Madison, 2012, p. 105). Audience members note that my careful use of inclusive language was helpful to generate a feel of "family" or "community" amongst audience members and between audience members and performer. For example, I refer to the audience as a whole as my "friends" and "family."

Paul Gilroy (1993) theorizes that the solution to deconstructing racialized silos is to explore and express the liminal perspectives that lie between the "Manichean absolutes." He describes this as "the process of cultural mutation and restless (dis)continuity that exceed[s] racial discourse and avoid[s] capture by its agents" (p. 2). I have observed the performances of wordplay in *The Talk* begin to pull diverse audience members down from the mountainous peeks of their own racialized identities and connect them in the valley of the liminal. This writing draws audiences closer to me and to each other, regardless of our ostensible differences.

At one moment in *The Talk,* I walk into the audience as the PROFSSOR with house lights up, and I ask audience members to look into the eyes of a person whom they do not know – preferably a person who does not look like them. Then, I ask them to say to one another, "We

make a beautiful family don't we?" The room lights up with smiles and twinkles in eyes. Then, I ask them to admit to one another, "We have some ugly truths to face." Even in this more awkward confession, audience members recall a feeling of "family" and "connectedness" with each other and with me. One survey respondent alludes to this ubuntu connection in the context of a Christian spirituality: "I was encouraged by the lack of bitterness around this topic - by the hopeful message that we are family. I believe that hope comes from Jesus" (Survey, 2018). Of note, this particular survey was taken at the one church performance that was included as part of this study. All other allusions to spirituality and religion mentioned above were recorded in secular settings. Again, we see the Afrocentric claiming of spirituality that impacted many interactions and responses in talk-backs and survey responses.

This level of communal subjectivity transcends racial, ethnic, and national differences. For example, in an email that I received from one of my son Langston's Chinese teachers after witnessing *The Talk*, he observes:

> I love this show because it shows great compassionate with all those people who have experienced disenfranchisement and marginalization in our society. When I see the parents and community members stand up to share their own stories, when I saw a daddy stand up to raise his questions, when I saw a young man stood up to share his stories when he was young with ADHD, I felt a strong power among those people. They are awake! The personal truth becomes the family truth; the family truth becomes community truth. Those black people's minds and hearts are connected at that moment. I admire those black people, and I believe they will overcome their challenges. And their interaction with The Talk also gives me hope! Because I know there are a lot of Chinese people in China are experiencing similar situations in China, and their voice is not being heard and shared. *The Talk* makes me feel the existence of hope! (X. He, personal communication, December 2, 2018)

The fact that this Chinese man could connect to the struggles of Black Americans and lay claim to hope for himself and a people who reside an ocean away spoke to the transcendent liberatory possibilities of performative writing.

One Indian woman wept as she shared her feedback with me after a March 2018 performance. Her sister, a Hindu woman, is married to a Muslim man. Their child will be a boy torn between two worlds in a country that has been torn by religious strife for centuries. The notions of double consciousness and teaching a child to navigate through the precarity of it all somehow gave her hope. It gave her a "place to start" as she prepares to embark up on the journey of helping her nephew to claim and frame his hybrid identity. Another Indian woman reflected upon the human tendency to "other" those outside our communities, and how the caste system in India is a clear example of this. Somehow, experiencing *The Talk*, and being engaged as a "family" member in this large room full of people from multiple backgrounds challenged her to think more critically about the caste system than ever. As a mother, she expressed her desire for her children to live unfettered by the caste system. She declared a new conviction to return to India and confront the dehumanizing practices in which she has been complicit for her entire life. In both cases, the personal, enacted, relational, and communal frames of identity are engaged in generative ways. Thus, the performative application of the Afrocentric subjectivity has exhibited the capacity to connect diverse people to each other and to critical approaches to their framing and claiming of identities.

The Afrocentric element of respect for elders is also exhibited throughout *The Talk*. It is evident in my handing of POP, MOM, MA, and GRANDMA JEAN. I perform POP and MOM from oral history interviews that I conducted with my parents. I perform MA and GRANDMA JEAN from memory of my paternal and maternal grandmothers. Each of these characters serves as a vehicle to tell an important truth. POP teaches the importance of hustle, resilience and perseverance as he recounts how he overcame segregation and Jim Crow by hard work, study, and self-determination. MA is also a picture of hustle, and of hope as she pushes her progeny to

achieve the education that she was not allowed to pursue. GRANDMA JEAN represents inclusivity and diasporic richness as she traces my diverse racial and ethnic heritage. MOM is the strong Black woman who faced the barbs of intra-racial discrimination and marginalization, as a woman who grew up in a Black community being disparaged as “that White girl over there.” In spite of a lifetime of alienation, she held onto hope that one day she would have a “brown baby” of her own and imbue him with a sense of self-love, dignity, and agency.

Call and response is another element of Afrocentricity that pervades *The Talk.* From the second scene when the PROFESSOR challenges the audience to return his greeting of “Good evening,” to the “We make a beautiful family” interaction noted above, the PROFESSOR’s role as Afrocentric griot is clearly marked by this device. The call and response moment that seems to have elicited the most profound responses was the moment when he calls audience members to say the term “Black man” out loud with him. Referencing this call and response moment, one survey respondent noted, “Although they are hard to do amongst strangers, the moments of engaging the audience to say and feel words in their body--such as, "black man"--were powerful” (2019).

This moment tended to generate critical discussions around our positionalities and perceptions with respect to Black men. For example a talk-back in the January 24, 2019 a Black man in his 20's admitted, “When you said 'Black Man', you know what the first thought that came to my mind was? Scary. Now, I got to do some soul searching and figure out why I think that about my people." I recalled the fact that Freddie Gray was killed in the presence of six officers. Three of them were of African descent. One middle age Black woman who identified herself as a pastor's wife and social worker, reached out to this man and admitted that she herself can remember a time when she witnessed a group of young Black men outside a store she was

visiting, and she found herself stricken with fear, so much so that she changed aisles in the store. She recalled a news story a few years back about a student that had hit a school social worker while driving a vehicle. The newscasts didn't show the assailant, but repeatedly displayed B-roll footage of the predominantly Black student body on a typical day at school:

> So they showed the Black kids in the hallway, and they said 'the student,' but they didn't show who he was. Then, they said 'the social worker,' but they didn't show who she was. So, in your mind, the media is telling you that this was a White woman and that was a Black kid. And that was totally the opposite. It was a Black social worker that was run over by a White child (January 24, 2019).

She observes, "We're not immune to what is trying to be portrayed about us." This was a particularly poignant lifting of concealed stories that revealed the internalization of the criminalized Black youth biotrope among Black people.

This “Black Man” call and response also had a profound impact on non-Black audience members:

> I heard Black man tonight and I heard it again for the first time. Why is it Black man. Why isn't it just man. I felt incredibly guilty that I'd let go for so long. Why is it Black man? 'A Black man did it.' Why isn't it just ‘a man did it’? What are we doing? We're keeping this alive just with our description. As a society, we haven't found words to talk about this. I think you are helping us to find words to our emotions, and things that we are thinking and things that we are feeling (2019, February 8).

By framing the term “Black Man” in the context of a father’s love and a fellow audience member’s fear or burden, this process has allowed us to collectively name the affective valence of the term. We can no longer deny the existence of the biotrope and its perverse affective impact on our sense of self, society, and other. We have become response-able. As one White audience member declared in a survey: “it enhances the depth of how I think about myself as a white person and a parent and the responsibility I have and how I teach my children verbally and in actions and how I relate to other people's of all races” (2019).

Nervous Writing

> We gain our understanding of group meaning collectively through aspects of the society around us that are shared and unavoidable: television, movies, news items, song lyrics, magazines, textbooks, schools, religion, literature, stories, jokes, traditions, and practices, history, and so on (DiAngelo, 2018, p. 11).

Performative writing is nervous in that it “anxiously crosses various stories, theories, texts, intertexts, and spheres of practice, unable to settle into a clear linear course” (Pollock, 1998, p. 90-91). In writing the script for *The Talk*, I explored and analyzed history, oral history, sociology, memory, communication and performance theory, archived poetry, and my own poetry. When I perform this nervous writing, I can feel the nervousness rise to a fever pitch as "Life is moving, influences are playing on actor and audience and other plays, other arts, the cinema, television, current events, join in the constant rewriting of history and the amending of the daily truth" (Brook, 1996, p. 16). Much of this crossing and layering is adumbrated above. Here I will articulate the nervousness of the writing process and the multiple stories that were lifted through the performance of this nervous writing.

My practice of Diasporic Spidering as adumbrated above, speaks to the details of this nervous writing. Here, I will expound upon the translation of nervous writing into nervous embodied performance. At the February 14, 2019 talk-back, the director of *The Talk*, Joseph Megel articulated how we embarked upon this process of nervously writing, re-writing, developing, and performing the piece:

> It was an interesting process because what Sonny describes as something that just happened in his DNA automatically, and then he had this traumatic sort of response to it, as one on a battle field might have when there in a traumatic moment. I just kept on trying to open that moment up in terms of, what are the things that make that up in his body. So we kept on asking, "What comes next in your mind?" in terms of what you need to build this moment. So, we just sort of expanded what was a single moment, from hearing the radio broadcast to the moment of having "the talk." We just sort of talked about exploding that moment out in terms of all the things that Sonny has experienced in

> his life - his reading, his family, his knowledge, his lived experience, and using all of those things to sort of unpack that one single moment (2019, February 14).

As I rehearsed and re-wrote *The Talk,* one of my objectives was to tap into "a language of actions, a language of sounds" (p. 49). In this way, I have learned to discover what Peter Brook (1996) calls "the struggle for true expression" (p. 51). To this end, the script weaves, layers, and collages a myriad of sights, sounds, movements and wordplay in an effort to capture my harrowing experience of giving "The Talk" to my son.

I have found it useful to mark and tether emotional signposts with sound cues. The music that I have selected is all deeply meaningful to me. Muddy Waters, one of my father's favorite musicians declares that he is a "*man…M-A-N…*" as the song "Manish Boy" challenges us to consider the mannish responsibilities and burdens that society places on the frail bodies of Black youth. Later, Waters admonishes listeners to "Take the Bitter with the Sweet," as my father reflects on growing up in the segregated south. EPMD's "The Cross Over" is the anthem SONNY's reminiscing about his teen years. As the only Black boy in most social settings, I found myself constantly pressured to cross over (assimilate), or to resist the notion of crossing over in order to preserve my own sense of positivity, dignity, agency, and wholeness. Finally, Oscar Brown, Jr's "Brown Baby" (sung by my wife) is a particularly endearing song dedicated to Black children everywhere. This song ushers us into the performance and recurs at SONNY's first meeting with his brown baby, Sterling, then again when my mother (MOM) confesses to the audience that my brown skin represented hope for her own sense of identity and wholeness. In these ways the music I have added to *The Talk* is offering these wonderful reservoirs and rendezvous for ritual, repetition and connection.

Visual cues also help to activate and narrate the story. I have 85 slides that focus on the faces of people in my family. However, I never show Sterling, as I want him to represent every

child who deserves to be loved and protected. The pictures of my family draw me back to stage left where the audience will see memorabilia and trappings of home. Center stage is the car – my present situation where I must prepare to give "The Talk." On stage right, we see the PROFESSOR's realm – a large table, bookshelf, lectern, and books. These visual cues, along with the slides were designed help the audience to follow along and to engage both intellectually and emotionally.

However, many of the slides bear pictorial messages that will confront the complacency and denial the audience members may espouse at the beginning of the show. For example, several pictures of Black men being arrested, riots in Baltimore, White supremacy demonstrations in Charlottesville, Virginia from 2017 nervously point to the violence and persistence of manifested by racism. The Charlottesville material only became a part of the performance after I experienced the trauma of having to explain White Supremacy and Anti-Blackness to my children as we watched the event on the news. This is yet another element of the emergent nature of nervous writing. At one point, I contrast a picture of an early 20th century chain gang comprised of all Black men against a picture of a modern day chain gang of Black and Brown men. While these pictures enter the visual field, I articulate statistics and facts that frame the School to Prison Pipeline and America's racialized infatuation with incarceration.

The visual components of *The Talk* effectively connected audiences to cognitive dissonance that can spur on social change. For example, one survey respondent, reflects upon my oral and pictorial telling of Kalief Browder's story: "I was aware of most of the tragic injustices involving the young man that you talked about -- but the pictures, the stories of families-- made it more personal and tragic. My place in society really has been privileged." Several people noted that they had either never seen the pictures of Emmett Till, or that they had seen them too long

ago to remember. Placing these striking visuals before an audience was educational and affectively stimulating. One White mother noted, “I was struck by the photo of Emmett Till. I can't imagine, as a mother and as a human. I appreciated the different voices and perceptions. (I had tears but know I will cry for all later…again)” (2019 survey). Thus, we see how the multi-media portrayal of narratives can connect to audience members in such a visceral manner as to incite response-ability and establish interest convergence and a sense of responsibility toward antiracist action (cf. Brecht’s (1957) notion of “literarization”).

Citational Writing

> The repetition - going back to your father and to Hughes' poem was very poignant (2019 survey).

Performative writing is citational in that it “quotes a world that is already performative - that is composed in and as repetition and reiteration” (Pollock, 1998, p. 92). Throughout the script for *The Talk,* I include repetition (sometimes embodied, silent, audible, and/or visible) to connect with the repetition and reiteration bound up in performance. For example, I have written into the script a constant return to a staged driver’s seat (center stage), at a particular point in time when I am about to have “The Talk” with my son. As my apprehension and anguish build, my commitment to him and to truth will not allow me to leave the ritual. This embodiment of performance as repetition (Schechner, 2013) is also poetic in that it acts as an embodied refrain, returning performer and audience to the point of the whole experience – talking to our children. One audience member criticized the “multiple false endings” in the performance due to my repetitive returns to the chair. These “false endings” helped to unsettle us all into the discomfort and trauma that frame and necessitate “The Talk.” Consider the response of another survey respondent to this repletion:

> I was so moved by the number of times he kept coming back to "the car" to start The Talk with Sterling, because he didn't know what to say to his dear dear child. By the time he had The Talk with Sterling, I was in angst for Sonny, the father--knowing that the words he was using to a 7-year-old--innocent, fully loved--would likely confuse his son, but nevertheless absolutely essential in our current world (Survey, 2019).

For me, this performance has become about returning to memories (sacred, roguishly painful, and immediately poignant), returning to the ancestors, returning to a composite truth, and to a father's sense of duty, in order to move forward.

I find that including details and repetition in the script is also helpful to engage the audience in the creative power of performance and poetic rendering. Faulkner (2016) states that effective poetry should include "artistic concentration" which "manifests itself in careful attention to detail (titles, lines, punctuation, sound, rhyme, figurative language, and word choice) and feeling (tone; mood)" (p. 90). *The Talk* exhibits these traits in text, movement, visual, and audio elements that establish routes of repetition. These patterns of repetition communicate artistry, analysis, and the amplification of critical decoding messages.

One example of the artistry of this particular performative poetic inquiry is my performance of three successive stanzas of Langston Hughes' poem "Let America be America Again" as a means of punctuating my dramatization of three different examples of "The Talk" through history. I start with my own experience of having to give "The Talk" to my son in April of 2015, then, I portray Mamie Till's talk to Emmett back in 1955. I tell the story of Trayvon Martin's death in 2012as an example of the very real threat to Black bodies. I close this segment by returning full circle with Howard L. Craft's Grandma talk published in 2016. Each vignette is punctuated with a stanza of Hughes' poem, the title of which is a strategic discursive resistance to the "Make American Great Again" slogan that has all too often accompanied movements of White Supremacy and anti-Blackness.

I also use numbers as signposts throughout the script. For example, whenever I mention an important date, like the deaths of Freddie Gray (Sunday, April 19, 2015), Kalief Browder (Saturday, June 6, 2015) and Trayvon Martin (Sunday, February 26, 2012), or the inauguration of the Confederate Statue, “Silent Sam” on the campus of UNC Chapel Hill (Monday, June 2, 1913), I verbally frame them with day, month, and year. In an effort to ground Freddie Gray’s death, and the resulting protests and riots, for myself, I tethered their telling to a numeric inventory of events that ranged from $20 million in damages down to one Black man. This systematic citation of numbers, photos, and details repeated codes that I had harvested from public sources in order to de-code the racist violence that had occurred. One audience member noted, "I found it interesting how you started really big with numbers and always reduced it back to one." This numerical index articulates J.D. Peters’ notion of the limitations of love - humans desire to love all, but we can really only love one person at a time.

Consequential Writing

> That’s the power of the arts in general, is that it gives you permission to explore spaces in yourself and in your community that you otherwise would not have done. It opens up those feelings that you don’t necessarily want to deal with and that’s the power of the arts. Performance allows to all be moved by emotion and not by fact. Facts don’t change the world, it’s emotion. You have to feel personally implicated to want change. That’s why white supremacy is rising. It’s not the facts. White people are feeling ‘othered’ and they are moved by emotion. You’re moved by emotion to create positive or negative. The arts gives you that (Sonia Frischmeier of Boomerang Youth, Inc., personal communication, 2018, November 1).

Performative writing is consequential in that it does something in the world (in the sense of J.L. Austin’s definition of a performative as a word or combination of words that enacts real action/change in the world with its very utterance). Pollock (1998) notes that “performative rhetorics are performative to the extent that they operate from within circuitries of reader response” (p. 95). The fact that I have written a script for public consumption now places this

text, in many ways outside my control and into the eyes of the beholders – readers and audience members. Della Pollock (1998) articulates the daunting dynamism that this act of performative writing entails:

As performance, as writing that stipulates its own performativity, performative writing enters into the arena of contest to which it appeals with the affective investment of one who has been there and will be there at the end, who has a stake in the outcome of the exchange. The writing/subject puts his/her own status on the line […] in the name of mobilizing *praxis*, breaking the discursive limits of the emperor's stage, and invigorating the dynamics of democratic contest in which the emperor and his new clothes (or lack thereof) are now continually refigured. (p.96)

The moment that I put pen to paper (or finger to keyboard as it were) to develop the script for *The Talk*, I effectively entered the consequential praxis of performative writing. By performing this writing publicly and conducting talk-backs, I found that to move audience members and me further and further into antiracist consciousness and action. By embodying this process, I have put my skin in the game to mobilize the power of performed ethnography to unite and educate disparate peoples in the spirit of *ubuntu* and to pull them together for the collective purpose of seeking justice, equity, and mutual benefit, in the spirit of *harambee*.

For example, at a talk-back on February 8, 2018, one White man felt called to connect my experience raising Black boys to his experience raising two White girls:

> I'm a father of two daughters - two White daughters. And your point about being the father of two Black sons and the issues that they have, just because they're Black. I was terrified of having two daughters because they could always do stupid things, let alone all the brilliant things they do. And, yet, that must pale in comparison to knowing that there's this oppressive meaning that gets applied to Black people - Black sons especially (2019, February 8).

Here the talk-back lifted two apparently disparate, experiences of trauma around having “Talks” with uniquely vulnerable children. After having born witness to my trauma, this man allowed me to bear witness to his. Susan Brison (2002) states that “The communicative act of bearing witness to traumatic events not only transforms traumatic memories into narratives that can then be integrated into the survivor’s sense of self and view of the world but it also reintegrates the survivor into a community, re-establishing bonds of trust and faith in others” (p. xi). In turn, I responded to my fellow survivor:

> I don't know that it pales. Whom do we rape, and whom do we defile and murder? Children and women. Especially women and female children. I wouldn't compare the two. I would just say that they're both horrible and need to be addressed. So, I see a connection here. I don't want you to try to talk that connection away. It is a connection. You feel me? I love my boys and you love your girls, and we should be able to expect society to treat them and respect them for who they are, equally, right? Thank you.

At this point, White audience members, especially spoke out, desperately, "What can we do?" and "How can we fix it?" A rumble of groans, sighs, and shouts arose, fanned by nods of agreement. This moment of interest convergence and mutual voicing toward response-ability was a highly consequential moment of reflexiveness, inclusion, and generative critical dialogue for me.

Mike Williams, Director of the Black on Black Project supporting Black artists, and talk-back panelist, reflected on the relevance of *The Talk* as performative text:

> I think the first thing is the information. We have to have the information so that we can know what our wounds are, where they are, and begin to heal based on that. Art has done that in the black community since the world was created. […]Whether you know it or not, you are a consumer of art. So, I think that art has always done that. Art will continue to do that, and art is the thing that sort of helps us come together and heal (November 1, 2018).

In this light, *The Talk* stands as a performative text that is at once informative, analytical, and artistic. What I hear echoed in this statement and in so many others shared during the talk-backs,

and in surveys, is confirmation of Pollock's (1998) declaration that performative writing can truly become an act of love. In this project, performative writing has created spaces for love, generated intentional practices of love, and empowered participants to claim our right to love.

The Talk as a Route Toward Antiracist Public Dialogue

> As a mother of multi-racial boys it is imperative to have transparent honest conversations about the reality that we live in today. My husband and I have had to have "The Talk" with our teenage boys and it is very concerning and terrifying to have to always think about how the world we live in today still plagued with hatred and racial inequity. Thank you for the courage to speak about something that still plagues our society today though courageous stories (November 18, 2018, email).

While "The Talk" has emerged as a sort of habitual hand-me-down, from generation to generation in the Black community, *The Talk* has remastered this restored behavior to lift concealed and resistance stories, confront static stories, and generate emerging/transforming stories. The more I perform this autoethnography, the more I understand that it is bigger than me. Rooted in my own lived experience and research, it has routed its way into my academic, professional and personal trajectories. It has emerged as a touchstone from which witnesses are launching emerging/transforming antiracist modes of thinking, talking, and being.

The Talk has emerged as a communicative bridge across a myriad of identity divides. Teachers and law enforcement officers have committed to getting to know their students and community members better. People have committed to reading and learning more about Black youth and marginalized peoples. People have committed to engaging in "tough," "uncomfortable," and "new" conversations with their peers, parents, and progeny. Many White participants are growing in racial stamina; and many Black participants have felt encouraged to engage White people in difficult conversations from a place of inclusion and love, rather than finger pointing and anger.

While the writing, production, and performance of *The Talk* has created spaces where the positionalities and perspectives of Black youth and their caregivers could be examined, expressed, affirmed, and witnessed, the post-performance talk-backs serve as an extension of these spaces. The talk-backs themselves are modified from the typical post-performance talk-back, in that moderators and panel members join me on stage and we overtly drive the conversation toward critical dialogue around antiracist thought and action. As such, this modified talk-back is an important intentional practice that *The Talk* has generated for performer and audience members to examine, voice, and reframe their lived experiences. This talk-back has proven to facilitate a critical dialogue that empowers it participants to reclaim the inherent dignity and agency of Black youth and their caregivers.

The talk-back that I conduct after every performance is based upon my "skin in the game" approach. I lead, and participate in, the dialogue through empathic physical presence. I sit down stage, as close as I can get to audience members. I strip down to a t-shirt and jeans as an act of opening myself up to social penetration and to receiving their insights, thoughts, and stories. Thousands of years ago, this concept was espoused in the writings of the *Holy Bible*. Again, Christianity is not only an integral part of my communal frame of identity, but it also serves as a fulcrum for activating ethical action toward liberation of the oppressed.

There is a multitude of Bible scriptures that command believers to begin all communication by listening and to loving first, but, the three that I find most salient for this occasion are 1) He who answers before listening – that is his folly and his shame (Proverbs 18:13); 2) A fool finds no pleasure in understanding but delights in airing his own opinions (Proverbs 18:2); and 3) Let every person be quick to hear, slow to speak, and slow to anger (James 1:19). As a result of this leading with love, audience members felt welcome and

encouraged to stay and share. Every talk-back we had in this study consisted of the majority of audience members staying and a continued consistent dialogue. One audience member reflected in their survey, "I often find post talks to be people ranting or preaching to the choir, but I found this talk back better than most as it focused strictly on what each person felt connected to from the performance and those responses were quite varied" (2019).

I often share this aphorism on the first day of class when I teach: "Nobody cares how much you know, till they know how much you care. David Campt's (2018) work with his *White Ally Toolkit* puts this concept into action. He challenges White allies to address racism deniers by first reflecting on the perspectives and experiences of those racism deniers. The next step – before arguing or educating – is to ask questions that clarify those perspectives and experiences. Then, Campt challenges the White ally to connect their own experiences with the experiences of the racism denier. That is, he challenges those who want to engage in critical dialogue to seek first to understand. Finally, only after this deeper level of empathic, thoughtful, loving understanding (or might we say "world traveling") occurs, can the White ally pursue a path of expanding the race denier's understanding of race and racism by adding their own narrative elements to the racist narrative currently espoused. I have applied these practices to my writing, performance, and talk-back participation around *The Talk.* I have also walked talk-back participants through these steps when the question of "How do I bring this level of critical consciousness to my own community/family/work place?" arises.

During the talk-back, I transition from performer to facilitator of dialogue, while maintaining the authority and playfulness of the Anansi, or Augusto Boal's Joker (*kuringa*) character. Boal's (1979) Joker is a performer who frequently engages both audience members and fellow performers while he honestly analyses what *is* and pursues what *could be.* He takes

control over his situation and, right or wrong, makes definitive decisions that result in clear and lasting consequences. Keep in mind that Boal's (2002) Joker does not tell or command people what to think, but rather, he "sincerely and democratically seeks to learn what needs to be done" (p. 9).

This performance-centered approach to critical dialogue enacts a mode of critical pedagogy that is best articulated in the language of Augusto Boal (1979), who transmutes Freire's (1970) "co-learning," facilitated by a teacher in the classroom, to a practice of "spect-acting," facilitated by a Joker in performance spaces. According to Performance Studies scholar and *Theatre of the Oppressed* practitioner, Jan Cohen-Cruz (2010), "The multiplicity of perspectives within plays created through the Joker System means that spectators have to decide what they think about themselves" (p. 48). What we think about ourselves – how we theorize ourselves – is based upon the stories that we tell ourselves. It is the presence of the Joker that allows audience members and performers to release their hold on extant dominant narratives for long enough to consider alternate concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming narratives. To reach this key objective, I have leveraged the PROFESSOR in a layered role as Boalean Joker (Boal, 1979), Brechtian epic narrator, and intellectual "contextualizer."

Boal's (1979) Joker system is a crucial element of this alchemy. PROFESSOR operates as a Boalean Joker in three ways: 1) He teaches new information from critical perspectives, and he opens himself to learn new information through audience interactions during the show and the post-performance talk-back; (2) He expresses consciousness of his tri-fold nature (the PROFESSOR, not the PROFESSOR, and not *not* the PROFESSOR); (3) He insists upon audience interaction via direct eye contact, call and response, and close proximity with audience members. One witness observed:

> I was struck at the eye contact you made, and I had this funny feeling uncanny feeling from time to time throughout the performance that you were speaking directly to me. The way you looked at us, and at me, gave the message - the messages - so much power to me. And it just made me realize how incredibly important it is for us to truly look at each other (February 14, 2019 talk-back).

All the while, this dialogic drive to both teach and learn catapult me into a Freirean model of liberation through critical education. I conceptualize myself and my audience members as co-learners who must work together to de-code the sundry limit-situations that frame our current states of oppression and ignorance.

By writing in some audience interaction - always led by the PROFESSOR - I have been able to tap into the power of this mystical Joker figure who inhabits the liminal spaces between audience and players – and between my own layers of identity - while playfully blurring those lines to incite critical consciousness about the object at hand – Black youth identity, as framed and claimed by racism. Each audience member becomes a witness and is thereby more committed to engaging in the project at hand. As one survey respondent noted:

> The show was very powerful. Sonny Kelly expressed a difficult subject in a way that made the audience part of the show. I think that this was extremely important to making the show relevant to the audience and not just Mr. Kelly. He was very empathetic towards the audience (2019).

By pulling audience members into my/our stories like this, in much the same way the *My Life Matters* collaborators and I have pulled each other in, I am able to connect, learn, and teach more effectively with them.

My talk-back moderators and panelists were endowed with this same Joker authority by association with me. For example, talk-back panelist Bishop Omega articulated a striking observation around the number of books positioned all over the stage during the performance. I display 20 books on stage during the performance. These books are some of the texts that I have consulted in my critical analysis of “The Talk” and Black youth identities. As I handle these

books and stack them on a desk down stage, I am performing the scaffolding that I have created to frame my understanding of racism's impact on these identities. Toward the end of the performance, the PROFESSOR pushes this stack toward the audience, asking "How do you explain to a seven-year-old his all-encompassing Blackness?!" Omega noted that using multiple books as performance objects, portrays this notion that Black people are "so much more than six or seven books." In other words, Black identities are far too complicated, rich, and robust to be adequately framed or claimed by racist tropologies or stock stories (2019, February 15). Another talk-back panelists, Natalie Bullock Brown encouraged audience members to continually read and learn about others in order to "decode systems of oppression." I further challenged audience members to decode with the intent of dismantling those systems (February 8, 2019).

With only 15 to 60 minutes of time in a talk-back, I found myself pressed for time to transition from the traditional post-performance talk-back format to a more engaged facilitated critical dialogue. I achieved this by opening the session with an invitation to audience members to share what elements of the performance they found most memorable, striking or interesting. After about five minutes of this discussion, I quickly sought to turn the conversation toward critical dialogue. My moderators and I did this asking the panel members to share their thoughts. Because the panel members and I had specifically antiracist political and social motives, we were able to lead in the critical analysis by naming the concealed and resistance stories that we observed in *The Talk*. We lead by example in this, which primed the pump for audience members to publicly delve into their own examination of race, self, society through their comments, questions, and interaction. Ironically, this process was impacted by the demographics of each audience.

Except for the December 1, 2018 audience that was comprised of 99% people of Black/African descent, and performed in a predominately Black church, audiences were generally diverse based upon my observations of race, gender, age, and ethnicity. However, they were predominately White, college educated females over the age of 40 (See APPENDIX J). In other words, approximately 70% of the audience members that I encountered during these 24 performances were White. Many of them expressed in survey responses and talk-back conversations that they had either not heard of "The Talk" genre in the context of race before experiencing the performance, or that they had not fully understood it in the context of history or the lived experiences of Black youth and their caregivers. I personally encountered new perspectives that impacted my understanding of self and society.

Talk-backs offered Black people an space to openly express their perspectives and positionalities before a willing witness of non-Black audience members. They were able to present to non-Black audience members their own concealed and resistance stories as a means of lovingly confronting those stock stories that sometimes go unspoken. For example, at the November 1, 2018 talk-back, I recorded this exchange between Black and White audience members:

> [White mother] My name's Sherrie. In the spirit of interacting and reaching out to people we don't know very well and understanding others' first person point of view and perspectives - something that I've observed that has really bothered me is, one of the most segregated spacers that I see in my life is at Chapel Hill High School. What can we do? When our children are young, there's more interaction between parents and children amongst each other than there is by the time the kids hit high school. What are we doing wrong as parents that causes that to happen? Everything's different. It doesn't feel like one school to me.
> [Black woman in her 60's and adopted mother of a Black teen female: My name is Liz Carter. I'm a graduate of Chapel Hill High. I'm part of the integration class of Chapel Hill High. We were forced to integrate in Chapel Hill, contrary to popular belief. It was not by choice. We integrated Chapel Hill Carrboro schools to avoid enforcement by the courts. So, it's about image. There's a lot of things that continue to be in Chapel Hill. We in Chapel Hill live in a fantasy world. The only thing that we don't have to separate us as

> people is a train track. You know, we talk about history often in separated communities. I've gone to some of these parents meeting, and parents don't come - particularly Black parents - because they're not really welcomed. I served 13 years on the Board of Education here. 13 years! [audience applause and a whoop]. […] The only time we got people to come out...We got a room full of people come out to talk about gifted education. I had a little boy last week at a school - I sub now - and do you know what he said to me? He can't read. In 4th grade, he can't read. But we had a room full of parents in a town hall. But, when we talk about the performance of kids who look like me, we don't get that […] and the community needs to stop pointing at the schools and point at yourselves. I think Michael Jackson says take a look in the mirror. [Grunts of approval and agreement throughout] [Applause] (November 1, 2018).

Here, Mrs. Carter answers Sherrie's sincere question with a concealed story that confronts the stock stories that assume essential racial differences and inevitable self-segregation.

At the February 7, 2019 talk-back, I sat on a panel with two other Black fathers of Black boys (poet, writer, and playwright, Howard L. Craft and Durham County Sheriff Clarence Birkhead). This particular talk-back before an audience of mostly White people included several questions from the audience around the Black father experience. In response to one inquiry about if/when we had received "The Talk" in our childhoods, and how our talks with our children differed from those talks, Craft recalled,

> I think I got the talk when I was like eleven or twelve. I didn't think I'd have to give that talk to a four year old, and then try to explain that. Even now, with simple things like kids that are in the neighborhood. You know, like, 'So and so and so and so get to play with their Nerf guns in the yard. Why can't I have a Nerf gun, Daddy?' Well, 'cause so and so ain't gonna get shot. Right? It's a different situation.

Here, Craft shared a father's testimony that derived narrative coherence from its engaging and empirical nature, and narrative fidelity from Craft's allusions to history and literature.

On February 2, 2019, I sat on a panel with two Black mothers, Natalie Bullock Brown and Reverend Anette Love. Bullock Brown beseeched the audience to expand their critical understanding of racism by tracing it roots from slavery to its routes into to the framing and claiming of Black female identities:

> Black people are...It's almost like we wander around with no place. It's like we built the country but we don't really belong, because there's no recognition still of our humanity. And, I think that is such a huge part of what we have seen with Freddie Gray, with Trayvon Martin, with Michael Brown. But, let's not forget the women Coryn Gaines, Sandra Bland, Tanisha Boyd. There are so many names of Black women - young Black women - who have been killed by state violence that we don't even know about. So, it's not just Black men. It is Blackness that's violated and suspected and looked upon in a certain way on a daily basis. If we are going to deal with any of this in a way that is conscious or 'woke' in any way, we have got to go back (2019, February 2).

While my performance and talk-back participation had neglected to voice this perspective, the talk-back format created a space for Natalie Bullock Borwn express it for the affirmation and witness of the audience that night.

White witnesses and panelists also engaged their Black counterparts in generative critical dialogue. Father, educator, and panelist at the April 4, 2019 talk-back at Enloe High School in Raleigh, North Carolina admitted, “I kept thinking about all the things that are going on in your head about how teachers in the education system are going to view your son that never came into mine.” Buxton recalls the time when one of his sons was suspended during his first year at Enloe, "I did not worry that he was marked. I did not worry that the rest of his time at Enloe - what would teachers think about this child who had been suspended. I just was mad that he got suspended.” This humble acknowledgement of White privilege and the racist dilemma of disparities met a collective nod of affirmation and gratitude from me and many Black panelists and witnesses in the room. Buxton continued,

> And, I'm struck by the similarities between conversations we have with police officers to those that are had with Black parents and their children. I mean, 'The Talk', right? And when I talk to police officers who work with me - particularly police officers of color - they all can talk about 'The Talk.' They've all had 'The Talk.' They've all given 'The Talk' to their children if they have children. And, so, every time I see the show, I'm struck by the similarities of the discussions we have around the police department and the connections to what we heard here tonight (February 16, 2019 talk-back).

I found that *The Talk* experience succeeds in challenging diverse witnesses to put their skins in the game, and to courageously, yet lovingly, engage one another in the difficult race talk. Only then can we collectively be empowered to reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities.

Because I found myself so often racially outnumbered, I took on the intentional practice of applying psychologist David Campt's (2018) RACE model for developing White allies. I first Reflect on the stock story or rebuttal that the person is sharing with me. I consider how it intersects with my own lived experiences and stories. Is there truth in it? Can I see how they logically came to this conclusion? Next, I Ask the person about their own experiences and the evidence that supports their argument. I do not ask to prepare for counter-attack, but rather to gain a deeper understanding of just where their heart and mind is with regard to this argument. Having listened out loud and traveled to their world a bit, I counter by Connecting. I find connections, commonalities, and points of interest convergence between their story and my own. Finally, once we have built trust, rapport, and a mutually agreed upon level of narrative fidelity, I offer to Expand their understanding of race and racism by sharing some of my own concealed, resistance, and transforming stories.

