Abstract

Within the past decade, two major events raised the national profile of the experiences of black youth and the realities of racism in the city of Kingston, Ontario. The first event occurred in the spring of 2001 and involved the dramatic “high-risk takedown” by Kingston Police of two innocent black male youths who were wrongly profiled as suspects in an assault case. The second event involved the subsequent release of a report commissioned by Kingston Police which confirmed that black male youth in Kingston were almost four times more likely to be stopped and questioned by Kingston police than any other racial group (Wortley and Marshall, 2005).

This research, while not addressed to the specifics of racial profiling and policing in Kingston, focuses on the marginalized voices of male and female black youth in Kingston. Eight youth volunteered to participate in this study. Participants took part in one-on-one interviews with the researcher and three participated in a follow-up focus group session. Themes explored in the one-on-one interview and focus group sessions included factors influencing the construction of black identities within a predominantly white city, the negotiation of friendships and relationships, and interactions with public authorities such as teachers and the police.

This study addresses the various ways in which black youth, male and female, experience life in their city— at home, at school, and in the community— and how they feel their blackness affects these experiences. It highlights the perspectives and insights of black Kingston youth. The findings of this research can help us better understand how black identities develop in small Canadian cities, how blackness is policed, and the internal and external “regimes of power” that govern these relations. (Foucault, 1977, p.112). The study offers a medium by which these
voices may be heard and may contribute to long-term community-based anti-racism work in
Kingston.
Acknowledgements

My soul looks back and wonder
How I got over, how I got over… (Ward, 1961)

For each of my life’s blessings, thank you.

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And in memory of Carolyn Davies, a friend and community leader with whom I was fortunate to have shared the frustrations and triumphs of pursuing graduate studies as a working mom.
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Preface

Stephanie: What would you like, you know, people who are big in the city or teachers...what do you think they need to know about black kids in Kingston?
Tareq: That they’re not all bad.
Stephanie: That they’re not all bad.
Carver: I live here too.
Shawna: Yeah.
Carver: You know? I live on this earth too.

(Focus group discussion, “Black in Kingston”)

For many years, academics and policy makers have pointed to Canada’s rapidly declining workforce population and the apparent necessity of recruiting foreign-born workers to meet projected labour shortfalls. Efforts to supply Canadian employers with an adequate pool of skilled labour are boosting Canada’s immigrant population to levels not seen since the Great Depression (Proudfoot, 2007). The growing recognition of immigration as key to Canada’s economic future is leading both to shifts in policy direction and to unexpected re-openings of discussion on the meanings of democracy and citizenship in a multicultural nation.

The imperative to consider how Canadian communities may better embrace “outsiders”, thereby tapping into their economic and social value, has extended beyond large urban centres such as Toronto and Vancouver where many newcomers settle. Various levels of government have identified the importance of more evenly distributing newcomers across the country (Krahn, Derwing, & Abu-Laban, 2005). Smaller second- and third-tier Canadian cities such as Kingston, Ontario, long defined by racial and cultural homogeneity, now also find themselves under some pressure to determine how they will attract newcomers and harness new sources of economic and social potential. Kingston mayor Harvey Rosen has recently cited the city’s flat population growth as the impetus for programs meant to "...attract more new Canadians to Kingston to help grow our knowledge based community, fill worker gaps in our health-care and
skilled trades communities, and generally grow our community” (Website invites new Canadians to make Kingston home, February 23, 2010).

Recently the Community University Research Alliance (CURA) funded “Ontario Welcoming Communities Initiative” and the Ontario government-sponsored Local Immigration Partnership initiatives have been tasked with researching and implementing measures that will strengthen the capacity of small cities to provide a welcoming environment and opportunities to newcomers. Further initiatives such as the Canadian Coalition of Municipalities against Racism and Discrimination (CCMARD), to which Kingston recently became signatory, commit to combating racism and its negative effects on the civic participation of racialized residents.

The existence of a positive social environment for children is a key indicator of welcome and future possibility for those establishing themselves in new communities. Kingston's immigration web portal announces, "Kingston is safe, clean and easy to get around – an ideal size for raising young families" (City of Kingston, "Kingston welcomes you!", n.d.). But is Kingston an ideal home for racialized young people? Despite national claims of multicultural equality, racialized newcomers to Canada have long been excluded from discourses of citizenship and continue to experience staggering levels of economic, political and social discrimination (Henry, Tator, Mattis, & Rees, 2000; Colour of Poverty Fact Sheets, 2007). While racialized families moving to very large urban centres may be somewhat comforted by the presence of supportive communities of people with shared ethnicity, those considering life in smaller, less diverse cities will have greater doubts about prospects for themselves and for their children. Will the development of their children be nurtured through full community participation? Or will they find themselves marginal to the community experience? One logical place to begin exploring the answers to these questions is in dialogue with young people who
have had the experience of growing up and forming racialized identities within relatively small and ethnically/racially homogenous communities.

The ethnicities, places of origin, and ancestries of black youth in Kingston are diverse. Not all black Kingston youth identify as immigrants; some, along with their parents, were born in countries outside of Canada, while others have lived their entire lives here and have known no other home but Kingston. In 2009, I had the great fortune of meeting and speaking with several black Kingston youth of different backgrounds about their experiences of identity and belonging in this small city with a majority white population. As one might expect, responses to this very broad and complex question varied among these young people. However, in speaking with them, I was struck by the readiness with which the youth sought to define and articulate their identities as young, black Kingstonians. As the quote beginning this passage indicates, the youth with whom I spoke sought to be heard, to tell their stories, and to assert their presence within the fabric of a place in which they are frequently unseen or misrepresented. They speak of their “here-ness” with urgency and passion and believe their words can positively influence the shape of their city, material and imagined. These young people from small-town Ontario give life to Rinaldo Walcott’s (2003) suggestion that “the writing of blackness in Canada, then, might begin with a belief that something important happens here [emphasis added]” (p. 27).

In the past decade, Kingston has seen several opportunities for thoughtful and constructive dialogue on the subject of how racialization and racism affect prospects for meaningful community participation. It has been difficult to sustain dialogue in the aftermath of cases such as the highly publicized and sensationalized arrests of several black Kingston youth, the details of which I present in the Introduction below. It may be that the current discourses of “welcome”, “community diversity”, “youthfulness”, and “growth” will provide a more inviting
platform for full and open discussion of barriers to community participation. Now is an
opportune moment to consider the important contribution Kingston youth, including the
racialized youth who have participated in this study, can make as the city navigates through these
complex issues.
Chapter 1: Introduction

Kingston is a small city located in southeastern Ontario at the north-western edge of Lake Ontario. With a greater metropolitan area population of just over 152,000, Kingston is often viewed as a transitory point between the larger, more diverse urban centres of Toronto, Montreal, and Ottawa as well as a gateway to popular summertime destinations such as the Thousand Islands. Kingston’s civic identity is deeply tied to its British colonial past. Known as the “limestone city”, its various heritage stone buildings and military outposts are testament to its history as a white, British Loyalist settlement. Much is made of the fact that Kingston briefly served as Canada’s capital city following the unification of Upper and Lower Canada in the 1840s. Although the city was established on land used by First Nations, the long presence of aboriginal peoples, as well as of various later arriving racialized minority groups, receives little attention in the city’s official narratives. To quote McKittrick (2006), the “geographic language” of Kingston, like other small eastern Ontario communities with Loyalist connections remains “predicated on ownership and conquest” (p. 28). The stories of those racialized as non-white in Kingston are recast within a storybook past of “pirates, indians (sic) [and] army guys” (City of Kingston, "Kingston History Colouring Book", n.d.) or viewed as transient, recent and, therefore, peripheral to the Kingston story. Despite evidence of the early presence of black residents and citizens in this region, blackness is still somehow an unimaginable or surprising part of Kingston’s heritage and present reality.

Blackness Hits the Headlines

In the spring of 2001, the themes of racial profiling, policing, and black identity hit the headlines in Kingston, Ontario in a way they had never before. In that year, a confrontation
between Kingston police and two young Kingston siblings offered the community an unsettling
glimpse into the reality of being young and black in Kingston.

According to a report in the *Kingston Whig Standard* (McArthur, April 26, 2003), two
black youth, Andrew and Mark Wallen, along with Mark Wallen’s white girlfriend, Jennifer
Burnham, were sitting in a Mercedes Benz that had been rented to the boys’ father, parked
outside a Kingston apartment complex on a Friday evening in March 2001. The youth, aged 12,
17, and 19 respectively, were reportedly waiting for the boys’ father who had entered the
apartment building for a brief visit with a friend. At one point, the trio decided to take a short
drive around the complex to find a place to dispose of some garbage from a take-out meal they
had enjoyed in the car. In what would prove to be a fateful moment, the youth were spotted
driving around by a resident of the complex who believed the youth were engaged in suspicious
activity. The resident, as it turned out, was a woman who had entered a witness protection
program following the incarceration of a black man who had once beaten her severely and left
her for dead. Fearing that one of the black “men” she had seen driving around in the Mercedes
was her former assailant, the panicked woman called 9-1-1. Responding to the dispatcher’s
questions about the suspects and their identity, the woman acknowledged she could not
positively identify the individuals in the car, but rationalized her decision to phone the police
with the comment, “You know, I’m sure there’s not a lot of black people running around in
Mercedes’ in Kingston...who dress like, like the hip-hop style driving a $60,000 car” (McArthur,
April 26, 2003).

The police response to the call was swift. The youth were soon surrounded by cruisers,
pulled over, and ordered from the vehicle one by one in a “high-risk takedown manoeuvre” (W.J.
Closs, personal communication, October 4, 2001). In the presence of barking dogs from the
force’s canine unit, drawn guns, and onlookers, the youth "sobbed and pleaded with police as they were forced from their father's Mercedes by gunpoint and made to kneel on the pavement" (McArthur, April 4, 2003). After the frantic intervention of the young men’s parents, the three youth were released at the scene. No apology was offered to the now traumatized youth or to their families. Both families joined in making a formal complaint about the incident to Kingston Police questioning the degree of force used against three innocent youth and whether the blackness of the two brothers was a factor.

A later independent investigation conducted by the Ontario Provincial Police cleared the officers of charges that they had used excessive force in the take-down. The OPP came to the further conclusion that race and racism had played no role in the officers’ response (McArthur, April 26, 2003). In a follow-up memo, then Kingston Police chief, William Closs, concurred that the take-down, while understandably upsetting for the youth, had been appropriately executed and that the one thing the officers had failed to do was extend an apology at the scene. In his view, the race of the two black youngsters in the front seat of the Mercedes was of no consequence and any suspicions of bias were conjectural. However, he commented extensively on the importance of appropriate etiquette when dealing with people who had otherwise experienced racism and recommended that his officers receive appropriate “sensitivity” training (W. J. Closs, personal communication, October 4, 2001).

As it turned out, the issue would not so easily be laid to rest. The spectre of racial profiling in policing had been raised and even the results of the external OPP investigation would not be sufficient to dispel it. Years after the incident, editorials and letters in the local paper scrutinized the known details of the high-risk takedown and further confrontations Mark Wallen would have with the police. Community members by turns expressed outrage, support for the
local police, support for the children and their families but, above all, bewilderment over evidence suggestive of police bias (Rasbach, April 5, 2003; Youmans, June 7, 2003; Flecker, August 20, 2005).

In the following year, the release of a special investigative report on racial profiling in the Toronto Star, one of Canada's leading daily newspapers, further fuelled public debate around the issue across the country (Police target black drivers, October 20, 2002). Through a Freedom of Information request, the Star gained access to Toronto Police data relating to arrests and charges dating back to 1996. The results of the data analysis were explosive. The Star confirmed that black drivers, particularly young black men between the ages of 25 and 34, were being stopped and subsequently then charged with “out of sight” traffic violations at rates disproportionate to their representation in the city population. The conclusion reached by the Star and independent analysts was that race was likely a factor in these stops and that Toronto Police were engaging in biased policing. Then Toronto Police chief, Julian Fantino, along with the Toronto Police Association, quickly dismissed the findings as methodologically flawed. In an angry retort, Fantino argued that the racial profiling study, "...isn't a good exercise because you don't have all the facts....If you find that leads you to conclude certain inappropriate conduct on our part, then I vehemently deny that." (Fantino, 2002). Meanwhile, members of Toronto’s black community hailed the results as confirmation of a problem it had long identified. Expressing disappointment with Fantino's initial response to the study, Valerie Steele, then president of the Jamaican-

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1 “Out of sight violations” refers to breaches of law that cannot be identified through observation alone. Examples include driving with an expired licence or without appropriate insurance. A vehicle would have to be stopped and information about the licence, etc. explicitly sought in order for the violation to be detected. When a group appears to be receiving a disproportionate number of tickets for such violations, it raises questions as to what prompted the initial stop of the vehicle and whether visible characteristics, such as the colour of the driver, may have played a role.
Canadian Association, and Lincoln Alexander, former Lieutenant-Governor of Ontario, were among many black Canadian leaders who called for public dialogue with police on how to address, rather than continue to side-step, problems of racial bias (Moloney & Shephard, 2002).

A few months later, Mark Wallen, now 19 years old, found himself once again at the centre of controversy regarding racial profiling and policing in Kingston. The youth had been walking home in the north end of the city with a teenaged friend, also black and male, following an evening basketball game. A Kingston police officer, responding to an anonymous report of suspicious persons wearing dark clothes and looking into car windows, stopped the two youth and demanded to speak with them. The youth resisted the officer's interrogation when the officer refused to give them a reason for stopping them. When the youth refused to cooperate with the officer by not removing their hands from their pockets, the officer drew his weapon and called for back-up. Once again, both young men were found innocent of any wrongdoing and released at the scene (McArthur, April 4, 2003). Complaints from the youths’ families of unlawful arrest and the excessive use of force prompted yet another internal investigation into the issue of racially-biased policing in Kingston.

This second dramatic stop and search of Mark Wallen, a young man who, unfortunately, would become the face of the racial profiling issue in Kingston, brought concerns of racism against black community members to local headlines once more. Spurred by national debate and increased pressure to address the growing impasse between local law enforcement and racialized communities, the Kingston Police chief took unprecedented action. In a controversial move applauded by racialized communities across the province but decried by police unions, William Closs issued an immediate ban on racial profiling in his force and commissioned a third-party inquiry into the effects of racial bias on policing in Kingston (McArthur, July 18, 2003).
Kingston police officers were directed to collect race-based information regarding all stops for a period of one year, from October 2003 until September 2004. Information about these contacts were recorded on “contact cards” which contained various categories of race and ethnicity including “white”, “black”, “native” and “Asian” as well as information about age and gender. The data were later handed over to University of Toronto criminologist Dr. Scot Wortley for independent analysis (McMahon, May 31, 2005).

The results of the Kingston data collections project were sobering but, again, unsurprising for those who had long maintained that racial bias was a factor in local policing. Based on information relating to 10,114 stops over the period of a year, the study concluded that black community members were almost four times more likely to be stopped by city police than other community members. While it was true that more of these stops had involved white people than any other group, this number, unlike the number of stops recorded for black community members, was proportionate to the majority status of white residents within the city’s population (Blacks stopped more often by police, May 26, 2005). Males and youth were more likely to be stopped than residents who were older and/or female. However, “young black males, between 15 and 24 years of age, are more likely to experience a police stop than any other demographic group” (Wortley & Marshall, 2005, p.75). In addition, black females, while less likely to be stopped and questioned than males in most categories, were more likely to be stopped and questioned than any other category of females (Wortley & Marshall, 2005).