The Talk has also emerged as an imperfect means of reframing and reclaiming imperfectly conceptualized identities in an imperfect society. Just as coming to the table to talk about race requires what DiAngelo (2018) calls racial stamina, staying at the table and moving yourself and your fellow society members toward persistent antiracism, in a persistently racist society, requires critical reflexivity, or, what Kendi (2019) calls "persistent self-awareness, constant self-criticism, and regular self-examination" (p. 23). *The Talk* also revealed those blind spots where diverse witnesses may never fully understand or agree. However, our willingness to

share, witness, and imagine possibilities together can draw us that much closer across the chasms that seem to gape between us.

I wrote and perform *The Talk* in a way that allows us all to take turns at being right, wrong, and ambivalent about the pressing issues related to the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth in America. By leading with vulnerability, playfulness, and a commitment to my craft, I have enacted a liminalizing effect that has allowed my fellow witnesses and me to dive deep into the excesses that these challenging issues generate. We engage in mutual world travel where disagreement does not automatically devolve into dehumanization. For example, The *Raleigh News and Observer* columnist Peder Zane (2019) noted, "I took issue with some of Kelly's points, especially his focus on how African Americans are made hostages to fortune rather than the ways they can be masters of their fate." Critical feedback like this has challenged me to temper my message with more intelligible expressions of the hope that I do feel, while continuing to challenge witnesses to pursue action steps toward antiracist consciousness and transformation.

Consider, for example an unsettling exchange I had with a White male at one of the 2019 post-performance talk-backs. This man, was very calculated in his words as he asked me to consider the full context of Freddie Gray's death. He reminded me and the audience that, at the time of Freddie Gray's death in Baltimore, Maryland, the Mayor was a Black woman and the state Attorney General was a Black woman. His argument was that Freddie Gray's death should not be simplified as a "pro-White" and "anti-Black" phenomena. I was grateful to hear this message of mild dissent, because I had grown comfortable with preaching to the choir and receiving such resounding affirmation and celebration from audience members. My first response was to pause and to thank this man for sharing his perspective in an audience full of

people who – if they were like most of my other audience members – were probably rather progressive, and might not take kindly to his critique.

I learned that in order to create a space for my own coming to voice, I needed to share that space with other voices, even if I disagreed with them. I admitted that he was right. I added that three of the six police officers involved in Freddie Gray's death were Black people. I admitted that I didn't clearly express this in the performance, and that this omission might paint a false White vs. Black dialectic, when the real problem is the dehumanization and criminalization of Black youth by people of all racial backgrounds. He seemed satisfied with my admission and I was sharpened by his feedback. I have since taken it upon myself volunteer these contextual details of Freddie Gray's death early in the talk-backs that have followed this incident. I have learned that my own power to create lasting spaces where I can express my perspectives and positionalities, and be affirmed and witnessed depends upon my own willingness to allow others to express conflicting perspectives and positionalities themselves as I affirm and witness them.

For example, one White male sent me an email after a performance and admonished me against overstating the 2017 Charlottesville incident. In *The Talk,* I frame this incident as terrifying terrorist event. This gentleman, however, found my explanation to be an "exaggeration" since there were so "few numbers" of true White Supremacists at the event. He challenged me to "stick to the facts" of the situation. What this gentleman did not recognize was that to *me,* and to my family, Charlottesville was indeed terrifying. Neither facts nor numbers can erase the generational memories that we have of Jim Crowe era lynch mobs. These memories were triggered, and confirmed, by the images, discourse, and racist violence that took place in Charlottesville that day. What he didn't seem to understand in his lamentation around exaggeration and sound rhetorical argumentation, was that his assessment of numbers is starkly

different from mine. The only number that matters to me in this context is one. In the pictures that we have seen of our own bodies being lynched, there is but one of us, hanging, lifeless, sometimes charred, beaten, and naked, from a tree – surrounded by a few - and sometimes hundreds of - White people. The technicalities of numbers mean nothing to one Black man (or boy) when the wrong group of White people catch him alone at the wrong place and wrong time.

While I never experienced anything more than mild conflict or dissent during the talk-backs, I have studied David Campt's (2018) work that reveals routes to generating antiracist dialogue with even the staunchest deniers of racism. He does this through the process of story sharing. Consider, as an example this electronic dialogue that I had in February 2019 with a White man who is tired of the "race talk," and whom I have since learned to be a well known "troll"[67] in the Triangle Area of North Carolina. He rejected the premise of *The Talk* and expressed his protest via a comment on the *Raleigh News & Observer* Face Book post about *The Talk*. I have included screen shots of his comments here:

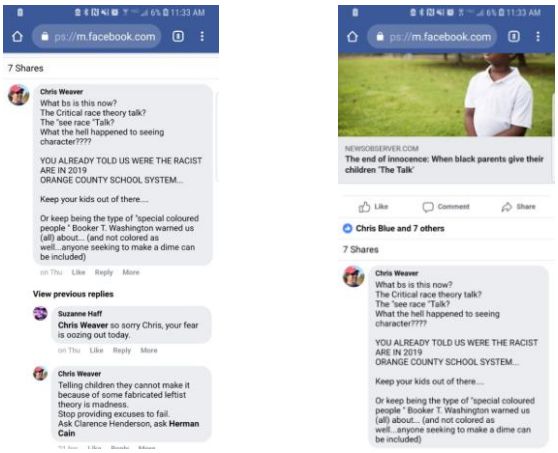


Figure 9. Screen shot of February 2019 correspondence with Chris Weaver

[67] Akiva Fox, of Bulldog Ensemble Theater, a producer of the January through February, 2019 shows, informed me in an email on February 1, 2019: "Oh, that's not just any MAGA troll – that's Chris Weaver, king of the Orange County trolls. He was MAGA when Donald Trump was still just a failed casino developer. I used to work at WCHL/Chapelborro, and he would call in and comment whenever they said anything nice about taxes or non-white people. Nice to hear he's still going strong."

My response to Mr. Weaver was as follows:

> Thanks for sharing your passion Chris. I wish you could see the show. No, sir. It's not a race talk. It's a human talk. It's a talk about a daddy's love for his child. Part of that love is preparing that child for a world where some (but certainly not all) people will treat him differently, and sometimes dangerously, because of his perceived race. Sadly, as you have alluded to, this concern spans back beyond a century. Even more sadly, the concern continues today, based upon the truth that real people still feel racially divided in this country, and some of us still fear each other. I thank God that things are better, but I also acknowledge that my son's safety and wellbeing are still not in the clear from racism's perils. I tell my son that he can make it and that he has to work hard and work with integrity to succeed in what I think is the greatest country on earth. As veterans ourselves and as offspring of teachers, police officers and firefighters, my wife and I are teaching our sons to respect and honor authority and public service. We empower our boys to dream, be fair, be kind and to love all people; and we expect them to reap what they sow. However, the truth is that sometimes, some people will not return that fairness, kindness, or love, due to the prejudices, fears, and hatred that they feel toward people who look like my sons. Those people will sometimes be black, white, or any other color. But, my life experience has taught me that blackness can, at times, be a calling card for violence, rejection and exclusion from many directions. We are raising our boys to be personally accountable and to walk in character. We also need to warn them that some people with power, authority, focus, strength, and intelligence will not honor their character simply because those people don't, or won't, see past their blackness. I just want to make my boys aware of that without putting fear, hatred or identity politics into their hearts. That's all. That's what the show is about. I would really like you to see it. If you message me on Face book I will get you two free tickets and I really want you to speak your heart and mind at the post-show talkback afterward. Will you join me?

Mr. Weaver never replied. However, I am grateful for this opportunity to exercise the kind of gracious, open-hearted, loving witness that I demand from myself and my witnesses who participate in narrative shifting public antiracist dialogue. I later argued, at the February 17, 2019 talk-back (with Chapel Hill Police Chief Christ Blue and Professor Lloyd Kramer on that panel) that, “if I can get closer to you, and you closer to me, we mutually humanize each other. Now we've got conversation. Now we can move toward these institutions breaking down. We're not just controlling, but we're actually caring in that community.”

Figure 10. Talk-Back at Chapel Hill Library with Chapel Hill Police Chief Chris Blue and host of "Intelligently Ratchet" web series, Kaze Thomas, July 26, 2018.

Some of the White audience members have reminded me of the positive dialectic of response-ability. That is to say that, while on one hand *The Talk* and its talk-back creates space for Black youth and their caregivers creates a space wherein we are endowed with the ability to respond. We are also endowed with the ability to address non-Black people and to witness their response. Just as the writing, performing, and witnessing of *The Talk* has empowered me to come to voice and to claim my right (and the rights of all Black youth and their caregivers) to a positive, agential, dignified sense of our selves, this process offers the same benefit to its witnesses. In other words, I have observed through the performance process of *The Talk* the manifestation of Oliver's (2001) argument that response-ability is connected to a positive dialectic based upon mutual witnessing. That is to say that response-ability can, and should result in mutually inclusive humanization and empowerment. One manifestation of this poem, written right after a performance of *The Talk* by Angela Westmoreland, a Fayetteville, North Carolina teacher and wife of a police officer, who happens to be a White woman:

"New Thoughts", By Angela Westmoreland
Inspired by Sonny Kelly's, "The Talk"
I wasn't alive in 1955,
Barely aware of the King affair;
But they affect me now
As I kneel and bow
My head in submission
And with great decision
To serve as an ally,

A friend with a reply,
A retort ready to go,
To say, to shout,
To call them forward
And call them out.
Let's reclaim it, reframe it,
Not just rename it.
Let's again change it and
Not just exchange it for more hate.
I'm white but I'm willing
To help where there's need,
To do the work, to plant the seed.
Let's unite, let's fight,
Let's empower each other,
As sisters and brothers,
With support and grace,
Intentionality.
We'll all make a change—
Just watch and see.
[written by a White woman who is a public school teacher and the wife of a police officer] (Emailed A. Westmorland, (A. Westmorland, personal communication, December 17, 2019)

I am reminded of the CRT tenet that antiracist transformation is slow when it is driven by those who are privileged enough to enjoy safety within the confines of racial hierarchy. Baldwin (1962) diagnoses one cause of this slow change: "Many of them indeed know better, but as you will discover, people find it very difficult to act on what they know. To act is to be committed and to be committed is to be in danger. In this case the danger in the minds and hearts of most white Americans is the loss of their identity." So, I share my stories in a manner that allows "my" stories to become "our" stories. Our stories can begin to bridge the chasms between our respective identities. When we share stories, we can conceive of our respective self-concepts, and sense of dignity and agency as mutually constructive, rather than mutually exclusive. When our stories break our collective hearts, we share a vested interest in mending those breaks together.

My message to every witness of *The Talk* is to embrace broken hearts and pursue open minds. A common response that I heard from my fellow witnesses at the talk-backs was what many audience members expressed as an overwhelming sense of "heart break." My response is, "Now that your heart is broken, let that pain drive you on toward equity, and let our broken hearts graft and grow together." Now that you know, you are response-able. The question remains, what do we tell our Black children when they confront an American Dream that tends to frame and claim their identities in ways that are inextricably bound to their very demise? As an act of performative poetic inquiry, *The Talk* has begun to answer these questions; but, more importantly, it has called diverse audiences in to critically consider the racist and myopic ways in which we tend to claim and frame Black youth identity. I am hopeful that the work that this performance is doing in the hearts and minds of audiences, and in the public imaginary, is creating an emergent approach to "The Talk" that transcends the dehumanization and criminalization that systemic racism imposes upon Black youth identities. Perhaps the young lady from the Jubilee Project's (2016) "Dear Child" video answers my question best in her closing words to the imaginary human child she is addressing, just beyond the camera lens: "I love you. I believe in you, and I believe that others just like you, who hold onto their light – together, you all will change the world."

CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

> I'm less interested in how we label ourselves. I'm more interested in how we treat each other; and if we're treating each other right then I can be African American, I can be multi-racial, I can be – you name it. What matters is, am I showing people respect? Am I caring for other people? [Barack Obama] (Walters, 2010)

The purpose of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project was to create spaces and to generate intentional practices of performance-centered pedagogy and praxis that empower Black youth, their caregivers, and their communities to come to voice, engage in response-ability and, take on a collective responsibility toward antiracist attitudes and action. Through the layered theoretical lens of critical race theory, communication theory of identity, critical interpersonal communication theory, and theories of performance, this project mobilized performance as critical analysis. Through the performance process this project has produced poetry, prose, photography, rap, theater, and performed autoethnography that comprise an artistic repertoire. This repertoire voices the positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth and their caregivers. In our examination and public expression of this repertoire, my collaborators and I have been empowered, affirmed, and witnessed, even as we have exercised our ability to empower, affirm, and witness others.

We have done this work in the spirit of W.E.B. Du Bois' (1926) commission to all artists: "Thus all art is propaganda and ever must be, despite the wailing of the purists. I stand in utter shamelessness and say that whatever art I have for writing has been used always for propaganda for gaining the right of black folk to love and enjoy" (p. 7). To this end, we enacted our roles as

artist-analyzer-activists to engage in performance-centered modes of YPAR, critical pedagogy, writing, ethnography, and poetic inquiry. As a result, the *Pipelines to Pathway* project participants have performatively, pensively, playfully, and lovingly forged routes for reframing and reclaiming the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities.

This work began in 2016 with the *My Life Matters Project* which focused on teaching and empowering a small group of Black youth collaborators to discover, analyze, write, and perform their own stock, concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming stories. From this work, *The Talk* was born in 2018. It represents a particularly strategic approach to publicly presenting and discussing the stock, concealed, resistance, and emerging/transforming stories that have framed and claimed the identities of one Black caregiver. The results of this work have proven how a performance-centered approach to reframing and reclaiming Black youth identity can simultaneously operate as antiracist artistry, analysis, and activism.

To examine the efficacy, impact, and relevance of this project as an antiracist artistic, analytical, and activist endeavor, I employed Sandra Faulkner's (2016) *ars poetica*. Faulkner (2016, 2020) has combined observations from her own practice of poetic inquiry as a mode of qualitative research with insight from other poetic inquiry practitioners to develop her *ars poetica* – a standard for sound research poetry.

Ars Poetica: Evaluating the Power of Performance to Reframe & Reclaim Identities

> The art of poetry provides an entry point from which we can discuss potential criteria for evaluating research poetry. Examining a researcher's goals and consideration of poetic craft through *ars poetic* suggests these criteria (Faulkner, 2020, p. 142).

Here I will articulate how both *My Life Matters* and *The Talk* have met the criteria for sound research poetry: *artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery/surprise, conditionality, narrative truth*, and *transformation*. While these six criteria of *ars poetica* are

fluid - allowing for the often unpredictable and dynamically innovative nature of poetry - they do offer some guidelines for establishing a collective understanding of how we can evaluate poetic work. By applying these poetic criteria to the poetry and performance produced by the *Pipelines to Pathways* project, I am able to systematically articulate the performance-centered means by which my collaborators and I have: (1) created spaces for coming to voice, response-ability, and antiracist responsibility, (2) developed intentional practices for finding, examining, expressing, and framing that voice, and (3) empowered ourselves and others to engage in antiracist attitudes and actions that reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth identities.

I have found that these six criteria of *ars poetica* are also helpful in the evaluation of the performance process of performative poetic inquiry. Richard Schechner (2013) conceptualizes the performance process into a "time-space sequence" organized by three phases (p. 225). Chapter 4 was especially focused on the *Proto-Performance* phase – the phase that includes "training," "workshops," and "rehearsal." Both Chapters 4 and 5 focus on the *Performance* phase, which includes "warm-up," "public performance," "events/contexts sustaining the public performance," and the "cool-down." Most importantly, we explored and examined live performances of spoken word, storytelling, theater, and public dialogue that we produced and publicly presented during the course of this project.

Here, I examine what Schechner (2013) refers to as the *Aftermath* phase of performance as a means of qualitatively evaluating the impact, relevance, and efficacy of the artifacts, performances, and experiences generated by *My Life Matters* and *The Talk.* The elements of the Aftermath phase include "critical responses," "archives," and "memories." Using post-performance surveys, self-reflection, observations of current events, and elements of the performative repertoire, I evaluate the performance-centered praxis via the criteria of *ars poetica*.

Artistic Concentration

> It was beautiful and moving […] The children were absolutely amazing! (August 5, 2016 survey, *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance)

> I was so impressed. The writing was excellent, the acting was so incredible it reminded me of James McAvoy in the movie *Split*. Incredible performance. I was also impressed with how it was directed. The way Kelly moved around the stage with the different props and lighting cues was awesome (2019 survey, *The Talk*).

The artistic concentration exhibited in the *Pipelines to Pathways* project created enlivened spaces where Black youth and their caregivers were encouraged and empowered to express their persons, perspectives, and positionalities for affirming witnesses. Artistic concentration entails "close attention to detail" and a command over crucial poetic devices like rhyme, rhythm, meter, metaphor, simile, word choice, alliteration, assonance, etc. (Faulkner, 2016, p. 90). Applied to performance, artistic concentration includes excellent attention to, and execution of, characterization, vocalic modulation, diction, energy level, facial expressions, stage presence, and emotional demonstration. Artistic concentration requires that the poet/performer researcher abides by (or artfully defies) aesthetic standards and forms.

The *My Life Matters* program, for example, exhibits a sophisticated level of artistic concentration that is found in *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* book (see APPENDIX B). These poems are woven into the *Our 'Ville* script, and many of them were performed live at the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance on August 5, 2016. After months of workshopping, dramaturgy, and rehearsal, these young people shared powerful poetry and performance in a public space in a way that connected profoundly to their audiences. One survey respondent (2016) noted the artistic concentration exhibited by the performance: "I loved the performance of all of the students. Each one demonstrated strength, courage, and talent […] I highly recommend taking this show on the road."

Bringing witnesses into spaces of excellent artistry produced by, for, and about Black youth calls them to address the positivity, dignity, and agency that they witness in the performance space. In turn, when a Black youth feels this ability to respond, he can boldly call out "Ago!" to a world from which he had previously felt disconnected, and expect an affirming response of "Ame!" Each performance of poetry or story on that August morning in 2016 at the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance, was a public address where Black youth were invited to share and diverse community members were invited to witness. After each sharing, the audience responded with smiles, leaning in, and looks of expectancy and appreciation. In obedience to their prompting, the witnesses responded to each performer with a collective "I hear you," and each performer knew that in that moment, in that space, they were heard. Their own positive, dignified, and agential identities were enacted through artistic excellence performed in that meeting room, turned stage.

The Talk, as an epic narrative poem in its own rite, has been lauded for its artistic concentration in the areas of performative writing, performative poetic inquiry, and performed autoethnography. Thus, *The Talk* stage created a space for witnesses to be simultaneously entertained, educated, and engaged. One audience member observed that in spite of the pain and heartbreak that he felt around the issues presented, the show was also "really entertaining." He noted that he felt a "tinge of guilt for being entertained in the midst of this whirlwind of dark and scary issues" (February 15, 2019 talk-back). In a 2018 survey, one witness cheered, "I was taken by how well written it is (I teach English) and appreciated how well integrated the multi-media was." One 2019 survey respondent theorized, "The beauty is the stories and the characterization-the details you put into developing the characters. That was different, and not expected." Rooted

in a place of pain and constriction (the front seat of my car), *The Talk* mobilized artistic concentration to transport audience and performer to a new space of hope and transformation.

The artistic concentration exhibited by *The Talk* also helped witnesses to re-enter worlds that they thought they already knew. For example, one survey respondent observed, "despite the fact that on the info level I am pretty familiar with this - it was still fresh and affecting due to superb acting, wide-ranging ideas tied together, and interweaving the family story with the broader cultural references" (2019). Another respondent (2019) appreciated the attention to historical detail that was lifted from this performative poetic inquiry:

> Mr. Kelly interwove personal history with broader, geographic history, situating his audience at times post-Civil War North Carolina, present-day New York, 1950s Texas, and the suburbs of California.

For this respondent, artistic concentration was a vital element of the Lugonesian "world travel" that he experienced during *The Talk* performance. Still other witnesses found themselves spell bound by a "masterful" performance that playfully and lovingly transported them from a place of ignorance to a world of persons, perspectives, positionalities, and life experiences that they had never before explored .

<u>Embodied Experience</u>

> Having an audience put wind under the kids' wings. Shyness melted away. Boldness and surety slowly rose. Smiles sparkled and eyes wide open captured the reflection of love and respect. This is what I envisioned! (*My Life Matters* field notes, August 5, 2016).

> It moved it from news stories and history and protests to one person's life. It moved it from my head to my bones. Change comes when you can feel another person's pain in your own bones (2019 survey, *The Talk*).

The embodied experience exhibited in the *Pipelines to Pathways* project created space within - and between - bodies where coming to voice and response-ability generated intentional practices of examining, expressing, and reframing our persons, perspectives, and positionalities.

In both *My Life Matters* and *The Talk*, the performers led by putting our skin in the game poetically and physically. We were able to harness what Peter Brook refers to as "the vehicle of drama" that drives performer and audience member by "flesh and blood" to those liminal spaces of possibility where "completely different laws are at work" (Brook, 1996, p. 17). Faulkner's (2016, 2020) *ars poetica* calls for research poetry that is evocative and alive, such that it "make[s] audiences feel *with*, rather than *about* a poem, to experience feelings and emotions in situ" (p. 88). Good poetry should enter our bodies and change our minds. Because performance is an embodied praxis, this criterion of embodied experience includes the poet/performer and the reader/audience. As witnesses, audience members and collaborators should be drawn into the poetic performance, body, mind and soul.

Chapter 4 is replete with stories of Black youth who felt affirmed and empowered by the performance process. We learned that simple repeatable rhythms formed by regular meetings, embodied acting games, rituals, call and response, collaborative writing, poetry, performative writing, and public performance could effectively create spaces where the positionalities and perspectives of Black youth could be examined, expressed, affirmed, and witnessed. As collaborators and ensemble performers, these youth also served as witnesses to one another as they examined and explored the intersections of identity, relationships, and power that framed their senses of self and society.

After the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance, a 66 year old White woman declared responded in a survey, "I am blown away by all the feeling exposed by this wonderful group of young people." From physically standing in our truth, to enacting patterns of call and response, to shedding (and sharing) tears with our witnesses, the performers forged routes to human connection and collective critical consciousness by "showing up and showing

out." This all began with weeks of embodied storytelling, acting games, call and response activities, and rehearsals where we challenged each other to embody our truths in ways that would most clearly express those truths in a public performance.

We began our August 5th, 2016 performance with an opening prayer, where we stood hand-in-hand in a circle. Shauna and I looked the kids in the eyes and told them how proud and pleased we were with them and their hard work. I led a prayer, then we breathed together and squeezed the hands we held. Smiling and searching the eyes of our comrades across the circle, we engaged in affirmation and witnessing before the public performance even began. We were embodying our collective power, rooted in our positive, dignified, agential identities.

The *My Life Matters* performance was a training ground for me. There I played Master of Ceremonies and storyteller. I was newly introducing the Joker within me. By the time I had dug into the praxis of reflexive poiesis that became *The Talk*, I had mastered the act of flinging my own body into spaces of vulnerability and uncertainty in order to connect with even the most fragile and introverted of collaborators and audience members. Below are some particularly poignant observations by witnesses of *The Talk* around the embodied experience that it presented to them:

> Embodiment of issues that I "knew" about is a different kind of understanding. The performance's physicality put the 'Talk' out in the world in motion (Survey respondent, 2018).

> I loved when you had us look at someone who didn't look like us and have 2 verbal exchanges. It's been a few days since I've spoken to someone who doesn't look like me (2019 survey).

> Possibly the first play I went to that ended with so many hugs among strangers, or as you called us, family (2019 survey).

After my witnesses and I have pressed ourselves into the discomfort of some of our ugliest truths, we "hug it out," maintain eye contact, and commit to holding and sharing physical space for each other going forward.

I learned this practice of inclusive embodiment with my youth collaborators at Find-A-Friend. These young people were less impressed by my artistic skills and much more drawn by my consistent embodied presence, affirmation, and witness. The more I committed my body to a particular acting warm-up, the more they pressed into that warm-up with playfulness and courage. When I shared a particular poem or memory that moved me to tears, these young people held space for me in my vulnerability. They leaned in, listened, and witnessed. Later, after I had expressed and enacted my own need for them to hold space for me in my vulnerability, they would lean on me for the same favor. After sharing some of our more vulnerable moments, we all needed some form of embodied affirmation. We welcomed hugs, hi-fives, winks, smiles, verbal affirmation, and sustained eye contact.

When you are addressed from another body, your human instinct is to respond. When that other body gives you space to respond, and promises to respond with love and affirmation to your response, you are empowered to respond whole heartedly. Then, your skin is in the game, and you are ever more responsible for this other, and they for you. You are furthermore responsible for enacting the positivity, dignity, and agency that you expressed in, and through, your response. Our embodied witness both affirms the other and holds them accountable. It is an act of love.

Leading with love, however, is a courageous act. Others are not required to love us back. They're not even required to witness our voicing. However, the potential benefits, especially in the lives of marginalized youth, are immeasurable. At the February 3, 2019 talk-back for *The*

Talk, Tami Pfeifer, Executive Director of Boomerang Youth, Inc. observed the importance of communicating with youth from a place of love:

> So, what do we communicate to our young people, and how does that translate to their actions and the way that they feel about themselves? Those are the kinds of things that we think about all the time. That expression of what you're living and what you're feeling is really important for us to start moving beyond that [criminalization and dehumanization of Black youth]. I think there's a lot of sadness and worry, and we need to sit in that. But, also, I think there's a lot of hope. And, Sonny brings that just by being there an interacting with our youths.

She recalls a young person leaving a self-expression workshop and reflecting, "I've never been in a place where I felt so much love." She suggests that we need to develop and protect "resilient spaces" for young people who are living in love starved realities.

Discovery/Surprise

> This project brought things out of these kids that I don't even think they knew were there! (Shauna Hopkins, personal communication, August 5, 2016).

> I liked all the literature/historic references because it brought it all into perspective, how this issue is the same issue that has been happening for centuries that is now happening with more blind eyes/closed doors, making it seem like it's no longer happening (2018 survey, *The Talk*).

The elements of discovery and surprise exhibited in the *Pipelines to Pathways* project empowered participants with new information by framing it in unusually engaging ways. The element of discovery, or surprise, in poetic research means that the poetry (performance) should "[teach] us to see something familiar in new ways or ways that may be surprising" (Faulkner, 2020, p. 145). Its language, rhythm, and movement should shift paradigms, adjust perspectives, and inform world views. Its lexicon is more accessible than academic. Its flow is more spontaneous and innovative than predictable and formulaic. Its expression is more dramatic than didactic.

At the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance several audience members marveled at the "new" perspectives, life experiences, and thoughts that the poetic performers presented to them live and in person. For example 30 year old White woman declared in her survey response, "What a powerful event! […] The two most powerful moments for me were 'They vs. We' and 'Music' (see APPENDIX B, pp. 405-406). I had never thought of John Legend's song in a greater cultural context as loving each other – and his solo voice singing these words to this community was touching. Amazing, empowered youth."

During performances of *The Talk,* witnesses were often startled to encounter historical figures, people whom they knew, or even themselves in my embodiment of the diverse persons, perspectives, and positionalities that have formed my own identities. One 2019 survey respondent noted, "Although I had heard the remarks by [Julian Shakespeare] Carr and [General Robert E.] Lee before, I had not heard them put into conversation--or materialized--as done by Mr. Kelly." As I restored behavior through performance, I also somehow restored real life experiences and people in the hearts and minds of my fellow witnesses. At a February 16, 2019 talk-back after *The Talk,* one woman remarked, "I saw my mother there" when I was performing my own mother.

The Afrocentric and dialogic nature of the performance process that produced *The Talk* allowed me to engage freely in the practice of Diasporic Spidering – weaving and re-weaving my body, mind, and soul through a continual cycle of surprise, discovery, and restored behavior. Through this process I grappled with my confusion around my own sense of identities, the tragic delimitations forced on the identities of my elders, and the hopeful possibilities for the identities of my children. Live performance of this process allowed me to share my own sense of surprise

and discovery with my audience members. In fact, one survey respondent noted, “Seeing ‘The Talk’ as a generational event was enlightening” (2019).

In the Aftermath of *The Talk* performance, I found that feedback from the surveys and talk-backs was replete with testimonials of audience members who left the experience with markedly more antiracist attitudes than they had before they entered the performance space. Participants of *The Talk* often developed a critical consciousness that helped us to move from the neutered position of “not racist” to the affirmative active position of antiracist. One 2019 survey respondent articulates this phenomenon: “I have been told in so many forms how not to harm. How not to express bias or tear down. This was a lesson on how to learn to love.” This conceptualization of love resonates with Oliver’s (2001) definition of love as “the ethical agency that motivates a move toward others, across differences” (p. 218).

With this love in heart, we took new looks at the “what is” of racism to imagine through the performative “as if,” both the “why” (tracing the roots of racism) and the “what if?” (imagining possibilities for antiracist futures). This allowed *The Talk* to restore behavior and facts in such a way as to renew and refract them in our minds and bodies. One 2019 survey clarifies the impact of this process: “While some of the information shared during the play was familiar to me, the emotional impact of the performance made me feel these truths in a way that I had not experienced before.” Another 2019 survey respondent observed, “I know statistics of racial differences with police contact and school suspensions, but this production allowed whites to feel the dangerous situations their black children can get into and how ubiquitous the dangerous situations are” (Survey, 2019).

Conditionality

> Ravon changed the way that I viewed how we should work with kids. It's now more important than ever that kids learn to value themselves and that they know that they matter and that they make a difference (S. Hopkins, personal communication, August 5, 2016).

> It made me more reflective of my own reality and gave a light by which I saw myself and my own history (2019 survey, *The Talk*).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project conditions our expression and witnessing of reality with a deeper understanding of the positions, perspectives and lived experiences of Black youth and their caregivers. Witnessing the performance of conditioned reality often led witnesses to honor and recognize the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency of Black youth. According to Faulkner's (2020) "point of view is conditional." The truth that is lifted from performative poetic inquiry is rooted in the positionalities and perspectives of the researchers/poets/performers. That truth is refracted, restored, and rehearsed in multivariate ways as it is told and re-told from (and to) unique persons presenting their own unique positionalities and perspectives. Through the use of metaphor, metonym, and the imaginary, poetry has the capacity to pull the cold hard facts of life into the liminal spaces for closer examination. The result is a deeper, more inclusive understanding of self, society, and others.

This conditionality was especially salient in the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance. The Black youth performers were between the ages of 11 and 18 and the majority of audience members were White people over the age of 30. Several audience members lauded this performance's invaluable contribution to their new "understanding" of the Black youth experience. Many expressed a deeper commitment to antiracist attitudes and actions. After the performance, for example, many audience members verbally committed to supporting Black youth in their communities by mentoring and pursuing other routes of engagement.

After I performed *The Talk* for my FAF collaborators on July 18, 2018, many of them expressed that witnessing my performance of my own conditional perspectives and positionalities gave them a sense of comfort in knowing that they were not alone in their American experience. One FAF teen expressed how she found connection and affirmation in *The Talk* with regard to dealing with incarcerated family members (in this case, her father is incarcerated, and has been since she was a small child)*:* "Your play reminded me of how my family is. People being in jail. People getting shot. Being in jail and not being able to see your family" (July 18, 2018 talk-back). Another, related to the precarity of criminalization that Black youth experience daily: "My cousin went to jail because he was playing football with his friends, and the football went into this White lady's yard, and they went to get it, and she called the cops on him. So, he spent the night in jail." Yet, another young lady found a connection to my mother's story of alienation and her own family's story of criminalization: "I think when you were talking about your mom. I mean, it's kind of the same thing. People usually talk about my mom because of her past, and they kind of hold it on me. People nowadays just see you for your past, and not what you do now."

After attending the March 11, 2018 performance at UNC Chapel Hill with her church group, one 16-year-old Black girl sent me an email reflecting on her experience:

> In July my family and I moved to North Carolina and I am a senior at a predominately white Christian school. Being at this school has made me feel like a minority for the first time in my life because I used to go to a predominately black public school in Virginia. Every day I feel like I'm having to fight against being a stereotype or passive racism(if there is such a thing). I just wanted to say that seeing your play taught me a lot not only about my race but also about myself. I cannot thank you enough for what you did for us. I definitely plan on reading the books referenced in the play (March 14, 2018 email).

These responses of Black youth witnesses reveal the power of the performative expression of perspectives and positionalities to affirm and empower the witnesses as well as the performer.

Another example of this created space occurred after the October 14, 2018 performance of *The Talk* at the Arts Council in Fayetteville, North Carolina. One of the *My Life Matters* collaborators/technicians/ panelists noted how surprised she was to have White people listen to her intently as she discussed her racialized experience in America during the talk-back. She noted that she normally didn't share her thoughts on racism with White people because she felt that she needed to be cautious her social interactions with them (October 14, 2018). Not only did *The Talk* create a space for her to feel comfortable and confident sharing this story publicly, but it also allowed her to frame it in a larger context that furthered our critical conversation around antiracist action.

Of course *The Talk* is replete with conditionality based upon my own autobiographical position and perspective. However, I found that my embodiment of other personas was also a significant entry point into world travel for many of my fellow witnesses. For example, addressing the "one drop" rule from Barack Obama's perspective brought some revelation to this survey respondent:

> I found myself wondering if our society could just as easily view Barack Obama as a white man with some blackness in him as easily as a black man with some whiteness in him, how different our views about race would be as I found myself surprised to consider Obama as a white man with some blackness in him; made me think how "toxic" (the chemical in the pool) being black is seen as such that we have to make any hint of it an 'other' (2019).

Another audience member was transported to 1962 when my "impression of Baldwin" gave him the sensation of being in the room with James Baldwin himself (2019 survey). More importantly, I am able to emotionally and intellectually tap into the spirit of James Baldwin because I know the desperation that we both have felt for seeing our beautiful Black boys grow up to be positive, dignified, and agential subjects in this world still framed by White supremacy's objectifying gaze.

I saw the potential for forging increased interest convergence through this process of conditional poetic performance. This "bringing people into the room" with me became a particularly puissant mode of connecting my/our stories to those of my witnesses. We often experienced simultaneous sensations of Diasporic Spidering as I brought a new persona to the stage and that persona quickened memories, aspirations, and frames of identity in our hearts and minds. For example, by embodying the stories of my mother - a Black woman who is phenotypically White – I introduced my mother to a White woman whom I'd never met before: "your mom's presence was especially helpful for me as a WW - to feel the weight of her situation resonate with my own" (2019 survey). This performance-centered approach to capturing and restoring the poetic rhythms of my own person, perspectives, and positionalities, found resonance in the bodies, minds, and souls of others in generative ways that I will never be able to fully name. We were called to deeper levels of response-ability that challenged us to reckon with a deeper sense of responsibility for antiracist attitudes and action.

Narrative Truth

> There's so much stuff that kids don't tell you because they're afraid of how you're going to react (Big Smoke, *My Life Matters* field notes, October 14, 2018).
>
> Deep honest emotion and careful crafted narrative through history and literature while also bringing in the very personal narrative (2019 survey).

The *Pipelines to Pathways* project creates a space for Black youth and their caregivers to claim their right to narrative truth in a way that magnifies their positivity, dignity, and agency. In the pursuit of lifting and sharing our stories, my collaborators and I also found pathways to collective empowerment. Faulkner's *ars poetica* demands of sound poetic inquiry, that "the facts as presented should ring true, regardless of whether events, feelings, emotions, and images

‘actually’ occurred” (Faulkner, 2016, p. 91). Above all, sound performative poetic research must present readers/audience members with narrative coherence and fidelity (Fisher, 1987, 1989)[68].

When audience members or readers buy into the narrative, they are conditioned for cognitive dissonance and critical consciousness that breeds transformative action. As we say in the *My Life Matters* circles, “No one cares how much you know, till they know how much you care!” In this context, my collaborators and I drew closer to one another as we learned to trust one another. We created a courageous resilient space where we could “keep it real” with one another. We then invited audience members into our space and challenged them to co-perform and witness with us according to our performatively designed front of coalescing rhythms, patterns, and flows. Through this process, we found strength in our vulnerability. We were able to lay claim to our own voices and self-production, reframe the narratives told about us, and call others into community, response-ability, and responsibility for antiracist attitudes and action.