Instead of spurring a revival of public discussion on how to correct bias in policing, the release of the Kingston racial profiling study in 2005 marked a strange denouement. The Kingston Police chief accepted the findings of the report and made several public apologies to the black community. However, perhaps as a gesture toward the Kingston Police Association,
Police Chief Closs was equally quick to absolve Kingston officers of any wrongdoing or personal responsibility. Taking personal responsibility for the systemic nature of the problem, Closs told the Kingston Police Services Board he was not "...asking any police officer to apologize in this room...My police officers have the right to leave this room and walk tall with pride. What we're doing wrong if we're doing anything wrong is systemic and that's my problem" (Blacks stopped more often by police, May 26, 2005).

Public discourse around the issue began to subside and morph into an examination of some of the purported benefits of biased policing. One article in the local daily newspaper, the *Kingston Whig Standard*, examined the ostensibly positive effects of over-policing youth as a means of deterring them from crime and teaching them how to behave appropriately in the community (McMahon, May 28, 2005). Critical examination of policing in the city and the experience of black youth in Kingston was further undermined by what appeared to be a rush to recognize the police chief for groundbreaking work in the area of policing. Despite his open ambivalence regarding the findings of the Data Collection Project and his skilful non-admission of racially biased police practices, the chief had, by then, been honoured by the Association of Black Law Enforcers (ABLE) with a Community Award for his "foresight and vision" (Lukits, May 27, 2004). He was also later awarded the Governor General's Officer of the Order of Merit of the Police Forces. For black youth like Wallen, by now aged 21, the findings from the Data Collection Project report offered only partial vindication. The problem of bias of which Wallen had complained for years had finally received third-party confirmation and national media attention. However, the study and its findings had done little to positively affect his lived reality in Kingston. Months before the release of the report, he and his family learned that the disciplinary hearing against the officer who had held him at gunpoint two years before had been
dismissed (McMahon & Perreault, December 9, 2004). Additionally, in the summer of 2005, several months after the report’s release, Mark Wallen was for a third time surrounded by police cruisers outside his home and charged for an out of sight traffic violation (McMahon, July 4, 2005).

While there may never be universal agreement on the merits of the Kingston Police Data Collection Project or who was really to blame during that turbulent period between 2001 and 2005 when police and media attention were so sharply focused on black Kingston youth, it is clear that the voices of young black men and women have been overlooked as an important source of information on racism and racialization in Kingston. One of the strongest voices of youth opposition to racism to emerge from Kingston in the last decade, that of Mark Wallen, is now gone, with no voice of leadership to take its place. Although, arguably, it seemed this young man’s voice could only be heard within a framing discourse of black male criminality (Kelly, 1998), for a time his and his parents’ outspokenness regarding his treatment afforded the community critical insight into the experience of being policed as a black male in Kingston. Reactions to Wallen’s voice and his story varied considerably. From letters to the editor to community meetings, Kingstonians struggled to make sense of what they were learning and how it mapped on to their own realities. For some these stories were welcomed as necessary and positive disruptions, leading citizens to reflect on the unsafe space Kingston was and the safe space it might become. Others reacted to these stories with condemnation and positioned the youth as an instigator, an attention-seeker, and the eventual author of his own misfortunes. As a result of some highly publicized acting-out behaviour, Wallen continued to be cast as an aggressive black male subject. The local media’s later connection of Wallen to a black Brampton man charged with murdering a white Queen’s University student (Wallen was once
part of the same rap music production company as the suspect) further cemented Wallen’s recasting as threat, rather than victim (McMahon, April 18, 2005) Eventually the price of speaking out became too high for Wallen and his family who decided to preserve their emotional health by ending participation in the public conversation (McMahon, 2004), and finally by leaving the city. Like other black Canadians who have spoken out against injustice, ultimately, his “appeals for social justice remain[ed] unheard by those in authority...largely due to the ambivalent place of black peoples in the national imagination” (Walcott, 2003, p. 12).

While experiences of racial profiling took an unacceptable, personal toll on the Wallen family, they have afforded us some important insights. Unlike any story prior or since, the Wallen story forcefully awakened the community, particularly the white community, to a subtext of racial complexity and tension running below the predominant discourse of white uniformity. Further, the Wallen family’s search for justice and the corresponding results of the Police Data Collection Project led us conclusively to the realization that Mark Wallen was not alone – that, in fact, many more stories like Mark Wallen’s – of black youth caught between the poles of invisibility and hypervisibility, belonging and unbelonging – existed. Though not all black youth in Kingston have experienced the same degree of harassment or conflict, there is much that can be learned from the stories of how diverse black youth have shaped their identities in a place where there are few black people, and of how their sense of self is influenced by their interactions with peers, teachers, authorities, and community institutions.

This study, “Black in Kingston: Youth Perspectives on Blackness and Belonging in a Small Ontario City”, aims to give space to the often marginalized narratives of black Kingston youth. While the black youth who participated in this study were invited to speak to any specific experiences they may have had with local police, this research consciously ventured beyond the
topic of police interactions, seeking to capture broader reflection on processes involved in understanding and claiming black identity in what could sometimes be a hostile or indifferent environment. Together we explored how black youth experienced life in their city – at home, at school, and in the community – and what effect, if any, “blackness” had on these experiences. We spoke about how black youth experienced their heightened visibility within a white dominated city and how or if these youth coped with pressures associated with being the surveilled. We spoke of how black identities develop where few black community spaces exist, as well as the internal and external “regime[s] of power” that govern their sense of identification (Foucault, 1977, p. 112).

The eight youth who agreed to participate and share their stories were from a diverse range of backgrounds. Some had been born in Canada; others had immigrated to Canada with their families as young children. Some were in the final years of high school; others had moved on to or past post-secondary education. Some had been raised by black-identified parents/guardians, while others had been brought up in white households or with both white and black parents/guardians. What many of these youth had in common was a very strong desire to speak about what their lives were like in Kingston and often specifically about experiences of racism. On one memorable occasion, I had gone to a local highschool to give students an information session on the project and provide prospective participants with permission forms. However, I found that the students were so eager to speak that they immediately launched into their stories – they wanted me to stay and conduct a focus group discussion immediately. I found myself having to ask the students to hold back on sharing their experiences with me, at least until they had returned their signed consent forms.
Among the youth who participated in the study there was a sense of excitement around contributing to the creation of a privileged and private space in which their experiences as young black people held value and importance. Our one-on-one interview and focus group sessions were times during which the youth could show their vulnerability, let off steam, and test their own assumptions and hypotheses. In a few instances, I observed how the mere process of articulating their realities appeared to lead the youth to transformations in consciousness. Participants who previously had not fully contemplated how they were positioned in their own world were now visible to themselves. By speaking their realities, the black youth in this study sought to view themselves more completely but also to become active subjects in the shaping of Kingston – to realize their potential as “...the invisible/forgettable [that] is producing space – always and in all sorts of ways” (McKittrick & Woods, 2007, p.4).
Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

My proposal to undertake research into the experiences of black youth in Kingston is based on a number of starting points. The first of these is that, as black people, young black men and women are members of a social group that has historically experienced, and continues to experience, systemic social, economic, and political disadvantage in Canada (Calliste, 2005; Henry et al., 2000). In the tradition of critical race theory, I view race discourse as an important determinant of social identity and racism as a “daily fact of life” for people of colour in North America (Parker & Roberts, 2005). For black people in Canada, racism itself, whether subtle and systemic or overt and direct, underpins the racialization process and is an unavoidable part of forming one's social identity (Kelly, 1998, p. 27).

Race and Racism

While the notion of race as a biological construct has been thoroughly discredited within scientific communities, perceptions and constructions of race continue to hold great historical and social significance (Henry & Tator, 2006; Kobayashi & Johnson, 1997; Taylor, James, & Saul, 2007). Despite the great human diversity now known to exist not only among but within races, "race has fashioned and continues to mould personal and social identity, the bounds of who one is and can be, of where one chooses to be or is placed, what social and private spaces one can and dare not enter or penetrate” (Goldberg, 1993, p. 206). Various theorists have persuasively linked current definitions of race categories in North America to the evolution of racist ideologies. According to Kobayashi and Johnson (1997), constructions of race may be understood as a condition and result of racism, rather than racism’s cause (p. 4-5).

Racism has been described as “a system in which one group of people exercises power over another on the basis of skin colour; an implicit or explicit set of beliefs, erroneous
assumptions, and actions based on an ideology of the inherent superiority of one racial group over another, and evident in organizational or institutional structures and programs as well as in individual thought or behaviour patterns” (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 352). Citing the anti-colonialist writings of Frantz Fanon, Razack (1998) notes that racism may be regarded as the rule rather than the exception in capitalist societies as the profit imperative has historically relied on racial and class stratifications. In her words, racism is the very “condition that enables the story of Western civil progress to be told, the bedrock upon which the emergence of bourgeois society is founded” (Razack, 1998, p.4). The racialization of various social groups over time may further be understood as the historical process of inscribing bodies with racial meaning (Kobayashi & Johnson, 1997) and “the processes by which meanings are attached to particular objects, features and processes in such a way that the latter are given special significance and are embodied with a set of additional meanings” (Henry & Tator, 2006, p. 6). As these race theorists show, racial categories are mutable and redefinable and racial statuses of certain groups, particularly white European groups, have changed over time in accordance with dominant group interests. Dominance can be understood as not just numerical, but also resulting from cultural dominance or alignment with “social practices and representation that affirm the central values, interests and concerns of the social class in control of the material and symbolic wealth of society” (McLaren, 2003, p. 201). In Canada and many small cities such as Kingston, Ontario, whiteness remains one of the primary reference points for Canadian identity (Kelly, 1998).

**Common Characteristics of Oppression**

Groups racialized as non-white minorities in Canada have historically experienced, and continue to experience, many forms of injustice and barriers to societal participation. Activists and theorists such as Suzanne Pharr (1988) and Iris Marion Young (1990) have endeavoured to
locate the roots of social oppression as a means of challenging such injustices. Both argue the existence of broad and common themes of injustice that have affected many historical “out-groups”. Young (1990) identifies the 1960s and 1970s in North America as the period in which activists and academics began to use the term “oppression” to encapsulate that range of injustices being encountered by aboriginal peoples, racialized minorities, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered people, people with disabilities, and others. She suggests that, in its (re)articulation, oppression has come to refer to disadvantages resulting from the well-intended and apparently neutral actions of a liberal society, rather than the intentionally tyrannical actions of individuals. In her provocative critique of social justice theories and movements, Young describes the condition of being oppressed as that of members of certain groups being fundamentally inhibited from fully developing their capacities, expressing their experiences, or determining their own actions. Pharr (1988) similarly suggests that oppressions are “linked by a common origin – economic power and control” and that the techniques of oppression have the effect of limiting people’s lives (p. 53). Young and Pharr identify several common means by which groups experience oppression, among them othering and stereotyping, exploitation, marginalization, disempowerment, the experience or threat of violence, and cultural imperialism.

In her book, *Homophobia: A Weapon of Sexism*, Pharr (1988) suggests that oppressions of all types begin with the standardization of the cultural norms of groups in positions of institutional, economic, and social power. The hegemonization of these dominant practices results in the relegation of relatively subordinate groups to out-group status.

In Young’s (1990) work on the “faces of oppression”, exploitation refers to the unreciprocated or uncompensated extraction of a group’s labour for the benefit of another group. It further refers to a group’s relative inability to make decisions about its work and the results of
its work. Young speaks of marginalization in reference to the sidelining of people “the system of labour cannot or will not use” (p. 53) and the relegation of such people to a state of uselessness and perpetual non-participation in society. Powerlessness refers to a lack of access to decision-making capacity and lack of access to the resources required for the development of skills, a condition which can be measured by one’s proximity to what is considered a respectable job or profession within the dominant culture. Both Pharr (1988) and Young (1990) remark on the use of violence and the perpetual threat of violence to limit the potential of members of subordinate groups. Young (1990) further points to the dominant discourses of fear and revulsion that permit violence and the continued devaluation of peoples’ lives. Finally, for Young, cultural imperialism results from the universalization and normalization of dominant group practices and the concurrent dehumanization and invisibility of subordinate group members.

Although not all oppressed groups will experience all of these injustices, or experience them in the same way, both Pharr (1988) and Young (1990) suggest that most oppressed groups are able to identify with at least one of the above described “faces” or “elements” of oppression. The history of black people in Canada has involved the complex interaction of most, if not all, of these factors at any given time.

Black Canadian Experiences of Oppression

Appropriate weight and acknowledgement must be given to the historical presence of black communities in Canada in order to contextualize the experiences of black Canadians today. While it is true that many black Canadians of various ethnic backgrounds are recent immigrants to Canada or the children of immigrants, the history of the black presence in Canada spans almost 400 years (Calliste, 2005; Henry et al., 2000; Walker, 1980; Winks, 1971). The histories of black Canada are often documented as a long series of “trials and triumphs” (Hill, 1993).
Black people have made, and continue to make, significant economic, political, social, and cultural contributions to Canada. The first known black person in Canada, Mathieu da Costa, arrived in 1605 as a translator for European explorer Samuel de Champlain (Hill, 1981; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1983; Walker, 1980; Winks, 1971). For hundreds of years, black people have participated in Canadian society as general and skilled workers, educators, politicians, entrepreneurs, writers, artists, and athletes. Even so, their contributions and successes have always occurred against a backdrop of struggle in the face of invidious racial oppression.

Within its official narratives, Canada is mythologized as a place of safety and opportunity for black people, particularly African Americans who had one time sought liberation from slavery through escape to Canada (McKittrick, 2006). However, the origins of Canada are themselves rooted in slavery, the most egregious form of human exploitation possible. The first black resident of Canada was a child from Madagascar who had been enslaved and brought to New France in 1628 (Henry et al., 2000; Hill, 1981; Ontario Ministry of Education, 1983, Winks, 1971). Although the institution of slavery was never to gain the foothold in Canada that it did in the neighbouring United States, the exploitation of black labour has, nevertheless, had a significant impact on the shaping of the Canadian state. Though silenced, the productive presence of marginalized and exploited black bodies, with those of the First Nations and other racialized minority groups, has significantly contributed to the production of the nation. The discursive and material evidence of their realities are “threaded through the colonial nation-space despite the repression of ethnic geographies” (McKittrick, 2006, pp. 92, 96). Traces of Canada’s oppressive origins may be found in de facto standards such as New France’s Code Noir which cemented racial hierarchies and inscribed the subordination and marginality of enslaved blacks (McKittrick, 2006, pp. 111-112). Both prior to and following the abolition of slavery, the
experience of life in British Upper Canada was often no less an experience of inequality, hardship, and broken promises for emancipated blacks (Henry et al., 2000). Though experiences of inequality varied among blacks in early Canada, black people were rarely viewed as equal to whites or untroubled by the existence of the “colour line” (Walker, 1980, p. 81). With few exceptions black people, though positioned within the nation, remained impoverished and cast as outsiders or second-class citizens.

The experience of relative powerlessness has persisted for many black people in Canada despite dramatic political gains and increases in the black Canadian population since the 1950s (Hill, 1993). Contradictory discourses which position black people as both a source of expendable labour and a drain on the economy persist (Henry et al., 2000; Walker, 1980, pp. 82 & 133). Along with other racialized minority groups, assumptions and stereotypes regarding such matters as “cultural fit” continue to shut black people out of positions of authority and power (Backlid, 2004). Black Canadians who have increasingly entered Canada on the basis of their labour potential, may find their Canadian identity and their potential for engaged citizenship disregarded (Calliste, 2005).

The threat of violent repression has been a feature of black Canadian life since the induction of blacks into the nation through slavery. Imagined outside of the nation while exploited within it, black people have, from the earliest periods of their settlement in Canada, been vulnerable to scapegoating and violence at the hands of the white majority population (McKittrick, 2006). Black Canadians have found themselves targets of mob violence during times of economic downturn and recession as early as the 18th century (Walker, 1980, p.32). Presently, black Canadians continue to be the group at greatest risk of racially motivated hate activity in the country (Mock as cited in Henry et al., 2000; Statistics Canada, March 13, 2009).
And as illustrated in the introductory section of this study, media reports and academic research confirm that blacks remain at great risk of police harassment and (mis)use of force in both large and small urban communities (Henry et al., 2000; James, 1998; Solomon & Palmer, 2004).

Finally, the subordination and dehumanization of black Canadians has been realized in the erasure of black experience from imagined and literal Canadian landscapes (McKittrick, 2006). The complexity and diversity of black Canadian experiences remain unarticulated within institutions such as schools, governments and media (Henry & Tator, 2000; Walcott, 1994; Yon, 1999). Black Canadian realities and histories remain peripheral to normative narratives of white European civilization, development and progress (Codjoe, 2005; Dei et al., 1997; Solomon & Palmer, 2004). While the persistent lobbying of black communities has resulted in some public recognition for celebrations of “black history month”, the histories and lived realities of black Canadians are still positioned as merely supplemental to the narratives of the white majority population.

*Schools – Race, Class, and Gender*

Within North America, schools operate as key sites in which children and young people are introduced and socialized into the norms of social life (Kehily & Nayak, 2008; McLaren, 2003). As such, schools may be understood as “normalizing agencies” (McLaren, 2003, p. 189), places in which children and youth “spend a good deal of their time and are...disciplined into becoming modern-gendered subjects” (Kehily & Nayak, 2008, p. 97) as well as classed and racialized subjects. Further, schools, operating within a capitalist economic system, may be regarded as “vital supports for, and developers of, the class relation” (McLaren, 2003, p. 29).

Schools and systems of schooling cannot be understood as accidental or innocently arranged. In his examinations of sexual repression and disciplinary power, Foucault (1990,
1995) identifies schools, secondary schools in particular, as places through which rules and physical structures order the lives of students and subject youth to surveillance and regulatory pressures. Schools are places in which the “whole indefinite domain of the non-conforming is punishable” (Foucault, 1995, p. 178). While many critical educators have argued for the creation of schools as places of nurture, “creating conditions for the development of freely associated human beings…and engaged citizens” (McLaren, 2003, p. 13) we remain confronted by the reality of a schooling system which is heavily “implicated in relations of power, social practices and the favoring of forms of knowledge that support a specific vision of past, present and future.” (McLaren, 2003, p. 187).

Black Canadian Youth and Schools

As a state institution, Canadian schools arguably play a significant role in perpetuating various forms of oppression experienced by black youth. As Giroux (2000) indicates, schools can, among other things, develop in young people a capacity for critical thinking which will allow them to participate more fully in community and in society (Giroux as cited in James, 1997, p. 17). However, schools have been criticized for the use of streaming as a conscious and unconscious process which effectively suppresses the creative and academic potential of black youth, limiting them to the best economic use that may be made of them in the workforce (Foucault, 1995; McLaren, 2003). Beyond this, literature from the UK, US and Canada continues to support the notion of school as complex ideological terrain in which many black youth find their identities, histories, cultures, and languages disaffirmed (Blair, 2001; Codjoe, 2005; Codjoe, 2006; Conchas, 2006; Daniel-Tatum, 1997; Dei, 2005; Gillborn, 2005; Graham, 2001; Walcott & Dei, 1993). Research indicates that black youth struggle to succeed in school and to adapt to school cultures in which they are socialized to adopt the “values, norms and
history of the colonizer” and in which their humanity is quietly devalued (Solomon & Palmer, 2004, p.1). Critical educators have challenged the teaching of a “white self-esteem curriculum that...by design or effect reinforces white students’ self-esteem” while concurrently overlooking or dismissing the abilities and values of black students (Asante, M.K. as cited in Codjoe, 2005, p.83). As a result, researchers are increasingly turning their attention to how various forms of acting out and the adoption of stereotypically brash and bold “black” dress, attitudes and activities, in fact, act as resistance to the normalizing power of schools (James, 2003; Kelly, 1998, Solomon & Palmer, 2004). Indeed, school for black youth has been identified as a perpetual “micropolitical terrain” of struggle against oppression (Solomon & Palmer, 2004).

For all adolescents, but particularly for black youth, school, then, represents a powerful but often contradictory force. School both oppresses and offers important opportunities and strategies for survival in an oppressive society (Dei, 2005). School disconfirms black experiences while offering a unique and empowering space in which black youth identity is imagined, tested, expressed and expanded. As black Canadian youth negotiate identity and belonging in their schools and communities, they must be understood as complex “social actors” who both create and are created (McLaren, 2003).

*Conceptualizing Blackness*

Blackness for Canadian adolescents cannot be assumed to be limited to a distinct set of experiences; rather it is also distinguished by the way in which it evolves and unfolds in the imaginations of black youth and in the way these youth choose to represent themselves (Hall, 1996). Blackness may be understood as a signifier that, over time, has shifted in response to conditions of “historical specificity” (Hall, 1996; Morrison, 1992; Walcott, 2003). While the
identifier “black” may refer to visible, bodily characteristics of black subjects, it ventures beyond notions of biological essentialism to encompass the complex relationship of black subjects to narratives of oppression – historical and present – community and cultural expression (Hall, 1996; Walcott, 2003). In problematizing the notion of an essential black subject or community, many scholars such as Hall (1996), Sealy (2000), Walcott (2003) and Yon (1999) have advocated for recognition of the “plurivocality and heterogeneity” of blacknesses within the black diaspora (Sealy, 2000, p. 102). However, as Hall (1996) suggests, notions of blackness and black culture may be strongly shaped by the twin influences of African “inheritances” and responses to experiences of European/American subjugation:

Selective appropriation, incorporation and rearticulation of European ideologies, cultures and institutions, alongside African heritage…led to linguistic innovations in rhetorical stylization of the body, forms of occupying an alien space, heightened expressions, hairstyles, ways of walking, standing and talking, and a means of constituting and sustaining camaraderie and community (p. 471).

Although Butler (1999) is cautious about transferring her theories of gender performativity to race, scholars have found her notion of stylized performances resulting from “an expectation that ends up producing the very phenomenon that it anticipates” useful for theorizing various ways in which blackness is understood and lived (Butler, 1999, p. xiv). Ibrahim (2000), for example, describes black identity as a “continual act of becoming” rooted in “not fixity, but performativity” (pp. 111-113). His research suggests that this process is particularly observable in the cultural adjustment strategies of African youth who have migrated to Canada. Such youth, who may not have viewed themselves as “black” in their countries of birth, find themselves undergoing a reinterpretation of being and becoming black once entering the North American “social imaginary (a discursive space or a representation) in which they are already constructed, imagined and positioned – and thus treated by the hegemonic discourses and
dominant groups – as Blacks” (Ibrahim, 2000, p. 120). For black Canadian youth, to assume the identifier “black” is, in part, to acknowledge the positioning of black bodies as the personification of “degraded otherness” (Sealy, 2000, p. 94). Yet, at the same time, blackness functions as a “reappointed sign of political agency” through which youth may define and express their interests and values, as well as assert claims to what they perceive to be self-validating communities (Sealy, 2000, p. 98).

*Black Diasporic Identifications*

For many black Canadians, and particularly black Canadian youth, possibilities for resisting oppression may be found in (re)imagining black identity within the context of an evolving and dynamic diasporic consciousness. Association with the diaspora, or globally politicized black identity, provides a means of breaking free from objectifications and “geographies that are bound up in human disempowerment and dispossession” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 3). The notion of a politicized web of people of African ancestry from which a “network of ideas and practices...for the benefit of common yet separate and dispersed communities” could spring dates back to the North American pan-Africanist movements of the 1940s through to the 1970s (Davies & M’Bow, 2007, p. 15). Though, as Yon (1999) cautions, these broad identifications can lead to dangerously uncritical perceptions of place, diasporic identifications are not always tinged with sentimentality and longing. Instead they may be formulated as strategic (re)positioning that may be at once material or symbolic, bound or unbound by geographic constraints. As theorists such as Walcott (2003) and McKittrick (2006) suggest, the diasporic imaginings of the black community and black youth defy prescriptive cartographic boundaries, while expanding and validating “spatial options” (McKittrick, 2006, pp. 102-104).
For historically oppressed communities, black diasporic subjectivity represents a response to a sense of unbelonging within and ambivalence about nationhood and citizenship, particularly in white dominated spaces. In negotiating diverse meanings and performances of blackness, “diaspora conditions work to produce black peoples in the contradictory space of belonging and not” (Walcott, 2003, p. 22). With Walcott, Yon (1999) appeals for (re)conceptions of identity and culture in which multiplicities of black identity may be understood. Diasporic connection is a means of challenging stereotypes and other oppressive essentialisms. Global identifications or “multiple place associations” (Yon, 1999, p. 625) create feelings of solidarity and empowerment while simultaneously problematizing unifying discourses of cultural identity and, therefore, widening opportunities for cross-identifications and dialogue. Outer-national youth exchanges through music and the arts offer possibilities for local cultural (re)invention (Walcott, 2003). Within the web of these exchanges, black youth experiment and play with identity, reconceptualising and testing, embracing and rejecting. For many black youth, then, the adolescent rites of self awareness and individuation are complex, multiscalar processes in which gender, race, class, and citizenship are continually interrogated and reevaluated.
Chapter 3: Review of Literature

I have found little in the literature addressed specifically to the experiences of black youth and their processes of identity formation within small, white dominated, urban, Canadian settings. Studies of black youth experiences have tended to be focused on centres such as Toronto, Montreal, Halifax, and Edmonton in which black people, while still a minority population, are numbered in the tens of thousands and where there are many other groups of racialized people. Arguably, attention to such centres is to be expected as these are the places in which black people and racialized newcomers have historically settled. Certainly, there has been no research into the specific experiences of black youth in Kingston where, according to the 2006 Census, black people number only 1,165 in a general population of 152,358. Again, I consider the lack of research in this area surprising, given possible indications that black youth in Kingston are subject to more scrutiny by local law enforcement than other groups.

Several major studies have examined the experiences of young black men and women in relation to self-concept and identity and, further, to schooling and school culture (Codjoe, 2006; James, 1990; James, 2003; Kelly, 1998; Kelly, 2004; Solomon & Palmer, 2004). Though researchers like Kelly (1998) and James (1990, 1998) have expanded their studies to document black youth experiences beyond schoolyard boundaries in places such as shopping malls and dance clubs, it makes sense that study participants frequently speak about life in school as the majority of their formative adolescent years is typically spent in contact with the school system. As a result, schools often act as common experiential reference points, even for youth across regions (Kelly, 1998, p. 6).

The last 40 years has seen gradual growth in literature focusing specifically on the history
of black communities in Canada and charting the experiences of black people throughout Canadian society (Calliste, 2005; Henry et al., 2000, Hill, 1993; McKittrick, 2006; Walcott, 2003; Walker, 1980; Winks, 1971). Education and sociological research in both Canada and the US has tended to focus broadly on perceived “black community problems”, for example, underemployment in communities and underachievement in schools. Much has been written on the issue of black youth disengagement, particularly in large centres like Toronto where black youth are frequently portrayed as an antisocial and dangerous presence (Henry et al., 2000; Kelly, 1998). A great deal of time and energy has been spent by researchers, educators, politicians, and journalists intent on cracking the code of black failure in predominantly white society (Conchas, 2006; Smith et al., 2005) and these efforts have typically been rooted in a “dominant conception of Blackness as associated with deviance and subversion” (Dei, 2008, p. 357). Increasingly, however, researchers are rejecting paradigms that simply individualize and pathologize experiences of failure, disengagement, and conflict among black youth in favour of theoretical models which better account for the role of institutions and social systems in creating barriers to black youth achievement and opportunity (Walcott & Dei, 1993). Following the lead of theorists such as Freire (2008) and Giroux (1981), researchers now commonly preface inquiry into issues of disengagement with acknowledgement of how mainstream schooling, as a result of hegemonic ideological strategies, is designed to disempower learners, particularly those who are members of oppressed groups. To quote Freire, "So often do they hear that they are good for nothing, know nothing and are incapable of learning anything –that they are sick, lazy and unproductive – that in the end they are convinced of their own unfitness" (2008, p. 63). School-based learning, then, must be understood to take place within social systems of inequality and human exploitation (Dei, 2008; James, 1990; Kelly, 1998; McLaren, 2003; Smith, Schneider &
Ruck, 2005). Critical education theorists point to the great odds against school achievement for black and other marginalized youth forced to adapt to schooling “entrenched” in “European norms, values (&) traditions” (Solomon & Palmer, 2004, p. 2) and absorb a curriculum that “teaches [white] Western superiority” (Codjoe, 2005, p. 66). Recent research, particularly that which has generated data from interviews with black youth themselves, indicates that black youth are countering odds against their success and positive development via strong identifications with blackness and a diasporic black community, an awareness of the reality of racial oppression and discrimination, and a will to succeed without compromising their human dignity.

Black Youth - Positive Identification With Blackness

Current research on the experiences of black youth in Canadian society confirms that black self-identification and awareness of how black people are situated within the social fabric of the community are important to young black women and men (Codjoe, 2005; Dei, 2008; James, 1990; Kelly, 1998). As Walcott (2003) points out, black youth have sophisticated understandings of the connection between racialization and black identity. They acknowledge the reality of racism in Canada and the negative associations frequently made to blackness and know intimately that “to be black and at home in Canada is both to belong and not belong” (Walcott, 2003, p. 147). Yet many youth continue to view blackness and relationship with a black community as a source of pride and collective strength (James, 1990). Black youth interviewed by Carl James (1990) in his landmark study, Makin’ It, indicated a desire to meet the challenges of living in Canada on their own terms and resisted any suggestion that they were “frustrated seekers of white Anglo middle class values” (p. viii). In some cases, black youth have indicated a reluctance to fully identify as "Canadian", (a term frequently loaded with the
symbolism of white colonialism and dominance), preferring instead to be known as black (Codjoe, 2006; Kelly, 1998; Kelly, 2004)). Researchers such as Codjoe (2005) and Dei (2008) have suggested that affirmation of black racial and cultural identity is, in fact, an important prerequisite for black youth success in school as it supports the development of self-esteem and acts as a foundation and reference point for learning (Dei, 2008). According to Dei, schools genuinely committed to the achievement of their black students would do well to include more curriculum focusing on African heritages, cultures and languages as, he argues, “when schooling negates a form of students’ complex identities, education is not served” (2008, p. 361).

In areas where curriculum on black identity is unavailable, young black men and women have reported learning about their identity from various sources, including family, friends, and books (Codjoe, 2006). Another important source of information about blackness for black youth, predictably, is music, film, and other media often generated in the US and often depicting the particular experiences of black people in the United States. While writer Andre Alexis (1995) famously lamented what he considered the underdevelopment of black Canadian culture and a consequent tendency to privilege African American experience, other theorists have argued that the melding of black cultural influences is a longstanding counter-hegemonic process that defies singular conceptions of blackness (Hall, 1996; Walcott, 2003; Yon, 1999). Walcott refers to the cross-cultural dialogue in which black Canadians, and especially black youth, routinely engage as “diasporic exchanges”, a refusal of the “boundaries of national discourse” and an embrace of black multiplicity both in and outside of Canada (2003, pp. 40, 146, 147). James (2003) in his study of young black male Canadian athletes notes that black youth often possess an “outer-national identification” that sees no essential difference between themselves and black American youth (p. 128).
Still, some theorists have argued for a move beyond the binary of essentialist/anti-essentialist debates toward an understanding of black identity as performed and purposeful (Kelly, 1998; Yon, 1999). They suggest that black youth are engaged in a process of racial identification that is fluid and ongoing and that, as members of a marginalized group, they are strategic in how they define their black identities. While, like all adolescents, young black women and men are at a stage in their lives at which exploring individuality is important, they are sometimes simultaneously invested in discourses around a singular, unproblematic conception of blackness and belonging that acts as a defence against the emotional and psychological impacts of racism (Spivak, G. as cited in Kelly, 1999).