I carried these lessons into my formulation and performances of *The Talk.* Honesty and vulnerability often came up in *The Talk* post-performance surveys as mutually inclusive components of the performance. For example, one 2018 survey respondent observed: “The honesty. How difficult t is in so many ways. I hadn't thought of to be black.” Because they connected to the coherence and fidelity of my narrative, they were able to receive my commentary on the precarity of inhabiting the Black body. Another respondent simply noted, that what they found most memorable, striking or interesting about the show was “Honesty, history, personal experiences” (2018). Another noted, “so moving, powerful, honest” (2018).

[68] I borrow this terminology from Communication Scholar Walter Fisher (1987, 1989) who argues that the capacity for our ubiquitous stories to become larger collective narratives that form our sense of social relationship, reality and identity, is based upon each story’s ability to achieve significant “coherence” and “fidelity.” Coherence and fidelity form the foundation of the “narrative logic” by which we generate and assess good reasons that inform and drive human attitudes, decisions and action. Coherence refers to the structural integrity of the story – the extent to which it makes sense and flows. Fidelity refers to the believability of the story – the extent to which the witness to the story considers it to be feasible founded in reality.

This narrative truth also called diverse people into my unique experience to transcend mere recognition or observation and to enter into a world traveling experience of sharing and communing together (c.f. Oliver's (2001) witnessing). For example, one White survey respondent declared, "He made us feel it in ways that I've been too privileged to feel before" (2019). My witnesses often spelunked into the deeper, uncomfortable truths that form the frames of Black Americans' identities: "Beautifully and powerfully written, spoken, and performed. Each part of the stories held the real truths that exist each and every day that people don't talk much about, except on a very surface level." Other witnesses expressed their experience with the narrative truth of *The Talk* in a variety of ways. For example in response to the question of what they found most striking, memorable or interesting about the performance, some of them observed:

> Really appreciate you being brave and honest (2019 survey).
>
> The truth throughout. The real emotion (2018 survey).
>
> The passion, connection with audience the transparency of the speaker and the openness of the play (2018 survey).
>
> The emotion presented. It was true and from the heart (2018).
>
> The raw honesty of Mr. Kelly's storytelling (2018).
>
> Sonny Kelly's heartfelt performance is powerful. His pain is palpable. His message is uplifting. Every young person in America needs to see this play (2019 survey).

One of the *My Life Matters* collaborators, a 15 year-old Black female, articulated the connective and transformative power that comes from sharing narrative truth at the July 18, 2018 *The Talk* talk-back: "I liked the way you interacted with the audience and their reaction to most of it, and how at the end everybody had input on it, and nobody really judged." The

PROFESSOR re-articulates this same sentiment in *The Talk:* "Your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth, and together, they inform our family's truth" (APPENDIX C, Act II, Scene 3).

Transformation

> I don't see how you can get emotional if you're not going to solve the problem or do anything about it. What's the point of putting all of your energy to explain something and nobody's like conversating it or understanding anything you're saying. You can have an opinion, but for your opinion to be critically valid, you have to do something about it. You can even start with little things. It doesn't matter what it is. (Thunda, a *My Life Matters* collaborator and technician, after the October 14, 2018 performance of *The Talk*)

> The depth of personification and feeling in this performance is something I hope to infuse in conversations with others (2019 survey, *The Talk*).

The work of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project has created spaces, generated intentional practices, and facilitated empowerment toward antiracist transformation. According to *ars poetica,* sound performative poetic inquiry should *do* something in the world. It should bring about changed minds, changed conversations and changed social conditions. Faulkner (2016) argues that "poetry should transform by providing new insight, giving perspective, or advocating for social change" (p. 91). Boal (1995) argues that performance is a "rehearsal for revolution." In other words, the goal is not for readers and audience members to sit back, relax, and enjoy the aesthetic experience. The goal is that the work inspires them to lean in, engage, and commit to transformative consciousness, conversations and courses of action.

For example, one Black woman in her early 60's noted in a survey after the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance on August 5, 2016, "These kids have inspired me to become even more active in my community, inspiring others!!" A White woman in her early 60's declared in her survey, "This should continue and grow! It can change Fayetteville and maybe even the world!" Another survey respondent cried for "more funding," because "it matters to our community." One respondent celebrated the artistry and confidence of the

performers, then she reflected, “More importantly, they knew the adults had their backs!” Part of our transformation toward a more antiracist society, is to create spaces of resilience, courage, and love where Black youth know by our parlance, our policies, and our presence that we have their backs.

In the Aftermath of the August 5, 2016 *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance, my collaborators and I were abuzz with confidence, pride, and hope. The mere act of publicly coming to voice for a diverse public audience was a tremendous victory for us. Communication scholar Lawrence Rosenfeld, who attended the performance, observed in his survey: “The proof is in the success – not just the college grads, but the skills and CONFIDENCE engendered. These ‘youths’ are learning important things about themselves and the power of listening and being heard.” All 15 (n=15) youth participants completed the post-performance survey. 13 of the youth felt that their participation in the My Life Matters project strongly increased their ability to change things around them for the better (the other two felt that it “slightly increased”). 13 of the youth felt that My Life Matters strongly increased their ability to express themselves (two felt that it “slightly increased”). 11 youth participants indicated that they strongly enjoyed the My Life Matters self expression workshops (four indicated that they “slightly enjoyed” them). 14 youth indicated that they had a lot of hope that this performance will make a positive difference in their community (one indicated “a little” hope).

The youth found a positive and healthy way to invest in themselves and their community through this performance. One, youth observed, “The kids and staff both put in a lot of work. Each poem/song was unique in all ways possible. Each youth had different characteristics.” Another young man shared his personal breakthrough from silence: “I feel that a lot of this really help me stop being shy. I got over being shy. I feel really better at being myself.” Of note, this

young man seriously contemplated not performing due to his shyness and insecurity. This experience taught him the power of positive front management as a means of coming to voice courageously through performance. The mere presence of a large crowd of loving witnesses inspired one young rapper to declare, “everyone showed my life matters.” Another poet re-affirmed the power of belonging and relationships in affirming the positive, dignified, agential selves of Black youth: “What I learned was my life matters and I still have something to work for that is my friends from FAF and my community.” Another youth declared, “I learned how to love and respect and be proud of who I am.” The resilient and courageous space for belonging that this project created is articulated by this young poetess, “Well, I like that you can be yourself and you don’t have to worry about if someone going to like you or not everybody have love and respect for you!” These are the foundations of the kinds of launching pads Black youth need to lift off from the reality of pipelines into the infinite possibilities of pathways .

Audience members, too were inspired and challenged. Of the 50 audience members in attendance 22 completed the post-performance survey for audience members. All but one survey respondent (n=21) agreed that the performance was helpful to the community. All but two survey respondents (n=20) strongly agreed that the *My Life Matters* project inspired them to make positive change in their community and that they had “a lot” of hope that that their participation in the performance would make a positive difference in the community. One 56 year old White woman cheered, “Very proud to see our future leaders.” This statement declares a sense of interest convergence and desire for inclusion, both of which are required to shift dominant narratives, policies and protocols in the way of antiracism. Two adults who indicated that they were family members of Ravon Jordan felt affirmed in their own insistence that “his life matters” in spite of the ever changing news cycles and apparent fungibility of young Black bodies in

America's prison/murder/violence/crime mills. Another survey respondent was so inspired by these Black youth's voices that she pled, "Please offer at every Parks & Rec Center all over Cumberland County because ever life matters. Continue to fund the programs."

In 2017, although we were not able to produce another live performance, 11 youth and I worked together for four months to write and rehearse the play *Our 'Ville.* All 11 youth took the project final service. Of these 11 participants, nine reported that the *My Life Matters* project slightly increased their ability to change things around them for the better (two reported that *My Life Matters* strongly increased it). Seven youth indicated that *My Life Matters* slightly increased their ability to express themselves (three indicated that *My Life Matters* strongly increased it and one youth indicated that they experienced no change). Six youth indicated that they slightly enjoyed the *My Life Matters* workshops (5 indicated that they strongly enjoyed the *My Life Matters* workshops). Seven youth indicated that they slightly enjoyed the Photovoice process (3 indicated that they strongly enjoyed it and one indicated that he disliked it). This tepid response makes since, due to the fact that the more rigid requirements for the Photovoice process often conflicted with the ever-changing schedule of FAF Summer Achievement Camp and the inconsistent attendance of youth throughout the summer.

Photovoice sessions tended to be less about fun and connection and more about completion. These youth experience that imbalance on a regular basis in the form of standardized tests, school discipline protocols, and the criminal justice system. Five youth strongly enjoyed the process of writing and rehearsing the play (four youth slightly enjoyed it, one youth slightly disliked it, and one youth disliked it). Collaborative writing and ensemble performance can be challenging. Youth were asked to give up leisure time and fun activities to attend rehearsals. Our investment of time and energy was certainly a cause for mourning and disappointment when we

learned that we would not be able to perform the play *Our 'Ville* for a live audience, due to logistical and time limitations.

However, we grew intellectually and emotionally as team members, writers, and performers. Three students indicated that they thought the play rehearsal process was "fun." One indicated that he would have preferred more warm up games. One young lady shared, "I liked how I found other people that feel the same way I do." Another youth who indicated that he slightly disliked the writing and rehearsing process noted, "I liked the fact that we talked about what really gets to us and then we try to express our feelings." He further indicated, "I would like to do more group things." This trend indicates to me that the magic of this performance-centered mode of artistry, analysis, and activism is in the simple repeatable rhythms that we set with check in's, warm ups, games, and the 3D process.

The live performance itself is also a crucial means of engaging that enacted frame of identity. The 2017 *My Life Matters* participants who had experienced the empowerment of the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* performance in 2016 were the most disappointed in the lack of live performance opportunity in 2017. They had experienced first-hand the power of coming to voice in way that coalesced all four frames of their identity (personal – a person worthy of being heard; enacted – a person who performs; relational – a person who performs as a team/family for a witness of family members and friends; and communal – a person who is actively reframing and reclaiming Blackness and youth for herself and her community).

I recall the presence of the Mayor of Fayetteville, Mayor Nat Robertson (who is incidentally a wealthy White man), at the *Ravon Jordan My Life Matters* presentation on August 5, 2016. After the performance, he stayed behind to give each child a high five, learn their names and take pictures with them. He then followed up with me to coordinate a moment at the

September 12, 2016 City Council meeting, where three young adolescent girls were literally given the proverbial mic to share their hearts. He didn't just put them up for the optics of it. He took the time to ask their names and what they wanted to be when they grew up. He even encouraged Council members and attendees to visit the FAF program and get involved. In that moment, those three girls looked around the room from the caregivers, peers, and other community members with whom I sat, to the high-class, mostly White City Council members in their high-back black leather seats. They were invited by a community to share their voices before a loving witness. As they sang, danced, and spoke their original poetry, I personally saw a transformation in those girls that day. Shyness melted away as boldness rose from the souls of their feet to the crowns of their heads. Nervousness was converted to electric energy. Eyes that once averted themselves to fend off a myriad of face threats, lifted and absorbed the gaze of a loving witness. They in turn sang a song of encouragement and inspiration for the audience as they engaged their witness with eye contact and hopeful expectant smiles – as if to say, "I honor your witness and I return the affirmation and honor to you." This is what Oliver (2001) refers to as the "infinite response-ability of witnessing" (p. 17). Not only were these Black youth empowered and encouraged, but their embodied coming to voice enacted a publicly performed resistance of the dominant narratives that framed them as criminal, antisocial, animal-like, "at risk," etc.

Audience feed-back from *The Talk* is replete with reports of renewed antiracist commitments, paradigm shifts, and acknowledgements of newly apprehended levels of critical consciousness. For example, one survey respondent noted, "It let me see how I can provoke change and hopefully change things for the greater good" (2019). For another respondent, this performance "created a space for me to re-question identity and race" (2019). Playwright and

performer Mike Wiley applauded the transformative power of *The Talk* as an innovative approach to racial equity training:

> This production is a testament to what theater can do - what the arts can do. I know that people spoken to the power of racial equity training. Yes, it's powerful, but it's two dimensional. This, what theater, what seeing you up there sharing your emotions, sharing your life, laying it all out there for all of these folks to see, and experience, and feel, and walk in your shoes momentarily, does more than racial equity training can ever do. So I challenge the people in this room to see this kind of theater - to support and produce this kind of theater that is life changing" (February 17, 2019 talk-back).

As such, *The Talk* performs as an act of performative activism.

The post-performance talk-backs we conducted with *The Talk* were especially generative of new ideas and plans of action toward social transformation (i.e. emerging/transforming stories). Of these talk-backs one survey respondent observed:

> While I was aware of many of the issues addressed in the event, this mode of communication - both the play and the discussion afterwards - makes it personal and immediate and reminds me of the need to take more action - the large social and structural changes that are needed are somewhat daunting, but we can all have impact through every interpersonal interaction we have each day. And I will be telling all my friends to go see this play! (2019)

In addition to the opportunities for activism that my fellow panelists and I presented after every performance, many audience members developed their own plans for transformation. For example, one survey respondent, who is a teacher, expressed his commitment to transformative action: "ahead trying to make my classroom a place where are can learn and can feel confident to confront issue, privilege, and supremacy. But this hammered it home in a meaningful way" (2019). This performance-centered approach to transformation was so relevant and impactful for one 17 year-old Black youth audience member that he had already planned his approach to "The Talk" with his future children: "With my son, we going to have a totally different talk. I'm going to bring him to one of your plays and he's going to watch it" (July 18, 2018 talk-back).

During the summer of 2018, I was able to merge the two spheres of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project when I performed *The Talk* for 25 teens (21 were from FAF and four adolescent males came the Fayetteville Cumberland Youth Council (FCYC) - another youth serving organization) on July 18, 2018. Tyshica Tucker, the adult in charge of the FCYC youth noticed that one boy who has been really acting out at school and at home was surprisingly focused during the performance. He sat on the front row, leaning in and engaged the entire time. Another FCYC teen sat in the back with ear buds on, but she noticed that he was really engaged and participated in the discussion afterward. Tucker observed that it helped to have a play where the youth can see "a little piece of themselves presented." Ralph, one of the boys who had the most to say at the end of the show, was a FCYC participant as well. After performing the 70-minute version of *The Talk*, I led a 50-minute talk-back using the Photovoice S-H-O-W-E-D steps to get to the core of what the show meant to the youth. That was very helpful. I audio recorded about 50 minutes of discussion.

Talk-backs generated an overt consciousness of the six tenets of CRT, as is articulated in the curated quotes from Black youth below:

1. Race is a social construct.

> Focus on me and my eyes. Don't focus on my color. Look in my eyes and see exactly what I can do. Don't try to judge me because of where I come from, or my background, or my record. Focus on what I can do right now? (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 13 year-old female)

> Your play basically brought thoughts to people and it showed that stuff really is going on. When we say that Black Lives Matter, it's not that we're saying that all lives don't matter. It's just that we're putting out that we matter too (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 15 year-old Black female)

2. American racism is systemic.

> It made me feel more negative because I knew about the past and everything, but

the way you did it, it was like I could see more. It was personal experience from you and what you went through. So, it made more of a negative reaction, because it was just like, ‘wow.’ (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 15 year-old Black female)

I wish that people don't just rely on the past and what the world was. I feel like that's what most teachers do. Most teachers are like, since most Black people didn't have the money to go to school and have an education, they don't rely on Black young ladies and boys to pass their grades. I feel like that's a big part too. Like, Black people need to have a part in something - need to have a say in something (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 14 year-old Black female).

3. Storytelling is a useful tool for disrupting and dismantling racism.

The most important part of the play for one young man was "Hearing people's stories. Because of my height, I thought I was the only one that had it bad, bad; or because of my darker skin tone, I thought I was the only one who had it bad. I realized it's other ones like me - a little lighter than me (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 17 year-old Black male)

[*The Talk]* can help other people so they can understand how we understand a lot of stuff" (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 12 year-old Black male)

4. A liberal, top-down approach to racism causes slow change, if any.

Society really hasn't changed over time because some of the stuff that you was talking about is still going on (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 16 year-old Black female)

5. Antiracist transformation only happens when the privileged perceive an interest convergence between their welfare and antiracism.

When it comes to this stuff, people getting hurt. Sometimes it feel like everything goes back to normal. Like people don't care no more. Like if it happened to them, that's when they gonna care. Some people don't care what's going on in this world (July 18, 2018, 16 year-old Black male).

It can impact the non-racist White people to tell the racist White people to be respectful of us and treat us all as one and equally, so we can all come together in the world and live peacefully and equally (June 15, 2018 Sterling Kelly, personal communication).

6. An intersectional approach to racial inequity generates a deeper and more useful understanding of racism’s nature and impact.

> But, right now I'm still a little kid. People don't expect me to be in gangs or have access to guns and stuff. So, it doesn't really apply to me now, but later, it will probably be important for me (Sterling Kelly, personal communication, June 15, 2018). He considers here the intersections of age and race.
>
> Kalief Browder didn't have a lot chance because his family didn't have money. I think a lot of African American families don't have chances and we need to change that (July 18, 2018 talk-back, 12 year-old Black male). He considers here the intersections of wealth and race.

Here are a few of the insights that my youth collaborators shared with me with regard to the routes of empowerment that they found in *The Talk:*

> ‘Grandma’s Letter to Peanut During his Freshman Year’] shows that if you put your heart and mind to it you can accomplish anything. So he proved to the whole world that even though you Black, you still can make a change (16 year-old Black male)
>
> I felt encouraged by the stories you was telling - how different people, how they was treated back in the days and stuff like that (16 year-old Black male).
>
> I feel like this show can help us to become stronger together and stand up for ourselves and just be closer together (14 year-old Black female).
>
> Whenever you were describing about don't let no one disrespect you. Whenever the guy was about to clean the guy's shoes, and he was about to pat his head, but he pulled away and walked away. He didn't let him disrespect him like that (13 year-old Black female).
>
> I was the sound person. If the show didn’t have sound then it wouldn’t have as big an impact on the people […] I felt valued (16 year-old Afro-Latina).
>
> It was fun being around people that you know that would help you out […] We all help each other and we have each other's back (16 year-old Black female).
>
> I really enjoyed being on the team with somebody I look up to […] I feel special (17 year-old Black male).
>
> It let me know that I can tell my story and encourage others to know that you can have a voice too (15 year-old Black female).
>
> It gave me inspiration to last the rest of my life. It inspired me as a writer and as a singer. When I write another poem, I'll definitely use *The Talk* as an example. (13 year-old Black female).

Perhaps the most poignant point of empowerment that I heard from Black youth who reflected on *The Talk* came in the words of my own son. I consider the closing scene where SONNY pleads with STERLING to be the "best" – "the smartest, kindest, most attentive, most obedient" student in his classroom. Replaying this restored behavior in my body and mind, I am overwhelmed by the delimiting pipeline of unrealistic and unfair expectations that these words might have placed over my precious childe. The question I posed to Sterling here is what he would change about *The Talk.* He responded:

> I wouldn't change anything, but I would add - It's not just that you're gonna be called stupid. It's not just that you're gonna be judged, but that you have to - you don't have the be the best, but you have to be careful and try your best. You don't have to be the very best. Because YOU said I have to be the very best, but maybe, like - you can do all things through Christ that strengthens you, but maybe your level is not 'the best,' but maybe you're trying your best.

These words, voiced from a place of critical consciousness, positive self-concept express how *The Talk* experience as a whole has empowered Sterling beyond my own paternal shortcomings. While I may have framed and claimed his identity with stock stories of Black boys having to work harder and expect less, this Black youth took in the whole picture, remixed it and recovered a deeper sense of positivity, dignity, and agency that I could not have designed alone.

I also found that *The Talk* became a catalyst for further youth empowerment when we connected it to *My Life Matters.* Four youth *My Life Matters* collaborators and I experienced the fruits of this kind of empowerment as they served as my technical team at the July 18, 2018 performance. Three of these four served as technicians and panelists at the two October 14, 2018 performances in Fayetteville, and at an August 1, 2019 performance for the Southeast Institute for Group and Family Therapy's 50th Conference held in Raleigh, North Carolina. For all three performances, I sat on a panel with these two 16 year-old Black females and one 17 year-old Black male. We fielded questions, shared our stories, and witnessed the stories of audience

members for 30 to 90 minutes at each event. These youth who are operating as my technicians often don't fit in – or don't feel like they fit in – and, yet we all continually grew closer to one another over the course of three summers. All three of them have written poetry that appears in *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters* project. Two of them participated in the 2017 Photovoice project. Connecting these prolific collaborators to *The Talk* has empowered them a greater sense of purpose and agency.

On October 14, I participated in my first ever post-performance talk-backs with Black youth on the panel with me. After a few back-and-forth volleys of thoughts, questions and answers with the audience, one of the *My Life Matters* collaborators asked me for permission to speak. He talked about a time when several police cars pulled up to him near a Waffle House at age 13. They pulled guns and pointed them at him. When they realized he wasn't their guy, they got into their cars and left without so much as an apology. With tears running down his face, this 17 year-old young man directly addressed an audience of mostly White people, "Can you imagine how scared I felt? I was just a kid, and you pullin' guns on me?" It is no wonder that he has harbored negative feelings toward police officers for years.

It wasn't until he met Officer James (the School Resource Officer at his high school) that he began to see police officers as humans and helpers. Officer James asked him one day, "Why don't you like me?" The young man didn't say much to that question. Later, Officer James pulled the young man out of his class and asked him, "What happened to you? Tell me about your experiences with cops." The young man reluctantly began to share, and as he did, he realized that this was the first time that a police officer had ever asked him an honest question and took the time to really listen to his answer. He developed a friendship with Officer James that didn't make him trust all police officers, but it helped him to acknowledge the fact that all

cops aren't bad or oppressive. I usually lead with this concealed story to break the ice with law enforcement officers and authority figures in my diversity and inclusion classes and spaces.

Later we addressed the challenges that all three of my youth technicians/panelists faced with living in neighborhoods where violence and crime were ubiquitous and persistent. One audience member asked why some people don't call the police when they need help. One of my visual technicians, a 16 year-old female quickly retorted, "Snitches get thrown in ditches." She argued that in her neighborhood they never call the cops because people don't want to get hurt by the people they snitched on, and the cops rarely get anything done. She noted that there are gunshots in her neighborhood every night. I asked her how much she sleeps at night, and she responded, "I don't." When I asked her about college, she said that she knows she is going for sure. I asked her where, and she made it clear that she wants to be local to help to take care of her sisters and mother (October 14, 2018).

I have found that Black youth desire to be empowered, but many of them are not sure of how to begin the process. A praxis of culturally relevant pedagogy, where students' voices, stories, ancestral heritages, positionalities, and perspectives are highlighted, invited, and lovingly witnessed can offer this kind of empowerment. In addition to my observations in Chapter 4 about the simple, repeatable rhythms that we created with the *My Life Matters* project, I present some poignant examples of culturally relevant pedagogy here that were lifted during *My Life Matters* workshops and *The Talk* talk-backs.

There are three things I always ask audience members to do at the close of each talk-back for *The Talk*: (1) Have a conversation with someone who looks, lives or loves differently from you today, (2) Choose some action that you will take to be a part of a more antiracist and equitable world, and (3) Get the word out about this show and the importance of this kind of

community dialogue. I have observed time and time again, people leaving the theater engaged in active conversations with strangers who appear to look, live, and/or love differently than they do. I have observed *The Talk* experience generate antiracist activism on an individual, institutional, and community level. This work, and it's products answer Oliver's (2001) question: "how can we witness and bear witness to oppression, domination, subordination, enslavement, and torture in ways that open up the possibility of a more humane and ethical future beyond violence?" (p. 18).

Intentional Practices to Reframe and Reclaim Black Youth Identities

Our simultaneous commitment to artistic concentration, embodied experience, discovery & surprise, conditionality, narrative truth, and transformation throughout the *Pipelines to Pathways* project has generated several intentional practices for Black youth and their community members to examine, express, and reframe our persons, perspectives, and positionalities. For example:

- The 3D or 3T model (Display, Dialogue, Develop or Tell, Talk, Transfer) of performance-centered youth engagement. We were able to effectively apply this method of critical examination and expression to the critical analysis of poetry, prose, photography, spoken word, and music videos as well. These diverse objects of analysis served as the Display/Tell step of the 3D/3T model - showing the youth an example of artistic self-expression around difficult issues. We spent most of our time (30 to 80 minutes) together on the Dialogue/Talk portion, walking through the steps of SHOWED, as applied to the object of analysis. During this step, most of the youth felt comfortable sharing their perspectives and positionalities, which often included some strong emotions and insights. Finally, the Develop/Transfer step is where we as

participants pulled from the first two steps to create new forms of expression collaboratively and individually. This step could last anywhere from ten minutes to several weeks, depending upon the scale of project we decided to develop. For example, we collaboratively developed the play *Our Ville* over the course of one month, based upon a series of applications of the 3D/3T as applied to photography, poetry, prose, and music videos. The result was a rich full-length play that expresses the stories, feelings, and insights that we gleaned from the 3D/3T process.

- The Modified SHOWED method was effectively applied to poetry, live performance, music videos and spoken word videos was tremendously helpful during the Dialogue/Talk step of 3D/3T. Although the SHOWED method was designed to engage and examine photography, we found it to be an effective tool for engaging and examining multiple modes of expression.
- The Photovoice process, in particular represents a uniquely performative approach to YPAR that should be further developed and mobilized for this work. After having conducted one full summer session of Photovoice for *My Life Matters*, my collaborators and I had developed the following recommendations for future iterations of Photovoice to be successful in this work of reframing and reclaiming Black youth identities:
    - Photovoice groups consist of no more than 12 participants.
    - Disposable cameras are useful only if you have 7 to 10 days for film to be developed and ample funds to pay for weekly film development.
    - Digital cameras worked well. I only had four, and I was able to pass them around to different youth.

- The youth didn't seem very motivated to take quality pictures. Don't focus on the "quality" of the product (i.e. exposure, aperture, angle, lighting, etc.), but rather focus on the meaning making process that is at play in the taking and presenting of the photos.
- Asking youth to take pictures on their cell phones was not effective. No one took me up on that offer when I presented it three weeks into the six-week project. However, if this option is stated up front, it may be useful for some groups.
- A separate closed in space to conduct Photovoice is crucial. The fact that we have had to share space with other teens caused too much inconsistency, lack of focus, and distraction.
- A regular time and day to meet is crucial. Between schedule changes for camp (i.e. activity windows opening and closing, causing them to shift times), inconsistent attendance at workshops/sessions, and my own life emergencies and scheduling conflicts, it didn't work out. So, life happens, and the best you can do to schedule regular predictable meeting times, the better the Photovoice sessions will go. You should also designate alternative session leaders for back up.
- We often felt rushed, and this curbed our creativity and problem solving. Photovoice sessions require at least one full hour (preferably two hours) to fully process the information and ideas shared. At times we had to split one session into several minutes so as to avoid disrupting the dynamic flow of summer camp activities.

    - We found that using large writing boards and sheets was useful to review the key points. This helped to establish continuity and flow.

- The 3S Collaborative performative writing method was exemplified in Chapter 4. This approach entails two or more collaborators joining forces on their own volition, or at the suggestion of a third collaborator who assesses that their similar or complementary styles, interests, or themes have the potential to enhance their self-expression work. The first step is to Share. The two collaborators should spend time sharing their current work and ideas with one another (one at a time). This usually works best when at least one collaborator has an unfinished project or undeveloped idea that could use some collaborative help. The next step is for the collaborators to Synthesize their work and ideas. During this step it is useful for a facilitator to review poetic devices, salient themes, and personal style choices that can prime the pump of creative juices and get the collaborators on track toward a mutually desired end. Finally, the collaborators will Sharpen their piece by sharing it with the larger group of collaborators who will share affirmation and constructive feedback (what makes sense/works in this piece? What doesn't? How can we enhance it to take it to the "next level"? The poem "I Want More" was a direct product of the 3S method of poetic collaboration.
- Haiku starters. After a check-in and warm up, guiding collaborators to write haikus based upon a simple prompt is helpful to get the creative juices flowing. This activity is simple, accessible, and can take as little as ten minutes. For those poets who are comfortable and willing with this, have them pass their haiku to another collaborator to read out loud. Ask the poet to perform as a director, guiding the reader to endow

the haiku reading with the intended inflection, emphasis, and emotional indexing. The facilitator/leader/co-learner should always be prepared to perform any of the haikus if there are not enough volunteer readers. This process often results in a series of haikus that can be joined together to make one larger poem, like "Violence Makes Me Feel" song referenced in Chapter 4.

- Critical post-performance talk-backs. The post-performance talk-back is a typical artifact of modern theater, wherein audience members tend to focus on expressing their appreciation and curiosity about the aesthetic elements of the performance. The goal here is to transform it into a discursive and embodied space where the persons, positionalities, and perspectives of Black youth and their caregivers can be examined, expressed, affirmed, and witnessed. The moderator or leader of the talk-back (often the main performer) should open the session by previewing the fact that their purpose is to get the audience and performers engaged in critical dialogue around pressing issues in this community. Then, the moderator should ask for panel members and one to two audience members to share what they found most memorable, striking, or interesting about the performance. This portion is helpful to allow audience members to perform the roles that they typically perform during conventional talk-backs. It should not take longer than 1/3 of your total time allotted. The moderator should take note of points that are made during this portion that can be mobilized toward critical dialogue. The panelists should be briefed before the performance that we desire for them to share their expertise and insights in ways that will feed and drive critical antiracist dialogue. As the moderator guides the witnesses and performers toward critical antiracist dialogue, she should proceed with this question in mind (it should be

posed directly or indirectly to performers, panelists, and audience members): What do we need to be talking about in *this* community. Finally, the talk-back should always close with at least there potential courses of antiracist action that participants can implement immediately. After *The Talk,* I prompted participants to: (1) meet and engage some stranger in the room who does not look, live, or love like them before they leave, (2) Continue this critical dialogue with someone else in your sphere of influence, and (3) Choose at least one youth-serving antiracist agency to support with your time, talent, or treasure (I always share the organization's contact information)

- Include a reading list of antiracist literature for participants to take home and study. Countless audience members requested a reading list from me, and I have refined a robust one for *The Talk* in order to meet this request.

Performance as Antiracist Activism

In many ways, adumbrated above, the performance process of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project has served as antiracist activism. It has also effectively empowered individuals, agencies, and communities to engage in antiracist attitudes and actions. The opportunities for this performance-centered work to inspire and enliven diverse communities toward antiracist conversations, consciousness, and courses of action continue to abound. Below are some examples of how the *Pipelines to Pathways* project has inspired and facilitated antiracist activism by, and for Black youth at the individual, institutional, and community levels.

Participants Empowered to Engage in Antiracist Attitudes and Actions

In response to the survey question "In what ways will this experience impact your future conversations and actions?," many survey respondents listed particular antiracist actions that they planned to take after being inspired by *The Talk* experience. For example:

> It provided a ‘frame’ for the work I as a white person need to be doing with other white people. We need to have ‘the talk’ among ourselves - actually an ongoing series of talks - to answer questions along the lines of ‘why do white people fear black men?’ and how do we make fundamental changes […]? (2018)
>
> Reaffirmed my need to remain committed to be a disrupter and an advocate for students of color (2018).
>
> I want to read! I want to read so much black literature (2019).
>
> I brought my 12 year old and 10 year old because I don't have to have the same talk with them, but now we have some ground to work from (2019).
>
> It makes me realize that I need to talk with my kids about the fact that other families must have the talk and why it is important that they are aware and allies (2018).
>
> My thoughts on black youth in America are being that voice and leader for them. Talking to them, educating them and loving on them (2018).
>
> It made me think of the companion talks that white parents should have with our children to make clear the different experience their friends of color may have and how to ease the struggle (and their responsibility to do so) (2019).
>
> It inspired me to be a more active participant of discussions regarding my experiences and more willing to listen to the other side (2019).
>
> Instead of shutting myself off and cutting people who are different from me, I will now communicate and express myself as well as learn from others (2018)
>
> I will make a conscious decision to "talk" more to my grand children and their peers (2019 survey).
>
> [I plan to] connect with Boomerang Youth and make sure I am creating loving spaces for black youth (2019 survey).
>
> This show helped my principal to decide to start an equity club at my school and she asked me to be a member (April 5, 2018 email from a Black youth male to *The Talk*).

This is a small selection of the hundreds individuals who have committed to antiracist action.

The lessons I have learned and notoriety I have gained from *My Life Matters* and *The Talk* have equipped me to conduct performances, antiracist community conversations, guest lectures, key note addresses, and workshops around the nation. Most recently, I have conducted

trainings and keynote addresses around storytelling for social transformation at UNC Chapel Hill's Maternal and Child Health Workforce Center training, July 12, 2019 and the Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs National Title V Program Training, October 24, 2019. I have been invited to continue this training with public health programs in Boston, Massachusetts and Wilmington, Delaware in 2020. The Association of Maternal and Child Health Programs has invited me to speak and participate on a panel entitled "Inside a Teen's Mind: Empower Youth, Empower You" on March 24, 2020. I have also conducted guest lectures for future educators, scholars, and performers at Fayetteville State University and Syracuse University in 2020.

Talking *The Talk* in Fayetteville, North Carolina

Funded by Graduate Student Humanities for the Public Good Initiative Summer Award (from the Humanities for the Public Good Initiative, College of Arts & Sciences, UNC Chapel Hill), The Talking *TheTalk* project mobilized *The Talk* performance toward positive change in diverse local communities. The Talking *The Talk* project was designed to produce three community performances and post-performance community conversations (talk-backs) during the summer and fall of 2018. In June of 2018, I attended the FAF Advisory Council meeting where three Council members and I worked with the FAF Director, Shauna Hopkins to consider how we could be more useful to the FAF team. Shauna said that she needed us to help with fundraising, organizing an annual event in August, and organizing a city-wide youth conference in January or February. I suggested that this Talking *The Talk* project be a part of this process.

Ms. Hopkins guided me in the process of recruiting four youth to serve on my technical team, as well as procuring a venue and audience for the July 18, 2018 youth show. As described above, I performed *The Talk* for 25 teens from Cumberland County in a space shared by FAF and the FCYC. These youth and I engaged in a 45 minute post-show discussion that allowed me

to encourage them while learning about the issues that they find most pressing and relevant in their lives. Later, I worked with the Fayetteville Cumberland County Arts Council outreach team, consisting of Adrienne Trego and Ashanti Bennett, to market and produce two performances and community talk-backs on October 14, 2018. Along with three FAF teens who served as my technical team and co-panelists, I performed for almost 40 community members and engaged them in post-show talk-backs. These performances also served as fund and awareness raisers for FAF's artistic enrichment efforts. We garnered $142 in donations. These funds, in turn, were used to print the first ten copies of *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters* poetry book that we distributed to all youth whose poetry appear in the book. I am currently working with Ms. Hopkins to publish the book professionally and use the funds to support programming for marginalized youth in Cumberland County, North Carolina.

Walking *The Talk* at Broughton High School in Raleigh, North Carolina

Figure 11. Broughton H.S. Talking *The Talk* board, November 2019

After hearing of *The Talk*, Dr. Elena Ashburn, the principal of Broughton High School invited me to perform *The Talk* for a school-wide teacher training on October 9, 2019. This performance for over 140 teachers and an additional 30 to 40 community members and youth gave birth to an antiracist movement aimed at developing a more culturally relevant, inclusive and equitable environment at the school. By November, Broughton High School administrators

were facilitating a series of "Walking *The Talk"* workshops. They started by reviewing the lessons learned from the October 9th performance.

By mid-December, 2019, the Assistant Principal, Michael "Mac" MacGovern reported to me that, in subsequent workshops all Broughton High School teachers were challenged to discuss the most pressing issues of inequity on the campus. Everyone was then challenged to draft a list of things that they would start doing in their classrooms and work spaces to advocate for antiracism. They listed their commitments prominently on a board posted in the teachers' lounge. Teachers committed to such antiracists practices as adding more authors of color to their curricula, teaching subjugated narratives in the context of their courses, intentionally checking their own biases as they strive to treat and serve all of their students equitably, learning the proper pronunciation of their students' names, and challenging their students of color to pursue honors courses.