*Black Youth Experiences of Racism and Barriers*

In the literature, there is much descriptive evidence of the types of racism and barriers to academic and other forms of achievement black Canadian youth experience. Because most black youth spend much of their time in school settings, it is unsurprising that they report experiencing some of the most troubling forms of this discrimination in schools. Black youth, particularly black male youth, are reportedly stereotyped, labelled, and stigmatized in schools as problem students who are both to be feared and closely monitored (Dei, 2005; Dei, 2008; Solomon & Palmer, 2004). They perceive that they are stereotyped by educators and other authority figures and subjected to low expectations. Much is also now being written about the biased application of zero tolerance discipline policies to black youth. The concept of zero tolerance for "bad behaviour" first gained a foothold in Ontario schools in the mid-1990s, and eventually became legislated under the Conservative government’s *Safe Schools Act* in 2001 (Bhattacharjee, 2003). The Safe Schools Act became infamous for the discretionary authority it conferred on school officials to suspend and expel students, most often racialized students and students with
disabilities, for school code infractions. Researchers such as Solomon and Palmer (2004) have identified a disturbingly seamless connection between zero tolerance approaches and police surveillance which have positioned the school as the first stage in a “pipeline” that simply shuttles black male youth from the community into the criminal justice system (Skiba et al. as cited in Solomon and Palmer, 2004, p. 1).

Black youth frequently find themselves subjected to daily experiences of devaluing and bias as damaging as their experiences of blatant harassment and discrimination. They report dissatisfaction with being limited to studying curricula which promote the achievements and contributions of white people to society to the exclusion of racialized groups (Codjoe, 2005; Dei, 2005; Kelly, 1998). They are aware of how infrequently they are portrayed or discussed in schools as actors participating in the development of their societies (Codjoe, 2005). Black youth and members of the black community who raise such issues as examples of how Canadian schools are failing black children are further subjected to discourses of colour-blindness and victim-blaming which allow school administrators and educators to avoid responsibility for their complicity in systemic racism (Dei, 2008; Henry et. al, 2000; Kelly 1998;). And, as Yon (1999) points out, there is, even among anti-racist educators, an investment in multicultural approaches to education which, despite good intentions, reinforce the marginalization of black youth and limit development by reducing communities and cultures to fixed, immutable categories.

Black Youth Resistance to Racism

In spite of the many challenges, direct and indirect, which confront them, black youth and their families consistently aspire to meaningful and equitable participation in their schools and communities and are prepared to confront inequality (Dei, 1993; James, 1990; James, 2003;
Kelly, 1998). Studies consistently demonstrate that black youth are generally optimistic about the potential of schooling to help them achieve their life goals, as well as their chances of academic success (Codjoe, 2006; James, 1990; James, 2003; Smith et al., 2005). Contrary to popular discourses depicting black families as neglectful and incapable of nurturing their children’s development, black parents speak of a strong interest in seeing their children succeed in school and develop skills and values which will equip them for global citizenship (Dei, 1993, p. 2). Young black women and men indicate that they are pushed by their families to “have a goal in life” (James, 1990, p. 8). While researchers have reported different findings with respect to whether black newcomer youth are more optimistic about school success than “involuntary minority” youth born and raised in Canada, generally it is agreed among black youth and their families that school is a place of disadvantage and inequality which, nevertheless, offers important opportunities for success. While some express an expectation that Canada and its institutions foster discrimination and preach “propaganda” as a result of white supremacist foundations (Dei, 1993, p. 5), black youth are nonetheless encouraged to use schools to their advantage and to overcome the effects of racism by achieving educational success (James, 1990, 2003).

Black Canadian youth interviewed about their experiences in schools and in the community report an awareness of the need to overcome racism in order to achieve their life goals, and as a result, a need to be strategic in order to overcome obstacles placed in their way. For example, James (1990) found that youth desiring well-paying careers often found themselves in jobs or fields in which they were the first black person to be recruited. In spite of the less than desirable position of “token hire”, James found that these youth were willing to accept the extra responsibility that came with being perceived to represent black communities, and often to
endure the maltreatment of co-workers, in the interest of eventually gaining better opportunities (James, 1990). In another study concerning aspiring young, black male athletes, James (2003) found that some black youth went to considerable lengths to seek out opportunities that would better position them for lucrative sports careers. These youth described a common practice among fellow athletes of bouncing between schools, some located considerable distances from their homes, in order to increase their chances of being noticed by American recruiters for college and university basketball teams. While the youth conceded that by focusing so intensely on playing sports they were, at times, playing into the stereotype of black male runners and jumpers, they viewed this as a necessary means to an end; for them this was a temporary injustice that would be corrected once they had achieved the status of star athletes and had proven what they were capable of academically.

Still other black youth interviewed about their experiences of discrimination have contended that academic and life success in the face of racism rests on one's ability to keep injustices from becoming overdetermining liabilities. James (1990) and Kelly (1998) found that, while many black youth spoke of methods for getting around and past everyday obstacles to success, others spoke passionately of refusing the psychological burdens of racism and what they perceived as disadvantage in accepting the notion of everyday racism. While such black youth identified as black, they believed that positive, “colour-blind” attitudes would reduce the effects of racism and racialization in their lives. In their view, their blackness, while phenotypically undeniable, was for the most part incidental and that all people, irrespective of race, ultimately have an equal obligation to prove themselves (James, 1990, p. 95).
Black Identity as a Counter-hegemonic Strategy

This perpetual dance between refusal and embrace of black racialization and the role it plays as a coping strategy among black youth had been the subject of much recent research. Increasing analysis is now being done to show how blackness is “read and performed” by black youth and how such performances, among peers, in schools and in the wider community, can be viewed as a counter-hegemonic confrontation with white-dominated authority and institutional structures (Kelly, 2004; Yon, 1999). Again, James’ (2003) study of black athletes revealed the centrality of basketball culture and the black basketball player identity to black male youth in white-dominated secondary school environments. Finding their experiences, histories and individual potential disconfirmed in curriculum and in school culture, black male athletes pointed to the importance of the basketball court as a place of safety and comfort in which they could interact easily with other marginalized youth peers. Some of these youth, who had given up on the possibility of academic success for black men in Canada, assumed the “baller” identity for the promise of local celebrity. To be part of this subculture, which in some respects placed limits on their imagined potential, was to refuse white control and, consequently, to affirm black masculinity.

Recent research (Kelly, 1998; McLaren, 2003; Solomon & Palmer, 2004) has further identified ways in which black female and male youth counter what they experience as the oppressive gaze of white-dominated society by turning up their black performativity as a means of “glaring back” at and refusing, white control (Kelly, 1998, p. 20). While it appears that some black youth cope with the conformist pressures associated with white-dominated institutions and communities by distancing themselves from black identity and, therefore, by seeking invisibility, others choose strong identification with “vibrant, dynamic, nonconformist” markers of black
culture (Solomon & Palmer, p. 2). This purposeful, hypervisible, oppositional stance frequently puts black youth in conflict with community authorities who view blackness as a threat warranting greater surveillance as well as discipline (Kelly, 1998; Foucault, 1995; Solomon & Palmer, 2004). It is in these circumstances that a conflation of black identity with oppositionality presents black youth with the dilemma of reconciling achievement and success in white society with a desire for authentic, self-actualization as black people (Smith et al., 2005).

Summary

As various researchers and writers have observed, there is much research on the experiences and negotiated identities of black Canadian youth that remains to be done. While it could be argued that young black men and women in Canada have much in common with some African American adolescents, the comparatively extensive body of inquiry into issues affecting African American youth cannot account for the distinct realities associated with being both black and Canadian. Further, it is not possible to assume that the experiences of black youth in large Canadian urban centres – thus far the source of almost all data on the experiences of black youth in Canada – are generalizable to black Canadian youth in all regions. Recent research in this area focuses primarily on cities such as Toronto, Halifax, Edmonton, and Montreal which have very large general populations, considerable ethnic diversity and sizeable black communities. In order to develop a fuller and more complex picture of black Canadian experience, ongoing research must do more to account for the reality of regional differences and particularities (Smith et al., 2005).

Research into the issue of racial profiling in Kingston conducted by Kingston Police has revealed two important things: one, that black people, particularly black male youth, are almost
certainly subjected to greater scrutiny by Kingston Police than any other group in Kingston, and
two, that much remains to be learned about how black youth in this city live and understand the
realities of being racialized as black. Prompted by the Kingston Police data collection project,
many community members, with varying levels of insight, have weighed in on the issues of
racism and racialization in Kingston, yet the voices of youth who, arguably, have most been
affected by the issue, have largely been absent from the discussion. How do black youth in
Kingston feel about police surveillance and racial profiling? Do they, like their counterparts in
larger cities, feel that they are under greater scrutiny in the community as black people? Where
do black youth feel most heavily scrutinized – is it on the street, or is it also in places like
schools? How does their lived reality affect their personal aspirations? How do they define
blackness? Is it an identity refused or embraced? How do experiences/perceptions of space and
place intersect with conceptions of blackness? These are among the many issues I had the
opportunity to discuss with the young black women and men in Kingston who agreed to
participate in this study.
Chapter 4: Methodology

Research Framework

The overall aim of my research on blackness in Kingston has been to document the lived experiences of black male and female youth in Kingston as racialized group members growing up and coming of age in a small, white-dominated community. Throughout this research I have made a point of emphasizing my interest in female as well as male youth as a means of countering the tendency to automatically associate youth/adolescence with trouble, delinquency and, therefore, masculinity (Kehily & Nayak, 2008). Following the research in this area, which was described in the preceding chapter, my goal was to create a discursive space in which black male and female youth in Kingston could participate in the process of “form[ing] a picture of their experiential world” (Solomon & Palmer, 2004, p. 4). Similar to James (1990) and his classic study Makin’ It, my aim was “to obtain ideas, insights and critical appraisals, not to get an average opinion that would correspond to the average opinion of the population of black youth,...but to get some idea of the variety of ideas which exist in the youth population” (p. 128). A qualitative framework was used for this research as the methodology best suited to broad engagement with both the “multiple realities,” and the “individual and collective perceptions...” surrounding personal and group identities and the strategies employed by black youth to make sense of the complexities of racism and racialization (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006). A phenomenological approach, one which looks at “...lived, human phenomena within the everyday social contexts in which the phenomena occur from the perspective of those who experience them” was used to guide the data collection and analysis (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 121). Further, my research was strongly informed by fundamental tenets of critical race theory which necessarily reveal and question the hidden effects of white cultural normativity and bring
into focus the dynamics of racism and racialization (Parker & Roberts, 2005). A critical aspect of my research approach was conscious acknowledgement that I would not be able to distance my personal identity and experiences from this study and that as a researcher I am “first and foremost rooted, immersed in the world and not separate from it” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 123). As such, I was, at all times, aware that I naturally carried into my research my identities as a black woman, a second-generation Canadian, a person whose teenage years were spent in a large urban centre, and a person with the experience of co-parenting a black child through his teenage years in Kingston. In addition, I was aware that my training, and my position as a human rights advisor at Queen’s University continually shapes my analysis of issues of social (in)justice and community development. I believe that my subjectivity and personal experiences contributed to the richness of this research, allowing me to develop a rapport and trust with the study participants that facilitated a “natural impulse to tell stories about past events and personal experiences” (Schram, 2006, p. 104).

Soliciting Participation

“Snowball sampling”, in which “a small number of individuals are identified to represent a population with particular characteristics” and then subsequently asked to assist the researcher by “recommend[ing] similar individuals”, was the primary technique relied on to generate the sample (Lewin, 2005, p. 219). I initiated this process by speaking to friends and colleagues (including community activists, social workers, resource people, etc.) in the community whom I felt may know of black youth who would be interested in participating in the research. I further solicited participation through the use of electronic notices sent to individuals and community group representatives. I also generated posters and flyers advertising the research which I had placed in public venues such as the downtown library and local community agencies and which I
requested be shared at community events to which black youth had been invited. Electronic notices, posters, and flyers gave the name of the study, disclosed the objectives of the study as per my research proposal, and invited young black women and men to participate in the co-construction of a narrative about black experience in Kingston. All offered contact information through which interested individuals could contact me. Advertisements clearly stated that participation was voluntary.

*Soliciting Participation Through Schools*

Though I had originally hoped to find all of my participants through various word-of-mouth strategies outside of the school system, I eventually found this to be a very challenging approach. The networks through which black youth can be reached in Kingston are few and limited. Whereas in larger urban centres, communication with “the black community” is fairly easily facilitated via recreational centres, black-centred events, and non-profit organizations, in Kingston there are few such venues. As I was to learn from the youth with whom I later spoke, there are presently few, if any, spaces in Kingston outside of school where black youth feel comfortable gathering and events organized for racialized and black youth are very rare. Further, while word of the study was slowly getting out, I found that some of the youth interested in participating were, nevertheless, reluctant to commit as they were concerned about fitting this project into their already busy lives.

Through colleagues working for the local school board, I learned of a few local high schools at which there were significant numbers of black students who might be interested in taking part in the study. I was encouraged to tap into the communications vehicles available through schools and teachers in order to reach these prospective participants. Networking
through teachers and other school board employees required that I go through an ethics approval process for the Limestone District School Board. To obtain Board approval, I was required to ensure that any prospective participants under the age of 18 received written permission to participate from their parents/guardians. I was also required to ensure that no names of students, school board employees or schools would appear in my published research. In spite of the possible limitations of working with the school board, for example, a lack of certainty around how the involvement of school “authority” would affect young people’s perceptions of the study, I believe going through the school board was ultimately a useful and effective strategy. By working with the youth in cooperation with their schools I was able to tailor needs and expectations associated with the research to the rhythms of the students’ lives. Working through schools made it easier for several of the study participants – high school seniors with tight schedules – to work with me. I saw them on their lunch hours and during their spare periods. I was able to chat with them in the hallways before and after school. The youth welcomed me into their social worlds and introduced me to various school places, activities, and people that were important to them. Connecting the study, however indirectly, to school also gave the project an air of legitimacy for both the youth and school personnel and this, I believe, played a role in sustaining the youth’s motivation and interest.

The Participants

Eight young people who were living in Kingston at the time of the study and who self-identified as black agreed to participate in this research. There was an even gender split within this group, four of the participants identifying as female and four identifying as male. In selecting participants, I sought out “information rich” informants who were capable of thoughtful reflection and who had time to participate meaningfully in this process (Morse as cited in James,
The participants were adolescents or young adults whose ages ranged from 16-24 years. With the exception of one participant, all had been born and/or raised in the Kingston area and were attending or had attended a Kingston secondary school. The one participant who had not attended a Kingston high school had lived in Kingston for several years and had grown up in another small, predominantly white community setting with a black population size similar to that of Kingston. As such, I found she was able to make some interesting observations about being black in a small urban setting as well as useful comparisons between her original hometown and Kingston that I felt would be useful to include in this research. Again, participation in this research was voluntary and no compensation for participation was offered or given.

Describing the participants and presenting findings in a way that respects confidentiality presents a challenge in a community with such a small black population. As such, the following short participant biographies, in addition to the information presented in later chapters, make use of pseudonyms and generic terms. Conscious efforts have been made to edit out any information likely to identify individuals.

Andrew

At the time of this study, Andrew was a senior at a local Kingston high school. Soft-spoken and thoughtful, he aspired to a career in sciences and was preparing to attend university. He had migrated to North America from Africa as an older child and had lived in several U.S. cities before coming to Canada. His university-educated parents had instilled in him a deep appreciation for family as well as an interest in the politics and history of the African diaspora.

Shawna
Having moved to eastern Ontario as a very young child, Shawna had lived in Kingston for as long as she could remember. At the time of this study, she was working in the service industry but had had some post-secondary education and was planning to return to university. Quietly strong and insightful, Shawna viewed herself as an individual, often rejecting community and societal conventions regarding how to look and behave, despite the emotional costs that occasionally came with being "different". She expressed a deep love for her family and credited her mother with being a key role model.

*Tareq*

Tareq was a high school senior who had come to North America from Africa as a young child. He had lived in the community for several years and found Kingston a "decent place to live", though not without its challenges. Recent brushes with local law enforcement had led to greater reflection on issues of identity and racialization, as well as prospects for his future. He was determined to successfully complete high school in spite of various obstacles and to move on to post-secondary and a good career. Affable and popular with his peers, Tareq expressed a deep pride in his African heritage and practised many aspects of his family's culture, including speaking his first language, at home.

*Alicia*

Alicia was a mature, energetic, and focused young woman. She had come to Kingston from a small town outside of Toronto, completed her university education, and was working for a local community organization. She spoke of an identification with her parents' Caribbean and African heritages that had deepened over the years. Completing one of her degrees at an African American college was a life/identity defining experience. Alicia's sense of community was
deeply connected to her faith practice and she described herself as a religious person.

Chris

Chris had come to Canada from South America as a young child and retained a strong identification with his South American family and culture. Though he had lived almost his entire life in Kingston, he nevertheless described himself as South American "born and raised". Chris endured many difficulties growing up in Kingston, often involving blatant racism. Charming and "swag" (stylish and well-dressed), he took pride in his decision to give up street involvement in order to transform himself into a serious student. He dreamed of studying applied science and eventually moving to a larger urban centre such as Toronto.

Renée

Renée was a high school senior and a respected leader in her school. She had moved around eastern Ontario with her family as a young child before settling in Kingston, but considered Kingston the only home she had ever really known. With her dry sense of humour and warm laugh, Renée spoke of her plans to attend a post-secondary institution and train for a career in the health sector. She had not learned very much about her South American heritage growing up, but was interested in eventually finding out more about this aspect of her identity.

Carver

Carver, a high school senior, was also recognized by peers and teachers as a school leader. He had lived in several Ontario cities, eventually moving to the Kingston area with his family in his early teens. Equally athletically and academically inclined, Carver was ambitious, articulate, and energetic. He enjoyed being a source of counsel and support for his friends and hoped to earn a degree that would allow him to give back to the Kingston community through a
helping profession. Early and ongoing encounters with racist hostility in Kingston had contributed to Carver's development of a strong, positive black identity.

Jacqueline

Jacqueline had been born and raised in Kingston, but maintained a close emotional connection with her extended family in the U.S. Gregarious and outspoken, Jacqueline was strongly black identified though, like many of the other youth who participated in the study, popular with peers of various backgrounds. Entering her final years of high school, Jacqueline looked forward to possibly moving to a more diverse city. She dreamed that her strong athletic and academic abilities would someday earn her a scholarship to a U.S. college.

Data Collection- Method

I conducted a series of individual interviews with all of the black youth who volunteered to participate, followed by one focus group session with three participants, in order to obtain data for this study. I employed a semi-structured interview process for both the one-on-one interviews and focus group interview as a means of prompting "the evocation of the real" and co-constructing discourses through which black youth were able to articulate, imagine, and (re)create their identities (Barbour & Schostak, 2005, p. 42). I chose to first conduct one-on-one interview sessions with participants as there were a number of questions I wished to explore with the youth that I felt they might consider sensitive or personal. I anticipated that participants would be more comfortable sharing their thoughts on these questions in private conversation with me rather than in a group setting with either peers who were part of their social networks or with other young people who were strangers to them. I felt these initial private interviews were necessary to ease the youth into the process. They allowed participants to gradually develop a
trusting relationship with me as researcher and confidence in the value of taking part in this study. They were an ideal first forum for voluntary disclosure of matters related to personal social identification, as well as family and peer relationships.

The follow-up focus group session provided a forum for participants to venture beyond the self-reflective focus of their individual interviews toward questions of how to name and collectively address matters of racialization and racism in the wider community. As one of the key aims of this study is to eventually contribute to anti-racism discourses and efforts in Kingston, it was crucial that participants had an opportunity to speak together about their lived experiences of identity, as well as their frustrations with, and hopes for, their own city. As Paulo Friere suggested (Friere as cited in Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 890), people “in communion liberate each other”. The dialogic encounter enabled by this study's focus group generated an "unearthing of information that is seldom easy to reach" via individual interviews alone (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903). It "facilitate[d] the exploration of collective memories and shared stocks of knowledge" central to the co-articulation of black youth experience in Kingston and to transformative community action (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2005, p. 903).

Data Collection - Process

Once contacted by individuals expressing interest in participating in the study, I either forwarded them electronic copies of a Letter of Information and Consent Form (see Appendices A and B) or had an initial meeting with them to discuss these documents. I also conducted one meeting at a local high school for students interested in learning more about the research and how they could participate. Each student who attended that meeting was given the Letter of
Information, the Consent Form, and, as per Limestone District School Board regulations, an additional form for parents/guardians of students under 18 to complete (see Appendices C and D). The Letters of Information and Consent Forms outlined the aims of the study and asked prospective participants to indicate their interest in first doing an individual interview with me, and then being contacted to participate in a focus group with me and a small group of other study participants.

I collected the signed consent forms from participants prior to the start of individual interviews. With each participant, I negotiated the date, time, and place of individual interviews according to mutual convenience. I proposed venues for conducting these interviews that were public in nature, yet private enough to ensure confidentiality and audible/reliable audiorecording of discussions. Half of the individual interviews conducted took place in my private office at Queen’s University. The remaining interviews took place in a meeting room within a local highschool that the youth had identified as a comfortable, quiet space.

One-on-one interviews

Individual interview sessions were semi-structured in that I prepared a set of questions (see Appendix E) that were used as a guide and a reference point from which natural and more unstructured conversation about key themes could flow (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Study participants were given a copy of the proposed questions in advance of their interview and time to review the questions before the interview started if this was desired. At the beginning of each interview I explained the research process as well as the fact that I would be asking some somewhat personal questions about identity. I reminded participants that they were not obligated to answer any question that made them uncomfortable and, as I wished to have an open
conversation with them on various themes, that I welcomed their input regarding additional/other topics to explore. I began interviews with general questions about the participants’ school, work, interests, and aspirations. I asked them how long they had lived in Kingston and how they felt about living here. I then proceeded to ask more directed questions about blackness, how they defined it, and how they understood themselves as black people.

While I had some concern that the youth might perceive me as an adult authority figure and be reluctant to open up to me, beginning the data collection process with individual interviews allowed the youth to develop a level of comfort and speak freely about experiences. Initial individual interviews avoided the potential challenges of group interview dynamics including "...'pecking orders', the histories [participants] have with each other, their possible animosities and the considerable potential for confusion about the purpose of the meeting" (Barbour & Schostak, 2005, p. 43). Like James (1990), I found that, despite our generational differences, participants were quite enthusiastic about speaking to an adult who appeared to be an “accepting and interested listener” (p. 130). Further, in order to minimize the "symbolic violence" of the power of the interviewer, my approach was to "adopt the pose of the listener in a way that parallels the language and manners of the interviewee and does not impose or objectivize the person who is invited to speak" (Barbour & Schostak, 2005, p. 43).

Each individual interview session was between 45 minutes and 1 ½ hours in length. These interviews were audiorecorded and later transcribed by me.

*Focus group session*

Once the individual interviews have been completed, I followed up with participants who had indicated an interest in being invited to take part in a focus group session. Three participants
were unavailable to further participate in the study while five participants indicated that they would attend the focus group meeting. Taking into account the schedules of the participants, I arranged to have the focus group meeting time take place over the lunch hour and first part of third period at the participant high school. The session was scheduled in the same meeting room that had been used for several of the individual interviews. Three of the five interested participants attended the focus group meeting on the agreed upon date.

Participants who attended were given copies of proposed discussion questions in advance of the focus group session (Appendix F). Before beginning the session, I again explained the research process and my wish to explore with them some general questions about growing up and living in a predominantly white community. I explained that the conversation was meant to be free-flowing and invited them to present other/additional topics on this theme for discussion. I further reminded participants of the importance of respecting differences of opinion as well as participant confidentiality. The focus group session, approximately 1 ½ hours in length, was audiorecorded and later transcribed.

Data analysis

My primary objective in analysing and presenting the data collected from the youth was to “increase the understanding of lived experiences by readers and others” (McMillan & Schumacher, 2006, p. 333) by offering “re-present[ations][of] participants’ own understandings, [and] subjective meaning context...” (Titchen & Hobson, 2005, p. 126). After transcribing the data from the individual interviews and focus group, I began the process of organizing the information based on emerging themes, categorizations, and patterns. The chapters that follow – Making Sense of Blackness, Interpreting and Negotiating Space, Life in Schools, Relationships
with Peers and Others, and Life in the Community – follow the broad categories of questions explored during interviews as well as observations and comments made by participants. Key themes emerging from the data are further categorized by subsection within each chapter. While my overall aim has been to develop an account of Kingston's black male and female youth at a particular time in history, I also hope that the findings will generate further interest in this topic and questions that will open up other avenues of inquiry.
Chapter 5: Making Sense of Blackness in a Predominantly White Environment

Who are the young people of Kingston who identify as black youth? How did they come to accept or embrace this identification? Where and in what ways have they seen/heard blackness articulated within a predominantly white community where very few people share their backgrounds and physical characteristics? The interviews for Black in Kingston began with discussion of the meaning and significance of black identity for youth in Kingston.

The Importance of Blackness

Although all the youth I spoke to confirmed that they self-identified as “black”, their perceptions of blackness and the importance of it varied. For some, interviews for this study represented one of the very first fora in which they found opportunity to focus attention on notions of “blackness”. A few participants expressed, at least initially, that blackness was not a major consideration for them. In their view being black was either not that important or not as pertinent as other issues/dimensions of identity:

Andrew: I haven’t really thought about it much. I’m an easy going guy, like, I just like to live life and stuff. So I don’t really think about it. Besides, I’ve been around, um, diverse cultures, I’ve been around Asian people, African people, Americans, British people so I’m basically ok with everyone and, yeah, I haven’t really considered, like, never thought of it like that.

Shawna: I never think about it. Umm, I don’t think...I don’t know if I should have, should be thinking about it more but I don’t. I feel like it’s just...if I do think about it, I just shrug it off and say that I was raised in such a white community that...and no, not a white community but just a tolerant community, you know? They don’t question you if you’re different very much, very often.

Renée: ... I haven’t really thought about it because no one really says anything about it, like, my friends don’t really bring it up or anything like that and my mom doesn’t say anything about it and stuff like that, so...
In these responses to questions about the importance of blackness, Andrew, Shawna and Renée suggested that issues of race often fell below the radar in their community and social circles, allowing them to avoid any preoccupation with racial identity. For Andrew and Shawna, the language of “tolerance” and “diversity” precluded an emphasis on how black identity might differentiate them from their peers. While these youth may have experienced some racism in their childhoods, such racist encounters had not yet necessitated a stage of critical reflection on racial identity (Tatum, 1997). Shawna’s statements regarding blackness – an issue best "shrugged off" and forgotten – revealed the kind of underlying pain associated with racial awareness that launches many black adolescents into a period of self-exploration (Cross as cited in Tatum, 1997).

Like Shawna and others, Chris expressed ambivalence about the importance of being black. However, he acknowledged the inescapability of being perceived as black in a white community and discussed the psychological weight of being a visible minority in a place like Kingston:

Stephanie:  ...is being black important to you? Um, do you think about being a black guy?

Chris:  Mmm, no...

Stephanie:  No?

Chris:  Like as important? I don’t hate being black...ummm, it’s who I am I guess...I don’t know...

Stephanie:  When you, when you walk around so... when you walk into Queen’s [University] today...

Chris:  It depends, it depends...

Stephanie:  ...and stuff like that, do you feel your blackness?
Chris: Yes! Definite! That’s just how...depends... Ok, depends on where you are. Like in Kingston, yeah, everywhere. Like Queen’s, I’m like...there’s probably 50 black people in this whole area! Do you know what I mean? Right there you feel it.

As Tatum (1997) describes in *Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Chris’ awareness of disharmony between his internal sense of self and others’ perceptions of him contributed powerfully to his experience of black identity. Other youth, such as Tareq, while acknowledging the burden of living with people’s perceptions and prejudices, unambivalently embraced their black identity and spoke of its value:

Stephanie: Is being black important to you? Is it something that you think about or...

Tareq: I wake up in the morning, I look at myself and say, I’m blessed –thank you—I’m blessed that, you know, one I came I grew up from nothing and then, I want to start rearranging something. So, being black is like God giving you a gift. It’s like having magic everyday of the week. It’s like you can’t even describe how the feeling of being black is ‘cause it’s like, you wake up, you look in the mirror and you see you and you know that... everyday is a new day.

Though "overdetermined from without" (Fanon, 1967, p. 116), Tareq viewed black identification as a process involving first hardship, then the sweet rewards of triumph. Trials of racism and alienation were elevated to spiritual tests, ultimately causing the lives of black people to be enriched.

*What Makes a Person “Black”?*

The question “what makes a person black?” was, as expected, a very difficult question for youth to answer, particularly those just beginning to grapple with issues of identity. Most of the youth viewed black identities as complex and multifaceted. However, as Kelly (2004) discovered in her study of black youth style in Edmonton, narratives of black identity among Kingston youth tended to reference either phenotype or states of consciousness. For example, several participants were quick to respond that skin colour was the primary, defining
characteristic of a black person. The youth did not suggest that dark skin colour is indicative of a genetically-constituted racial identity. Rather, “black” skin was the characteristic that marked them as different in a predominantly white community and made them susceptible to stereotyping and judgement:

Stephanie: ... how do you define blackness? What in your opinion makes a person black?

Chris: Skin colour.

Stephanie: Skin colour alone?

Chris: Umm, yeah...because people are judging you by your skin colour.

Chris further commented that, regardless of the complexity of his own self-defined identity, a biracial person of South American heritage, he had come to expect to be marked as a black man in Kingston:

Chris: So...yeah, skin colour. (pause) Because I’m Spanish but I’m considered black because of my skin colour. Like, I can’t...black. Skin colour is definitely the main one.

Stephanie: Yeah, and so what I hear you saying in there as well is that it’s the way that people perceive you, right?

Chris: Yeah, it’s, it’s almost like prejudice. Bluntly ‘cause I am Spanish. And just...(pause) I’m black (laughs). In Kingston I am black, ok? It’s all on your skin colour. If you’re, if you’re light skinned, as long as you if you have some complexion on you, to me, that’s black.

Alicia, though more inclined to consider connection to African ancestry and the African diaspora as important determinants of a black identity, also identified skin colour and self-awareness of one’s racialization as black in North America as key indicators of blackness. Origins were important, but black phenotype remained critical to authentic performance of black identity (Kelly, 2004).