Figure 12. Broughton H.S. Walking *The Talk* board, December, 2019

Boomerang Youth, Inc. in Chapel Hill, North Carolina

I have been a volunteer and resident artist with Boomerang Youth, Inc. since the spring of 2016, when I began conducting weekly self-expression workshops for youth in their alternative to suspension program. As a devoted supporter of this agency, I performed The Talk

for free as a fund and awareness raiser for Boomerang at Smith Middle School in Chapel Hill on November 1, 2018. I made a plea for donations after the November 1 performance and we generated $1,000 in donations that night, in addition to the $1,220 we generated in ticket sales. In January, 2019, Boomerang's financial officer Sonia Frischemeier advised me that Boomerang's organizational goal was to generate $20,000 by December, 2018. They met the goal.

In addition I wore a Boomerang Youth, Inc. t-shirt at talk-backs during the January and February professional run of *The Talk* in Durham and Chapel Hill, North Carolina. I was sure to include a plea for donations and volunteers on behalf of Boomerang Youth, Inc. after each talk-back. Sonia Frischemeier notified me in October, 2019 that the Boomerang office has periodically received donations and inquiries based upon this exposure. Sonia exclaimed, The fact that you mention Boomerang has a multiplying effect. It also can lead to community organizing around difficult subject areas, where people feel that they have some skin in the game." Referring to a $25 check she had recently received from an audience member from one of my 2019 performances and talk-backs, Sonia observed,

> This is someone who was moved enough to do that [mail a check to Boomerang], and he may now pay more attention, be more aware, talk to other people. That's that grass roots multiplier effect, where we can't always gauge the impact, but we know it's happening. We have anecdotal evidence of people connecting the dots. Simple name recognition – your name – people say 'The Talk; and they know how powerful it was. In your mental virtual rolodex, it causes people to stop and think. To sit up and take notice of things that can make you feel very uncomfortable, but because of the power of the 'The Talk,' you feel some agency in yourself to explore that space, which you may have not done otherwise (October 15, 2019 personal communication).

This is a sterling example of how the performance-centered work of *My Life Matters* has transmuted itself into community action. First, it inspired and educated me to write and perform *The Talk*. Then, through *The Talk,* I have woven the simple repeatable rhythms and patterns that I learned in *My Life Matters.* All the while, I have kept an eye on the dynamic interplay of

identity, relationships, and power in this work of moving myself and others toward antiracist action on the stage, in the classroom, and beyond.

Raleigh PACT in Raleigh, North Carolina

I was introduced to the Raleigh PACT in 2018 by my colleague, co-performer, and activist, Dr. Marie Garlock. Barbara Smalley, one of the Board members of RPACT attended a performance of *The Talk* and insisted that I connect my work to their RPACT's activism. According to a December 7, 2018 email from Mrs. Smalley, Raleigh PACT generated a net gain of $2,975 in donations from *The Talk* fund and awareness raising performance and talk-back on November 3, 2018. Barbara recognized that "Raleigh PACT leaders and members are passionate about using the arts to move people to action for racial justice. The Talk was a powerful extension of that work."

The ultimate goal of Raleigh PACT has been to keep Raleigh Police officers accountable by establishing a community oversight board. Raleigh PACT members have been attending regular City Council meetings and seeking an audience with the Mayor every month since February of 2016. The Raleigh Police Department and City Council leaders have resisted this request consistently since Raleigh PACT's inception in April of 2015 (incidentally the same month and year when I had "The Talk" with Sterling).

On Saturday, November 3, 2018, I sat on a post-performance talk-back panel with Rolanda Byrd, the Director of Raleigh PACT, and mother of Akiel Denkin, who was killed by Raleigh police on February 29, 2016; and PACT staff member and activist, Surena Johnson. Amidst tears and a deep seated anguish that seemed to creep from her core and grip her throat like a bull horn, Rolando opened the panel discussion like so:

> I have an 18 year old son, and I have two young grandsons that my son left behind, as well, who are four and five. I'll be having this kind of talk with them real soon. This is a

> real life thing. So, this type of thing is the kind of the thing that people have to deal with on a daily basis...In some form or some fashion, we have to get together as a people and make some changes to these policies, these laws. We have to come together as a people. As human beings that bleed the same color blood. To make some type of change so this can stop. We have to begin somewhere. So, that's my speech.

As I sat between these two strong black women, facing an audience of mostly middle age White people, I was overwhelmed by the thought of the steadfast, faithful, sacrificial efforts of strong Black women to redeem, reclaim and reframe our community over the centuries! This is why Black feminism is so powerful, poignant and pertinent! I felt the abiding spiritual presence of Fannie Lou Hamer, Ella Baker, bell hooks, Harriett Tubman, Sojourner Truth, and so many others.

When asked by a White audience member what “we can do” Rolanda replied quickly and concisely:

> The main thing is coming out and supporting us when we go to City Council. They have people that come out - so many people that they could fill this room - with green t-shirts on, so that they can get a tennis court put up in their neighborhood. So they can get a stop sign put up on the corner where they think somebody is driving too fast. We're there asking for a community oversight board with subpoena power to help us to stop these violent crimes that are happening against our sons and daughters in our community.

Bryant especially noted how White people tend to be received in a much “friendlier” manner than Black people when they show up to City Council meetings.

Barbara Smalley (a wealthy White woman in her 70’s) spoke poignantly on how to begin the journey toward White ally-ship. She stood at the November 3, 2018 talk-back and began by quoting one of Raleigh PACT’s Black female members, Sister Simone, who said, "Go toward trouble, and let your heart be broken open." Barbara went on to declare:

> That's what we as White people need to be doing! We have a responsibility to go find out. It doesn't happen to our sons. I have never worried about a police officer hurting my son and it should break our hearts enough to get active in putting a stop to racialized policing. It's wrong!

Both Barbara and Rolanda made impassioned pleas for White allies to put their skin in the game that night, and those pleas were answered.

In a February 15, 2019 email, Barbara commented on the continued impact that *The Talk* performance has had on Raleigh PACT community involvement:

> This month PACT used the list of clergy we put together last fall to help us recruit folks from their congregations for The Talk. By reaching out to some of those same clergy in preparation for the Raleigh City Council Meeting, we ended up having 20 people who turned out in support of Raleigh PACT. Our usual numbers are around 5 and are generally PACT's board members.

Barbara also noted that three new people who saw *The Talk*, and two others who had been invited to the performance, but could not attend, were present at the November 8, 2018 General Body meeting of Raleigh PACT. In addition one local member of Raleigh's Chapter of Amnesty International who experienced *The Talk* asked other members of her local chapter to join her in supporting Raleigh PACT at City Council Meetings in 2019. Raleigh PACT leadership charges this increased participation at least, in part, to the public relations boost that *The Talk* performance lent to their movement. In order to market the November 3, 2018 performance Raleigh PACT connected to over 40 prominent Raleigh churches. Many of the witnesses in the audience at that performance were from those churches. I have no doubt that my own Christocentric language and tendencies further appealed to those witnesses, generating interest convergence toward praxis of collective liberation theology.

My performance of *The Talk* appears to have served as one significant catalyzing element that helped to foment increased activism toward police accountability in Raleigh, North Carolina. At the writing of this dissertation, on Tuesday, February 4, 2020, Raleigh city leaders have approved the city's first ever "Citizen Advisory Board" that is designed to provide the police

force with advice and oversight (Associated Press, 2019). After four years of prodding and pushing, the Raleigh PACT can lay claim to a significant victory.

Recommendations

> The Talk reminds me how important my job is as an educator really is and how important my job as a white female who weaves the narrative of history to all black and brown children really is. We get in the trenches and sometimes forget, but it is my responsibility to never forget and always empower and equip. So thank you for reminding me (2018 survey).

Pipelines to Pathways' performance-centered praxis has exhibited the capacity to empower marginalized Black youth, their caregivers, and their community members to come to voice and engage in positive self-production and antiracist attitudes and actions. The *My Life Matters* and *The Talk* projects have both forged routes by which Black youth, their caregivers, and community members can actively partake in the intellectual and political work of claiming and framing the ways in which their identities are pushed, pulled, portrayed, projected, and progenerated by racism within the private and public spheres.

Culturally relevant (or responsive) pedagogy is a crucial element of creating more empowering and inclusive spaces of learning and being for marginalized youth. The *My Life Matters* project has confirmed Gloria Ladson-Billings' (1998) argument that we must get to know the youth we hope to teach, or help. As Julia Moore (2017) argues, we must attend to the dynamic elements of indentity, relationships, and power that are always at plat in this work. We also must honor the wealth of intellectual, cultural, and emotional wisdom that these youth bring to our spaces upon arrival. These are wells of invaluable source material that can inform generative performative poetic inquiry, critical pedagogy, and simple repeatable rhythms that weave together the connective tissues of our mutual humanity.

As many participants and community members have observed, the work of the *Pipelines to Pathways* project has far reaching implications and applications for American society at large. The performance-centered praxis has exhibited the capacity to connect with, and serve, people from multiple identificatory intersections. For example, one survey respondent connected *The Talk* to the issue of immigration in the U.S.: "I know that I've been privileged; this story of vulnerability is now also the story of abused immigrants and their children" (2018). Still many Jewish witnesses expressed their similar predicament of existential precarity in light of the resurgence of anti-Semitic violence in the country today.

Professor Lloyd Kramer argued in the February 16, 2019 talk-back that, while the show frames the "One Drop Rule" so thought provokingly, we must not forget that the same rule is applied to Native Americans in the U.S. in reverse. He notes:

> The opposite form of racism is directed toward Native Americans. They have to be pure Indian. Like the Lumbee in North Carolina. They define themselves as a community of First People - of Indians - and because there's this sort of idea that they don't have 'pure blood'...There's this strange way in which racism is used to construct the 'other' among Whites, that has absolute 100% pure blood, or one drop. Did you ever think of how crazy that is? In terms of the cultural and racial construction of identity.

Thus, the global implications of this work ought to be explored. The global transferability of the performance-centered praxis explicated here appears promising, but begs testing.

In spite of the hope that this project has to offer, it must be carried out cautiously, especially with younger youth. I recall the quivering voice of a fifth grader at the WE ARE (Working to Extend Anti-Racist Education) Antiracism summer camp in Durham, North Carolina, where I performed a 10-minute excerpt of *The Talk* for fourth and fifth grade students in July of 2019. The little boy with brown skin and dread locks admitted, "I'm scared!" This is not one of the goals of *The Talk.* I have surmised that the ideal age for *The Talk* is 10 years old, with a robust talk-back and a full performance. So much of the restored behavior that I play

through in *The Talk* has traditionally been leveraged to warn, scare, and scold Black youth simply for being normal healthy children. So, while performance of critical antiracist artistry (like *The Talk)* should help Black youth to construct historical, social, and theoretical frameworks around their racialized experiences, we must be cautious not to lock youth witnesses into those frameworks that can impose a chronic state of fear, anger, and hopelessness that delimit subjectivity.

In spite of the overwhelmingly positive feedback I received from audience members, there were several points of criticism. For example, several witnesses challenge me to consider a wider cross-section of the Black Diaspora in my analysis of Black youth identities. The diverse and multivariate experiences of dehumanization and criminalization experienced by females, Muslims, non-U.S. citizens, LGBTQIA+ identities, and mixed race people became salient themes in post-show talk-backs. It has been made clear that "The Talk" transcends Blackness and maleness in America. Future projects should express and explore diverse these positionalities and standpoints. Chatham County Commissioner, Karen Howard also suggested that this conversation happen with diverse socio-economic groups to address the lack of communication that exists between races and between classes (January 27, 2019 talk back).

Furthermore, a point of contention that I shared with many of the witnesses of *The Talk* was the fact that the people who most need to experience *The Talk* and the *The Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Project* will probably never experience it. Several audience members suggested that racism deniers, racists, and self identified "color blind" community members needed to experience the show and critical talk-back the most. One survey respondent from *The Talk* articulated one of my deepest concerns: "I fear that the performance may be speaking to, more or less, the choir, although I don't know how to ensure that those who are not members of the choir

could be invited in such a way to get them to attend" (2019). So, the challenge is getting these performances into spaces that are Whiter, more conservative, and include authority figures and power brokers who directly impact the welfare of Black youth. How do I convince Chris Weaver (my internet troll from Chapter 5) to join me in the resilient and courageous space that these kinds of performance can create for people? To this end, I have been in conversation with several law enforcement and educational institutions to expand the reach of the performative repertoires produced by *The Talk* and *My Life Matters.*

This performance-centered praxis offers multiple entry points into intercultural and interracial communication. DiAngelo (observes that "a critical component of cross-racial skill building is the ability to sit with the discomfort of being seen racially, of having to proceed as if our race matters (which it does)" (p. 7). Somehow, *The Talk* experience has exhibited a capacity to inspire racial stamina and a critical understanding of that stamina. For example, after a June, 2018 performance at the Chapel Hill Library, Eric Bannan, a local storyteller and musician that I met at the Universalist Unitarian Church in Chapel Hill thanked me for sharing this story and for "calling others in, rather than calling them out." As a White/cis/heterosexual male, he was refreshed that this show did not point fingers at him for his White Privilege, but called him into discussion and community.

This discussion is only the beginning of a larger community conversations that are necessary to bring about the antiracist attitudes and actions that are needed to reframe and reclaim the positivity, agency, and dignity of Black youth identities in America. The 15 to 60 minute talk-backs create a space to start this process, but they do not offer sufficient time or scope to maximize this process at the community level. Future iterations of *The Talk* should include more extended community discussions and workshops to reach a deeper level of

engagement. I am currently in communication with an organization in Asheville, North Carolina to design one such expanded community-wide approach. I will perform *The Talk* at a theater on a Friday, then, on the following Saturday, I will facilitate workshops to develop antiracist attitudes and plans of action and youth empowerment, with local community leaders. This will allow me to share the insights that I have gained from the *Pipelines to Pathways* project with regard to creating spaces where the persons, positionalities and perspectives of marginalized people can be examined, expressed, affirmed, and witnessed; sharing intentional practices that help community members to examine, express, and reframe their lived experiences; and empowering participants to engage in antiracist attitudes and actions that reclaim the inherent positivity, dignity, and agency in themselves and others.

A Closing Thought

> In the Catholic tradition, there is a form of grace – the sanctifying one – that is the stuff of your soul. It is not defined by moments of mercy or opportunity. It is not good things happening to you. Rather it is that good thing that is in you, regardless of what happens. You carry this down through generations, same as the epigenetic trauma of a violent slave master's society. But the grace is the better part. It is what made the ancestor hold on so that we could become (Perry, 2019, p. 5).

Figure 13. Sonny, Sterling, and Langston Kelly after a performance in Durham, North Carolina, January 2019

After the Enloe High School performance on April 4, 2019 a Black female high school student stood and asked me the final question of the night, "Do you ever think there will be an end to all the preparation needed for Black youth to survive in America?" My response comes from a place of perpetual optimism and a profound faith planted in me by my ancestors and elders and cultivated by my experiences with the *Pipelines to Pathways* project. Saying that we can end racism, is like saying we can end all sin and evil on the Earth. We'll never reach that level of perfection where we fully understand, respect, and love each other. When racism is diminished to the point where it is not as deadly or salient as it is today, humans will find something else. We will devise some pattern of differentiation to impose some hierarchy of social order. I think humans will always be in the process of "othering" each other, as long as we're insecure and we fear that someone else will rob us of the scarce resources that we want to reserve for ourselves and for our respective tribes. It seems to me that humans are always going to be fighting against "others," and conceptualizing their identities based upon false antagonistic dialectics. I believe that the eternal purpose of critical performance is to develop a place where we can be more human with each other. That is, performance creates spaces of resilience where we can exercise our higher capacities for being all at once vulnerable, powerful, gracious, critical, equitable, assertive, inclusive, and outspoken, no matter what our perceived differences are. There will always be some way in which people are "othered" and it is incumbent upon us to stand with them, and for them, artistically, analytically and actively.

Considering the fact that the United States was founded on certain moral principles that are strongly influenced by the Judeo-Christian tradition, I find myself appealing to this religious sensibility in my efforts to root out the biotrope of the criminalized Black youth from the American imaginary, and to forge routes toward hope and antiracist transformation. I recall the

fact that the Abrahamic religious traditions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam all agree that the father of their faith was an ancient patriarch named Abraham. Abraham won favor with God because he was willing to sacrifice his own son, Isaac, at God's command. God spared Abraham from having to sacrifice his son, but never forgot Abraham's tremendous show of faith in his willingness to do so[69]. God the Father counted Abraham's faithfulness as righteousness, despite his imperfections. The Christian tradition considers Abraham's initial willingness to sacrifice his son as a point of reference for the sacrifice of Jesus Christ – whom we believe to be the Son of God[70]. According to the Christian scriptures, God, the Father, sacrificed his only Son - Jesus the Christ - for the propitiation of the sins of all humanity. Thus, all the sins of humanity have been forgiven, and relationship with God the Father is reconciled via the sacrifice of His Son, Jesus Christ[71].

This compelling story of love, redemption and willing sacrifice for others is turned on its head with regard to the state of Black youth in America. Instead of a benevolent God sacrificing His Son for the masses, the dominating forces (or, shall we say "gods") of racism, neoliberalism, and White supremacy have strategically labeled the least among us - our Black children - as a pernicious threat to all we hold dear. These greedy gods have positioned the biotrope of the dehumanized and criminalized Black youth as that which must be punished or purged for the good of a holy and righteous society. They demand the sacrifice of our children, promising in return, only profit and promotion for the greater economic and social welfare of those in power.

Through critical performance, the *Pipelines to Pathways* collaborators have forged a prophetic path of spiritual warfare. This path connects people who once appeared hopelessly disjointed and disconnected, and enlists them into the struggle for antiracism. Numerous

[69] Genesis 21 – 22, *Holy Bible*. The New King James Version
[70] Galatians 3, Hebrews 11, *Holy Bible*, The New King James Version
[71] John 3:16, *Holy Bible*, The New King James Version

examples adumbrated above exhibit how the performance process repeatedly generated artistic, intrapersonal, and interpersonal coalescence in the face of seemingly insurmountable tensiveness.

Perhaps most memorable for me is an encounter I had with an elderly Irish woman after a performance in Raleigh, North Carolina on August 1, 2019 for the International Transactional Analysis Association. After the performance, an elderly woman from Ireland named Elizabeth pulled my arm and beckoned me to sit beside her. She said that it struck her when they said my very Irish name that I might be a countryman of hers. When she saw that I was Black, learned that I was an American, and heard my story, she assumed that, like most Black Americans, my last name was the name of a previous owner of my ancestors. It pained her to think that one of her countryman – an Irishman- had owned slaves. Then, she saw me smile, and sighed tenderly, "That is an Irish smile!" It almost startled her to see something so familiar on my brown face. As my brown eyes met her green eyes in the aftermath of the performance, we shared smiles, ideas, and an embrace beyond the tensiveness. Our identities somehow coalesce (if only for a moment), exceeding our words. We were together, committed to the immodest proposal that Black youth should be seen and loved as positive, dignified, agential human beings.

Going forward, I am challenged to seek strategic routes for producing performances that engage audiences that are currently unaware of, or resistant to, critical dialogue surrounding racial and social inequity. In this work, the ancient East African virtue of *harambee* ("pulling together") is being revived and mobilized toward solidarity and critical pedagogy through embodied performative practices. These practices produce cultural perforamances that "not only reflect who we are but they also shape and direct who we are and what we can become" (Madison, 2010, p. 12). It is in this revelation that I locate the power of performance to pull

together disparate peoples into spaces of courage and resilience. As we create and frame these spaces, we are compelled by proximity and our divine creative nature to embrace the spirit of *ubuntu* – our mutually assured re-construction. If we can stretch our stamina enough to extend the necessary grace and to endure the inevitable discomfort in these spaces, we will find ourselves generating collective purpose and forging playful and loving pathways to antiracist attitudes and actions. Along these pathways, we will learn to attend to, articulate, and affirm the positivity, dignity, and agency of those least loved and protected souls among us.

APPENDIX A: OUR 'VILLE PERFORMANCE SCRIPT, 2017

Our 'Ville

ACT I: FALL
SCENE 1a: CHILDHOOD
LIGHTS UP
(Children version of SABRINA, ANDRE, TIANA and JOSEPH come out and play as their names are spoken by the NARRATOR)

NARRATOR: They say it takes a village to raise a child. This story is set in *our* village. The City of Fayetteville. Some folks call it "The 'Ville". Our characters are four best friends who live in the 'Ville. There's Sabrina. She is a natural born boss. She is always ready to face a challenge and follow her heart. Andre is a kind hearted young man with a lot of energy and a daring mischievous personality. Tiana is a girl with a strong spirit. She faces all of life's challenges with determination and a big heart. Last, but not least, there's Joseph – a talented young man who loves to laugh and dance. He's the life of the party, but he covers his hurts with light hearted laughter. These four friends met each other right here in the 'Ville at the Find-A-Friend after-school program where they found people who loved, supported, and included them just as they were. Over the years Sabrina, Andre, Tiana and Joseph became best friends, and their friendship became an important part of the village that would raise them up.

LITTLE ANDRE: Friends?!

ALL KIDS: Fo' Life! (All the CHILDREN RUN OFF TOGETHER HOLDING HANDS)

NARRATOR: Ten years later…

SCENE 1: BACK TO SCHOOL
JOSEPH, SABRINA, ANDRE and TIANA arrive at school as other students rush by.

SOUND: Ring the bell

ANDRE: Whattup y'all?! Guess who's back?!

SABRINA: Andre? Why you here? I thought they put you in Ramsey Street School after you caught that case last year, Bruh?

ANDRE: They did! I was at Ramsey Street for a semester last year, then, I spent all summer in this wilderness camp for "at risk" youth. It wasn't nothin' nice, but I did my time, got it together, and I'm on track now. I ain't goin' back, that's for sure! What's up with you, Sabrina? (Enter JOSEPH and TIANA)

SABRINA: I'm good, just on that grind, you know.

JOSEPH: Andre! What?! What you doing here man? I thought you got locked up.

TIANA: Yah, somebody said you was in the state pen doing real time!

ANDRE: Wait. Y'all are buggin'. You just took me from Ramsey Street to the State pen in like a minute! Naw. For real. I had a lot of time to think when I was away and I'm ready to turn my life around.

SABRINA: Okay. That's cool. I'm proud of you. So, no more bangin' and slangin'? You really 100% legit?

ANDRE: Yeah, you know it! One hundred! I was up in that wilderness camp, hiking every day and working hard…Then, I realized that I was just…angry. And most of the dudes up there with me were just angry too.

TIANA: What were you so angry about?

ANDRE: It was like I couldn't get no help out here, you know? Like, every time I needed help, I never got it. When I needed help with my homework. Everyone was too busy, so I did it myself. Or, when I was sick and everyone was gone, so I made my own soup and got better. Whenever I got hurt and nobody cared. I had to pick myself up, wipe off the blood and walk it off. I was just a kid, but I had to learn to take care of myself. I had all this anger inside because I felt like people were just sitting back and watching me suffer…That's when it hit me…

JOSEPH: Who hit you, Bruh? Your bunk mate at camp? Man, that's why I could never get locked up! They too violent in there! And the Lord knows, I'm too pretty for prison.

ANDRE: Man, you trippin'! Naw, nobody hit me! It hit me that, just like I needed help, other kids need help too. I don't want anybody else to go through that. So, I'm wanna help other people.

JOSEPH: Okay, kind of like community service? Okay…Yeah. That makes sense. I'm doing some community service down at the Urban Ministry! It looks good on the resume, you know!

SABRINA: Joseph, you are so stupid, Bruh! Please stop talking! I know what you mean, Andre.

JOSEPH: Girl! I know you didn't just come for me! Bruh, don't be calling me stupid!

TIANA: *Anyway*! Whattup with you, Joseph? How was your summer?

JOSEPH: You know how it is for me. Nothin' nice. I worked with my dad mowing lawns all summer. I had to hear his mouth the whole time. You know nothing is ever good enough for him.

TIANA: For real? I'm sorry to hear that, Bruh…But, real talk…I wish I had that kind of problem. I ain't seen my dad in like…I don't remember the last time I seen him. I mean, I know

your dad is hard on you. But, at least you have a dad. I don't even know if mine cares. What's that say about me?

SABRINA: Girl! Nothing! He ain't got nothin' to say about you! If he ain't been around, that's his loss! Tiana, you are the bomb! You're beautiful, you're smart. Bruh, you one of the smartest people I know. Your daddy can't change that!

ANDRE: Yeah, Tiana. You are amazing…I feel you though. My pops' been locked up since I was a baby. I've seen him, but I can't even remember what he looks like. He just got out last year, and still ain't come by to see me. When I was acting up, my moms had him call me up…He called himself correcting me. I'm like, "Dude! You ain't been here! You don't even know me like that. How you gonna just come at me like you my boss?"

SABRINA: True! You got to give respect to get respect. You know I stay with my dad in Atlanta during the summers. It was straight, but I ain't feeling his girlfriend though. She tried to be all "Step-Mommy" with me, and I was like, "Please! I *can't* with you!" Then, I feel like he's always choosing her over me. I'm like, how you gonna choose some lady you just met over your own flesh and blood!

JOSEPH: Right! Like, my dad won't even listen to my side of the story!

SABRINA: Joseph! Please! Tiana just said she doesn't even know if her dad is alive, and Andre's dad just got out of prison. I only see my dad on summers, IF he's not working. Then, I gotta share him with his new wifey. At least you got a year-round daddy!

JOSEPH: Sabrina, you have no idea of what I go through! But, how could I expect somebody so hard headed to understand!

SABRINA: No you didn't! Boy, you must don't know 'bout me. I will…

TIANA: Will you two chill? Look at us, we are about to start our senior year in high school. Anything is possible! Don't waste your time fighting about nothing!

ANDRE: True! True. Tiana, you didn't tell us about your summer. How was it?

TIANA: Boring! Basically babysat my little brother and sister and stayed in the house.

JOSEPH: Wait! Why you stay in the house all summer? It wasn't that hot?

TIANA: It wasn't my choice. You know Bobby and Sammy got beef now, so it's all kinds of drama in the street. Shooting and drama like every day. I don't even feel safe on the front porch. Gun shots every night, and dudes acting stupid. It's safer to just lock the doors and watch T.V. And my mom ain't getting' any better, so I gotta hold it down for my little brother and sister. But, y'all don't want to hear about all that.

JOSEPH: Yah, well, it sounds like we all had a lame summer. Y'all are depressing me. I would love to kick it with you all for the rest of the morning, but it's time for me to walk the yard. I can't let this new wardrobe go to waste. I'm 'bout to Tupac this thing!

ANDRE: TuPac? What you mean?

JOSEPH: All eyes on me, Baby! You know how I do! (*Starts strutting and dancing)*

ANDRE: I prefer East Coast rappers, like Notorious B.I.G. What's that song I like?

SABRINA: " Mo' Money, Mo' Problems"!

SOUND: "Mo' Money, Mo' Problems" by Puff Daddy

(*All of the characters and STUDENTS do a fashion show.)*

JOSEPH: Ha! I still got it, y'all!

SABRINA: You mean *we* still got it!

ANDRE: Yah, best friends fo' life, right?

ALL: Fo' life! (They give each other daps and hugs)

TIANA: I don't know what I'd do without y'all. Okay, so you know how we start every year with one big goal. What's yours Andre?

ANDRE: That's easy, I want to be the first person in my family to apply for college. I'm getting my grades together and I'm already looking at schools I want to go to. How 'bout you, Joseph?

JOSEPH: Fair enough. Real talk…I just want to be true to myself this year. I'm tired of worrying about what everybody else thinks. I want to be a model and a dancer and I'm gonna go all out to make that happen no matter what. How 'bout you, Tiana?

TIANA: I just want to prove my mom wrong. By the time she was my age, she already had two kids and dropped out of school. I want to graduate with no kids and good grades. Maybe, make my dad proud if he's out there somewhere. How 'bout you, Sabrina?
SABRINA: I want to…Naw, y'all will laugh at me.

ALL: No we won't!

SOUND: Bell rings

PRINCIPAL: Let's go! Move it people! Get to class!

ANDRE: Looks like you got saved by the bell!

JOSEPH: But you owe us, girl! I'll see y'all at lunch. Holla!

PRINCIPAL: Don't make me come after you! I said get to class!

(Kids leave and TIANA stays behind)

TIANA:
What they see is a beautiful, smart and focused young lady,
What I see is a girl wondering why her dad left her at three,
That point in her life where the good times should be
Wondering if he'll ever come back for me
I kinda feel like it's a little late
This girl is almost eighteen and feels so out of place
The memories are still meddling
Of Mom and you madly arguing
You guys slept in separate rooms for years and years
The only times I seen you have fun was sitting and drinking beers
My name may be tattooed on your arm
But that doesn't heal my scars from the harm.

LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 2: ANYTHING YOU CAN DO, I CAN DO BETTER
SONG: "BetterThan You" by Backronym (00:00 to 00:30)
SOUND: School Bell
LIGHTS UP
JOSEPH, TIANA and ANDRE are at lunch together laughing.

ANDRE: Hey y'all. Has anybody seen Sabrina?

JOSEPH: Who cares? I don't like her attitude lately? She's always in her feelings. She needs to get over herself!
TIANA: Joseph! You are a mess. We don't know what she's going through. I hope she's okay.
(SABRINA limps in and sits down uncomfortable)

ANDRE: Yo, Sabrina! What happened to you?

TIANA: Girl, are you okay? Why you walking like that?

JOSEPH: Maybe somebody finally checked that attitude!

SABRINA: NOT today, Satan!

JOSEPH: Satan?! Girl, you the one that looks like you been hangin' out with the Devil all day!

SABRINA: Oooh, Bruh! Are those chili cheese fries? I'm starving! Can I please eat those, Andre? (She takes them and starts eating up the food)
ANDRE: Sure…I'm glad you like 'em. Yo, Sabrina! Take your time! Don't choke !

SABRINA: I'm sorry. It's just that ever since I started practicing with the team, I am always hungry!

JOSEPH: The team? What team?

SABRINA: Okay…I guess I'm busted. That's my goal for the year. I want to be on the first all-girl step team to win the City-wide Step Show Competition.

JOSEPH: Ha! You gotta be kiddin' me! An *all-girl* step team?!

SABRINA: Yeah…

JOSEPH: So, who's leading the team?

SABRINA: Me!

JOSEPH: You? Ha! You know you got two left feet, right? Plus, everybody knows girls can't come with it like dudes can!

SABRINA: See. That's why I started this team. I'm tired of men always telling women what we can and cannot do. I put this team together, because I know we can win! And, when we win, we'll be the first all-girl step team to take home that trophy.

ANDRE: Yo, Sabrina! That's big. I'm proud of you!

TIANA: Me too. But…You sure you're okay. You walkin' around like you're busted!

SABRINA: Y'all…practice is no joke! I'm sore all over. But, I'ma get this thing down. Once I set my mind on something, you know I don't quit!

TIANA: True! I remember that time you ate a live worm just to prove your point back in 3rd grade.

SABRINA: Yeah, well worms don't taste that bad, really.

ANDRE: Or how 'bout that time you beat down Bobby Glover for talkin' about your mama in the 8th grade?

TIANA: Oh yeah. She beat him like he stole something!

JOSEPH: Okay…am I the only one who thinks this is cray cray? Sabrina, as your friend, I gotta tell you to chill on this step team thing.

SABRINA: See, that's why I didn't tell y'all my goal earlier. I knew Joseph would pop off with some hater-aid! Joseph, I don't care what you think! I believe I can do this. I made it this far and I'm not gonna give up now!

JOSEPH: Really?

ANDRE: Joseph. C'mon, man. Chill with that!

TIANA: Yeah, Joseph. Sabrina is our friend. If she wants to be on an all-girl step team, then that's cool.

JOSEPH: No. It's not cool. Sabrina, you're trying to be something you're not. You're just gonna make a fool of yourself!

SABRINA: *You're* a fool if you think I'm gonna give up on this!

JOSPEPH: Okay…Okay…Sabrina. Lets' see if you can keep up with me. Watch this… (does a basic step)

SABRINA: Oh! You want to see my moves? Okay…Watch this! (SABRINA eats one last fry and stands up)

SABRINA: Hey ladies! Y'all ready?! (STEPPERS join SABRINA for STEP SHOW)

JOSEPH: Whatever! That still sucks!

SABRINA: Ok, Ladies! Let's get in formation!
SONG: "Freedom" by Beyoncé (JOSEPH watches judgmentally, then storms off)
LIGHTS OUT
SCENE 3: NOT MAN ENOUGH
LIGHTS UP
(JOSEPH walks alone up to his house)

JOSEPH: I can't believe that girl thinks an all-girl step team can win! They do have some nice moves, though. How did that step go?...(He starts to do the step)

DAD: Boy! What do you think you're doing? We got work to do, and you out here doin' a little dance like a little girl? I oughta whoop your tail right here in the street! You know we got work to do, where you been?

JOSEPH: Dad! I didn't know you were…

DAD: Yeah, I know you didn't! With your little tight pants on, looking like a white girl on spring break! Put some socks on, Boy! I don't know how many times I gotta tell you. You are a

black man. Life is hard enough for us out here, without you being soft. You as soft as a fluffy white marshmallow. You're weak. You're ain't no man!

JOSEPH: I'm sorry, Dad. I just...

DAD: Sorry?! Sorry don't cut it! Sorry! That's all you ever say. I'm ashamed of you, Boy! Get in the house before I beat your tail out here in front of everybody.

JOSEPH: But, dad! You don't understand…

DAD: "But, dad! You don't understand…" You can't even talk right. Talkin' all proper. What? You think you better than me? Say somethin' else so I can break you clean off! That boy ain't good for nothin'! (DAD Exits)
(JOSEPH rushes inside)

JOSEPH: I'm sick of crying. Tired of Trying. Outside I'm happy. But inside I'm dying…

SONG: JOSEPH Sings "Not Good Enough" feat. Jussie Smollett

LIGHTS OUT

ACT 2: WINTER
SCENE 4: CRIMINALIZED
LIGHTS UP
(ANDRE, SABRINA, and TIANA are hanging out at the park. ANDRE's hood is up.)

SABRINA: So then the football coach was like "You girls really think you can beat a boys' step team?" So, I was like, "I'm offended that you even asked us that!"

ANDRE: Wait! You said, "I'm *offended*"? That's the *hardest* thing you think of?

SABRINA: What?...You got something better?

ANDRE: Yeah! How 'bout…"Shut up, Coach! That's why your football team ain't hittin' on nothing!"

TIANA: Or, how 'bout…Maybe yo' mama can't beat a boys' step team, but we can!

(ALL laugh)

SABRINA: ANYWAYS! I said I was offended, and he stopped everything and apologized to me in front of everybody. For real, this is the toughest thing I've ever done, but I know I'm doing the right thing with this, y'all!

ANDRE: Hey, we support you.

TIANA: Yeah! You know we got your back!

SABRINA: Friends?
ALL: Fo' Life!

(DENISE walks by)

DENISE: Hey Andre! What's up Sabrina and Tiana!

SABRINA: Hey girl!

TIANA: What's up Denise?

DENISE: Girl, nothin'. Just trying to get this school work done.

TIANA: I know that's right.

DENISE: Alright, well I'll see you all later…Bye, Dre

(DENISE exits)
ANDRE: Bye…Hold up! Was that Denise?

SABRINA: Yeah. Why?

ANDRE: Bruh! Summer has been GOOD to her!

SABRINA: Typical man. Just looking at women like objects.

ANDRE: Naw, Denise ain't no object. That right there is a superstar! She's smart, beautiful, and she's cool like that. Denise is 24 karat magic!

SONG: "24 KARAT MAGIC" by Bruno Mars

(JOSEPH Staggers in drunk with one shoe on)

JOSEPH: Ha! There go my friends…Fo' life! That's right! Hey…y'all seen my shoe?

TIANA: Joseph. Are you okay? Have you been drinking?

JOSEPH: Am I okay…Ha! That depends on who you ask. If you ask my father… I'm too weak. I'm not black enough. I'm not man enough. And, I ain't worth…

SABRINA: Joseph! Don't talk about yourself like that!

ANDRE: Yah, man! I mean…Nobody's perfect…But, you're perfect for us.

TIANA: Wait! Ain't that a J. Cole song?

ANDRE: Yah…Sorry…It was all I could think of. But, it's true. Joseph, do you need to talk about something?
JOSEPH: Yeah…I need to talk…I need help…I can't…I can't take it no more!

SOUND: SIREN
LIGHTS: Bright spotlight on the characters

ANDRE: Awww! Here they go again. It's twelve!

SABRINA: Why they trippin'?

TIANA: We haven't done anything?

ANDRE: It don't matter. Y'all get outta here. Get Joseph home. I got this.

TIANA: Come on Joseph!

JOSEPH: Wait! Where's my shoe!

SABRINA: Boy, if you don't leave that shoe alone…Let's go!

(SABRINA, TIANA and JOSEPH run off)

COP: Hold it right there! Put your hands up where I can see 'em! Drop your hood.

(ANDRE Puts his hands up and drops his hood)

COP: Hold up! Is that? Is that…Is that Andre Strong? You just can't stay out of trouble, can you Andre?

ANDRE: I'm not doin' nothin', officer.

COP: Right…You got any weapons on you?

ANDRE: No Ma'am.

COP: Any drugs?

ANDRE: No, Ma'am. Why you stopping me?

COP: *I'm* asking the questions here. Why'd your friends run off so fast?

ANDRE: I guess they had someplace to be.

COP: Yah. I know some place you can be if you keep running that mouth. Sounds you're looking for trouble, Andre. Is that what you want? You want some trouble?

ANDRE: (Almost choking) No…Ma'am. I'm good.

COP: Turn around. Hands on your head. On your knees. You know how we do this. (COP pats Andre down) Well, you're clean…TODAY! But, I know your kind. You'll be back out here selling drugs and gang bangin' tomorrow. You thugs are like roaches. We just can't seem to get rid of you.

ANDRE: That ain't true.

COP: You say something to me?

ANDRE: I said that ain't true. That's not who I am anymore. I'm different. I'm goin' to college. I'm doing positive things now… and I don't appreciate you stoppin' and frisking me for no good reason…I'm offended!

COP: Excuse me?...Did you just tell me you're "offended?" Ha! (To his partner off stage). Hey, Steve! Andre Strong just told me he was "offended"! I got my eye on you, Andre, and I'm not takin' it off. I know your type. You make my job harder, so why don't you get off my streets and go home. (ANDRE pauses).

ANDRE: I live here. These are my streets too! This is my neighborhood. Since when I can't just hang out in my own neighborhood?

COP: Since I *said* you couldn't. Try me Andre! Just try me! (ANDRE slowly walks away) I didn't think so. (COP Exits)

ANDRE:
A society corrupt with injustice. But…Must this go on with no justice? Stupid petty crime. Sometimes it feels like only blacks doing time. At-risk teens with skin color just like mine
Yet all society gives us is locked doors…Cells measuring four by four. But, what if I want more? Not just a locked door. What if I want knowledge? What if I want to go to college? What if I want more? Knowledge is power. I don't want to end my life at this hour! What if I want to make something of myself. Not being like a broken toy on a shelf? What if I want more? What if I want to stop bangin' and slangin'…Stopped by cops for how my pants are hangin'? What if I want more? What if I want to stop being profiled for my past. Write a *new* play, with a *new* cast. What if I want more?
Song: "They Don't Really Care About Us" by Michael Jackson
LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 5: HOME ALONE
LIGHTS UP
(TIANA bursts through the door of her home just to see the Christmas tree with no gifts under it, and her little brother and sister home alone.)

BROTHER & SISTER: Tiana! (They rush to her)

TIANA: Hey y'all. What's goin' on? Where's mama?

BROTHER: She left as soon as we got back from school.
TIANA: (Walks over to the tree) What happened to all of the Christmas gifts?

SISTER: Mommy said she had to take them all back to the store to exchange them for new ones.

TIANA: What? Really?!...No…No…Mama! I can't believe this!...Have ya'll eaten yet?

BROTHER & SISTER: No.

BROTHER: Mama said to ask you for dinner.

TIANA: Yeah. Of course she did. I guess I won't get any homework done tonight. Y'all go get ready for bed and I'll cook some dinner.

BROTHER & SISTER: Okay (Start to leave)

SISTER: Tiana.

TIANA: Yes?

SISTER: Is Mama takin' the bad medicine again?

TIANA: I don't know…I don't know. Will y'all please just go get ready for bed?....What am I gonna do?

SOUND: Phone rings
LIGHT: Spolight on JOSEPH

TIANA: Hello?

JOSEPH: Hey Tee! Is that you?

TIANA: Joseph. Hey, are you alright?

JOSEPH: Yah, I'm good. Sabrina helped me sneak back in my house before my father could catch me. I still can't find my shoe though…Hey, Tee…I really need to talk to somebody right now. I'm losin' it!

TIANA: Yeah…Okay. I gotta take care of my little brother and sister right quick. Can I give you a call back?

JOSEPH: Uh…Yeah…Sure (they hang up. Both are standing on opposite sides of the stage as the weight of their worlds presses in on them. We hear pounding on a door)

DAD: Joseph. Boy, are you in there? Where have you been? Boy you are just useless!

JOSEPH: I need somebody. Help. Not just anybody. Help. You know I need someone.

TIANA: Help…it's what we as kids need…Things that's minor to you but to me it's everything. I need you to listen to me. Listen to my thoughts, and look at my actions. You say actions speak so much louder than words
And when I look at yours I see that's what you're lacking. But my actions show that I need you and that I'm still a kid…Help…

JOSEPH: And when you're looking at my exterior, it looks like I have it all together, But isn't our skin supposed to protect our insides from falling out? So, yes I'm holding myself up, Because it's my interior that you don't know about. Help…

TIANA: I need somebody…
JOSEPH: Help…

TIANA: Not just anybody…
JOSEPH: Help…

TIANA: You know I need someone…

JOSEPH: Help…When I got sick that day. You said it's because I was standing out in the rain, But honestly I just want you to feel my pain, And to see the stains that are upon my cheeks, Because I have to restrain myself from falling to your knees, And it feels like such a burden to speak, 'Cause if you're really supposed to help me, Then why am I afraid to stand to my feet…Help…

TIANA: Why can't I lift these weights from my shoulders And let you hold them for a while. I need to stretch out. I need to feel the sun kiss my skin. I want to be a kid again…Help

JOSEPH: I need somebody
TIANA: Help

JOSEPH: Not just anybody…
TIANA: Help…

JOSEPH: You know I need someone…
TIANA & JOSEPH: Help! (JOSEPH Exit)

TIANA: (Picks up the phone to call her mother's cell) Mama. It's me. Where are you. I came home and the Christmas gifts were gone. The kids are hungry, and…I can't keep doin' this, Mama! I'm tired, and I got homework. Just…please bring the gifts home. Some of that stuff I

bought myself. It ain't fair to the kids Mama. You can keep my gift, but please just bring theirs back…(Hangs up)…Why do I stay…When she disapproves of me in dismay. I have other places where I can go, But I have a fear of being alone. Her attitude is so mean. It just makes me want to scream. She tells me that I'm just like her. But I don't see it. She seems so broken. And now, my heart has been awoken. So, I'm stuck here taking care of my sister and brother. But, I refuse to be like my mother. (TIANA Exits. JOSEPH enters from opposite side of on the phone)
LIGHTS OUT
LIGHTS: Spotlight on Singer
SONG: "Free" by J. Cole
LIGHTS OUT
SOUND: Tiana's Voicemail. "This is Tiana! You know what to do at the beep."
JOSEPH: (on the phone) Hey, Tee. It's me again. I'm sorry. I don't want to bother. I don't want to bother anyone anymore. I just need...I'm sorry. I can't take this anymore.

INTERMISSION

ACT 3: SPRING
SCENE 6: SAYING GOODBYE
SPOTLIGHTS on ANDRE and TIANA
(ANDRE enters talking on his phone to TIANA)

ANDRE: Are you sure?

TIANA: (In tears). Yes, they said he overdosed on pills last night. I tried to call him back, but it was too late!

ANDRE: Oh no. We gotta call Sabrina. Hold up, I'll call her on three-way now. (dials)

SOUND: Dial tone, then 7 digit tones and one phone ring
SPOTLIGHT on SABRINA

SABRINA: Hey Andre! What's up? Are you okay?

ANDRE: Yah. I'm good. But, I got Tiana on the line. She just told me Joseph is gone.

SABRINA: I coulda told you that! Did you see how drunk he was? That boy was gone!

TIANA: No! Sabrina…I mean…He's gone…His mom called me this morning to say he overdosed on painkillers last night and they couldn't save him.

SABRINA: …What? But, I…I just dropped him off at his house! Y'all trippin'! He's probably somewhere laughin' at us right now. You know he does the most! Oooh, Josseph makes me sick sometimes…

TIANA: Sabrina! He's gone!

SABRINA: He's gone? (drops to her knees)

ANDRE: He's gone…
LIGHTS OUT
SCENE 7: THE FUNERAL
LIGHTS UP
(MOURNERS gather around as the preacher begins to preach. They are crying, fanning and giving the preacher "Amen's" and "Thank you Lord's".)

PREACHER: Dearly beloved, we gather here today to lay to rest one child too many. Our children are dying by violence every day, and something needs to be done. Gun violence, gang violence, bullying and suicide are stealing the precious lives of our babies. Each one of them was fearfully and wonderfully made! We cannot afford to stand aside as bystanders while our most precious resource…our children…are threatened on every side. We will not be silenced. We cannot be silenced. And now for a selection…

DIAMOND: This is called "Change." Loving care is the key to this harmony speech. I'm lyrically speaking about society. People dying and kids lying on these streets. I can barely go to sleep without seeing flashing lights on my street. Gun shots ringing in my ears. Children growing up in fear. Seeing all this violence. My heart ends its silence. I stand against all violence. Beatings and bombings and Rapings and robbings, And there's more, but I'll keep that stored beneath the pain that I have gained. The enemy comes to steal, kill and destroy, And every girl and every boy got a chapter in this story. Let's fall on our knees. Let the Lord give us strength. Show His glory. To believe, That we can Achieve any and everything. There's a crowd and There's a voice. Time for me to let them know the right choice. When a child takes his own life, there's nothing sadder. I speak so you'll know that my life and your life matter.
(TIANA, SABRINA & ANDRE enter)

TIANA: I feel…POWERLESS. Like an hour glass, time will pass. My best friend in the grave. Too late to save. (SABRINA Enters)

SABRINA: I'd give my life if I could. Unsafe in my 'hood. Don't feel PROTECTED. Feel unwanted, neglected. From life REJECTED. (ANDRE Enters)

ANDRE: System says I'm fine. Out of line with my own kind. Walking this maze BLIND. In decline doin' time, Behind bars, Beautiful Minds. (Drops a rose on the grave)

TIANA: Beautiful minds (Drops a rose on the gravesite)

SABRINA: Beautiful minds (Drops a rose on the gravesite) (The come together and hug to comfort each other)

SONG: "When I See You Again" by Wiz Kalifah and Charlie (Children's Choir)
LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 8: GRADUATION

NARRATOR: Six months later. Graduation Day.

LIGHTS UP
(SABRINA, ANDRE & TIANA line up in their caps and gowns as they take a selfie.)

TIANA: Say, "Friends Fo' Life!"

ALL: Friends Fo' Life!

ANDRE: I can't believe we made it y'all! I'm really going to college. I never thought I'd say that!

TIANA: Just make sure you visit. I don't know why you couldn't just go to FSU with me.

ANDRE: Ha! FSU is cool, but Robeson Community College had the better financial aid package. Plus, it gives me a chance to move in with my grandmother down in Lumberton and help her out. Who knows, maybe I'll transfer to FSU in a coupla years.

TIANA: Yeah, well, you know it's all about that Bronco Pride!

SABRINA: There she go again! Watch this…Attitude Check!

TIANA: Bronco Pride!

SABRINA: Attitude check!

TIANA: Bronco Pride!

SABRINA: Attitude, Attitude check!

TIANA: Bronco, Bronco Pride!

SABRINA: Attitude, Attitude, Attitude Check!

TIANA: Bronco, Bronco, Bronco Pride!

SABRINA: Ha! See? They got that girl brainwashed already!

TIANA: Talkin' 'bout *I'm* brainwashed?! Ha! You the one joining the Marines!

SABRINA: I know! I'm so excited. I go to basic training in three weeks!

ANDRE: Well, if you get through basic training like you got through that step show competition, you'll be just fine!

TIANA: I know, Sis! You made history! First *all-girl* team to win the City-Wide step championship! Y'all did the thang!

SABRINA: See, and you all didn't think I could do it!

ANDRE: What?! I'm offended! I knew you could do it all along.

TIANA: I'm offended too. You know we had your back! We're your biggest fans, girl!

SABRINA: Oh, NOW y'all are "*offended,"* huh? For real though, Bru. Thanks for believing in me. I couldn't have done it without you. You were right there cheering me on, and that meant a lot to me. And, today, I'ma be cheering for you, Ms. Valedictorian!

TIANA: I know, right?! Mama couldn't believe it!

ANDRE: Is your moms coming today?

TIANA: I hope so. But you never know. My aunt is bringing my little brother and sister. That's the most important thing to me. I want them to see me do this, so they can know it's possible for them too. I'm a little nervous about this speech, though.

SABRINA: Don't sweat it Tiana. You're gonna be great. I'm proud of you, girl!

ANDRE: Yeah. Congratulations. We're proud of you.

TIANA: Thanks, y'all! You know who I miss?

SABRINA: Yup…I miss him too…

ANDRE: Man, I wish Joseph were here. Can you imagine if he were here right now?

TIANA: You know he'd have some fly shoes on, since that's the only thing you can see in these robes.

SABRINA: And he would dance to anything! You know he'd be turnt up all the way down the aisle, like… (does a silly dance)

ANDRE: It's time to TuPac this thang y'all.

ALL: All eyes on me! (ALL start dancing)

SONG: "Ju Ju on that Beat" Plays
(SABRINA, TIANA & ANDRE dancing. JOSEPH enters dancing in all white)

SONG: "Pomp & Circumstance"
(SABRINA, TIANA, & ANDRE straighten up and march forward in the processional)

PRINCIPAL: Ladies and gentleman. As the principal of this school, it has been my pleasure to mold these young minds for the future. Even though some of you tried to drive me crazy this year, you made it through and I congratulate you. And now, let's welcome our valedictorian Ms. Tiana Hunt…

TIANA: This has been a very tough year for me. I needed a lot of help. And to be honest, sometimes I got that help and sometimes I didn't. I want to thank my family, friends and mentors who helped me through the pain, and let my express myself to heal this migraine. Those who let me be myself when I didn't even know what that was. Those who heard me and encouraged others to hear me too. This is poem I wrote called "Uplift":

TIANA: We need to uplift our people not degrade them. We've been through too much to throw them out on a whim. And it's sad that we're still out on this battlefield. When we don't even know why we're fighting this battle still. Too often kids who look like me are born at the bottom of this economy. But isn't America supposed to have equal rights and not dishonesty. I mean honestly, we had Trump in one corner and Hilary in the next. "Ready to box" for a country with an equally bounced check. I mean there's finally proof on how this economy's run. We're fighting for our rights that's should've already been won. To be young, gifted and black is my rarely seen as a privilege. We're just trying to raise our kids in this unholy village. In America the great, I'll work to improve our fate. To Uplift our people and not degrade them. Cherish every child, and never throw them out on a whim. Congratulations, class of 2018!
LIGHTS OUT

SCENE 9: GROUP
LIGHTS UP
(A bunch of teens gather around to sit in chairs for a Find-A-Friend Group session. SABRINA, ANDRE, & TIANA are in the group. MS. SHAUNA enters).

MS. SHAUNA: Alright guys. Listen up! It's hard to believe, but this is our last Find-A-Friend Group session for the school year! Y'all ready for the summer?!
(LISA ENTERS)

SHAUNA: Hey, Lisa! Mmmmm-hmmmm. Chil' I heard about you today. Over there at school acting like a fool!

LISA: No, But Ms. Shauna! It was her! She the one that was runnin' her mouth!

SHAUNA: (Cuts her off in a petty way) I already know the story. Have a seat! We'll talk later.

(DAVID enters)

SHAUNA: Good afternoon David… I said Good afternoon, David!

DAVID: Good afternoon, Ms. Shauna.

SHUANA: I heard you got an A on your test today. Good job.

DAVID: Thanks!

SHAUNA: Now, pull your pants up. Nobody wants to see all your business!

(ENTER Emonie, Maliyah and Neveah whispering and giggling)

SHAUNA: Oh, here comes the clique! You know it's not polite to whisper ladies.

GIRLS: Ms. Shauna! C'mon Ms. Shauna!

SHAUNA: Ah-uh! Don't "Ms. Shauna" me! We not doin' this today. Y'all always talkin'. Always got drama. Go ahead and split up. I want each of y'all sitting with somebody else today. (GIRLS sit down in chairs) I know it's been a tough year for all of us, but thank God we made it through. First of all, let's give a round of applause to all of our high school graduates! Congratulations Sabrina, Tiana and Andre! You've all come a long way. Tell us how you made it.

ANDRE: Well…Every time somebody doubted me or had low expectations, I just got motivated to prove them wrong. Plus, I learned what goes around comes around. The more I helped other people, the more help I ended up getting. Plus…this place…I mean, Find-A-Friend is family to me!

SABRINA: For me, it was my friends and my mom. At first, she was trippin' about me wanting to start a step team and join the Marines. But, when she saw how important it was to me, she started supporting me and visiting the recruiter with me. It meant a lot to know that I had people who would love me and support me no matter what.

TIANA: I'm grateful for these Group workshops. I'm grateful for the Find-A-Friend Staff. They loved me and helped me to laugh. They showed us that they cared and listened to our words. You all taught me that my life matters, and that I deserve to be heard.

MS. SHAUNA: Awww…It sounds like we all found shoulders to lean on this year. Congratulations. I'm proud of all of you.

ANDRE: Yeah, And I want my friends to know…You can all lean on me!

TIANA: (singing) Lean on me…

SABRINA: (singing) When you're not strong…
(Enter Children's Choir)
SONG: "Lean on Me" (Children's Choir)
(JOSEPH enters in all white, and the kid YOUNG JOSEPH, YOUNG TIANA, YOUNG SABRINA, and YOUNG ANDRE enter and sing along)

LIGHTS OUT

THE END

The Ravon Jordan "My Life Matters" Project

"My Life Matters"

This project is based upon three six-week summer camp sessions held with over 70 youth participants. The host agency for this summer camp is an award winning youth intervention program that has served an urban community in the American Southeast since 1982. This project took place under the leadership of Shauna Hopkins, the program's director since 2012. Shauna, who earned her B.A. from Fayetteville State University in Psychology, is a master at loving, encouraging and challenging youth to stay "out of trouble and successful in school." The program's annual summer camp, funded entirely by donations, includes three 12-hour days of summer camp activity for six weeks between June and August. This project began with weekly self-expression workshops facilitated by volunteer UNC Chapel Hill Doctoral Candidate in the Department of Communication, Sonny Kelly.

Sonny Kelly

Shauna Hopkins

During the summers of 2016, 2017, and 2018, Sonny served as a volunteer artist in residence with FAF's *Summer Achievement Camp*. As part of Sonny's dissertation, *Pipelines to Pathways: Performatively Reframing and Reclaiming Black Youth Identity,* Sonny has been exploring the notions of identity formation and self-expression with youth participants. Through acting, poetry, storytelling, song, photography, and dance, participating youth explored ideas of self, society, and survival. The goal of this process is to improve positive self-concept, self-efficacy, and social engagement, while developing a deeper understanding of the issues that these youth face in their everyday lives. By sharing and performing narratives that explore their unique *selves*, *struggles*, and *solutions*, we invite audience members to experience with us what Augusto Boal calls "the therapeutic stage," where we are all encouraged to imagine new possibilities together.

An Introduction

By Shauna Hopkins

The "My Life Matters" project was conceived after listening to the youth that I work with debate the concepts of "Black Lives Matter" and "All Lives Matter". As they were debating which was more important, they looked to me and said, "Ms. Shauna what do you think?" As I looked into their eyes, trying to best think of how to answer their question without offending anyone or making them feel as though I didn't value their opinion, it dawned on me to remind them that no matter what society tells them, **THEIR** lives were important. I explained to them that, despite that circumstances that are going on in society, they needed to understand that they mattered in this world. Often, we (adults and children alike) get so caught up in trying fit into what society dictates as valuable, we often forget that we as individuals are valuable as well. That's why the "My Life Matters" project is so important. It allows youth to artistically express their daily lives and struggles, reminding us of why we need to listen to what they have to say.

As the project unfolded, I was overwhelmed with emotion and moved at the stories that the youth told with their poetry, music, photographs and dance. It reminded me of a young man I had worked with a few years earlier...Ravon Jordan. Ravon often expressed himself through dance, song, and fashion. He was a beautiful soul that was so full of love, laughter, and life. Anyone that he encountered was automatically drawn into his world of creativity, beauty, and passion. Ravon was also a young man that was champion for those that were mistreated or unfairly judged. His words were strong and meaningful, and he fought for those who could not fight for themselves. Ravon took his activism to our city council and other platforms that would listen to him about the violence and turmoil that were not adequately being addressed in our community. Unfortunately, he was gunned down at the age of 19 as an innocent bystander of a shooting, and tragically passed away.

As the youth continued to work on the "My Life Matters" project I shared with them Ravon's story. I told them how important that his voice was to our community; and because of him there were measures put in place to make our community safer. I encouraged them to use Ravon's legacy as inspiration to find their voice and show the world why they were important. This project not only gave the youth a voice, it gave them a platform to come to terms with the world they live in and an outlet to work through the difficult issues that they live through every day. The youth also became a support system for one another and encouraged each other to tell their stories without any judgment. As you peruse the pages of the "My Life Matters" project remember that Children are our best natural resource and it is important that we continue to feed love and life into our youth; because they truly are the future.

My Self

Stories have been used to dispossess and to malign; but,stories can also be used to empower and to humanize. Stories can break the dignity of a people, but stories can also repair that broken dignity.
~ Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, author and activist

Each "My Life Matters" workshop begins with an "I hear you" session. Each participant shares (and shows) how they are feeling. As a group, the rest of us do our best to take on the movements and tone of the speaker, as we declare, "I hear you!" We go on to demonstrate different forms of artistic expression, dialogue about it, and develop our own original work. We constantly inspire each other.

"Shattered" by Misunderstood

"Life and Death" by The Scholar
One day Life and Death were going for a walk and having a talk. Life asked death, "Why do people hate you?". Death looked at life and said, "Because I am the painful truth and you are a beautiful lie."

"My Heart" by Heartfelt

By the color of my skin by the love in my heart
No matter what people say I know I will make a mark
When I stop and look around I see tears and shattered hearts
It makes me wonder why life has to be so hard
I have been brought to light so I stand on my feet
And say what God has asked me to speak
Knowing it might change a life is what means so much more to me.
So I say let the world shine in joy and laughter and that is why my life matters.

"Queens" by Thunda

Queen! Ruler of love and prosperity, affection, and charm. But where is her king? Where's her knight in shining armor to come sweep her off her feet, slay the dragon and win over her heart? Where are the wedding bells, white dresses, flowers? Oh my! Search through the crowd looking for answers that can't be solved all this time. She been searching, searching for a love that will never come. No light in a dark pit you grew yourself. No fire on a torch. No man on a noble steed. No solitude with a hand, a kiss. Just a tall tower and a girl called Queen…

"A Black Woman" by Thunda

Fire and desire, the warmth of getting
What you want, when you want it
Showing people you the bomb
Making people tremble at the sight of you
Your beauty
The sway of your hips
The white of your smile
That style you got, to die for
What they call fat, Oh No babe. We call it thick.
Thunda thighs that hypnotize
Made to love and give love
They don't got nothing on me
The glossy lips, hoops, golden, brown, chocolate skin.
With our fist balled up in the air and sing out
WE ARE BLACK WOMEN!

"The Dancer" by The Dreamer

One day there was a girl who wanted to be a dancer. She loved to dance every time she had a chance. But her parents thought her dream to become a dancer was stupid. All they wanted her to do is work to take over the family business. But every time she had a break she would sneak away to practice her dancing without her parents knowing. After years of practice, she finally had her chance to show off how well she could dance. She danced in front of a crowd that was wild and they loved her style. Now that she's older she feels a lot bolder and dances whenever she pleases.

The moral of the story is: always follow your dreams no matter what.

"POWER" by Big Sister

Black's vs white's always starts a fight. Joy starts to fade away and people start to think about the Martin Luther days. I started to remember things like boycott, segregation and how they said blacks in the back and whites in the front, and just by writing that puts hurt in my heart because everyone's life matters. What happen in the past is the past and we can't change it, but if I had a power to change the past, blacks and whites would be treated equally and not one better than the other. What Is Your Power?

"Why Do They Want Me?" by Young Black Man

My Struggles

I feel like we only have three options in life: court, college, or the cemetery…
~ Big Smoke, participatin youth

In our workshops and discussions, the youth were encouraged to consider the greatest threats to their welfare. Overall, they agreed that violence was their biggest threat. They were encouraged to journal, write, and take photographs throughout the summer. Regular experiences with different forms of violence became a prominent theme. They are concerned most with bullying, suicide, racial violence, incarceration, gender-based violence, and domestic violence. Below are some of the original works of expression that these young people produced.

"**Animals in a Cage**" by Participating Teens

"Violence Makes Me Feel" by FAF Teens

(CHORUS)Violence, violence, violence makes me feel…
I feel…
POWERLESS
Like an hour glass time will pass
Unsafe in my 'hood
(CHORUS)
Don't feel PROTECTED
Feel unwanted, neglected
From life REJECTED
(CHORUS)
System says I'm fine
Out of line with my own kind
Walking this maze BLIND
In decline doin' time
Behind bars, Beautiful minds
BEAUTIFUL MINDS, BEAUTIFUL MINDS, BEAUTIFUL MINDS!
I feel..
POWERFUL!!

"I Want More" by Misunderstood and Big Smoke

A society corrupt with injustice. But…Must this go on with no justice?
Stupid petty crime. Sometimes it feels like only blacks doing time.
At-risk teens with skin color just like mine
Yet all society gives us is locked doors…Cells measuring four by four.
But, what if I want more? Not just a locked door.
What if I want knowledge? What if I want to go to college?
What if I want more?
Knowledge is power. I don't want to end my life at this hour!
What if I want to make something of myself?
Not being like a broken toy on a shelf?
What if I want more?
What if I want to stop bangin' and slangin'…
Stopped by cops for how my pants are hangin'?
What if I want more?
What if I want to stop being profiled for my past.
Write a *new* play, with a *new* cast.
What if I want more?

"When I Needed Help" by Lonely One

When I needed help with my homework
Everyone was too busy.
I ended up doing it myself.
When I was sick
Everyone was gone.
I made soup so that I could feel better.
When I was injured
Everybody was inside doing something else.
I went inside, wiped off the blood and put alcohol on my leg, and put a bandage on.
I felt proud.
I can take care of myself.
I can do stuff.
It would have been nice to have help,
But I have learned how to take care of myself.
With these skills I will take care of others
When others need help…
I will help.

"Bullying" by Lonely One

Untitled Poem by The Quiet Artist

I'm sick of crying
Tired of Trying
Outside I'm happy
But inside I'm crying

"Disconnect" by In-Between

Do you even speak Spanish?"
"You look too Hispanic to not speak it"
"Mi pequeña estrella por qué no hablas español","Gringa","mut"
Are all things that I hear too often
Sometimes I sit and ponder if my disconnection to where I "come from"
Is a big as a deal as everybody makes it seem
Of course, you may not know what I'm talking about or even what I mean
The one thing that kept me connected, I lost at nine
Sometimes I sit and I cry and wonder why
WHY WOULD HE TAKE THAT FROM ME, THE ONE THING I LOVED?
Her love it wrapped around my heart like a glove
And when she left it disintegrated into a million pieces
You would think the least I could do is learn my culture
Learn about where I come from learn how to speak it
I ask myself about my future children
Will they feel disconnected,
Always on a search for who they really are?
You know I just wish that I had a car
So I could drive away from pain, the sorrow and emptiness I feel inside
Of course you will never tell,
They tell me to smile, don't let them see you down, and of course I could not help but to abide.
So again, I ask myself if my disconnection to where I come from is as big of a deal as everyone makes it seem,
I think so because as long as I'm disconnected there will always be a missing piece of me. People often ask me if I speak Spanish
The real question is do you speak *me*?

"Not Like Her" by Quiet Storm

Why do I stay…When she disapproves of me in dismay?
I have other places where I can go, but I have a fear of being alone.
Her attitude is so mean. It just makes me want to scream.
She tells me that I'm just like her. But I don't see it.
She seems so broken. And now, my heart has been awoken.
So, I'm stuck here taking care of my sister and brother.
But, I refuse to be like my mother.

Sinner by Thunda

In this beginning i will say hello and later goodbye.
for i will ask god for forgiveness, for i have sinned, and no not a one time sinner.
a sinner of mind.
like a switch i can't turn off, for it has taken over part of my mind.
i will try and try, and ask for forgiveness again and again, but when will it end?
locked up with a new friend who has surprises waiting for me,
flowers all around my family crying and letting down my grandma 'cause i didn't keep my promise…
i don't want that
i want to be my own person
i don't want sin overcoming my mind and my heart.
in this ending I will say goodbye and in my beginning i said hello.
for I do not know what the future will hold for me.

Depression by Thunda

Depression is weird
I drown in my fears
I can't move even if I want to
Holding me back my panic attacks
Have ways of holding me hostage
Sit on my couch a joint in my mouth
I can't leave my house
How on earth did I get back here?
I thought things were good
I thought that I could…
Be normal today
Depression is strange
Depression is weird
I have spent many years like this
Being this way
I pray for change
And Brighter days
I'm sad…But I'm hopeful

"Poor & Homeless" by Bright and Bold

"Violence" by Heartfelt

My heart isn't silenced
I stand against violence
Independent from it
I like to run it, but
When I run my mouth
I'm talking about society
People dying and kids
On these streets
Doing all this violence
The enemy comes to steal,
Kill and destroy and cheat.
My mama got me on my knees
Sayin' Lord help me please!
Can barely go to sleep
Without seeing a flashing
Light on my street.

"Girlfight" by Big Sister

"Change" by Heartfelt

Loving care is the key to this harmony speech
I'm lyrically speaking about society.
People dying and kids lying on these streets
Doing on this violence
My heart ends its silence
I stand against all violence
Beatings and bombings and
Rapers and robbers
And there's more,
but I'll keep that stored
beneath the pain that I have gained
The enemy comes to steal, kill and destroy
And every boy and every girl got a chapter
in this story.
Let's fall on our knees
Let the Lord give us strength
To believe
That we can
Achieve any
And everything
Society's going through a phase
But trust and believe
This will fade away
There's a crowd and
There's a voice
Time for me to let them know
The right choice
That my life and your life matter.

"Gang Violence" by Big Sister

"Problems" by Zyeflex

Blood drippin' (woo)
Tears liftin'
Don't lose yo' life while you're winning
Be my friend, nah, yo' head is spinning
Take me, I'm alive
I'll be whipping
Give me your trust,
Huh, oh, I hear ya!
People killing
I'm feeling
Hear, I'm so whippy, so rippy, cut and pippy
So hippy, so fresh and winning
And that's where I come in
My life matters
That's where I come in
Ago (ame), Ago (ame), Ago (ame)
My problems aren't my bars
They let me go to mars
I pull up fire like the stars
Ago (ame)
Ok, listen
Aye, Aye, Aye (2X)
I jump up and I wash then I know I'ma have to deal with people fussing man
Like a retired man,
And I don't see too much I think I'm blind,
And I know that I'm not crying
I see it and I gotta receive it
and I know my family know to believe it.

"Life Stain" by Misunderstood

Life is pain
Leaving me feeling like a stain on the carpet.
May as well put me in a tar pit.
I'm tired of all my nightmares,
All the laughs and glares behind my back.
The stack of life is against me.
Why won't you see me in pain?
The stain I feel
I think I got a steel knife in my wind pipe.
But still gotta fight,
Just gotta make it to sleep at night
Is this the end…Or is it?
Blink once…You might just miss it.
I'm now gonna end it.
Send it back, now.
Put the stack back.

"Feelings" by Heartfelt

It's hard seeing my mama cry
'Cause the feelings in me shot and then die
Y'all torturing my hood
Got me jumping from place to place
For a better place to live
It's like two colors.
Red or blue
Fighting over number one spot
That's their hood but you're hurting these kids in the end
Y'all doing stupid time
For some dumb crimes
Y'all got me in pain
Stop all these games
I'm expressing how I feel, so I can heal,
Join us
United means one
Together, we fight as one
Stand as one
Speak as one
And if you join my ride, you'll show all your pride!

"**Graveyard**" by The Poetess

"Dilemma" by Misunderstood

A society corrupt with injustice
But, must this go on with no justice?
Stupid petty crime, yet it feels like only blacks doing time.
Just like the teens with skin color just like mine
And yours
Yet all society gives us is locked doors and four by four cells
Having to say goodbyes and farewells to families and friends
But, doesn't it seem like its cops that bend the law
You know Trevon Martin died before he could get a kiss from his ma Goodbye
Oh why did it have to be that guy?
Well me, I'm black and white
Yet I don't like to fight
Day and night
It would be a sight to see
Yes it would be
For all races to get along and sing the same song.

"They vs. We" by The Poetess

We try to just blend in with They
We try not to upset They
We try not to get in They's way
We try to shield ourselves from getting hurt
But sometimes what we do isn't enough and sometimes we mess up
But still They don't think We'll make it far in life
They think We are dumb
They look down upon We
They think they're superior to We and we are just a clog in their "perfect" machine
They think We steal
Do drugs, and kill
But still They take our culture
Take our clothes
And it's funny that They even wanna take our souls
But We can't keep up with their goals
So We try to keep our mouths closed
I just can't stress how scared We feel in this world
How unprotected We feel in this world
They who are supposed to protect us
But They just protect They
And We have to protect We by ourselves
They say it takes a village to raise a child but We feel like instead it's corrupting our children
They shoot up schools, movie theaters
And rape women
They kill our We's and then they basically get smack on the hand
They with a gun is a patriot We with a gun is a thug
But We just go to the store, to school, to work or just walk down the street and get shot down no questions asked
We are born original but They set out to see us as copies
Cookie cutter people in their eyes, planting We's like We're all the same with the same treatment
We are dead before We even get that trial
We are tired of seeing our little We's and our big We's being shot and killed for unnecessary reasons
We are tired of not being able to just walk down the street without feeling threatened

We are tired of getting bullied and not being good enough for They
We are tired of looking at the news and seeing our fellow We's talking about their dead We or their unconscious We
We are tired of just sitting here waiting for They to stop and listen to our pleas concerning our fellow We's
We are tired of having the talk with our little We's about safety in these fellow streets
I am tired of seeing They vs We
They vs We, They vs We
How about They *and* We or They *with* We
Or They *supporting* We and We *supporting* They
We are born mourning our already lost souls that are already sold to They and our lost lives We can't even touch 'cause They have it in the palm of their hands
But every time We try to confront another problem it seems to make matters worse. Just when We think it's getting better They and We go and mess it up
They say we're free but do We really believe that?
Do They really believe that we think we are safe in this world
When all we see is hatred in their eyes?
But They say We are free and that might just be
But not as long as THEY keep fighting with WE.

"Alcohol and Drugs" by The Poetess

"Daddy's Little Girl" by Quiet Storm

What you see in this picture is a beautiful, youthful, joyful and happy little girl
What I see is a girl wondering where her dad left her at three
That point in her life where the good times should be
But at least he's trying to come back
I kinda feel like it's a little late
This girl is almost sixteen and feels so out of place
The memories are still meddling
Of Mom and you madly arguing
You guys slept in separate rooms for years and years
The only times I seen you have fun was sitting and drinking beers
My name may be tattooed on your arm
But it doesn't heal my scars from the harm
You're here now, but you're seeing someone
Yet you constantly complain that she's not "the one"
She must have you tied to a thread, 'cause you have yet to leave
Hanging like a disco ball in my head, whose light I never see.

My Solutions

Our program is like the Island of Misfit Toys. Everybody belongs here, because they know they're not alone, they're seen, and they're loved here.
~ Shauna Hopkins, Program Director

Through the artistic process, we asked ourselves, "what if we lived in a better world?" We sought solutions to the challenges and threats that we experience in life. All of the youth agreed that the program is a safe haven for them – a place where they can go to be loved, challenged, encouraged, and built up. Artistically, we explore new positive possibilities and pathways where we could not only survive, but thrive!