Alicia: Ummm, I don’t know. Like, honestly... I guess I consider myself black because, you know my parents have roots in African and the Caribbean. But at the same time you
could come from those places and not be black. So actually I think that you’re black as long as you consider yourself to be black, if that makes sense. Because there are people who come from Latin countries, for example, who if you look at them you’d say they were black, like people from the Dominican Republic, but in their minds they’re not. So, I think it, you know, obviously you should have brown skin or...But I don’t know. It’s a very hard question for me, actually. But, um, well ok...I guess have brown skin and to consider yourself to be black and to relate to other people who are black.

Drawing on her own experiences, Shawna was adamant about the primary role skin colour played in determining one’s black identification. She recalled growing up in Kingston and feeling that the only factors substantively distinguishing her from her white friends were phenotypical:

Shawna: What makes [people] black is the colour of your skin, and...I think that is all that makes them black is the colour of your skin because I...I guess I grew up in such a...I had one white friend, or, one black friend and everyone else is white and I just didn’t really catch on that they’re white, kind of thing. And, uh, I guess, like me being black doesn’t make me different than them is what I see. So, I’ll...like to me the colour, just the colour of my skin makes me black. Because, I didn’t really...I feel like I haven’t really been exposed to a lot of the black culture that I see in my cousins that live in like Montreal and stuff. I did not even really know what that would feel like, kind of thing. If that makes any sense...

Here, Shawna, like Alicia, explores the role of culture in determining one’s black identity by making a distinction between herself and her cousins whom she considers culturally black. However, having not been personally immersed in a “black culture” she is unable to point to anything besides phenotypical characteristics as the sources of her black identity. In the course of her interview, Shawna referred several times to her outwardly black characteristics – curly hair and dark skin colour – as the features of identity that fundamentally separated her from friends growing up:

Shawna: …I had a joke actually about bandaids and how they’re supposed to be skin colour, and they’re, they’re not skin colour. And I remember everyone when I was a kid,
everyone talking about going tanning, wearing tanning lotion and stuff. And I’m like, no, it’s not happening for me, I’m sorry. And, um, stuff like that and just like going swimming and stuff and I’d be like, actually I can’t go swimming, I can’t get my hair wet. Like just little things, not like big things, like little, little things like that. And like Barbies and toys...I don’t know...TV shows...nothing, nothing like life changing. Just like little tiny things.

Stephanie: Little things that made you different.

Shawna: Mmhmm, exactly. Like the tanning...(laughs) I remember, I’ll never forget I went camping and everyone’s like, someone brought tanning lotion. It was in grade 6 so I was pretty young. And someone brought tanning lotion and it smelled really good and they’re all putting it on. Everyone in my cabin was putting it on. So I was like, “Oh my God, can I have some?” And they all looked at me like, “You don’t need to tan” and I was like, “Oh, ok.” And then like after that I was like, “Oh, I can’t tan…” (laughs)

"Environmental cues" such as social exclusion from the "little things" – practices like swimming, sharing tanning lotion, playing Barbies – are often the catalysts for reflection on what it means to be part of a racially marginal group (Tatum, 1997, p. 55). In Shawna's examples, the physical characteristics which differentiated her from her white peers also formed the basis of much memorably painful exclusion. For Shawna then, blackness became defined both by skin colour and closely correlated experiences of separation and marginalization.

Carver similarly referred to the experience of skin colour bias as a factor influencing black identification. He identified the human predisposition to stereotype and form prejudices from a very early age as the roots of the many racist assumptions affecting black youth:

Carver: Because you know when people look at you, even at that age or older or what, when people look at you they see your colour right away. Right? They don’t think of the person who you are. Right away, no matter what, even if, even if they were to say that they weren’t racist, you know, just by looking at them and thinking that they’re black, they’re separating them from you... People put it on you. No matter, it can be, you can be at the grocery store, you can be in the classroom, at work, you know, anywhere you are black. People see you as black. They don’t see you as a person, they see you as black. And um, to be black is, to me, I can’t get over it because I’m such an equal person, right? Like I think of being black as being white. People are people, it doesn’t matter what colour you are. Just others can’t get over that. There’s just some
that want to play hard, just because. See you have to think about what their parents teach them, you know, what they’ve been through. Like some people do it because they’ve had a bad experience with a black person. That’s one person. And that person could have been white. That person could have been Chinese, that person could have been any colour. But because they’re black, now all of a sudden you hate all black people? No. That’s not supposed to happen. People make their own choices, good or bad.

Here, Carver’s personal convictions regarding human equality make it difficult for him to accept the emphasis he feels some white community members place on skin colour. Nevertheless, he remains aware that negative perceptions of black people based solely on skin colour are part of the reality of young black people in Kingston.

Reactions to Stereotypes

Black youth in Kingston were aware that black identity, as defined by the white majority population, is predicated on a number of stereotypes. When presented with popular conceptions of black young people relating to “urban” dress styles and tough attitudes, most participants were dismissive and viewed these characterizations as over-generalizations.

Renée: Yeah, I guess because, like a lot of people say like there’s a black person and they act like really gangster and stuff like that. Not every black person acts like that, like there’s really proper people and stuff like that, so you can’t really say like that’s an attitude, like it doesn’t go by attitude or something like that, so...that’s what I would say.

However, even as they disavowed many of these stereotypes, there remained a tendency among these youth to standardize a certain manner of performing blackness. Shawna, for example, positioned herself and her family as black people who do not fit the stereotypical mould, yet, in doing so, reinscribed notions of a “normal”/typical urban black female/male:

Shawna: Those are just stereotypes. I find that I...see my family, we, uh, I would say that my family’s not the stereotypical black family. Like my brother, I would, he’s not, the kind of, the type of regular black boy that you would see with the baggy clothes and the hat and the rap music and the chains and the...He likes classical music and he composes music and he, like he makes films. He’s like one of those. I’ve never met
anyone like him, white or black to be honest. Well, I guess, yeah. And me, um, I never liked the music really (laughs) or like the clothes and I don’t wear high heels or anything. I don’t like talk (snaps her fingers) like that or like with the finger snap. And so, I don’t think it’s important at all. It’s just I’m, I’m black and I’m me. I feel like it’s just right. So...

For these black Kingston youth, popular conceptions of blackness as urban, “ghetto”, or “gangsta” typically resulted from media (mis)representations. To quote Kelly (2004):

Reception and consumption of magazines, movies, and music videos draw heavily on U.S.-based youth culture and other racialized and gendered discourses that exist within society. This access to predominantly U.S. youth culture adds up to a hegemonic representation of blackness for these Canadian youths of African descent. (p. 107)

Many of these youth felt that their peers’ understandings of blackness came directly from television and that negative attitudes toward blackness were also being further reinforced in places like home and school:

Carver: I think, most of those happen from movies, right? Like a lot of our friends, my friends, other people’s friends, it’s TV, television. Where we are now, just, population in the world, what we’ve become, um...I think we classify people how black they are by how ghetto they are, you know (laughs) it just, it just happens. You know, living in a bigger city, I know what lot of ghetto-ness is [compared] to [a] little. So, it’s, I don’t know, it’s just funny, just the way that we’ve now, in our lifetime how we’ve chosen to consider how black you are, right? ....sometimes it happens over school, like how much you focus on schoolwork, ...that shouldn’t happen but sometimes that’s the way it comes...

Renée: Well they might pick it up from school, like kids who are being taught that at home that just like certain things. Then maybe like something they’ve seen on TV like a black person, like, commits a crime or something like that and then all of a sudden they just think that all black people are bad because this one person, and like they’re stereotyping and stuff like that. So they might have picked that up or their parents have been telling them stuff like that, just because their parents don’t know either, so they just tell them what they want them to know.

As Renée suggests, the cycle of stereotyping that young people enter is often perpetuated by adult authorities and role models. Parents, for example, who had been fed various stereotypes
about black people during their childhoods may not have had the tools to refute negative conceptions of blackness to which their own children were now being subject.

While the black youth I interviewed were careful to dismiss stereotypes of black youth and black communities, stereotypes were not spoken of in exclusively negative terms. On occasion, rejections of ostensibly “black” traits, styles, and approaches were assigned a unifying function. Black commonalities were, at times, referred to as sources of community strength and pride, particularly where such traits defied historically negative representations of black people. As Kelly (2004) observed, "sources of commonality are called on in order to indicate the ways in which blackness as a cultural form unifies..." (p. 49). Chris, for example, was critical of the “gangsta rap” dress style and, due to a number of negative experiences, consciously refused this identity. However, with an enthusiasm equal to his condemnation of gangsta, he described the “black lifestyle” to which he and an exclusive group of friends had subscribed:

Chris: With one crowd of friends it’s our lifestyle, right? Like everything we did was black. Like everything. Like our shoes had to be crisp... Like, what we ate, no pork, you know what I mean (laughs). Like we just, like everything we did. Our clothes...it was all about swag. Black people are all about swag, ok? I don’t care, that’s the key word...

Stephanie: Tell me more about the black lifestyle. So tell me more about the crisp shoes, and you know, all the rest of it.

Chris: That’s what it is...it's all about the swag. Waking up, looking fly, going outside, you know what I mean? It’s...and then all black people are like that and Spanish people. They always worry about their appearance. It’s like where...white people don’t worry about their appearance. I don’t care what it is, they *don’t*...

Stephanie: Mmmhmm...

Chris: Some of them do, but a lot of them don’t. Black people are very, um, you’d never find a black person that... a clean black person would dress bad. It doesn’t happen. It doesn’t. I never met them. None of my friends, doesn’t happen. And I’ve met a lot of
white guys that dress very bad. We’re, we’re always worried about our clothes. The way we look. Our presentation.

Stephanie: Mmhmm. What about the food....

Chris: The food is not from Canada.

Stephanie: Mmhmm?

Chris: Umm...curry,...just... I eat everything. Umm, Muslim food. They’re... the food is actually different. ...A lot of black people are Muslim so the food that they eat is blessed and they can only be eaten if a priest blesses it, you know what I mean, like... Like all my friends, none of them eat pork. None of them will eat a piece of pork. In fact, my goal in life is to get them [to] eat pork [without knowing] and then tell them about it...

Stephanie: (laughs)

Chris: ...because that’s like, they will not eat pork, you know what I mean? Like, they’re all religious. Every black person for some reason is religious because, I’m religious and everybody I know that’s black is. Whether they’re good or bad, they’re religious.

Clearly, many of Chris’s beliefs about black style, practices, and belief systems are not universally held. However, within the social circles he describes, black identity, a liability in certain contexts, gives him privileged access to the codes of an exclusive, imaginative black world. The focus on stylish appearance and ritual cleanliness challenges historically racist associations of black skin with un-presentability and non-respectability. In this world, the tables of historic racism are turned and whiteness, typically associated with notions of purity, becomes a symbol of uncleanliness. Certain behaviours associated with white people are "viewed with disdain" (Tatum, 1997, p. 61).

Jacqueline further describes a tight social network of black youth in which aptitude for dancing and “black talk”, albeit stereotypical, is embraced as a characteristic which sets black youth apart and makes them special:

Jacqueline: Um (pause), like I know how to answer but I don’t know how to put it. Like it’s just, we kind of all...ok like if we’re gonna go out, and like dancing wise, it’s just a lot easier to be with your black friends to know what they’re doing, than it is (laughs)
with the white people that are kind of just like, doing their own thing, whatever. But then when they look at you seeing that they automatically are like, oh, what is that? What are you doing? And then you look at them and are like, what are you doing? Like, what is that? And then like, but it’s just a lot, you feel, not more comfortable because I’m comfortable with everyone, but it’s just more of a, maybe connection I’m trying to get at? Because I hang, like you know Debbie, right? Probably everyone that you had in that group we are probably always together. And then like I hang out with my other friends and it’s totally different conversation. Like we’re talking about totally...like we’d be talking about whatever we wanted to be talking about. And then, if it was to kind of go together, it’d be...it matters who you’re with, how they act when they’re around us ‘cause we’re gonna act the same when we’re around them, right? But they try to change how they are. Like I notice that so much. Like people that they’d be talking about something with other people, like other white friends [unclear] where they’d be talking to us, but, either wouldn’t know what to say or be trying to say what we’re saying but not getting what we’re saying...

...so we’re kind of confused and then they see the look on our face and then they’re like make them feel stupid, but that’s not our point to make you feel stupid. We’re just kind of like, “No, what are you, just what are you talking about?” ‘Cause you’re not getting what we’re saying or seeing our point of view of what we’re talking about.

As Jacqueline indicates, her friendships are with both black and white youth. However, in the above example, Jacqueline and her black friends exploit stereotypes, reinventing their marginal space within a predominantly white community into coveted, exclusive space. Black dance and black talk are reclaimed as a new “cool” accessible only by invitation.

Belonging to strongly and, at times, harshly, disciplinarian black families was another “black characteristic” identified and celebrated by several black youth interviewed for this study. The violently strict black household, celebrated in American prime time television comedies such as The Bernie Mac Show and Everyone Hates Chris, was evoked, often humorously, as a touchstone for all black youth. Jacqueline, in an almost boastful manner, described how her African American father would react if she ever tried dressing like a “hoochie mama”, a stereotypically promiscuous black female:

Jacqueline: And my dad is stern guy and always, like he’s a black dad, like if I was ever caught in anything hoochie at all like he wouldn’t even hesitate to kill me. Like he would
take that punch and go to jail, like that’s exactly how he is. And like he talks a lot, he’s very smart and he, like, he’s one of those dad’s that, like, you roll your eyes at, but he’s like, you,” I’m gonna tell you you’re gonna need me one time and I’m just gonna say, I told you so.” Like, and it’s not that he’s trying to be rude, he’s just trying to teach me a lesson but he thinks that we’re all hard headed, so...but really we’re listening but we just don’t want to hear it. So he doesn’t see it like that but that’s how we see it.

Jacqueline’s portrayal of a black father who would coldly assault his daughter if it meant preserving her morality is disturbing but also curious. The tone adopted in telling the story was light and at no time did she suggest that she had ever actually been physically punished in the manner described or that her father had ever come to the attention of law enforcement for such behaviour. Indeed, Jacqueline’s father did not live with her and, in fact, had not lived in Canada for many years. Stories told by Jacqueline and other black youth about discipline in black households were not meant to be taken as confessions. There was a purpose to the mere telling that was unrelated to the degree and nature of discipline actually taking place within their respective homes. In Jacqueline’s case, the characterization of a household under heavy discipline challenges historical stereotyping of black women as hypersexual and undisciplined. The evocation of the disciplinary black father is, in effect, a direct refusal of the racist “hoochie” stereotype as, in Jacqueline’s illustration, no child under her father’s authority could be that type of person. Arguably, it is not uncommon to hear adolescents of all backgrounds hyperbolize about unreasonably angry parents. However, as Tatum (1997) observed in her comments on appearance consciousness among teens, certain topics may indeed be common to all adolescents, but not all adolescents speak of these issues in a racialized manner.

For black youth, stories and remarks about being subject to black discipline were shared as a means of reinforcing bonds of commonality. Again, no matter what the degree of discipline actually experienced, stories were offered as “insider knowledge”, experiences to which any
black person could relate. In the focus group, participants further spoke of the fierce discipline applied to black youth as something that set them apart from their white peers:

Shawna: We, most of us, were brought up a lot better than the Caucasian families that bring up their children. Our families I feel like have a lot of values.

Carver: More discipline.

Shawna: A lot more discipline, a lot of values that we don’t stray from and, I don’t know. I guess that’s…yeah…

Stephanie: Mmhmm…

Carver: And it’s not like to put anybody down or anything…

Shawna: Put anybody down…no, because…

Tareq: No…no…

Carver: But just sometimes like I would go over to like white friends’ houses and see the way that they treat their parents and then…

Tareq: And it’s like…

Shawna: You just like…

Carver:…if you were in a black house…

Tareq: Whoa!