Journey to Joy by Big Smoke

"On Top of the Clouds" by The Scholar

When I see rainy clouds, I smile to the sky because I know on top of these rainy clouds there is brightness when I make it through the storm. I know that there is always a rainbow after the storm.

"The Moment I Knew" by Young Black Man

When I didn't know my life mattered
I didn't want to live
Because I was depressed at the time
I locked myself in my room
And considered suicide.
But when I knew my life mattered is when I saw my grandmother cry
That's when I knew without me her life changes and it matters that I'm alive!

"My Heart" by Heartfelt

By the color of my skin by the love in my heart
No matter what people say I know I will make a mark
When I stop and look around I see tears and shattered hearts
It makes me wonder why life has to be so hard
I have been brought to light so I stand on my feet
And say what God has asked me to speak
Knowing it might change a life is what means so much more to me.
So I say let the world shine in joy and laughter
And that is why my life matters.

"Round of Applause" by Misunderstood (re-write of "*Life Stain*")

Life is pain, leaving me feeling like a stain
On the carpet.
I'm tired of all the nightmares.
All the stares
Behind my back.
The stack of life is against me.
Why can't you see my pain?
With no fame to gain,
I am slowly being driven insane.
There's a steel knife in my wind pipe
Yet I just gotta fight
Just to sleep tonight
This is the end…
Or is it?
Just blinking once might make you miss this.
The loving kiss from a crying mother.
It should be unlike any other thing in the universe.
Yet this same song verse is like my life,
It seems to be playing in reverse
Time to pull out the knife
And get free from this curse.

"Music" by Not Invisible

I LOVE MUSIC
Music loves me
You know how I know?
As I sit it dances around me
As it plays I dance around it
Music shows emotion
It shows Love , Anger, Excitement, Depression, Happiness
But music doesn't show one thing…
Itself
Music has no feet
But you feel the thundering of the beat
Music has no hands
But it touches you with a warm embrace
Music has no mouth
But you hear its descriptive bountiful words
Music can change people
Music can hurt people
Music can soothe people
I LOVE MUSIC
Because it is what saved me.

"In This Life That We're Livin'" composed by Brilliant, Bright and Bold

[CHORUS - In the life that we're living there's something we need
Keep your eyes on the prize but don't forget to breath
And the song that we're singing when word's out of place
We say what we know but that's not the case.]
Never ever be ordinary, that's what they say
How can we be extraordinary with all the noise in the way?
So we stand up tall and shed that fear that we wear
How can we be strong as ourselves with all the guilt that we bear
[CHORUS]
Now take your arms and see how far they reach
Now your friends are your ocean, and your love the beach!
When the world says jump, don't ask why
Instead ask how high.

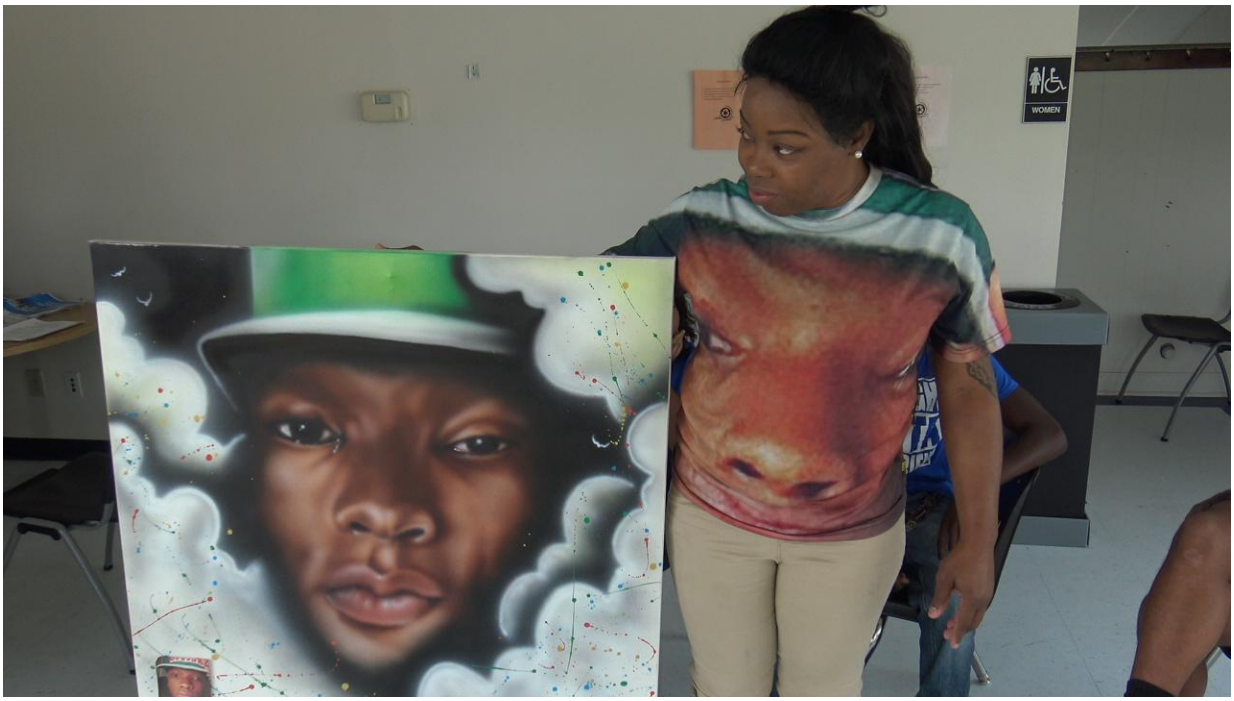
"Uplift Our People" by The Poetess

We need to uplift our people not degrade them
We've been through too much to throw them out on a whim
We wanna make black history
But all we seem to learn is white history
They say here's your 28 days and be on your way
Like we don't have anything else important to say
I mean you get your January March April and May
But we need more opportunities just to extend our stay
And it's sad that we're still out on this battlefield
When you don't even know why we're fighting this battle still
And they'll say it's all fine and dandy just give them this candy
Put your people in movies give them jobs and also randy
When just a little bit of diversity is good for this economy
But isn't America supposed to have equal rights not dishonesty
I mean honestly
You have Trump in one corner and Hilary in the next
"Ready to box" for a country with an equally bounced check
We have One that doesn't like us
The other will do anything to win
Guess who's who
But really guess who wins
I mean there's finally proof on how this economy's run
We're fighting for our rights that should've already been won
They say don't give them too much and they'll think they have some privileges
When we're just trying to raise our kids in this unholy village
Want us to march with their people
But at rallies hold up an "All lives matter" sign
And say all we do is get killed and whine
But why keep trying
When the system is multiplying
Multiplying our rules restrictions
And what we can and cannot do
All in notion of you
When we're supposed to have this big salad
But all we see is stew
America the great
Yeah it only seals your fate
So Uplift our people don't degrade them
Don't throw them out on a whim
Cherish our black kings and queens

"We the People" by The Scholar

When will We the People stand together
as one nation as one country, as one voice?
When will We the People fight against injustice?
When will We the People fight against unfair deportation?
When will We the People stand together
instead of putting labels on one another?
When will We the People stand hand in hand together?
So, America, you with me…
The choice is yours to make…
[PREAMBLE to the U.S. Constitution]

We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America.

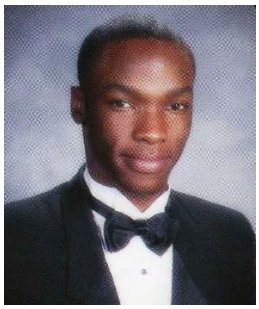


Felicia Jordan, Ravon Jordan's mother, at the 2016 Ravon Jordan My Life Matters Presentation in Fayetteville, NC

"Help" by The Poetess

I need somebody…Help
Not just anybody…Help
You know I need some…Help
Help…It's what we as kids need
Things that's minor to you but to me it's everything
I need you to listen to me
Listen to my thoughts
And look at my actions
You say actions speak so much louder than words
And when I look at yours I see that's what you're lacking
But my actions show that I need you and that I'm still a kid
And my words say that I am old enough to take care of myself
And when you're looking at my exterior, it looks like I have it all together
But isn't our skin supposed to protect our insides from falling out?
So yes, I'm holding myself up
Because it's my interior that you don't know about.
Help
I need somebody…Help
Not just anybody…Help
You know I need someone…Help
I got sick today
You say it's because I was standing out in the rain
But, honestly I just want you to feel my pain
And to see the stains that are upon my cheeks
Because I have to restrain myself from falling to your knees
And it feels like such of a burden to speak
'Cause if you're really supposed to help me
Then why am I afraid to fall to my feet?
Why can't I lift these weights from my shoulders
And let you hold them for a while?
I need to stretch out
I need to feel the sun kiss my skin
I want to be a kid again
Help
I need somebody…Help
Not just anybody…Help
You know I need someone…Help
I think I found somebody
He helped me through the pain
And let my express myself to heal this migraine
He let me be myself
When I didn't even know what that was
He heard me
And had others hear me too
With the help of staff
They all helped me to laugh
He told us that we matter and we're all meant to be heard
Yay!
I found somebody…Yay!
Not just anybody…Yay!
They helped me through…Yay!





Our children are speaking…Let's listen!

The *My Life Matters* project is a celebration of our youth, their beauty, brilliance, and boldness! This collection of our youth's creative expressions of their lived experiences has been put together in honor of Ravon Jordan, an aspiring college student and fashion designer who graduated from the youth intervention program, and stood up as a youth advocate against violence. Just 41 days after 19-year-old Ravon stood courageously before the Fayetteville City Council, in May of 2014, to speak out against gun violence in his community, he was killed by a stray bullet.

To celebrate Ravon's life, and the lives of the children in our community, the youth intervention program presented the "My Life Matters" Project Presentation Friday, August 5th, 2016. At this event, over 50 community members joined to witness our youth as they shared their hearts with their community at large via storytelling, poetry, and song. During these tense and harrowing times, this was an opportunity for our community to unite, wrap our children in our arms and assure them that indeed their lives matter to us all. Since then, Shauna Hopkins, the Director of the youth intervention program, and Sonny Kelly, a volunteer resident artist and UNC Chapel Hill doctoral student, have coordinated to incorporate artistic expression workshops at the program's annual Summer Achievement Camp each year. We invite you to gather with us to witness the culmination of these self-expression workshops designed to incite positive self-concept, community connection, and collective hope in our youth.

The "My Life Matters" Project features artistic performances for and by youth that can be used to help youth to work through trauma, explore positive life choices, improve positive self-concept and social engagement, and increase community awareness around youth issues. With the goals of increasing equity, awareness around youth issues, and cooperation to address those issues in our community, these youths will use their voices as a force for change!

APPENDIX C: THE TALK SCRIPT

The Talk
By Sonny Kelly

ACT I, Scene 1: CRASH!
****SOUND Files (MP3 Files played on WMP); SLIDES (Microsoft PowerPoint)***
Stage: *Center: one chair. Stage right: lectern, large desk, chalk board and book shelf w/books. Stage left: chest or blocks, short stool, chair and small table*

(DIM SPOTLIGHT ON CHAIR - CENTER)
(SOUND1:"Brown Baby"[72] lullaby) (41 sec.)
(LIGHTS: FADE TO BLACK AT 35 SEC.)
(SLIDE 1 BLACK) RIGHT(SLIDE 1 BLACK) LEFT
(LIGHTS UP *on SONNY in chair center*)

SONNY: *I've only just a minute. Only sixty seconds in it. Forced upon me, can't refuse, didn't seek it, didn't choose it, But it's up to me to use it. I must suffer if I lose it, Give an account if I abuse it, Just a tiny little minute But eternity is in it*[73]….Alright, you got everything? Backpack, lunch, glasses?...Glasses? C'mon man you know the rules. Glasses should be where? In the case or…
STERLING: On my face! I got 'em, Daddy…
SONNY: That's right!…Looking good, my man! Hey, and don't leave any fruits or vegetables in that lunch bag today. Eat it all, you hear me?! Don't you bring another piece of broccoli back to my house! You understand me?
STERLING: Ug…Yes Sir. But, Daddy, sometimes I run out of time at lunch.
SONNY: I bet you don't ever run out of time to eat pizza or drink chocolate milk, do you? Mmm, hmmm. Right! Don't you bring another piece of broccoli back to my house! You got that?
STERLING: Yes, Sir…
SONNY: Hey…Hey…Who loves you?
STERLING: Daddy and mommy…
SONNY: Who?
STERLING: Daddy and mommy!
SONNY: That's right! How much do we love you?
STERLING: Mucho, mucho, mucho.
SONNY: And what's that mean?
STERLING: A lot, a lot, a lot.
SONNY: You got it! **A lot, a lot, a lot!** (*SONNY turns on the radio)*

SOUND2: RADIO News (*recording)* (21 sec.)*:*
RADIO: Our top story is breaking right now in Baltimore where **rioting has broken out**
(SLIDE2: Baltimore Protests1) LEFT
in the streets. Violent clashes between police and roving groups have left several officers injured and turned one west Baltimore neighborhood into chaos. This violence

[72] "Brown Baby," track 9 on Oscar Brown Jr., *Sin & Soul*, Columbia CL 1577, 1960, 33⅓ rpm.
[73] Benjamin E. Mays, "God's Minute," in Randal Maurice Jelks, *Benjamin Elijah Mays: Schoolmaster of the Movement, A Biography* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 189.

comes just hours after Freddie Gray, who died under mysterious circumstances last week, while in police custody, **was laid to rest…** **(*RADIO OFF quickly*)**

SONNY: Son…We need to talk.(SLIDE3: BLACK) LEFT

SOUND3: WARP (long 11sec)

(LIGHT Shift to surreal slow flashes)

(*SONNY rises and crosses right; puts on glasses)*

(LIGHT Follow SONNY right then center)

ACT I, Scene 2: Defining "The Talk"

PROFESSOR: Langston Hughes **Let America be America Again.**

(SLIDE4: AMERICAN FLAG) RIGHT

Let it be the dream it used to be. Let it be the pioneer on the plain Seeking a home where he himself is free. America never was America to me[74].

(SLIDE5: BLACK) RIGHT

Good evening my friends…I said, "Good evening my friends!" (*Waits for a* response). It's about time we had a talk. In this often confusing, always uncertain, painfully thought-provoking age of the post-colonial, the post-modern, the post-racial, the post-whatever else you want to call it. Where black lives matter, blue lives matter, and all lives matter, but somehow we all end up sadder–We…need…to…talk. And, I don't have time for platitudes or political correctness, so, if you don't mind, I'm just gonna tell it like it T-I-is! As the **Good Book** says the TRUTH shall set you free[75]. Amen? But, first, I need to know something, my friends…Can we talk? No. Really. That's a real question from me to you. Can we talk? Can we talk? *Thank you.* ***(Chalk board)"***The Talk", as it has come to be known, is a resounding epidemic in communities of color in these United States. It is an activated artifact of an age long gone. A new craze based on an old habit. It's the kind of talk that **Mamie Till** (**SLIDE6: Emmett Till) RIGHT**

had with her only child, 14-year-old Emmett back in the summer of 1955. As she nervously packed him up for a trip from his native Chicago to visit her family down in Money, Mississippi. On that bright sunny August morning, Emmett was warned in the deep desperate tones of a mother who knew all too well the dire danger that Jim Crow justice posed to the bodies of bright black boys from Chicago. She called him by his nickname…(*Sit*) **(LIGHT Focus on CHAIR CENTER)**

MAMIE: Bo! Now, you listen here! Please, Bo. Just put a handle on all those "yes's" and "no's." Say, "Yes ma'am," or "No sir." Say, "Yes, Mr. So and So," and "No, Mrs So and So.[76]"

PROFESSOR: *That* "Talk" turned out to be their last. Just a few days later, Emmett Louis Till would be beaten, **murdered.**

(**SLIDE7: BLACK) RIGHT**

(LIGHT Follow PROFESSOR Right)

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[74] Langston Hughes, "Let America be America Again," in *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, eds. Arnold Rampersad and David Roessel (New York: Vintage Classics, 1995), 189.

[75] John 8:32.

[76] *DAR HE: The Lynching of Emmett Till,* directed by Rob Underhill (Durham, NC: Mike Wiley Productions, 2013), DVD.

His body, tossed into the Tallahatchie River, by Roy Bryant and his half-brother J.W. Milam – two angry white men who *merely suspected* that Emmett had flirted with a white woman - Roy's wife, Carolyn. Shortly after Roy and J.W. were found not guilty by a jury of their peers, they openly admitted to the murder. **Mamie insisted on an open casket funeral[77].** **(LIGHT Center)**

(SLIDE8: Emmett Till Funeral) RIGHT

MAMIE: Have you ever sent a loved son on vacation, and had him returned to you in a pine box, so horribly battered and water-logged that someone needs to tell you this sickening sight is your son, lynched? Let the people see what I've seen. I think everybody needs to know what has happened to **Emmett Till[78]**.

(SLIDE9: BLACK) RIGHT

(LIGHT Follow PROFFESSOR Right)

PROFESSOR: Now, I'd like to think that times have changed since 1955, right? Well, back in 2012, on Sunday, February 26th, in Sanford, FL, a 17-year-old black boy named **Trayvon Martin** **(SLIDE10: Trayvon Martin) RIGHT**

was stopped by a man named George Zimmerman, a community watch patroller who *merely suspected* that Trayvon was a criminal. Armed with only a bag of Skittles and a can of Arizona Tea that he'd just purchased from a local convenience store, Trayvon was stopped, shot, and **killed that night.** **(SLIDE11: BLACK) RIGHT**

The following year, shortly after George Zimmerman was found not guilty of Trayvon's death in a court of law, United States Attorney General, Eric Holder addressed the NAACP. (*Cross right*) **(LIGHT Right on lectern)**

(SLIDE12: NAACP Logo) RIGHT

ERIC HOLDER: Trayvon's death last spring caused me to sit down to have a conversation with my own 15-year-old son, like my dad did with me. This was a father-son tradition I hoped would not need to be handed down. But as a father who loves his son and who is more knowing in the ways of the world, I had to do this to protect my boy.I am his father, and it is *my* responsibility, not to burden him with the baggage of eras long gone, but to make him aware of the world that he must still confront[79].

(SLIDE13: AMERICAN FLAG) RIGHT

(LIGHT Follow PROFESSOR to Center)

PROFESSOR: **Let America be the dream the dreamers dreamed—Let it be that great strong land of love Where never kings connive nor tyrants scheme That any man be crushed by one above. It never was America to me.[80]**

(SLIDE14: BLACK) RIGHT

I recall the words of Howard L. Craft in his piece, "**Grandma's Letter to Peanut During His Freshman Year."**(*sits in chair as GRANDMA*)

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[77] *Time Photo*, "When One Mother Defied America: The Photo that Changed the Civil Rights Movement," *Time*, July 10, 2016, http://time.com/4399793/emmett-till-civil-rights-photography/.

[78] Editorial Board, "Everybody Needed to Know What Happened to Emmett Till," *Chicago Tribune*, July 12, 2018, https://www.chicagotribune.com/opinion/editorials/ct-edit-emmett-till-murder-mississippi-20180712-story.html.

[79] Garance Franke-Ruta, "Listening In on 'The Talk': What Eric Holder Told His Son About Trayvon," *Atlantic*, July 16, 2013, https://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2013/07/listening-in-on-the-talk-what-eric-holder-told-his-son-about-trayvon/277861/

[80] Hughes, "Let America Be America Again," 189.

(LIGHT Focus on CHAIR CENTER)

GRANDMA: *I was bragging on you to Mrs. Johnson, Sunday. My big rusty butt grandson is a freshman in college. I remember when you was playing with Power Rangers, now look at you, all growed up smart and handsome. Still, there some things I want you to keep in mind. I ain't worried bout you studying, you've always made A's. Your mama and your daddy done talked to you about drinking and them fast tail gals so I ain't much concerned about that neither. Just remember that college you go to is mostly white and you gon' have plenty of white friends; but the world y'all share ain't the same. When you get stopped by the police put your hands on the wheel and look straight ahead. Don't make no quick movements. Say yes sir and no sir, and don't ask no questions. Just take the ticket and we'll deal with it later; and if the lights ever come on behind you at night, you don't stop until you're in a public place. I know you done heard this a hundred times, but the time you don't heed it, we'll be headed to Greer's funeral home to make arrangements. My heart couldn't take that baby.*[81] (Sit up)

(SLIDE15: AMERICAN FLAG) RIGHT

PROFESSOR: Oh let my land be a land where Liberty Is crowned with no false patriotic wreath, But opportunity is real and life is free, Equality is in the air we breath. There's never been equality for me, nor freedom <u>in this homeland of the free</u>.[82] **(SLIDE16: BLACK) RIGHT**

"The Talk" has emerged as a sort of undesired discursive heirloom. An habitual hand-me-down from generation to generation.**(LIGHT Follow PROFESSOR Right)**

(Chalk board) It is a persistent reminder, that on any given day in this great land, the *location, disposition*, and *recognition* of any particular black body, may place *that* black body into the cross hairs of imminent deadly force. (*SONNY crosses to center chair*)

(SOUND4: WARP short) (8 sec)

(LIGHT Focus on CHAIR CENTER)

SONNY: Son. Son…Son…(*Rises and crosses stage left to put on POP's hat)*

(LIGHT Follow SONNY Left)

<u>ACT I, Scene 3: "The Two and the Ten"</u>

POP: (*Sitting in seat on Left*)Pay attention, now! Listen! Keep your hands on the two o'clock and the ten o'clock! Now, don't reach for nothing until the officer asks you for it. Have your license ready, and always keep your registration card in the glove compartment, on the top, where you can get to it. And, don't forget your insurance card! They always try to get you with the insurance. Have that ready too. Just follow the officer's instructions and answer his questions. And…make sure you call him "sir" or "officer. Understand? Boy, you listening to me?

SONNY: I got it Pop! I got it! Two and the ten…license…registration…insurance…I got it! (*To audience)* It's 1992. **(LIGHT Follow SONNY Down Center)**

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[81] Howard L Craft, "Grandma's Letter to Peanut During His Freshman Year," in *Raising the Sky,* (Durham, NC: Jacar Press, 2016), 35.

[82] Hughes, "Let America be America Again," 190.

I'm 16 and about to get my driver's license. And, outside of girls, it's the only thing I can think about! So, about a year before this, a man named **Rodney King**.

(SLIDE17: Rodney King Mug Shot/Video) LEFT

was beaten almost to death after he was pulled over by Simi Valley Police officers, which led to the famous L.A. riots just about one hour from my house. I mean, you could see the smoke from **the freeway.** **(SLIDE18: BLACK) LEFT**

That whole thing was complicated for me. I come from a family of cops and military people. (*Cross left to sit in chair as MOM*) My mom says,

(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Left)

MOM: Well you know your grandfather was an L.A. police officer all my life, and *his* father, Grandpa Claude was one of the first black firefighters in the city. I always felt safe around cops. You know, I would drop my dad's name to get out of traffic tickets or parking fines…(*Cross Center)* **(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Center)**

SONNY: My parents raised me in the suburbs of Orange County, CA, where I always felt safe. There were lots of kids of color in my community. Latino, Asian, South Asian, Pacific Islander, Arabic, Persian, you name it. We had it! Only *their* races were named for geographical locations and languages, while mine was just a color. I was always…"that *black* kid over there!""Your hair is so cool! Does it get wet? Can I touch it?", "Dude! Do you rap! Oooh, spit some rhymes for us, bro!", "Oye, mira este mayate, baila negrito", "Hey *My dan*, you play basketball?", "You like her? Well, you know she doesn't like black guys, right?"Being the only black kid in most of my classes and social settings wasn't *all* bad. Hip Hop was king which gave me automatic **street credit**.

(SOUND5: 90's Hip Hop beat) (35 sec) 30%

(SLIDE19:Sonny Teen)LEFT

So, I entered the world each day with an impervious armor, fortified by dance and diction lessons from my cousins up in L.A. "Whattup, Cuz! Bet! Word! Hey that's my jam right there for real though!" My breastplate was this leather medallion with the African continent embroidered onto it in red, black and green. You know what I mean? My helmet was a prominent perfectly picked high top fade, and I shielded myself from any haters with a black Bart Simpson shirt that I got form the Slauson Swap Mall. **It simply read**…

(SLIDE20: Bart Simpson) RIGHT

(SOUND: Fade to Off)

It's a Black thing, you wouldn't understand." Meanwhile, I took it upon myself to read Alex Haley's ***Roots*** and ***The Autobiography of Malcom X***. But, still, where I'm from, we didn't talk much about racism or oppression, discrimination, or police brutality. That was stuff that used to happen back in the day, you know? My parents had moved here from a mostly black and brown neighborhood in South Central, Los Angeles just before I was born. They said they wanted a **better life for my brothers and me.** (*Cross right)* **(SLIDE21: BLACK) RIGHT**

(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR Right)

PROFESSOR: Knock, knock (*Who's there?*)! Ghetto (*Ghetto who*?) **(Chalk board)** "Ghetto" and "Suburbs") *Get to* the suburbs if you want the best schools, safe streets, and a better life for your family. See, for centuries, Black families were actively excluded from white neighborhoods by discriminatory policies and predatory lending. White

homeowners knew that having even one Black family in their neighborhood would prove poisonous for property values. So, they kept Blacks out by any means necessary. Meanwhile banks and insurance companies took to **drawing red lines**

(SLIDE22: Red Line Map) RIGHT

around Black, Brown, and poor neighborhoods to mark the "high risk" places and people to whom they would *not* grant loans or insurance. So, the Color Line became the **Red Line**.

(SLIDE23: BLACK) RIGHT

But, by the mid 1970's anti-discrimination laws like the Fair Housing Act made it possible for some suburbs to become the upwardly **mobile Black family's Ellis Island.**

(SLIDE24: Statue of Liberty) RIGHT

"Give me your tired, your poor, Your huddled masses yearning to breathe free…"[83] as long as they have no criminal record, good credit, and can make this mortgage payment…Not to mention a car, car insurance and a **driver's license.**

(SLIDE25: BLACK) RIGHT

(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Left)

SONNY: So, I finally got my license…after taking the test twice.

DMV TESTER: Alright! Please pull the car over here and put it in…(*Body slams forward)* park. And, we're finished.

SONNY: How'd I do?

DMV TESTER: Well, Mr. Kelly. You made some interesting choices back there. But, you passed…Barely.

SONNY: I passed? I passed! Yes! Thank you! Thank you! What's funny is: my father actually taught Drivers' Ed, so I really should've done a lot better on the test. But, I remember that Pop would teach his students that keeping their hands on the "two and the ten" allowed them to react more quickly and defensively while the vehicle was in motion. But for *me* "the two and the ten" was also a lesson in the business of survival whenever the vehicle was stopped. Within a few months I learned first-hand the value of that lesson…And I was reminded of who I was, and where I was. (*Cross center)*

(LIGHTS Focus on CHAIR CENTER)

So, one day, some friends and I went over to Newport Beach, a mostly white, wealthy area. I drove my dad's old pick-up truck, loaded with a bunch a brown and black kids from Santa Ana, a mostly working class city. I guess I was just excited because everybody was like "Sonny, Dude! Turn right. The beach is over there! The beach is over there! Make a right! Bro, Make a right!" So, I turned right…onto a one-way street, directly in front of an oncoming **police cruiser.**

(LIGHTS Flash Red White and Blue)

(SOUND5: Siren) (3 sec.)

The officer stepped out of his vehicle.

(OFFICER strolls around the car scanning with eyes)

[83] "The New Colossus," Statue of Liberty, National Park Service, January 31, 2018, https://www.nps.gov/stli/learn/historyculture/colossus.htm.

OFFICER:"What are you homeboys doin' out here today?"…Goin' to the beach, huh? You know what you did there, right? Right. *That* is a one-way street. License and registration, please. Proof of insurance. This car is registered to a Berry Kelly. Who's that? Your father, huh?(*Scans entire vehicle with his eyes)…*Okay. Here's your ticket. You can appeal it by following these instructions on the back, or just pay the fine here and mail it in by this date. You homeboys be safe.

SONNY: Yes, Sir. (*Watch OFFICER walk away*) I don't think he ever called me by my name. I wondered what "homeboy" meant to him.

(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR in Audience)

(*Greeting audience members with daps, high fives*)

PROFESSOR: Homeboy! What's up my Homeboy! Homegirl! Homey! Homes! Home Skillet! Home Fry! (*Returns to stage on Right)* **According to Merriam Webster**,

(SLIDE 26: "Homeboy" definition) RIGHT

the word "homeboy" simply means "a boy or man from one's neighborhood, hometown, or region. **But, it can also mean…** **(SLIDE 27 "a fellow member…") RIGHT**
Will you please read that for me? ("A fellow member of a youth gang")[84] One word, two very **distinct definitions**.

(SLIDE28: BLACK)RIGHT
(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR Down Center)

Back in 1903, W.E.B. Du Bois wrote a book called ***The Souls of Black Folk***. In it he explains the experience of many Black American's: "One ever feels his two-ness, - an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder."[85] You see, whether we like it or not, these two souls daily navigate a precarious collision course. And, it's only a matter of time before…(*SONNY is dragged back to the car)*

ACT I, Scene 4: Of Black Boys and Men

SONNY: It's Spring. 2015. April. My son is 7. In the first grade…(*Sit).*

(LIGHTS Focus on CHAIR CENTER)

You got it! **A lot, a lot, a lot!** (*SONNY turns on the radio)*

(SOUND6: RADIO & Blackman Cacophony)(25sec)

This violence comes just hours after Freddie Gray, who died under mysterious circumstances last week, while in police custody, ***was laid to rest…***

(MOVEMENT: SONNY Fleeing – no way out)

(SLIDE29, SLIDE30, SLIDE31, SLIDE32 – Images of black men - 3 sec. ea.) RIGHT
(SLIDE33: BLACK) RIGHT

PROFESSOR: Did you hear that?...A ***black*man!**

(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR)

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[84] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "homeboy (*n.*)," accessed June 20, 2019, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/homeboy.
[85] W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York: Dover, 1994), 2.

Let that sink in. Feel that. In your skin. In your guts. In your bones. Feel what it does to you. A "Black Man"***(Chalk board)*** My friends, whether we like it or not, that term is more loaded than *all* the 12-gauge shotguns, .357 Magnums and .45-caliber pistols that the **Black Panther Party**

(**SLIDE34: Black Panthers) RIGHT**

brandished when they scaled the steps of the California State Capitol back in 1967, declaring their human rights before God and Governor **Ronald Reagan himself!**

(**SLIDE35: BLACK) RIGHT**

C'mon, say it with me- "Black man." Come on, let me hear you! Say it. "Black man." Say it again. I want you to take a moment to consider what that term means to you. Now, if I'm being honest, it's a little unfair of *me* to ask *you* what the term - "Black man" - means to *you*. When the truth is, we don't even really know, do we? It depends doesn't it? The age of said Black man, his size, his dress, his profession, his criminal record. Not to mention, the time of day in which you encounter this Black man. And, of course, as the real estate agents have taught us…*location, location, location*…A theater, a classroom, a city street, a back alley, a prison, a football field …This colonized, often brutalized and criminalized *infrahuman*- this Black man in the western world - has learned that his *value*, his *meaning*, his *humanity,* his very *life* may depend in any given moment upon a constellation of factors that far exceed his own reach. So, it's Sunday, April 12th, 2015 and an **unarmed black man…**

(**SLIDE36: FREDDIE GRAY ARREST) RIGHT**

Just 25 years old is arrested by the Baltimore police for reasons that are rather inconsequential now. By Saturday, April 18th this black man is in a coma caused by what the doctors call "forceful trauma". On Sunday, April 19th at approximately 7:00am Eastern Standard Time, this Black **man is dead.**

(**SLIDE37: FREDDIEGRAYFUNERAL) RIGHT**

Between April 19th and May 6th the streets of West Baltimore are ablaze. I'm talking, **Protests**, **riots**, **looting.** (**SLIDE38, SLIDE39, SLIDE40, SLIDE41: Baltimore)**

A state of emergency is declared in the city limits. At least **20** police officers injured…**27** drugstores looted…**60** structure fires**…150** vehicle fires…more than **250** people arrested…Over **300** businesses damaged…**Thousands** of police and Maryland National Guard troops deployed. All this cost the City of Baltimore an estimated **$20 million**! When the smoke cleared, **6** police officers were accused of this Black man's death. **3** were acquitted. **3** had all charges dropped. There were **zero** convictions. All this, because of **one** Black man? One Black man who was **some mother's child.**[86]

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[86] Yvonne Wenger, "Damage to Businesses from Baltimore Rioting Estimated at About $9 Million," *Washington Post,* May 13, 2015, https://www.washingtonpost.com/local/damage-to-businesses-from-baltimore-rioting-estimated-at-9-million/2015/05/13/5848c3fe-f9a8-11e4-a13c-193b1241d51a_story.html?utm_term=.1c3b6cf5d810; Richard A. Oppel Jr., "West Baltimore's Police Presence Drops, and Murders Soar," *New York Times,* June 12, 2015, https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/13/us/after-freddie-gray-death-west-baltimores-police-presence-drops-and-murders-soar.html; Ian Simpson and Warren Strobel, "Thousands of Police Descend on Baltimore to Enforce Curfew after Riots, *Reuters,* April 27, 2015, https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-police-baltimore/thousands-of-police-descend-on-baltimore-to-enforce-curfew-after-riots-idUSKBN0NI1N720150428; Rick Seltzer, "Baltimore Estimates Riot Costs at $20 Million," *Baltimore Business Journal*, May 26, 2015,

(SLIDE42: FREDDIE GRAY)RIGHT

Some father's son…some grandparent's hope, pride, and joy. One Black man named Freddie Gray. Freddie Gray was a man...Excuse me...Freddie Gray was a Black man...Who, like Emmett, Trayvon, Tamir Rice, Mike Brown, Eric Garner, Terence Crutcher, Filando Castille, Alton Sterling, Stephon Clarke, Botham Jean, and so many others who have perished at the hands of people with power and pistols- Like them, he was once, not long ago, just a little ***black boy.*** (**SLIDE43:FREDDIEGRAY CHILD) RIGHT**

(*SONNY sits in car*) **(LIGHTS Focus on CHAIR CENTER)**

(SLIDE44: BLACK) RIGHT

SONNY: He has this beautifully brown chocolate skin that he gets from his mother. Deep dark brown eyes that hide behind the rounded folds of his cheeks when he smiles. He got those from me. Dark tightly curly hair designed by God to grow from his scalp and protect his precious brain from the intense African sun. His name is Sterling. He reminds me of my Pop (*Looks at projection)*.

(SLIDE45: POP AS A BOY) LEFT

Pop was once a **black boy, too**.

(**SOUND8: *MuddyWaters "Manish Boy"*) at 30%**

(LIGHTS Follow POP Left)

POP: My last day at the Blue Bar. I was 9…maybe 10 years old.

(SLIDE46: BLACK) LEFT

Rudy was a kid about a year younger than me. He liked to follow me around all the time. Rudy Johnson played running back for the 49ers. A real big shot. But back then, he was following me around…Each day, after school, I would run home to pick up this raggedy old wooden box I called a shoe shine kit. I had finger painted "ten cents" on either side with Shin-ola shoe polish. We were at the Blue Bar. Good money there. I used to work the Blue Bar and two or three other joints. Rudy would follow me around, trying to make a little change on the shoes I couldn't get to*. I learned, you just had to be at the right place at the right time, and willing to hustle***.** So, one day…the owner of the place…I forget his name. Older white guy. Anyway, I was shining his shoes when he reached down to rub my head for good luck…That's what people did back then. Rub a nigga's head for luck. I don't know why they did it. **They just did it.**

(SOUND OFF Abruptly)

SONNY: Dark tightly curly hair designed by God to grow from his scalp and protect his precious brain from the intense African sun.

POP: I jerked away and he slapped the back of my head. I'd let people rub my head for luck before, but this day was different. I don't really know why. It just was. When he hit me, I picked up my shoe shine kit and **crossed that street.**

(**SOUND9: *MuddyWaters "Manish Boy"*[87]) at 50%**

He didn't really hit me that hard. But, something happened. Something rose up inside me. I can't explain it. (**SOUND10: *MuddyWaters "Manish Boy"*) at FULL**

I picked up a can of Shin-ola and threw it **right at him**. (**SOUND: *OFF* Abruptly)**

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https://www.bizjournals.com/baltimore/news/2015/05/26/baltimore-estimates-riot-costs-at-20-million.html.

[87] "Mannish Boy" Mudy Waters, recorded May 24, 1955 in Chicago, IL.

I think it landed by his feet, but I don't know. I didn't see it. I was too busy running as fast as I could. Laid low for a couple of days after that. I never went back to the Blue Bar, and *now* Rudy Johnson had a new spot to shine…Making that *good* money!

SONNY: Good money! That man invented the honest hustle! Worked for every dime he ever got. Never wasted one. His mother was a cleaning woman and his father worked **different jobs here and there.** **(SLIDE47: MA & SNOOK) LEFT**
The word is that my grandfather "Snook" –drank, gambled and partied away most of his pay. On more than one occasion, my grandmother was known to take a cast iron pot to his head for coming home late with empty pockets, smelling of liquor and strange women**.** We called her "Ma." Everybody called her Ma. I guess that was the best name we could think of for a woman who had raised her kids, some of the neighborhood kids; truth be told, some of their kids', kids'…Ma was tough! She believed in tireless hard work…**what Pop calls hustle…**

(SLIDE48: BLACK) LEFT

POP: Ma was the maid at the Parks home for over 20 years. I remember. The only way I could visit her was at the back door. At school, I always noticed how the Parks kids treated me differently. See, Black kids were raised not to trust Whites, but it looked to me like most White kids were raised to hate Blacks. The Parks kids acted like we didn't have nothing in common; but I could see the same sharp creases they had in their jeans were the same sharp creases I had in mine. Couldn't nobody starch and press like Ma!

SONNY: Pop, the only boy in a family of 5 sisters learned early in life to work and earn. And, I guess he never stopped. **I always missed him as a kid.**

(SLIDE49: POP w/SONS) LEFT

I mean, Pop was there, and my brothers and I knew he cared. But, he would work twelve, fourteen-hour days like a champ. He taught high school biology, science, driver's ed, and any other classes he could pick up. In his off time, he coached football, and somehow found time to deliver televisions. He even worked as the night attendant at a local convenient store, until he earned enough to buy his own convenient store.

POP: (*Pick up T-Shirt)* Kelly's Mini Market! I never wanted you boys to go through what I went through. It was tough coming up the way I did. I never got to spend time with my dad the way I spend time with you boys. I'm proud of you.

SONNY: When I was little, he'd call me "Daddy's Pumpkin Pie." Or, if he wanted me to run an errand, he'd call me…

POP: Boy Wonder! Boy Wonder, hand me that remote control over there. Boy Wonder, go get me a boar brush and come scratch your daddy's back with it. Ay Chihuahua! Porqué, hombre! No más! No más!

SONNY: That was all the Spanish he knew. It meant I was doing a good job. And sometimes, he'd just stare at me like I was some kind of precious work of art or something. I guess it's the same way I look at my **sons now.** (*Cross Center)*

(SLIDE50: BLACK) LEFT

(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Center)

I remember the first day I met my Sterling. I remember staring into his new face, his little brown eyes squinting at the glare of the hospital lights. And the kid's got a pair of lungs on him. I mean, he is wailing! I look at is mother. Weak, exhausted, but somehow more angelic and alluring to me than ever before. She gives me the nod. And, it's like that scene out of *Roots* when Kunta Kinte's dad holds him up in the moonlight. I'm dating myself. It's like that scene out of *Lion King* when Rafiki is holding up Simba on Pride Rock. Only instead of a lush African forest or a sprawling savannah, I'm in a hospital with all these people and bright lights and this baby who is screaming like somebody's killing him. "You are Sterling." He stops crying. **Our eyes lock….**

(SOUND11: "Brown Baby"[88]) (23 sec)

PROFESSOR: ***(Chalk board)*** "Sterling" from the Middle English "steora" which means star, followed by the diminutive "suffix", "ling". Sterling, literally means, "little star." Figuratively, it has come to mean…

SONNY: Pure and thoroughly excellent, as he is and always will be in my eyes. The year Sterling was born, I was home almost every night for dinner. I was there for his first step and his first word…It was "thank you"…I made my first six figure salary, more than my father had ever made in a single year. Working one job. I was a pharmaceutical sales rep, selling Viagra. The stuff sold itself! All I had to do was **be at the right place at the right time…and willing to hustle…**

ACT II, Scene 1: Sterling and Kalief

SONNY: Sterling is named after one of my best friends from Stanford, award winning actor Sterling K. Brown. Sterling's middle name is, Berron. It's a combination of his grandfathers' names. Pop's name is Berry and my wife's father is Ron. Two retired educators and pillars of their communities. Sterling Berron Kelly looks almost exactly like Berry Kelly did when he was a boy. It's like watching history repeat itself.

(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Left)

POP: (*Crossing Left)* One morning when I was 5 or 6 years old, I think…I was brushing my teeth w/baking soda and a glass of water on the front porch. It was time for the cattle to return home. One of the old cows, Molly was her name. She brushed by me. Something must have spooked her, because she turned her head toward me and butted me right off that porch. I flew into the air and fell to the ground. My sisters laughed. I was just mad. My pride was hurt more than anything. Everybody said I was messing with that cow. But I wasn't. I was just standing there. Minding my own business. Brushing my teeth.

SONNY: To this day, my Aunt Brenda swears…

[88] "Brown Baby," *Sin & Soul*.

AUNT BRENDA: He was messing with that cow! Berry was a bad boy! Bro - That's what we called your daddy - Bro was always into something. I'm telling you, he was messing with that cow!

SONNY: So, fast forward to a few years ago. I'm in this movie theater lobby and "Bro's" twin grandson is begging me for fifty cents… (*Cross Down Center)*

(LIGHTS Center)

STERLING: Daddy, can I have two quarters! Please! Please! I want to play a game?

SONNY: Sterl, we're here to watch a movie, not waste money in the lobby. C'mon let's go!

STERLING: Please, Daddy! Please! Please! It's the claw game. I'm getting good at it. See that yellow duck right there. I think I can get it. Can I please have 50 cents?

SONNY: Son, you know how I feel about that claw game! I don't know why you waste your money on that thing. The house always wins!

STERLING: No it doesn't! Last time, I got that teddy bear. Remember Daddy!

SONNY: Yeah, after you put like $5 in the machine! So, you spent $5 to get a raggedy teddy bear worth 50 cents. Like I said, son…the house always wins…Ugh…Forget it…Here…Go ahead and waste my money…But hurry up!

STERLING: Yes! Thank you, Daddy! Watch this Daddy…I'm gonna get that duck! Watch!...(*Hits the start button. Confused, he tries other buttons*). Daddy, it took my money! It took my money! (*STERLING bangs on the machine*)

SONNY: Sterling! Have you lost your mind?! All I could think about was the management calling the police on this unruly black kid for vandalizing their machine.

(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR Right)

PROFESSOR: (*Crossing Right)* The **book of *Ecclesiastes***, *Chapter 3:* To everything *there is* a season, A time for every purpose under heaven:[2] A time to be born, And a time to die; A time to plant, And a time to pluck *what is* planted; A time to kill, And a time to heal; a time to break down, And a time to build up…

SONNY: A time to talk. (*Cross & sit)* **(LIGHTS Focus on CHAIR CENTER)**
Son, we need to..Talk about what, exactly? I think about Kalief. **Kalief Browder…**

(SLIDE51: KALIEF BROWDER) LEFT

I probably think about him every day. The kid had these big brown eyes that kind of…

PROFESSOR: They kind of peer right into your soul don't they? Look at them! Kalief, from the Arabic word "*caliph*" – a spiritual and civic leader of Islam claiming succession from the Prophet Muhammad. (*Cross Down Center)*

(LIGHTS Center)

"In the early hours of Saturday, May 15, 2010, just *ten days before his seventeenth birthday,* Kalief Browder and a friend were returning home from a party in the Belmont section of the Bronx, NY. Soon the boys found themselves squinting in the glare of a police spotlight." **(SOUND12: Kalief SIREN) (2 sec)**
OFFICER: Hey, you two rob anybody tonight?
KALIEF: "I didn't rob anybody, You can check my pockets."'
OFFICER: Hands on your heads (*frisk the boys*). Nothing… Alright. Let's go.
KALIEF: "What am I being charged for?"…"I didn't do anything!"
OFFICER: "We're just going to take you to the precinct. Most likely you can go home."

PROFESSOR: Kalief didn't go home. He was charged with 2nd degree burglary. Bail was set at $3,000. The bond was $900. Kalief's mother, Venida- who was heading a household by herself in the nation's poorest Congressional district- could not pay. When she finally got the funds from a generous neighbor ,she learned that it didn't even matter. A few months earlier, Kalief was caught joy riding in a bread truck. A stupid kid mistake, but, at 16, Kalief was tried as an adult, and now had a felony conviction for larceny on his record. This latest arrest, marked a potential violation of his probation. *Bail was denied.* So, this 16 year-old boy; the youngest and smallest of 7 children, nicknamed Peanut by his mother, would spend the next 3 years locked up in the New York City jail complex - Riker's Island – Accused of stealing a backpack, and refusing to take a plea.

KALIEF: "I didn't do it! You're not gonna make me say I did something, just so I can go home. If I gotta stay here just to prove that I'm innocent, then so be it!"

PROFESSOR: In Riker's Island, Kalief was repeatedly beaten and bullied by both corrections officers and inmates. Collectively, he spent over 700 days – that's nearly two years - in solitary confinement. 23 hours a day. A broken, innocent boy locked in a windowless cell by himself for 23 hours a day! Charged for a crime he never committed, and for which he was never even tried! Kalief was released on Wednesday, May 29th, 2013, without so much as an apology from the City of New York.[89]

KALIEF: "Before I went to jail, I didn't know about a lot of stuff, and, now that I'm aware, I'm paranoid…I feel like I was robbed of my happiness."

PROFESSOR: On Saturday, June 6, 2015, Kalief pushed an air-conditioning unit out of a second-floor window at his mother's house. He wrapped a cord around his neck and, pushed his body out the opening **feet first.**[90][91]

(SLIDE52: BLACK) LEFT

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[89] Jennifer Gonnerman, "Before the Law" in *The New Yorker.* (Sep. 29, 2014). Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2014/10/06/before-the-law
[90] Jennifer Gonnerman, *"*A Boy Was Accused of Taking a Backpack. The Courts Took the Next Three Years of his Life*"* in *The New Yorker (Dec. 6, 2015)*
[91] Sarah Begley, "Man Jailed for Three Years without Trial Commits Suicide" in *Time.* Retrieved from http://time.com/3913686/kalief-browder-suicide/ (Jun. 9, 2015)

Kalief missed his prom, he missed his high school graduation.

SONNY: He missed driving lessons. At the age of 22 Kalief Browder was just another dead black man from the 'hood. Because his black body was in the wrong place at the wrong time…Sterling, have you lost your mind?! (*Cross Right)*

(LIGHT Follow PROFESSOR Right)

PROFESSOR: Location*…Location…Location…* In 2012, New York City police officers stopped and frisked approximately 1,460 human bodies a day. Nearly 90% of those bodies were found innocent after they were stopped. Nearly 90% those bodies were Black or Brown.[92] They were questioned, patted down and sometimes roughed up - without a warrant, without apology, and without being afforded the dignity of asking permission.

ACT II, Scene 2: Doing Time

PROFESSOR: I'd like to believe that Kalief's story was an anomaly. An outlier. A rare case of a good system gone wrong. But, the truth is, black children in America are born in the cross hairs of inequity and criminalization, in a country where a black child is three times more likely to live in poverty than a white child. Four times more likely to be suspended from school, and five times more likely to end up incarcerated, we have created **The *Cradle to Prison Pipeline*(SLIDE53:CRADLE-TO-PRISON PIPELINE) RIGHT**
Or ***The School to Prison Pipeline* (SLIDE54: SCHOOL-TO-PRISON PIPELINE) RIGHT**
And it is a money-making machine! Every year, the U.S. Prison Industrial Complex nets thousands of dollars in federal and state funds for each prisoner it holds; not to mention access to cheap labor! You see, while the 13th amendment outlawed slavery in America, it maintains that any person convicted of a crime may legally be forced to work for free. You remember those old black & white pictures of **chain gangs right?**

(SLIDE55: CHAIN GANG) RIGHT

Well, the chain gangs have become modern day **penitentiary production lines,**

(SLIDE56: PRISONERS IN LINE) RIGHT

where prisoners produce everything from Starbucks packaging to processed meats, generating hundreds of millions of dollars in revenue each year! So, a pipeline to prisons is also a **pipeline to profits.** **(SLIDE57: BLACK) RIGHT**

SONNY: Doing time is not an uncommon experience in my community. If you haven't been locked up yourself, chances are a parent, a sibling, a close family member has. For me, it was my big brother, several cousins, some aunts and uncles, and my grandfather. Snook did a few years in prison when Pop was just a boy. Once he got out, he made it up to Ma by getting steady job. See, in my family virtue is born and re-born in the crucible of hustle. So, there's a time to weep, and there's a time to…(*Cross Left*)

(LIGHTS follow SONNY Left)

ACT II, Scene 3: Getting Yo' Lesson in America

[92] New York Civil Liberties Union, Stop-And-Frisk Data, 2019, https://www.nyclu.org/en/stop-and-frisk-data

POP: Work! By the time I was 14, I was working on the shrimp yard with my father. One day, at work, I saw one of my classmates, Becky. Becky was a white girl. I shouted across the yard, "Hey! How you doing, Becky!" Old Snook panicked. See, Becky, happened to be the boss's daughter. "You call her Ms. Becky!"…How stupid I look calling my classmate "Ms. Becky?!" So, I just made sure I never called her Becky in front of Snook. By the time I was 16, I learned to work the wench to pull shrimp out of the hole. You have to feel the rope and know how to handle it. Once the big bucket of shrimp swings over to another guy – he's the dump man - you release the rope, nice and easy, and let him take the weight of the bucket and pour it out for processing. Once I taught a white guy how to work the wench. As soon as he learned good, they re-assigned me from the wench back to the bucket. I didn't mind so much. I liked to work. That's just the way it was…I met a few good white folks, though. Anybody who told you Texas was not the place for *you*, you knew they was a good guy. When I was just a little kid this one white man looked me in the eyes and told me to get out as soon as I could. I never forgot that! See, in Texas, there was no place to run. So, I got my lesson and I **got out.**

SONNY: Get yo' lesson! **That's what Ma called studying.**

(SLIDE58: MA)LEFT

She dropped out of school in the 7th or 8th grade when she got married; but she firmly believed in the power of education. She used to shout, "Get yo' lesson!" You'd be reading a book or doing homework, and if you looked up, even for just a minute - to like think or breath - she'd square up on you like she was willing to fight you. She'd stare you down like a drill sergeant-"Get yo' lesson!" Did I mention? Ma was deaf. No concept of volume control. Once you were reading again, she was quiet as a mouse. **She'd just sit and watch you.**

(SLIDE59: BLACK)LEFT

SONNY: So, Sterling is in this Chinese immersion program at his school, and the he's nearly fluent in Mandarin Chinese. I'm amazed, 'cause Spanish was hard enough for me, right? They don't even use letters. They write in symbols - characters. I can't even help the kid with his homework. I recall sitting close to my wife at his very first parent teacher conference with his kindergarten teacher, Sun Loa Shur. "Sterling's really been learning a lot of Chinese.…He taught his daddy how to count to ten in Mandarin…*Ee, ar, sun, su, u, lio, chia, bah, gio, shur*…" Sun Lao Shur, was kind of impressed but not surprised. In her broken English she sang the praises of our first-born son's academic acumen and aptitude. Then she said...
SUN LAO SHUR: "Sterling has...How do I say this...Sterling has integrity…very honest. Sterling is good boy."
SONNY: Yeah?...Yeah?...Thank you! XieXie! Alright! I'm a crybaby. I get it from, Pop.

POP: I was on the speech team, track, football and basketball teams, and I worked. First thing you had to do in high school was recite the preamble to the Constitution. You had to break it down. I did so well, I went to the regional **competition in speech.**

(SLIDE60: AMERICAN FLAG)LEFT

"We the People of the United States, in Order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general Welfare, and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves

and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."You know, I was the 1st Black to graduate from Aransas Pass H.S. in **1959.** **(SLIDE61: GRADUATION POP)LEFT**

I remember always following the rules. When I think about it now, following the rules was how we stayed alive. But, back then, to a kid—that was just the way it was. It was all we knew…The Grill restaurant had the best stew and chili, but you could only eat it if you went in through the colored entrance in the back. Just a couple of wobbly tables in the kitchen. And you still had to pay the same price as the white customers. And, everybody knew that the last two seats in the bus were for colored only. That was all we knew. I knew, I might couldn't change my world, but I knew could **get out of Texas.**

(SLIDE62: BLACK)LEFT

SONNY: And he did. He got his lesson! Left Texas, joined the Marines, went to college in Utah. Moved to California, started a career and a family, and never looked back. The opportunities that I've had, that I share with my kids, are born of Pop's sacrifice…Ma's sacrifice. Always hustling and hoping that things would be better for the next generation. And they are. Better, I mean. Thank God we're not where **we used to be, right?** (*SONNY sits in* car) **(LIGHTS Focus on CHAIR CENTER)**

ACT II,Scene 4: The Truth Is…

PROFESSOR: I'm sorry. We're family right? And family should keep it real with each other, right? We still have some deep seated issues in this country that we have not dealt with honestly for centuries! We're not talking. Oh, we're using words, but we're not *talking*. We debate, defend, rationalize, and run away. But, we don't talk! Which is a shame, because we make a beautiful family! **(LIGHTS – HOUSE LIGHTS UP)**

Look around. Look at us! Look at somebody you don't know and tell them "We make a beautiful family, don't we?" You're smiling because it's true, or, at least we hope it's true. And like any beautiful family, we have some ugly truths to face. Now, I want you to look at your neighbor again and refuse to break eye contact while you admit together, "We have some ugly truths to face." Was that a little uncomfortable? It's okay. It should be. See, the truth can be an uncomfortable thing to deal with, but it'll set you free! Unlike *facts* that can be alternated, fabricated and otherwise decimated, truth is truth, and it's not going anywhere until it is reckoned with.

(LIGHTS – HOUSE LIGHTS OFF)
(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR Right)

Your truth is your truth and my truth is my truth, and together, they inform our family's truth. The truth is that on Saturday, August 12, 2017, hundreds of white people, including white supremacists, Klu Klux Klan members and neo-Nazis, marched on the University of Virginia and the streets of Charlottesville to "Unite the Right", and to protest the removal of a statue of Confederate General, **Robert E. Lee.**

(SLIDE63: White Supremacists Marching) RIGHT

The truth is that what began as peaceful demonstrations became violent. **Very violent.** Protests and counter protests led to fighting, bloodshed. Hatred. Lots of hatred.

(SLIDE64: Charlottesville Violence)RIGHT

And, the truth is that a young man named James Alex Fields- a fellow American of mine who happened to be a white supremacist- drove his **sports car**

(SLIDE65: Charlottesville Car Attack) RIGHT

into a crowd of counter protesters, injuring over 30 people and killing another fellow American of mine, civil rights activist, **Heather Heyer.**

(SLIDE66: Heather Heyer) RIGHT

The truth is that, to me, this was an **act of terrorism.**

(SLIDE67: BLACK)RIGHT

(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Center)

SONNY: The truth is that I felt the *terrific* violence of Charlottesville in my own home before the first rock was thrown or bat was swung. We watched the news and saw what looked like hundreds of angry white people marching at night with torches, shouting slogans of white power, anti-Semitism and anti-immigration. A sight that my ancestors and elders would have looked on in terror and called a lynch mob. My two little boys saw this.

LANGSTON: Daddy, what are needle-Nazis?

STERLING: Langston! It's neo-Nazis. Not, needle Nazis!

LANGSTON: Sterling! I'm not talking to you! I'm talking to Daddy.

SONNY: Boys…please. Langston, Sterling's right. It's neo-Nazis.

LANGSTON: Uh-uh. It's *needle* Nazis, 'cause Needle Nazis have guns and they hurt people when they shoot needles out of the guns.

SONNY: (*Laughing*) Nice try, Langston, but no. The word is neo-Nazi. "Neo" means "new" and the Nazis were these bad guys back in World War 2 that killed millions of Jewish people and other people…

STERLING: Yeah, so "neo" Nazis are the new Nazis. Like, they're back right, Daddy?

SONNY: Yeah, Sterl. Like…they're back…

LANGSTON: Whose back?

STERLING: Langston! The neo-Nazis. They're like the KKK. They hate anybody who's not white, right, Daddy?

SONNY: Yeah. Yeah, Sterl. Kind of.

LANGSTON: Do they hate me, Daddy?

SONNY: No, Langston! They don't even know you.

LANGSTON: Daddy?

SONNY: Yes, son!

LANGSTON: Are the neo-Nazis gonna get me?

SONNY: No…No…Of course not…

PROFESSOR: The truth is that the boogeyman is real. Not just a figment of our imaginations, or some toothless reenactment of a time long gone, but an army of strong, violent, focused, intelligent human beings who are bent on the extermination or domination of people who don't look like them. So, you tell me…What is a daddy to say to his baby boy when the boogeyman is real? You see, the reality is that today, Heather Heyer is dead, and that young man, James Alex Fields will spend the rest of his life in prison. Meanwhile, that statue of Confederate General Robert E. Lee

(SLIDE68: GEN. LEE STATUE)RIGHT

continues to tower some 26 feet above Market Street Park there in Charlottesville, as it has since 1924; regardless of the fact that General Robert E. Lee, himself made clear his concerns about Confederate monuments way back in 1869:

"I think it wiser moreover not to keep open the sores of war, but to follow the examples of those nations who endeavoured to obliterate the marks of civil strife & to commit to oblivion the feelings it engendered."[93] **(SLIDE69: BLACK)RIGHT**

The truth is that- for some of us – the more than 700 Confederate monuments that stand across nation today, stand as so many painful open sores…obstacles to that oblivion…persistent reminders of America's bloodiest war and the Confederacy's hell-bent commitment to upholding America's ugliest truths: Slavery, white supremacy, hatred and fear of Black people. In fact, on Monday, June 2, 1913, at the inauguration of a Confederate statue known as "Silent Sam" **(SLIDE70: SILENT SAM) RIGHT**

on the campus of our nation's first public university - The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill - Confederate veteran, local business leader, and Ku Klux Klan supporter Julian Shakespeare Carr delivered an official public dedication, and left no question as to what these Confederate monuments meant to him **and to so many others…**

(Cross Right to lectern) (**SOUND13: Dixie) (8 sec**)

(LIGHTS Left on lectern)

"The present generation, I am persuaded, scarcely takes note of what the Confederate soldier meant to the welfare of the Anglo Saxon race during the four years immediately succeeding the war, when the facts are, that their courage and steadfastness saved the very life of the Anglo Saxon race in the South –and to-day, as a consequence the purest strain of the Anglo Saxon is to be found in the 13 Southern States – Praise God. I trust I may be pardoned for one allusion, howbeit it is rather personal. One hundred yards from where we stand, less than ninety days perhaps after my return from Appomattox, I horse-whipped a negro wench until her skirts hung in shreds, because upon the streets of this quiet village she had publicly insulted and maligned a Southern lady, and then rushed for protection to these University buildings where was stationed a garrison of 100 Federal soldiers. I performed the pleasing duty in the immediate **presence of the entire garrison."**[94] **(SLIDE71: BLACK) RIGHT**

PROFESSOR: Is it pride or is it prejudice? Is it heritage or is it hate? One of the leaders of the 2017 march on Charlottesville, David Duke, a fellow American of mine, and a former Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan stated

DAVID DUKE: Every man who wrote the Declaration of Independence were Western Christian men. And our heritage, you know if you wanna make America great again you can't make America great again unless you make the people who built America great again …We are determined to take our country back. That's what we believe in, and that's what we got to do..."

PROFESSOR: James Baldwin, back in1962, wrote a letter to his teenaged nephew about the great America that he lived in…

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[93] *General Robert E. Lee from the Lee Familly Archive (Aug. 6, 1869), https://leefamilyarchive.org/9-family-papers/861-robert-e-lee-to-david-mcconaughy-1869-august-5*

[94] *Julian Shakespeare Carr (Jul. 2, 1913), Dedication Speech of Silent Sam in Docsouth's Commemorative Landscapes of North Carolina:https://docsouth.unc.edu/commland/features/essays/spruill/ .*

BALDWIN: Try to imagine how you would feel if you woke up one morning to find the sun shivering and all the stars aflame. You would be frightened because it is out of the order of nature. Any upheaval in the universe is terrifying because it so profoundly attacks one's sense of one's own reality. Well, the black man has functioned in the white man's world as a fixed star…and as he moves out of his place, heaven and earth are shaken to their foundations. You don't be afraid…these men are your brothers, your lost younger brothers, and…we with love shall force our brothers to see themselves as they are, to cease fleeing from reality and begin to change it, for this is your home, my friend. Do not be driven from it. Great men have done great things here and will again and we can make America what **America must become.**[95]

(SLIDE72: AMERICAN FLAG) RIGHT

(*Cross Left*) **(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Left)**

SONNY: (Langston Hughes**): O, let America be America again— The land that never has been yet— And yet must be—the land where every man is free.**

POP: ***"…and secure the Blessings of Liberty to ourselves and our Posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America."*** I thought about how **beautiful it is to be an American.(**

SLIDE73: BLACK) RIGHT

ACT III, Scene 1: Masters of the Universe

PROFESSOR: An American. A Negro. In *Between the World and Me*, Ta-Nehisi Coates reflects upon the kinds of talks that American *Black* parents must have with *their* children, compared to those that American *white* parents have with *theirs*. "The galaxy belonged to them, and as terror was communicated to our children, I saw mastery communicated to theirs."[96]

SONNY: My favorite cartoon as a kid was *He-Man and the* ***Masters of the Universe.***

(SLIDE 74: He-Man) LEFT

Sometimes I would watch with my big brother, Brent. Each episode begins with some crisis started by the evil Skeletor. The main character Prince Adam was weak and mild mannered, but, when he picked up that Power Sword…

SONNY BOY: "By the power of Gray Scull…I have the power! Battle Cat! Let's ride! We must stop Skeletor's evil plan…When I grow up, I'm gonna be He-Man!

BRENT: Ha! That's the stupidest thing I ever heard! How you gonna be He-Man!

SONNY BOY: I just will! Watch this!...By the Power of…

BRENT: …(*Laughing)***.** Man, you so stupid! Shut up! Look at you! Look at He-Man! Look at his straight blonde hair. Look at his face. Dude, he's white! You're not! There ain't no black **super heroes!** **(SLIDE 75: BLACK) LEFT**

SONNY BOY: Yes there is!

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[95] James Baldwin, "A Letter to My Nephew" in *The Progressive*, January 1, 1962.

[96] Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me* (New York: Spiegel & Grau , 2015), 89

BRENT: Name one…
SONNY BOY: Umm…Fat Albert!
(SLIDE 76: FAT ALBERT) LEFT
BRENT: Ha! You are illin'! Fat Albert ain't no superhero. He can't fly, he don't have super powers. He's not even that strong.
(SLIDE 77: BLACK) LEFT
SONNY BOY: Okay, what about Panthro from Thundercats.
(SLIDE 78: PANTHRO) LEFT
BRENT: He's not the hero. He's a sidekick. Everybody knows **Lion-O** is the hero.
(SLIDE 79: LION-O) LEFT
Look at that long silky hair blonde hair! You know Lion-O's white!
(SLIDE 80: BLACK) LEFT
SONNY: So?! G.I. Joe has a bunch of 'em…**Big Lob**, Hard Ball, Road Block, Doc, the Refrigerator Perry. **(SLIDE 81: BLACK G.I. JOE's) LEFT**
BRENT: Side kick. Side kick. Side kick. Side kick. And slow ex-football playin' weak Side Kick! Every body knows the main hero in G.I. Joe is **Duke**! Blonde hair, blue eyes. You just got moded! **(SLIDE 82: DUKE G.I. JOE) LEFT**
SONNY BOY: So!... By the power of Grayskull…I have the…So!...You're stupid!
(SLIDE 83: BLACK) LEFT
(LIGHTS Focus on CHAIR CENTER)
SONNY: (*Cross Center*) Son…Okay…Listen, you are a black boy…Now I know that your skin is brown...and it is...brown, I mean...but in this country, they…*we* call it black.

STERLING: But, I want to be brown, Daddy. My skin is brown. It's not black.

SONNY: Well, you can't have brown…son, that's the color we use to describe like South Asians, and Arabs, and Latino's. And remember, they don't like to be called Mexicans unless they're from Mexico, and don't forget - don't "Hiss. Don't Panic". A lot of Latinos don't like to be called Hispanic, so it's safe to just say Latino, unless it's a female, then it's Latina…or if it's a person who doesn't use the gender binary, just say Latinx…or, just ask…How did we get here?...Listen son, I *know* that you and your mom have darker brown skin. Ok? And, sometimes we say that your brother and I have yellow skin, right? But, Langston and I are black. We don't get to be yellow.

STERLING: Wait…so, who gets to be yellow?

SONNY: Who gets to be yellow? Um…I don't know…Asians, I guess. No. No! That's offensive. Nobody gets to be yellow. And, while we're at it, please don't ever call Native Americans red skins!

STERLING: Like the football team?

SONNY: Yes, like the football team. But that's a whole 'nother conversation. Son, don't try to make sense of it. The system is broken. Okay? White people aren't even white.

STERLING: I know daddy! I was thinking about that. They're like a cream. But, sometimes they're pink or peach, or have freckles.

SONNY: Right. Look at your Grandma. She has creamy skin. But, inside, she's really black

SONNY:(*Eases out of the car. Saved by another distraction!).* I think my mother was the first person to make me color conscious. She experienced her blackness in a very unique way. Her father, my Grandpa George was a police officer with toffee colored skin, wavy hair and green eyes. **(SLIDE 84: GRANDPARENTS) LEFT**
Her mother, my Grandma Jean, has creamy white skin, bone straight hair, and these beautiful blue eyes that sometimes turn gray. My mom looks a lot like my grandma. All her life, her cream-colored complexion, "good hair," and hazel eyes betrayed her very real sense of **black identity.** **(SLIDE 85: BLACK) LEFT**
(LIGHTS Focus LEFT)
MOM: (*Sitting Left*) One day I went down to the police station looking for my father. I was in the area and thought I'd stop by and visit. I heard that after I left, some of the white officers harassed my dad about having a white girl asking for him at the front desk. They would say, "Shipp what are you doing with a white daughter?" That really bothered him for some time. It bothered me too**.** I never wanted you to go through that. I didn't want your skin to be a problem…Ya know?
SONNY: When I was growing up, every once in a while, a friend or classmate would ask, "Is your mom white?" That always surprised me. I mean, mom was just, a black woman to me- whatever that meant. She was proud to be black. She talked with the soulful undertones that I was used to hearing from black women. She sho' 'nuff whipped my tail like a black woman. But, according to my grandma Jean:

GRANDMA: "Oh honey. We have a little bit of everything in us. Scottish, Irish, English, some Black Foot Indian on my mama's side and a little bit of Hebrew on my daddy's side. A lot of my family passes for white, but we know who we are. We're black, and we're proud of it, Honey! **(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR Right)**
PROFESSOR: (*Crossing Right) Half* breeds, quadroons, octoroons, mulattos, mestizos, creoles or just plain mixed race people have historically been categorized and labeled in this country based upon the age old "One Drop Rule." ***(Chalk Board).*** For example, who here likes to swim? Now, imagine it's a hot sunny day. The sky is blue, the water is cool and crystal clear. You're just about to jump in when the life guard warns you that there happens to be just one drop of some highly contagious deadly bacteria somewhere in that pool? Do you jump in? Me neither. Likewise, if just *one* drop of Black blood enters your gene pool, the entire pool is thereby rendered "contaminated."In other words, *the pool is closed y'all*! (*Cross Left)*
(LIGHTS Follow SONNY Left)
SONNY: "No! My mom's not white! She's black! She's just really light skinned."

MOM: (*Sits)* And to be honest, I never felt safe around black people. I mean that's my community, but growing up, I was **always an outsider.**
(SLIDE86: MOM as Girl)LEFT

People would always call me, "that white girl over there!" They acted like I thought I was better than them, but I never did. But, that was all they could see when they looked at me. I felt like I had to be so careful. Around black people I felt so self-conscious. **Always insecure**. **(SLIDE87: MOM as Teen) LEFT**

I'd go to dances and nobody. They wouldn't even ask me to dance. All the brown skin girls got the boyfriends. I felt ugly, but I was **really a pretty girl.**

(SLIDE88: BLACK)LEFT

It was like there was no place for me in this world. That was horrendous…when your whole race turns on you. I just wanted to wear a big sign that said, "I am black!" For a long time, I hated white people…because they looked like me. (*Cross Center)*

(LIGHTS Follow MOM Center)

Now, when you were born, your brother Shaun was 7 and Brent was 3. Both of them were light skinned like me; and I'm thinking, "Why did I marry this brown man if I can't have a brown baby?"But, Sonny Honey, when you came…after 26 hours of labor, you were gray and nasty. But after a few hours, your skin started to brown up, and I knew I had my little brown baby boy! I called you my**"brown bomber".**

(SOUND14: "Brown Baby"[97], 25 sec)
(SLIDE 89, SLIDE 90, SLIDE 91) LEFT
(SLIDE 92: BLACK) LEFT

ACT III, Scene 2: Colorblind America

(LIGHTS Follow PROFESSOR Right)

PROFESSOR: Now, whether he likes it or not- and regardless of his skin tone- the child who is identified as Black in this country has been born with a congenital condition that Harvey Young refers to as the "misrecognition" of his individuated body, whereby the existing prejudices, fears and hatred felt toward black bodies are inevitably and continually projected onto his fragile frame.[98] And, there's nothing he can do about it. See, you can change your profession, your social status, your neighborhood, your religion, even your name, if you like. **The Bible** even speaks of the wonder working power of Jesus Christ himself: "Behold, old things have passed away and all things have become new!" *But, I ain't met a Black man yet who can stop being Black. .* **Paul Gilroy[99]** says that race is merely a construct of racism. What he means is that in the Western colonial world, in order for white to be right, black had to *lack*. For whiteness to be constructed as the pure and good *master race*; blackness had to be deconstructed from mere physical features and reconstructed into an essentially base and evil threat. It's what **Franz Fanon[100]** refers to as the **epidermalization** of a people, and what the rapper Ice Cube means when he says "my skin is my sin."

SONNY: Growing up, the reality that I learned to live would be framed by *misrecognized* homeboys, so-called thugs, pop stars, sports stars and rappers paraded before the

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[97] *"Brown Baby," Sin & Soul.*

[98] Harvey Young, *Embodying Black Experience: Stillness, Critical Memory, and the Black Body.* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2010).

[99] Paul Gilroy, *Against Race : Imagining Political Culture Beyond the Color Line* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2000)

[100] Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks* (New York, NY: Grove Press, 1967).

imagination of the world in the media; a One Drop Rule that forced the mis-fit of my grandmother's beautiful blue eyes and made my "high yella" mother to mistake me for a brown baby Messiah. I felt the insecurity that my mother must have felt. An outsider. Less than. Afraid to admit what I really wanted for myself. Then, in 2008**,** Barack Obama was elected president of the United States. And, that meant something. We had just elected a Black man as president!