Shawna: Whoa…

Carver: …you know that ain’t happening.

Shawna: That’s not happening. Exactly!

Tareq: No…no…

Carver: You know that ain’t happening.

Tareq: I can’t be cussing my momma like that!

Shawna: No…
Carver: Oh my God…

Within this very rapid exchange, consensus is quickly reached regarding the characteristics of a “black house” and around what the youth presume are shared experiences of discipline. The passage above offers a counter-narrative to stereotypical images of "indigent" and "neglectful" black families while presenting white families as overly permissive and white youth as disrespectful and undisciplined.

Diasporic Connections

Among many black Kingston youth, black identity is rooted in a sense of connection to the black African diaspora. Three of the youth interviewed for this study had been born outside of Canada – in Africa and in South America – and still had family in their home countries. Others born in Canada spoke of family and ancestral connections to black communities in Africa, the Caribbean, South America and the United States.

Growing up in a predominantly white community, Alicia had not given much thought to questions of black identity until she became a young adult and moved to the US to attend university. Although she had always lived in a black household while in Canada and had a few black friends, the experience of immersion within an African American community dramatically broadened her sense of identity:

Alicia: I wouldn’t say that I really…like I had some close black friends…let’s say from junior high through to high school, but I wouldn’t say that I really like had a typical black identity or whatever until I went to the US and then that was when I kind of got into you know, more of…Like listening for example to black gospel music. And the majority of my friends there were black. And that it wasn’t necessarily you know my choice to separate myself from other people. It’s just that that’s the way it kind of was in the US, more than I found in Canada. So that was when I kind of was more influenced by black culture. Like black American culture, let’s say.
However, while Alicia openly embraced certain aspects of the African American culture(s) to which she had been exposed, she was careful to point out that she had not fully invested in an African American identity. In the following passage she troubles "African-American discourses of blackness" and their tendency "to dominate in an almost hegemonic sense" (Kelly, 2004, p. 148):

Alicia: Um, well I don’t like consider myself African American. And I kind of feel…I feel a little bit…well I don’t know if “offended” is the right word. I want to use a less strong word but…I just don’t really like when, um, people… Well first of all, like I see African American as a very specific type of black person and um, you know, born and raised in the US and their parents were born and raised and maybe their grandparents. And um, and my upbringing and my family’s history is a lot different from that. So I guess I don’t necessarily include that except that I really like gospel music which is kind of African and American. And I also like, like Southern food. Yeah…

For Alicia, like many other black youth, there was no need to choose between cultures. No conflict between a rootedness within Canadian geographies and identification with a blend of diasporic influences existed.

Stephanie: Is there anything in particular that feels good about being black?

Alicia: Well, although I’ve said this a lot, I guess, the music is really important to me. And um, food as well. Like I really like, um, Caribbean food and if I wasn’t black I probably wouldn’t, like not have that exposure. So and I really like, like I also enjoy singing. And I like you know the black, I guess, style of singing. So I try to, like when I…well I haven’t, I don’t always but you know like if I’m asked to sing for church, for example, then I’ll try to sing a negro spiritual or something. Because most people in the church haven’t heard it. And I really think that, you know, the songs are beautiful.

Stephanie: So, it’s powerful. So you really positively identify with certain elements of black culture?

Alicia: Mmhmm, yeah.

The dimensions of “Alicia’s culture” are dynamic and hybrid. Culinary, musical and spiritual traditions from around the world are adopted and reconfigured into a unique black self-concept.
Other participants further spoke of ways in which perceptions of their blackness were bolstered by diasporic connections to family. Carver and Jacqueline described looking forward to reunions with family from Jamaica and the United States and, more specifically, to time immersed in the dialects of their respective black communities:

Carver: Yeah, it’s not that, it’s not that you, like, have to, it’s that you want to, right, because it happens to me like all the time, like when I go and see my grandparents, you know, and when I go to family reunions and stuff, like everybody’s accent is strong and mine is, you know, to this level, you know? So it’s, at that point I do feel different, you know, but by the time I leave there, my roots are back. You know, I’m back on the ground. Just like everybody else. And then I come back here, and, once again, I’m different. You know? It only happens for like two or three weeks but, you know, those two or three weeks make a difference to some people.

Jacqueline: We seem to always change our voices when we go back. Like my brother and sister come back saying a whole bunch of stuff. Like it just kind of clings to them. To me like it doesn’t ‘cause I can’t, like I feel like when I say stuff like that I sound stupid, 100%, so I don’t speak like that. But when they come back, when Zahara comes back talking all hand and up in her face, and my brother just, he’s um, he has glasses and just looks like a very smart person. But he comes back with all this like Gucci and like all this stuff that he has on like Rocawear and it just like, it looks good but it’s like different to see. It’s not [unclear]the baggy pants that I...’cause my mom buys him stuff from like American Eagle, right? ‘Cause she would dress him like that. We don’t even have stores like that here anyways, so...but like it’s just, we come back so different from what we left as.

Here, as in Alicia's story, immersion within black communities outside of Kingston, however intermittent, provides opportunities for (re)imaginings and performances of speech and dress not available in a small, predominantly white community. While many of the youth spoke of the possibility of black community in Kingston, they tended to describe blackness as something that existed more easily elsewhere – in Montreal, the US, the Caribbean and South America. For them, black diaspora, positioned as a "place of return", offered a means of escape and play. With Gilroy (1995), the youth viewed diaspora as less about territory than about "the social dynamics of remembrance and commemoration" (Gilroy as cited in Kelly, 2004, p. 151). The geographies
of Kingston, Ontario, associated with a weakening of identity, were seen as redeemable through black cultural exchange.

*Family*

When speaking of sources from which notions of black identity were gleaned, black Kingston youth frequently referred to family influences. The context of family life was the setting in which youth came to understand their minority or marginal position in society. As Alicia explained, blackness, when discussed at all, was more likely to come up in conversations with family members than with anyone else she knew:

Alicia: Yeah, yeah I do talk about it with my family. Like I’m very close to my mother and grandmother especially and I’ve had discussions with them about blackness and just what it means and, um, just my experience of being a minority and how that has affected me. So… and then, but it terms of peers you know, um, like I have friends from all different races. Especially in Canada like opposed to when I was in the US. So with my friends that are black I’ll talk sometimes about black issues. But with my friends in general, I don’t necessarily talk about it.

Within the bonds of family, Alicia experienced a sense of safety and belonging that allowed her to speak of her identifications with ease and enthusiasm. For Shawna, who recalled having few problems with racism or adjusting to life in a white community when growing up, "blackness" was a concept that did not capture her interest and was rarely discussed at home. She described her mother attempting to introduce the subject but with limited success:

Shawna: Umm, my mom tried to, I guess. She bought me a couple books and my brother about black history and we’d read them. But, we never really like talked about it. ‘Cause, I guess, she didn’t want to confuse us, I think maybe, and also we’ve, I guess she saw that we were just happy and fitting in just fine. ‘Cause we had a lot of friends. Like we were never lonely, like we never had any problems really growing up. There were a few kids, but, you know, we were, we were good.
In Shawna’s view, discussion of black identity and history served little purpose in contexts where children were not experiencing hardship.

However, for Carver and his family, discussions of race, blackness and belonging were fundamental conversations that enabled Carver and his siblings to "unpack" many incidents of racism they experienced growing up in the Kingston area:

Carver:  Right, so when it comes to black issues in our house, it’s just, we talk about how we can be so different from any other culture, as in, why whites…won’t consider us brothers or sisters to them. Like I don’t understand, who put something like that in their head? Right, like I understand, like other cultures fight with each other too. But when it comes to white and black we’ve been fighting forever and for nothing. For nothing, because we do not, we see eye to eye on many things, when it comes to money, when it comes to what we want in life. But just can’t get over the difference of a shade. You know, it’s not a c...we’re a shade from each other. I don’t get it.

Within the safety of the home environment, Carver and his siblings are able to make sense of the senselessness of racism and develop the skills necessary to "resist the negative impact of oppressive messages" in the process (Tatum, 1997, p. 47).

Youth like Andrew described being part of families in which lessons about black history and heritage were a routine feature of their home life. Though Andrew felt very comfortable and accepted in Kingston and had not run into any problems with racism, his parents placed considerable value on learning about black identity and struggles:

Andrew:  In my family we basically talk about it a lot. Umm, like recently on CNN there’s a series that’s like Black in America. Yeah, my parents they usually try and get me involved and like and watch the thing, but usually I don’t really pay much attention but, it’s kind of interesting, yeah. We usually talk about it though, yeah.

Stephanie:  Yeah, yeah. So why do they, why do they make you want to watch that?

Andrew:  They want me to learn about um basically blackness in America. They want me to know about the struggles that people have gone through before and how far we’ve come actually till right now.

Stephanie:  Mmmmm, and does that matter to you?
Andrew: Yeah, that matters a lot to me. Yeah. It shows that there is actually progression, yeah, into the accepting of blackness all around. Yeah.

Several of the youths’ families appeared to recognize the potential benefits – anti-racism skills, greater school success – of cultural affirmation (Codjoe, 2006). While at certain times, youth suggested that blackness was “not really [something] to learn”, the role of family in transmitting knowledge about black identity in white society was seen as crucial to self-development and an important pillar of emotional health (Codjoe, 2006, p. 45).

*Identification with Struggle*

While the experiences of black Kingston youth varied in terms of their sense of acceptance and belonging, they often referred to the importance of a common legacy of black struggle. Even among youth who suggested they had not encountered any discrimination on the basis of skin colour, there was a sense that black identities were forged through hardship and determination. Tareq identified, stories of “overcoming”, linked to his African ancestry, as a strong feature of his upbringing:

Tareq: Like, when my father, you know, he’s a real African man because he knows his struggles, he tells me the stories and I got my grandpa telling me stories and I’m just like, wow...I could have been dead or I could have been a straight, you know, soldier as a kid and growing up, who knows. So it’s like, having to learn and hear different people’s stories makes me think like, I am very blessed. Now like the fact that I wake up every day and know that I’m black but the fact that I’m safe in a society that there’s, you know, the government, the system, and what area I live in, I’m still safe. Or else, I’d be wandering around thinking like, should I take a knife today? Or do I need to call a few friends of mine and make sure that I’m ok? and like...things you gotta plan out. Little things can just, you know, waste, can just completely destroy your life. So, I don’t know, I’m just, I’m, I thank God the fact that my dad took that interview and got it and got me and my brother, well, me, my mom and himself to Canada.

Stories of what members of Tareq’s family had once endured in their home country, as well as the sacrifices made to ensure that he and his siblings were safe, preserved the family’s history
and empowered to Tareq to face challenges, such as experiences of racism, in Canada. Andrew similarly spoke of bonds with African family members and a common experience of struggle as characteristic of black identity:

Stephanie: Um, I’m interested in how you define blackness and, and related to that then, what is it, what are the qualities that make somebody a black person?

Andrew: Uh, I’m not really sure. I’d basically say it’s the experiences that they go through that make them a black person. Like sometimes it may be struggles that they’ve been through like, sometimes good struggles, sometimes bad struggles. Um, I don’t usually relate it to the colour of their skin, because you can be, like, many different people. It doesn’t really def...it’s not really defined by the colour of their skin.

Stephanie: Mmhmm, mmhmm, so, um, does it, so experiences, what kinds of experiences would define blackness?

Andrew: Mmm, like I said it could be a good struggle. Like if you had financial problems or like, uh, togetherness, basically. Like, family. Me and my family are very close. Like we keep in touch with family back in Africa as well. So we just stick to our roots as well, as well as communicating with other people.

In addition to speaking of family struggles, black youth would often invoke the names of prominent community leaders who had fought for the rights of black people. Jacqueline pledged to one day ensure her black children understood the effect of struggle on the determination of black identity:

Stephanie: What would you want to teach [your children] about blackness, if anything?

Jacqueline: Um, probably the importance of it or why you are the way that you are. Like, just everything I’d probably bring up something like, I’d probably talk about the stuff that happened when, like before...’cause I, when I heard about Harriet Tubman and all that, that’s how it got to be a lot easier...Into why it is so important to be it and why it’s you should be proud of it instead of...I’ve seen people or other black people, like I’ve heard about it on TV shows, that do anything to be white just to be respected. But you shouldn’t have to do that, like you should be respected either way, right? I’d go back to slavery and, like, just talk about the old stuff, ‘cause nowadays it’s just racism. It’s just why I don’t like this person and back then it was like all the stuff like what they went
through to get that respect and everything. I think that would be important for them to know.

In Jacqueline’s view, an acknowledgement of the contemporary concerns of black communities is not sufficient; a person’s black identity depended on an appreciation for the depth of struggle black people, such as Underground Railroad “conductor” Harriet Tubman, had experienced historically.

Carver was also quick to describe struggle as a defining feature of black identity:

Stephanie: How do you define blackness and what in your opinion makes somebody black?

Carver: Um, it’s hard to answer that question because, because when I think about black, ok, I think about white at the same time because I’m a very equal person. Right, like I think about equality over anything, right, so, when I think about being black I think of wanting to succeed because others tell me that I won’t. Ok, so pretty much the way that people put us on the scale, we tend to be at the bottom. For no reason. Just because. So it make me want to think like Malcolm X, Obama…I wanna do something big like that, right, like I wanna…before I leave this earth I want to have a name. You know, I want somebody to remember me.

For Carver and others, to be black was to be aware of present and historical injustices. However, it was also to locate oneself within an esteemed legacy of resistance and triumph. Interestingly, the youth tended to name African American figures when speaking of role models and "heroes" – likely the consequence of the relatively limited sources of information about historically significant black Canadian individuals and events available to Canadian youth. As Kelly (2004) suggests, images of Malcolm X, Martin Luther King, and Nelson Mandela are more accessible to black youth due to their popularization in the white mainstream media. Nonetheless, for some youth a sense of shared identity and destiny with those who have fought for black rights and equality, in whatever part of the world, rooted their conceptions of blackness. For Carver, there was no greater honour than to assume one's place as a black person on the frontlines of struggle.
Multiracial Identity

Several youth in this study who shared that they were bi/multiracial also spoke of being uniquely positioned to understand processes of racism and racialization and black identification. While each of these youth had white parents/guardians or other family members who were actively involved in their upbringing, for the most part their white identities remained hidden, though by no means secret, realities. The youth were acutely aware of an irrational, yet persistent, blood-quantum logic that defined them. Through the presence of "black blood" (African ancestry) they were racialized as black people in a way that they could never be considered white (Tatum, 1997; Taylor et al., 2007). Often earlier than many monoracial black children they understood that, based on stereotypes "…some people are 'made' Black regardless of how they identify themselves" (Taylor et al., 2007, p. 160):

Carver: Well, it’s funny because coming onto the identity part, I am right down the middle, black and white. Right down the middle! And, somebody is absolutely gonna look at me as black before they look at me as white. You know? And it’s ‘cause, people make jokes as in because I’m really like, I’ve found a way to be really good in school just to show people that, you know, it’s possible for us too…You know? And people are like, “oh, you’re smart. That’s the white side of you.” The white side. (laughs)...What do you mean the white side of me? So the black side of me is the fact that I can play basketball? And the white side of me is the fact that I have better grades than you? …

Chris: The States are pissed that Obama’s on top. Like, there’s a new saying on the internet...he’s um 51% white, 49% black. That’s the saying, ‘cause it’s... that proves right there how much racism there is. When they’re...when Obama’s election when they’re actually, like, amping, like, “Is the black guy gonna win?” That alone proves that there’s racism.