PROFESSOR: Not so fast…Technically, President Barack Obama was a mixed-race President. His father, **Barack Hussain Obama, Sr.**

(SLIDE93: Obama Sr.) RIGHT

was from Kenya, of the Luo people…It doesn't get much blacker than that. And, his mother**, Ann Dunham**, **(SLIDE94: Barack Obama's PARENTS) RIGHT**

was a very white woman, born in Wichita, Kansas, to people of English, Irish, and German descent. So, Barack Obama is as much the first Black President with white ancestry as he is the first White President with black ancestry…that we know of. Yet, Mr. Obama has no legal or practical claim to his own whiteness. Well, he can claim to be a white man, but you and I both would call him delusional for it. Any American school child would point to Barak Obama- President or not- and declare "**That's a black man.**

(SLIDE95: BLACK) RIGHT

"The operative word here, being…*Black.* Black cats are unlucky, Black hearted people are evil, getting Black balled will end your career, Black listed, Black sheep, Black magic, Blake mail, Black males. When asked why he didn't refer to himself as mixed race man, President Obama replied…

OBAMA: "Well, you know. When I was young and…going through the identity crises that any teenager goes through…part of what I realized was that if the world saw me as African American, then that wasn't something that I needed to run away from. That's something that I could go ahead and embrace."[101] We are talking about a man who was the leader of the free world here, y'all…Arguably the singularly most powerful person on the planet in his time. And it was dictated to him, who he was, what he could be, and what he was to embrace about himself. How is this thing supposed to end? How do you explain to a 7-year-old boy his all-encompassing blackness? And then what? When he turns 12, his voice starts to drop, and he stops being cute. When he's 16 and learns that his survival may depend upon the Two and the Ten and proper curbside etiquette? Which begs a more important question…Are we allowed to want better for our children? To do better for them?

ACT III, Scene 3: The Actual Talk

PROFESSOR: ***(Chalk Board)*** Sterling literally means, little star.

SONNY: Figuratively, it means pure and thoroughly excellent. Sterling Berron Kelly is the walking, breathing legacy of generations of workers, fighters and survivors. Teachers, preachers, fire fighters, police officers, soldiers, sailors, airmen, marines, mothers, fathers, cleaning women and hustlers; pillars of communities…And in those

[101] *Barack Obama, interview on The View with Barbara Walters, (Jul. 29, 2010).*

big brown eyes of his, I can see infinite possibilities! But today**.** But today. But, today (*Sit)* **LIGHTING: SPOTLIGHT ON CENTER CHAIR** when I peer into the backseat, all I can see is a *black boy* who will one day become a black man…Son, listen. Today, at school…and every day…I need you to be the best. Better than everyone around you. I want you to be smarter, more attentive, more obedient, kinder and gentler than any other child in your classroom…Because, when I look at you I see Sterling Berron Kelly… But, today, some people, when they look at you, they will only see a black boy…And, to some people a black boy is dangerous. To some people a black boy is violent. To some people a black boy is…stupid. Yes, son. I know it's a bad word. Please let me finish…to some people, son you will only *ever* be a black boy. But to me, your mother, and to God in heaven you are, and always will be, our little star, pure and thoroughly excellent. So, you represent your Creator, your family and yourself with dignity today. Son, do you know what dignity means? I'm out of time. Sterling, do you understand what I'm saying?

STERLING: Yes Sir... I think so, Daddy…Daddy?"

SONNY: Yes, Son? ...

STERLING: Can I go now?

SONNY: Yes, son. You can go…Sterling! Daddy loves you! **Get your lesson.** (*hands on wheel)*

(SOUND15: "Ella's Song")[102]

THE END

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[102] *"Ella's Song,"Bernice Johnson Reagon, performed live by Sweet Honey in the Rock December 2, 2008, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=U6Uus--gFrc*.

APPENDIX D: THE MY LIFE MATTERS PROJECT FINAL SURVEY FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS

THE My Life Matters PROJECT FINAL SURVEY FOR YOUTH PARTICIPANTS
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Research Project

YOUR NAME (OPTIONAL):_____
YOUR AGE (OPTIONAL):_____

Please answer the questions below to the best of your ability:

1. **How do you feel that the My Life Matters (My Life Matters) project has affected your ability to change things around you for the better? (Circle the number that best describes your answer)**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly decreased it	Slightly decreased it	Not at all	Slightly increased it	Strongly increased

2. **How do you feel that the My Life Matters Project has affected your ability to express yourself?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly decreased	Slightly decreased	No change	Slightly increased	Strongly increased

3. **Did you enjoy the My Life Matters Self Expression Workshops?**

1	2	3	4	5
Disliked	Slightly disliked	Don't care	Slightly enjoyed	Strongly enjoyed

4. **How hopeful are you that your participation in the live community performance for the My Life Matters Project will make a positive difference in your community?**

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Somewhat	Not sure	A little	A lot

Please share any thoughts you have about what you liked or learned from the My Life Matters workshops and performance, and what should be done to improve the My Life Matters workshops and performance.

_____
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX E: MY LIFE MATTERS AUDIENCE SURVEY

THE My Life Matters PROJECT FINAL SURVEY FOR AUDIENCE
University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill Research Project

YOUR NAME (OPTIONAL):_____
YOUR AGE (OPTIONAL):_____

Please answer the questions below to the best of your ability:

1. **Do you feel that the My Life Matters (My Life Matters) Project Presentation is helpful to our community?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Slightly Disagree	Not sure	Slightly agree	Strongly agree

2. **Has the My Life Matters Project inspired you to make positive change in your community?**

1	2	3	4	5
Strongly disagree	Slightly Disagree	Not sure	Slightly agree	Strongly agree

3. **Did you enjoy the My Life Matters Self Presentation?**

1	2	3	4	5
Disliked	Slightly disliked	Don't care	Slightly enjoyed	Strongly enjoyed

4. **How hopeful are you that your participation in the live community performance for the My Life Matters Project will make a positive difference in your community?**

1	2	3	4	5
Not at all	Somewhat	Not sure	A little	A lot

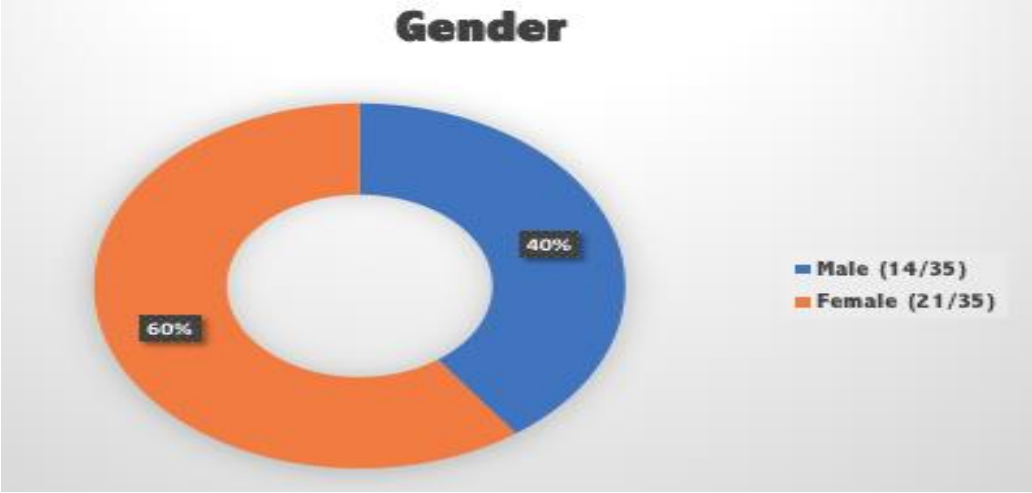
Please share any thoughts you have about what you liked or learned from the My Life Matters presentation, and what should be done to improve it.

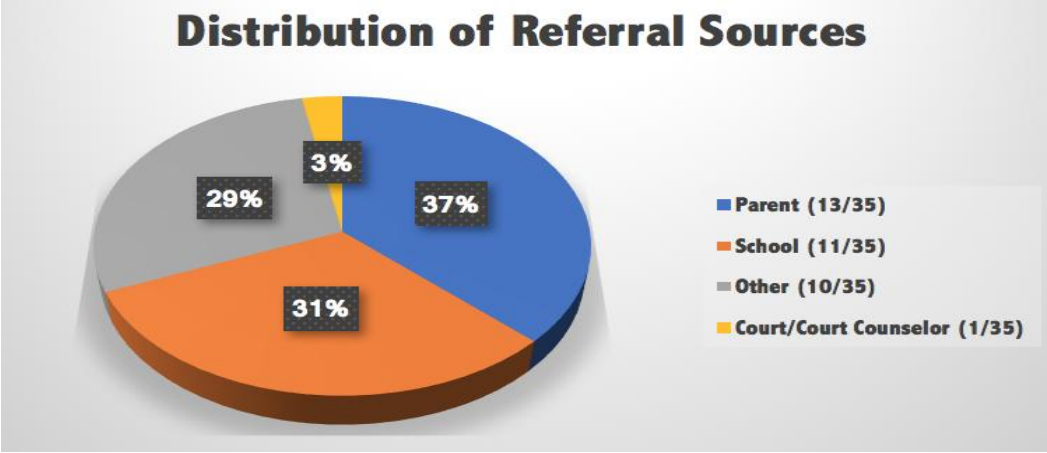
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX F: MY LIFE MATTERS DEMOGRAPHICS

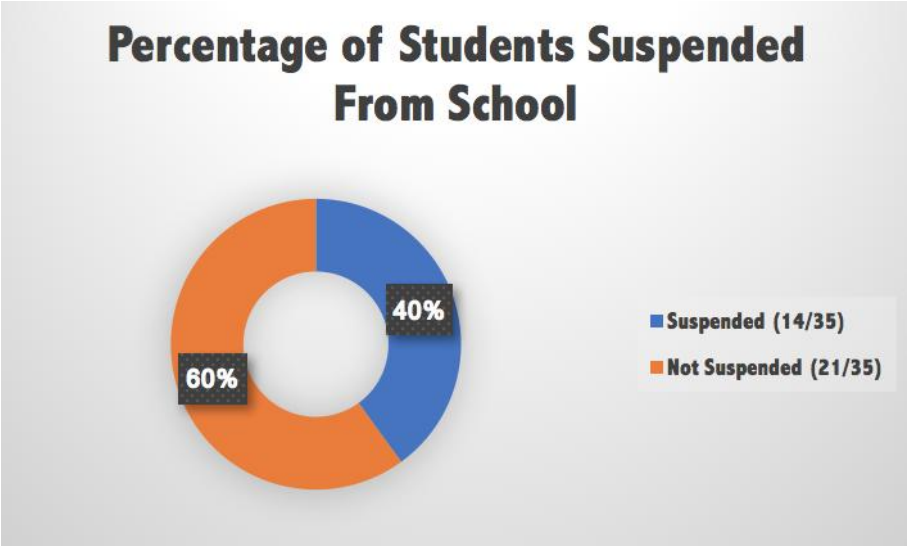
My Life Matters Youth Participant Demographics

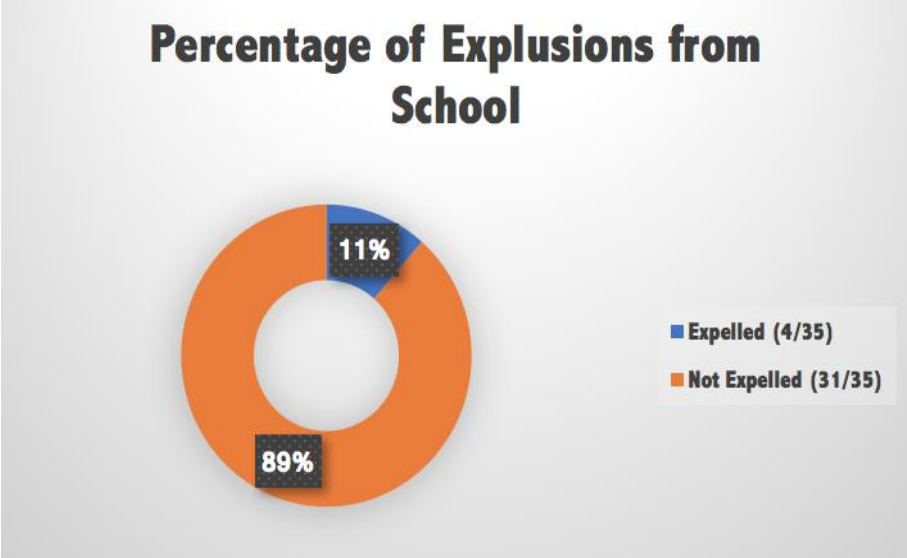
RACE:	**100% Black**
GENDER BREAKDOWN:	**40% Male, 60% Female**
NUMBER OF PARTICIPANTS:	**35 kids (23 completed SEQ-C)**
AGE RANGE:	**12 – 18 years old**
LOW-INCOME (FREE LUNCH):	**100%**
HOUSEHOLD MAKE-UP:	**100% non-traditional or single-parent**

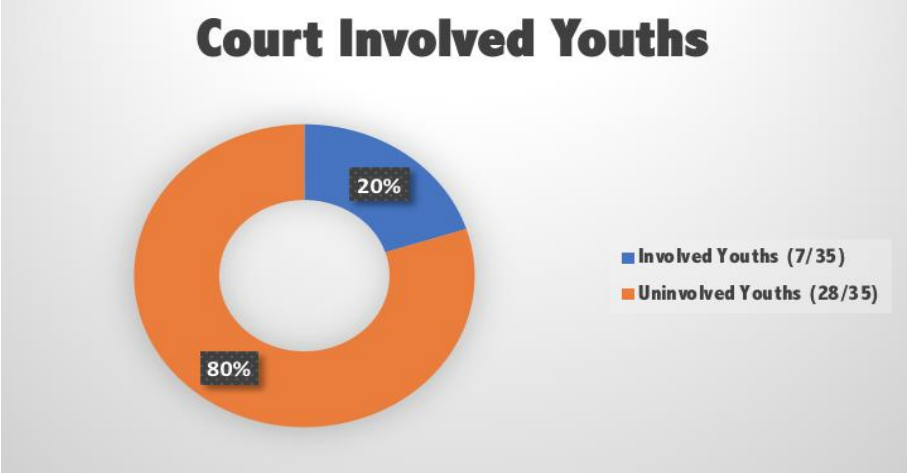




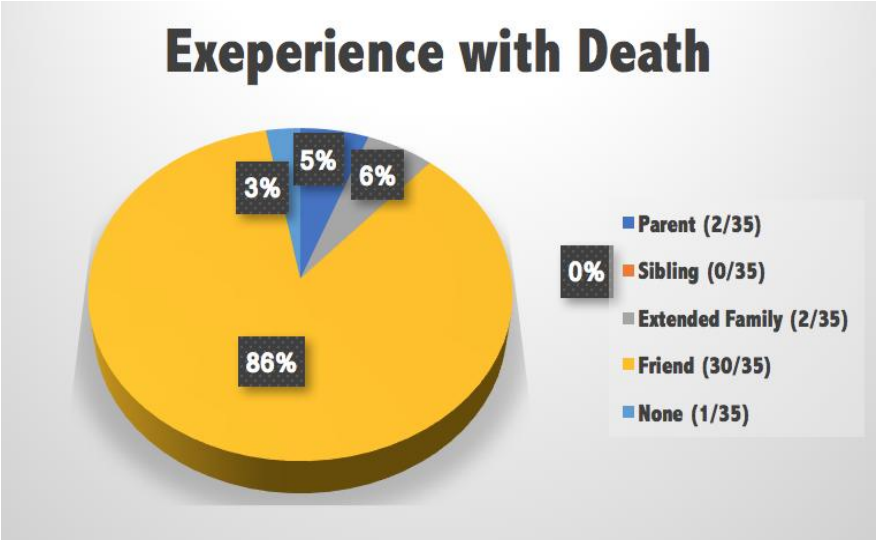
My Life Matters Youth Participant Demographics (Continued)

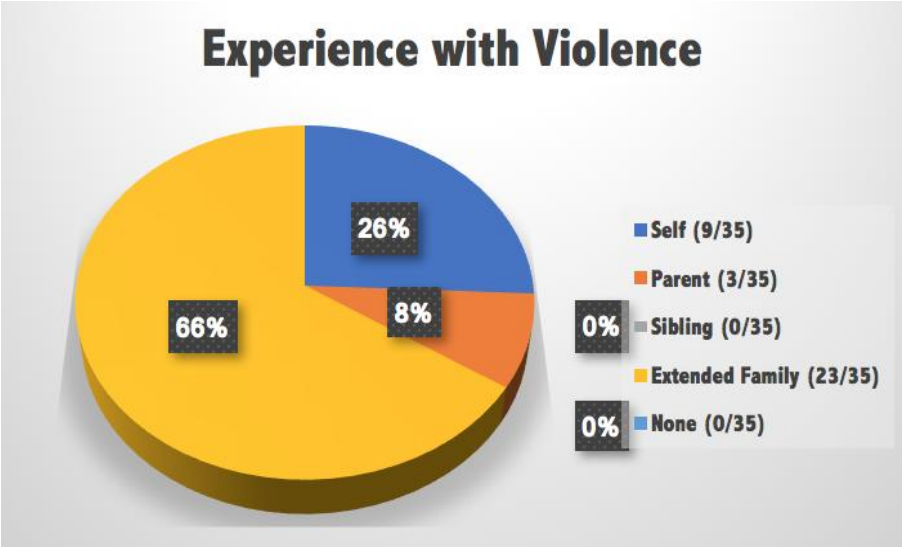






My Life Matters Youth Participant Demographics (Continued)





APPENDIX G: MY LIFE MATTERS LESSON PLAN EXAMPLE

My Life Matters Lesson Plan
2 HOURS

OBJECTIVES:

1. Students will get to know each other and facilitators better.
2. Students will practice expressing their own thoughts and feelings
3. Students will learn to consider, recognize, explore and express their life values.
4. Students will begin to develop critical consciousness regarding the state of marginalized youth in their community.
5. Students will begin to discuss literary, dramaturgical and rhetorical devices.
6. Students will develop a performance goal and select means of expression.

STEPS

1. Warm Up: How Ya Feelin?
    a. Introductions. Your name, how you are feeling and one thing you look forward to.
    b. Move around the room with a motion that expresses how you are feeling.
    c. Name replace game. Call the name of a person whom you want to replace and cross over in the circle.
    d. Vocal and physical warm ups
    e. Play Storytelling GAME**:** We start with a typical fairy tell and one person leads off. The facilitator will say "stop" at an appropriate time and have the next person continue the story. The storyline should adjust to the person's mood at the time.

2. Watch Clint Smith Video ("Danger of Silence")
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NiKtZgImdlY
3. Watch Clint Smith Video ("How to Raise a Black Boy in America")
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Us70DN2XSfM
4. Watch Donavan Livingston Video ("Lift Off")
   https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aGb8ZfZl_IE&t=23s
5. DISCUSS VIDEOS
    a. What moved you?
    b. Do you think their words mattered?
    c. How can we make our words matter? "Power of Words" poem
6. Colored Soldiers
7. DISCUSS PERFORMANCES
8. EXPLORE My Life Matters THEMES & Performance Options with SHOWED
    a. What do you See in the performance?
    b. What is really Happening?
    c. How does this relate to Our lives?
    d. Why does this issue exist?
    e. How can we become Empowered by our new understanding?
    f. What can we Do about it?
9. Sign Assent Forms
10. Homework assignments. Seek, create, and come back to discuss

APPENDIX H: THE TALK POST-PERFORMANCE AUDIENCE SURVEY

THE TALK POST-PERFORMANCE FEEDBACK

*Intended for audience members ages 12 and up.

This is an optional anonymous survey for audience members of *The Talk. After watching a performance of Sonny Kelly's* The Talk, we invite you to take *moment to help us to learn about the impact that this performance has had on you.* Thanks for taking a moment to share!

AGE(OPTIONAL):_____ RACE(S) (OPTIONAL):_____GENDER (OPTIONAL):_____
NATIONALITY(IES)(OPTIONAL):_____

1. **What did you find most memorable, striking, or interesting about this show?**

_____
_____
_____
_____

2. **How did *The Talk* impact your thoughts about our society and your place in it?**

_____
_____
_____
_____

3. **Will this performance impact your future conversations and actions about race?**
1. **__Yes __No**

Comments?

_____
_____
_____

4. **What did you learn from this performance (if anything)?**

_____
_____
_____
_____

5. **What impact do you think this performance can have on our society?**

_____
_____
_____
_____

APPENDIX I: THE TALK PROFESSIONAL AUDIENCE SURVEY

StreetSigns | Bulldog Ensemble Theater
The Talk written and performed by Sonny Kelly
AUDIENCE SURVEY

DATE:

AGE: Child / Adult / Senior

GENDER:

RACIAL/ETHNIC BACKGROUND: African-American / Asian-American / Latino / Native-American / Caucasian / Other

EDUCATION: Limited / High School / College / Post-Graduate

HOW DID YOU LEARN ABOUT THIS EVENT?

- Poster/Pamphlet
- Radio broadcast
- TV
- Newspaper
- Website
- From a friend/colleague_____
- Other_____

WE APPRECIATE YOUR PARTICIPATION IN THIS EVENT AND WE VALUE YOUR FEEDBACK. THANK YOU FOR TAKING A MOMENT TO TELL US WHAT YOU THOUGHT:

1. Did the event encourage and stimulate you to think critically about the subject matter? Y/N

COMMENTS:
_____
_____
_____
_____

2. Did the event place the subject matter in a larger cultural, historical, and analytical framework? Y/N

COMMENTS:
_____
_____
_____
_____

SEE REVERSE FOR MORE.

3. How did the event impact your understanding of society and your place in it?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

4. In what ways will this experience impact your future conversations and actions?

_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____
_____

GENERAL COMMENTS, FEEDBACK, and SUGGESTIONS:

_____
_____
_____
_____

If you would prefer to respond via an online survey, please follow these directions.

1. **Go to http://www.processseries.unc.edu/**
2. **Click on the picture for "The Talk."**
3. **Go to the bottom of the *The Talk* page and click "Show Survey Link."**
4. **Record your responses.**

We are very grateful for your participation, whether on paper or on line.

APPENDIX J: THE TALK AUDIENCE DEMOGRAPHICS

Based upon the demographic information that I gleaned from 375 surveys, representing approximately 2,245 audience members, respondents were distributed as follows.

Age

The 190 surveys distributed at the 8 performances conducted between June and December, 2018 included specific ages of respondents. Those respondents who reported their age (n = 166) were distributed as follows:

Age Rage	Respondents
17-24	9
25-29	7
30-39	28
40-49	32
50-59	28
60-69	34
70-79	23
80-85	5

The 190 surveys distributed at the 16 performances conducted between January and February, 2019 divided age ranges into "Child," "Adult," and "Senior." Of those who reported their age range (n = 184), there were 9 children, 110 adults and 65 senior survey respondents.

Race

All 375 surveys solicited information about race or "ethnicity." The term ethnicity was used on the January to February, 2019 survey and referred to the following options for self-designation: African-American, Asian-American, Latino, Native American, Caucasian, and Other. I combined these results with the open-ended results of respondents who filled in the "Race" section of the survey distributed at the June through December 2018 performances to derive the following racial/ethnic distribution of respondents (n = 362):

African-American/Black	90	24.9%
Caucasian/Anglo/White	246	68%
Asian/East Indian/Pakistani	5	1.4%
Mixed Race	4	1%
Latino/Hispanic	6	1.7%
Native American	3	.8%
Other	8	2.2%

Education

The 190 surveys for performances conducted between January and February, 2019 included education level. I suspect that results were impacted by the location of the majority of performances being either on or near the UNC Chapel Hill and Duke University campuses. The respondents (n = 181) were distributed as follows:

Limited	5
High School	4
College	44
Post Graduate	128

Gender

The 190 surveys for performances conducted between January and February, 2019 included a binary gender designation. The respondents (n = 171) were distributed as follows:

Female	116
Male	55

Nationality

The 189 surveys for performances conducted between June and December, 2018 included a nationality designation. The respondents (n = 175) were distributed as follows:

U.S./American	172
Philippines	1
China	1
Southeast Asia	1

APPENDIX K: THE TALK PERFORMANCE SCHEDULE

The Talk Performance Schedule 2019-2020

Date	Attendance	Location	Panel
3/8 – 3/11/18	approx. 200	UNC Chapel Hill	Sonny Kelly & Joseph Megel
6/26/18	approx. 110	Chapel Hill Library	Sonny Kelly, Christopher Blue[103], Kevin "Kaze" Thomas[104]
8/18/18	25	FAF, Fayetteville, NC	Sonny Kelly
9/15/18	20	Fayetteville. Arts Council	Sonny Kelly & youth technicians
10/14/18	28	Fayetteville Arts Council	Sonny Kelly & youth technicians
10/22/18	65	Cary Theater	Moderator: Tru Pettigrew[105] Collin[106], Jennifer[107], John Letteney[108]
11/1/18	71	Smith Middle School, Chapel HIll	Moderator: Howard L. Craft[109] Sonny Kelly, Atrayus Goode[110], Michael Williams[111], Tami Pfeifer[112], Janese Mason Carver[113], Christopher Blue
11/3/18	55	Burning Coal Theater Raleigh, NC	Rolanda Byrd[114], Surena Johnson[115]
12/1/18	80	Redeemed Christian Church, Fayetteville, NC	Bishop Dr. John Godbolt[116], Rev. Dr. Ron Godbolt[117], Dr. Tanya Bonner[118]
1/24/19	79	Durham Fruit	Kaze Thomas, Bishop Omega[119], Johnny Wilson[120], Marcia Owen[121]
1/25/19	89	Durham Fruit	Dr. Renee Alexander Craft[122] (moderator) Dr. Ronda Taylor Bullock[123]

[103] Police Chief of Chapel Hill, North Carolina
[104] Co-Host of Facebook series "Intelligently Ratchet" and father of a Black boy
[105] Speaker and workshop facilitator for diversity and inclusion training
[106] White male high school teacher of U.S. History and sociology in his 30's
[107] A Black mother in her 40's and teacher
[108] Police Chief of Apex, North Carolina
[109] UNC Chapel Hill lecturer, writer, playwright, and father of a Black boy
[110] Atrayus Goode, Exec Dir, Movement of Youth and MentorNC and father of a Black girl
[111] Mike (Michael) Williams, Founder, Black on Black Project
[112] Boomerang Youth, Inc., Executive Director
[113] A senior at Chapel Hill H.S. One of the leaders of the Minority Student Achievement Network, and a member of the NAACP Youth Council. She is captain of the track team and is involved in the Youth Leadership Institute
[114] Co-founder and Executive Director of Raleigh Police Accountability Community Taskforce (PACT) activist. Her son was killed by Raleigh police in February 2016.
[115] Raleigh PACT activist, youth intervention practitioner, and mother of a Black daughter
[116] Pastor of Redeemed Christian Church Retired educator and school administrator in Cumberland County Schools Father and grandfather of Black youth
[117] A church pastor and retired educator and administrator
[118] High school chemistry teacher in Cumberland County Schools, mother, and grandmother of Black youth
[119] Co-Host of Facebook series "Intelligently Ratchet" and father of Black youth
[120] Executive Director of Fayetteville Urban Ministry, member of the NC Juvenile Justice Association, and a father of a Black male
[121] Founder and former director: Religious Coalition for a Non-Violent Durham, restorative justice advocate
[122] Professor of Communication at UNC Chapel Hill, performance ethnographer, writer

The Talk Performance Schedule 2019-2020 (continued)

Date	Attendance	Location	Pane
1/26/19	50	Durham Fruit	Karen Howard[124] & George O'Brient[125]
1/27/19	22	Durham Fruit	Sonny Kelly
1/31/19	45	Durham Fruit	Karen Howard & Javonia Lewis[126]
2/1/19	55	Durham Fruit	George O'Brient & Rev. Annette Love[127]
2/2/19	100	Durham Fruit	Panel: Natalie Bullock Brown[128] & Rev. Annette Love
2/3/19	70	Durham Fruit	Tami Pfeifer
2/7/19	120	Durham Fruit	Howard L. Craft & Sheriff Clarence F. Birkhead[129]
2/8/19	100	Durham Fruit	Renee Alexander Craft (moderator) & Natalie Bullock Brown
2/9/19	100	Durham Fruit	Tami Pfeifer
2/10/19	100	Durham Fruit	Sonny Kelly
2/14/19	180	UNCCH	Joseph Megel
2/15/19	220	UNCCH	Bishop Omega & George O'Brient
2/16/19	240	UNCCH	Chris Blue & Dr. Lloyd Kramer[130]
2/17/19	240	UNCCH	Chris Blue & Dr. Lloyd Kramer
4/4/19	500	Enloe, H.S., Raleigh, NC	Moderator: Tru Pettigrew J.B. Buxton[131], Jordan King[132], Lieutenant Bobby Sutton[133]

[123] Fonder of We Are Antiracist activist organization and youth camp and mother of Black youth
[124] Chatham County Commissione, lawyer, and mother of Black youth
[125] NC Drug and Alcohol abuse counselor and ex-convict
[126] Parent activist in Durham Public Schools, Parents of African American Children – Durham (PAAC – Durham)
[127] Works with the Misdemeanor Diversion Program in Durham, NC that seeks to keep 16 and 17 year-old offenders out of the Pipeline
[128] Teaches Africana, Women's Studies and Film at NC Central University. A mother of Black youth
[129] Sheriff of Durham County and father of Black youth
[130] Professor in Department of History at UNC Chapel Hill
[131] Former educator and founder of Educational Consulting Group, father of White youth
[132] Senior at Enloe High School and a leader on the Student Equity Team. Black female
[133] Wake County Sheriff Office officer and father of Black youth

APPENDIX L: IRB APPROVAL FOR MY LIFE MATTERS

THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA at CHAPEL HILL

OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS
720 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.
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CB #7097
Chapel Hill, NC 27599-7097
(919) 966-3113
Web site: ohre.unc.edu
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #4801

To: Sonny Kelly
Communication

From: Non-Biomedical IRB

Approval Date: 5/17/2016
Expiration Date of Approval: 5/16/2017
RE: Notice of IRB Approval by Expedited Review (under 45 CFR 46.110)
Submission Type: Initial
Expedited Category: 5.Existing or non-research data,6.Voice/image research recordings,7.Surveys/interviews/focus groups
Study #: 16-1205

Study Title: Trauma-Informed Performance-Based Youth Participatory Action Research on the School to Prison Pipeline

This submission has been approved by the IRB for the period indicated. It has been determined that the risk involved in this research is no more than minimal.

Study Description:

Purpose: To learn from marginalized youth, their family members and intervention program staff and volunteers what they perceive to be the definitions, causes, effects and possible solutions to the U.S. phenomenon known as the School to Prison Pipeline; and to create a space and forum wherein they can express these findings in creative ways in public settings in order to start, expand and sustain community conversations on the matter while improving their sense of self efficacy. This project will also explore the manners in which performative methods of expression such as storytelling, dramatic interpretation, poetry, photography and other performing and visual arts can help marginalized youth to work through trauma, develop a sense of agency, improve their sense of efficacy and self-esteem, become more connected to community, increase their perception of hope, and become more civically engaged.

Participants: 4 - 6 Staff Members of Fayetteville Urban Ministry's Find-A-Friend program, 5-10 volunteers and interns who will help to manage the Find-A-Friend Summer Achievement Camp, 2-10 professional performance artists, 50-70 youth between the ages of 8 and 18, and their family members. 10 – 50 concerned community members.

Procedures (methods): Over the course of seven weeks, between June 14 and August 5, 2016, I will serve as an artist in residence for Fayetteville Urban Ministry's Find-A-Friend (FAF) Summer Achievement Camp, over the span of seven weeks. As the Artist in Residence, I will facilitate two 2-hour workshops each week where youth will explore the definition, causes, effects and possible solutions to the phenomenon of the School to Prison Pipeline via the process of Photovoice, poetry, dramatic expression, storytelling, dance, song and visual arts. I will also meet at least twice in focus groups with parents, guardians and concerned family members to update them on the workshops and offer them opportunities to share their perspectives on the School to Prison Pipeline. I will conduct ongoing one-on-one interviews and focus groups with all participants regarding their perceptions of the definitions, causes, effects, and possible solutions to the School to Prison Pipeline, their perceptions of the uses, benefits, and unique challenges of applying trauma-informed performance based training and interventions to youth programming, as well as their own sense of self-efficacy and collective-efficacy with regard to making a positive impact on the School to Prison Pipeline

issue. I will invite guest artists to select workshops to share their expertise in the fields of storytelling and other performance-based arts. I will conduct one-on-one and group interviews with storytellers and performance artists regarding their personal experience performing for and with youth in diverse settings to develop oral histories and notes on praxis. I will conduct a survey before and after the summer camp experience to measure the change in the youths' sense of efficacy, self-esteem, academic preparation, as well as their experience and comfort with the notion of expressing themselves in multiple ways, especially with regard to the arts and civic engagement. My collaborators (youth and staff) and I will also perform before an audience of their family members, peers, community leaders and community members, a collaborative performance piece that is based upon our collective expressions of their understandings of the local definitions, causes, results and possible solutions for the School to Prison Pipeline. The goal is for this performance to serve as an opportunity for the collaborators (youth, FAF staff, volunteers, and concerned community members) to advocate for their own needs and interests while informing the generalized understanding of the School to Prison Pipeline phenomenon by creatively and artfully speaking their experienced truth to power. We will also explore and develop capacities to express ourselves through dance, poetry, photography, dramatic interpretation and oratory. My observations from this experience will produce oral histories that will share insight on the use and impact of trauma informed performance based programming for marginalized youth.

Regulatory and other findings:

This research, which involves children, meets criteria at 45 CFR 46.404 and/or 21 CFR 50.51 (research involving no greater than minimal risk). Permission of one parent or guardian is sufficient.

Investigator's Responsibilities:

Federal regulations require that all research be reviewed at least annually. It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to submit for renewal and obtain approval before the expiration date. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without IRB approval. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in automatic termination of the approval for this study on the expiration date.

Your approved consent forms and other documents are available online at http://apps.research.unc.edu/irb/index.cfm?event=home.dashboard.irbStudyManagement&irb_id=16-1205.

You are required to obtain IRB approval for any changes to any aspect of this study before they can be implemented. Any unanticipated problem involving risks to subjects or others (including adverse events reportable under UNC-Chapel Hill policy) should be reported to the IRB using the web portal at http://irbis.unc.edu.

Please be aware that additional approvals may still be required from other relevant authorities or "gatekeepers" (e.g., school principals, facility directors, custodians of records).

The current data security level determination is Level II. Any changes in the data security level need to be discussed with the relevant IT official. If data security level II and III, consult with your IT official to develop a data security plan. Data security is ultimately the responsibility of the Principal Investigator.

This study was reviewed in accordance with federal regulations governing human subjects research, including those found at 45 CFR 46 (Common Rule), 45 CFR 164 (HIPAA), 21 CFR 50 & 56 (FDA), and 40 CFR 26 (EPA), where applicable.

CC:
Renee Alexander Craft, Communication

APPENDIX M: IRB APPROVAL FOR THE TALK

THE UNIVERSITY of NORTH CAROLINA at CHAPEL HILL

OFFICE OF HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS
720 Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd.
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Web site: ohre.unc.edu
Federalwide Assurance (FWA) #4801

To: Sonny Kelly
Communication

From: Office of Human Research Ethics

Date: 8/10/2018
RE: Determination that Research or Research-Like Activity does not require IRB Approval
Study #: 18-1790

Study Title: Talk The Talk

This submission was reviewed by the Office of Human Research Ethics, which has determined that this submission does not constitute human subjects research as defined under federal regulations [45 CFR 46.102 (d or f) and 21 CFR 56.102(c)(e)(l)] and does not require IRB approval.

Study Description:

Purpose: To learn the impact that critical theatrical performance can have on audience's understanding of racial and social inequity, and their willingness to discuss it. The *Talk The Talk* project seeks to expand these conversations and mobilize them for positive change in our local communities. This project will allow me to explore the impacts that performance ethnography has on diverse communities.

Participants: Up to 2,400 people of all ages genders and backgrounds (10 to 12 audiences consisting of 20 to 200 audience members)

Procedures (methods): *The Talk* is an original work of performance ethnography that I performed *The Talk* at UNC Chapel Hill's Swain Hall from March 8 through March 11, 2018 as part of the annual Communication Department series of productions. I will perform *The Talk* for diverse audiences across the U.S., and I will lead a 30 to 60 minute discussion about racial identity and equity with audiences afterward. I will distribute voluntary surveys to all willing and able adult audience members. I will also observe the post-show discussions to measure how the performance and the post-show talk-backs (discussions) facilitate deeper understandings and generative discussions about racial and social equity.

Please be aware that approval may still be required from other relevant authorities or "gatekeepers" (e.g., school principals, facility directors, custodians of records), even though IRB approval is not required.

If your study protocol changes in such a way that this determination will no longer apply, you should contact the above IRB before making the changes.

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