As Carver indicated and Chris confirmed, when white heritage is brought up in relation to biracial-black people it is only acknowledged for the purpose of reinforcing notions of black inferiority and associating desirable traits, such as high intelligence, with whiteness. For many
biracial children and youth, an 'in-between' racial status which disrupts presumptions of racial superiority/inferiority, is simply not a viable option (Tatum, 1997; Taylor et al. 2007).

However, in spite of the constant (re)negotiations of identity that come with occupying an ambivalent social position, these biracial-black youth viewed their situation as advantageous. Jacqueline offered a conception of blackness enriched by a multi-ethnic/multiracial worldview:

Stephanie: How do you define blackness and what in your opinion makes somebody black?

Jacqueline: Um, someone that can also be other things besides black. Like can roll with the punches through every race, that doesn’t have to make it seem like they’re only just black, but like knows how to react to different people. Like you can’t just be one person, one race and then have someone of another race come to you and not know what you’re doing. Like you have to know how to kind of go with everything else to be able to be your own race, if anything.

Stephanie: Right, right, right. So a diverse...

Jacqueline: Yeah...

Stephanie: ...perspective...

Jacqueline: Like not seeing yourself only as black, but as everything else. ‘Cause I don’t see myself as just black ‘cause clearly my mom is white, but like I have other family that are German, like my dad’s German and my mom’s Irish. Like, I think that that’s important to know about other things than just your own, if you’re even gonna pay attention to anything else. If you’re just gonna be all about what you are, like, that’s what I see when I see like the gangsters and stuff. That is they’re just thinking about them being black ‘cause that’s why they go out and do all their business, right? ‘Cause they’re big, black guys. But like you don’t know anyone else’s perspective from anything else...

In this remarkable description, Jacqueline's notion of black identity is expansive and borderless. Blackness is naturally inclusive of the many qualities, characteristics and perspectives she possesses as a person of mixed ethnicity/race. This radically reconceptualized blackness simultaneously resists black essentialism and makes real and imaginable those black subjectivities that, to many, would appear impossible.
For Carver too, biracial-black identity gives youth important insight into possibilities for blackness. Both academically and athletically inclined, he wryly spoke of the many times he overturned people's expectations that he, as a black male youth, possessed brawn over brains. He also spoke idealistically of the role of multiracial unions and children in promoting human equality and justice:

Carver: I think everybody understands that the joining of the two [races] made me. Every child is special, it’s a new life, right? This life can change the world. It has that possibility to change the world. So, I think when it came to that point just everybody in my family realized that I’m special, right. So...

Stephanie: So there’s that positivity running right through your family.

Carver: Yeah, there was never, we’ve never had a problem with white and black. You know, we all love each other.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah.

Carver: You know, most of them don’t really talk to each other on that kind of level. But that’s because we’ve never had to. You know, we’re comfortable with each other. You know? The joining of the two was great. It worked. It worked.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’m sure that’s a reason why, you know, on some level there’s got to be this feeling in you like this has to work... this has to be able to work in the bigger project, because, you know, it works in your own life.

Carver: Exactly, exactly. That’s, that’s how it happens, right? Like I’m looking at it and I’m like, ok, so if my family, like my two families can become one because of one person, right, then why can’t the world come together the same way? There’s always a negative seed, always, in something. But, you know, we have to find the solution to demolish that, you know? We’re working on it still, but, we’ll get there.

Summary

Among the black youth interviewed for this study, the meaning and significance of black identity within a predominantly white community varied. Some viewed blackness as a superfluous marker of difference and avoided conscious reflection on issues of racial identity. For others, persistent experiences of racism in Kingston prompted exploration of issues of race
and racialization as well as a growing sense of identification with black people who shared a background of challenges, injustices, and resistance.

Though opportunities for discussing blackness and the complexities of growing up in a racialized environment were few, interchanges with peers and family in which blacknesses could be performed and black realities articulated were fundamental to the development of the youth’s self concepts. Black youth who felt their racial identity held some importance, in relation to how they saw themselves or to how others saw them, further interpreted their identities within the context of a black diaspora. Their sense of culture was dynamic, forged, and reinforced within the milieu of global cultural exchange. Racial/cultural diversity and the influences of place were recognized as key factors in the development of black identity, informing the everyday ways in which youth negotiated their movements and activities in Kingston.
Chapter 6: Black Youth Interpreting and Negotiating Space

Perceptions of place and space frequently entered the narratives of black Kingston youth as they articulated their experiences of identity and belonging. In discussion of neighbourhoods, hangouts and social activities, an elusive “black sense of place” gradually emerged (McKittrick, 2006, pp. 9-10). The participants lived in various locations considered part of the Kingston area – the suburbs (often referred to as "Bayridge" or "Cat[araqui] Woods"), the mid-town area (close to the downtown Kingston Shopping Centre and bus depot), the north-Kingston area, and the rural areas north of Kingston's metropolitan area. The youth were very conscious of the processes of meaning-making associated with these places. For example, when asked simply, "How do you like living in Kingston?", the youth's responses, positive or negative, immediately evoked predominant discourses of Kingston as uncomfortably small, inhospitable and, therefore, an undesirable location, particularly for people of colour.

The "Up-side" of Living in Kingston

In response to what they felt were prevailing images of Kingston as small and boring, many of the youth attempted to draw attention to the positive aspects of living in Kingston. Youth like Jacqueline tended to be lukewarm in their praise but expressed a certain resignation about living in Kingston. The city, while not perfect, could still be associated with comfort and familiarity:

Jacqueline: Um, I think I kind of have to [like it] because I’ve been here for so long so like I’ve just grown to love it, I guess you could say, because I’m not used to being anywhere else but here... for what it’s worth I do like it. Like I like the people that are here, so...

Stephanie: Mmhmm. This is the place that you know.
Jacqueline: Exactly.

In certain instances, the youth considered Kingston a preferable location to other larger urban centres which were viewed as inaccessible and impersonal. Kingston was described as possessing certain attributes of big city life but without the stress of city bustle and overcrowding. In Kingston, it was possible for one to experience a genuine sense of community:

Renée: Um, it’s not too big, it’s not too small. Mmm, there’s a lot of stuff to do and like it’s not, I don’t know, like there’s not a lot of stuff to worry about like Toronto or something like that, [where] you’re always kind of worrying about stuff like that. You always see bad stuff on the news and stuff like that, so...Kingston’s not that bad, but...like it’s a big city, just like Toronto but a little bit smaller and you don’t have all the commotion and stuff going on, so...

Carver: Well, I want to say, because since I’ve lived in bigger cities like Ottawa and Toronto, I know a lot of people in Kingston. Like, when you go to Ottawa and Kingston, or Ottawa and Toronto and you’re just another face. Where, like here, everybody knows me. You know, like I do certain things like even just from playing sports or being something in my school, you know, other people in the city have recognized that and so, you know, I know them and they know me. But when I’m in Toronto or Ottawa it’s a lot different. Another face in the crowd.

Occasionally, participants spoke of Kingston's physical attributes, the natural landscape, as a unique "selling" feature of Kingston. Andrew appreciated the "quiet factor" and the local weather. Tareq looked back with fondness on his early days in Kingston, learning about what the city had to offer and taking his first boat ride across Lake Ontario:

Stephanie: ...is there anything specifically that you like about living in Kingston?

Tareq: Uh, the waterfront actually. The waterfront’s nice.

Stephanie: Yeah.

Tareq: There’s certain, there’s certain like big cities that wouldn’t have a reputation [like Kingston’s]...the reputation here, is probably one of the [best] in Ontario. And I learned a lot of things about it and actually the one thing I did when I came here I went straight to the ferry because at that time, at that moment I had never been on a boat before in my

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life so it was really a fun experience to go to the, you know, Wolfe Island and come back...Yeah, to see the city from ...the water. So yeah, um, that was, it was really, it was fun. It was fun.

Stepping out onto the unfamiliar terrain of the lake and being introduced to a different perspective of the city allowed Tareq to respatialize his Kingston experience. However, as Shawna wryly observed, "Water is nice, I guess, but water is nice in Ottawa too...". Many of the positive comments participants made about Kingston revealed underlying beliefs about Kingston as "a wrong move" – a place in which racialized people struggle. In the excerpts below, Tareq and Carver describe Kingston as a place of opportunity for those prepared to rise to a challenge. However, while it is possible for black people like themselves to succeed in Kingston, success is dependent on having the focus and determination to overcome such obstacles as racism:

Tareq: I was living in, uh, Kitchener, Waterloo area, but um, before that I started moving in different big cities so I can adapt... I don’t feel left out or uncomfortable. So when I came here it was more different to have that perspective...what’s actually the meaning for me to stay here. So, and um, yeah, it’s not a, I don’t feel ashamed that, oh this is a wrong move, maybe I should leave. No! I feel like there’s.... something here that I’m needing to take care of and be and set up a goal that I can be successful and...But I don’t know. It’s not bad. It’s not bad.

Carver: It’s...determination. My whole life has been over goal setting. I have been through so many things over my life, like without just being black,... So, I wanna be where I wanna be. Like whether I feel comfortable or not, if that’s where I wanna be, that’s where I’m going, because I have a goal to overcome whatever is the problem, right? Kingston, is, it’s a great city, and any other place there’s racism. Right? Doesn’t matter how little or how much there is, if I have a goal, just like most black people do, we’ll overcome it. If you want to overcome it, you’ll overcome it.

While able to ascribe a certain degree of value to the features of growing up in a small, Ontario city, the idea of Kingston, and specific spaces within Kingston, as unwelcoming in comparison to other locations remained a persistent theme within the youth's narratives.
"Not My Place"

For black Kingston youth who, like most other Kingston adolescents, were exploring their independence and expanding their social activities, the small size of Kingston relative to other cities was a source of irritation and discontent. Shawna, while not particularly bothered by Kingston's size, was, nevertheless, ultimately unable to view Kingston as the right fit for her.

Stephanie: Ok, how do you like living in Kingston?
Shawna: Umm, I didn’t have any problems with it. I liked it a lot. Umm, I did, well I did have some problems with it. I found it boring just because it’s a smaller city. And that’s pretty much the only problem I had with Kingston is that I thought it was boring that’s...I feel like everyone’s problem with it if they have a problem.

Stephanie: Like other people that you’ve grown up with?
Shawna: Yeah, all my friends that I’ve grown up with, but yeah...they all think that it’s boring. That it’s too small.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah...you had talked about Ottawa and Montreal. Umm, have you ever imagined living somewhere else or wanting to be somewhere else...
Shawna: Umm, I actually...

Stephanie: ...or is Kingston your place?
Shawna: Kingston is not my place. If I could leave right now, I would. (laughs) Umm, but I actually went to school in Ottawa for two years and lived there and...ah...that might be my place. It’s a really neat city.

Similarly, youth like Chris who were interested in being part of a more culturally diverse and vibrant urban scene experienced a sense of disconnection from Kingston and, therefore, an inability to imagine this place as their place:

Stephanie: Yeah, how do you like living in Kingston?
Chris: Uhh, it has it’s up, uh...(pause). I’m younger so I don’t like it. I’d rather live in the city but...yeah...nah, I don’t like Kingston...
Stephanie: ...mmmmmmmm.

Chris: ...no I just...Downtown is one street, there’s really like 250 black people in Kingston. Like you can actually count the families once you get to know them, you know what I mean.

Stephanie: Yeah...

Chris: Like it’s...I don’t like it. There’s no...one bar – the Elixir – it’s...I don’t like it.

As Shawna and Chris suggested, perceptions of Kingston as a small place in which there is little excitement were not uncommon among adolescents of all backgrounds. Everyone in Shawna's predominantly white peer group found living in Kingston unexciting. However, among black youth in Kingston, comment on the small size of the city was almost always also related to the smallness and hypervisibility of the black population. Chris's comments about how easy it was to identify and count the black people in Kingston revealed a sense of discomfort with living in the city that went beyond uninteresting nightlife and a paucity of facilities. Kingston is a place in which one feels one's blackness and, as a result of easy identifiability, lives under the gaze of the white majority population. For some youth who had lived in other places before coming to Kingston, Kingston was the first place in which they became deeply cognizant of their racial "difference":

Stephanie: Mmmmm, mmmmm. Do you feel like you went through any kind of a process where suddenly you understood that you were a black person?

Andrew: Uh, that’s sort of hard because back in Africa I used to...like my country is predominantly black people. Like the maj...yes, the majority is black so I never really got to experience like, I didn’t get any experience that made me realize I’m black until I came to Kingston which is like sort of the opposite of my country.

Ultimately, for Andrew and others, “no spatiality has escaped racialization” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 10). Through the experience of race consciousness, the geographies of Kingston had become inscribed with racial meaning.
Kingston was also a place in which black people could expect to be subject to stereotypes and to have difficulty asserting one's individuality. In the passage below, Shawna, Carver and Tareq share the experience of what it means to be simultaneously seen and not seen as a black youth in Kingston. Ironically, while the youth bristled at the notion of all black people being related, they spoke of a quiet familiarity that existed among black Kingstonians and of black community as a place in which the experience of kinship was embedded:

Stephanie: So … how would you describe, if you could describe it, the black experience in Kingston?

Shawna: Everyone thinks you’re someone else. Not to, it’s happened to me before where, people, my friend Odette I guess looks like me. And it’s happened to me maybe like 50 times in my lifetime where someone has thought that I was this girl. And we’re not even related (laughs) and also like the experience I would say includes everyone else thinking that you’re related to every other black person.

Carver: Yeah!

Tareq: Yeah!

Carver: That’s it absolutely. I walk down the street and the thing is, is that, like in Kingston itself you can walk down the street and name off every single black person there is. You know everybody by name.

Tareq: Everybody by name, yeah…

Carver: You know? It’s just it’s just how it is for us, I guess, here.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah. And if there’s a black person that you don’t know…

Shawna: It’s a surprise.

While the youth interviewed tended to speak of their visibility in a humorous way, they also described several situations and locations in which being marked as a black person in Kingston led to experiences of discomfort and threat.
When asked about places in Kingston they experienced as either welcoming or unwelcoming, participants’ immediate responses tended to suggest that the youth felt welcome wherever they went. As Carver put it, "No area's a bad area once you're accepted." However, upon further reflection, many of the youth were able to identify spaces in Kingston that caused them discomfort as black people. The youth sometimes referred to "the "Heights" – a short-form for "Rideau Heights", a neighbourhood in the northern part of the city – as an area in which they sometimes experienced discomfort. With 30% of its residents living with low incomes and 32% without high school diplomas, the Heights and surrounding north-end neighbourhoods house a disproportionate share of Kingston's poor as well as the social disadvantages that attend multigenerational poverty (Kingston Community Health Centres Annual Report 09/10). Chris spoke of the dangers of moving through the Heights as a young black male:

Chris: Like my other buddy, he just moved to the Heights. He parked his car in the Heights. Nice car. He just moved to the Heights. They threw rocks through his car 'cause he was black. It’s just, smashed up his whole car. You know what I mean? Just drove to the Heights, parked his car and they threw rocks all through it. So it happens. And if you make money and you’re black? You’re definitely hated. Yeah, you get robbed, you get jumped...

Stephanie: So that’s what it’s like in the Heights. Is that what...

Chris: Oh the Heights? In the Heights, doesn’t matter if you sell drugs, you don’t have, you don’t have to be in a bad crowd to be a victim. You don’t, you know what I mean? Like even now I could...if I’m black and let’s say I had a lot of money and then say that I was driving a nice car. The white people are not gonna be happy with this, they are not! It’s not gonna happen. There’s gonna be confrontation. Whether I get robbed or there’s gonna be like, “Oh that guy’s a nigger. What’s he doing? Is he selling crack? What’s he doing?” you know what I mean? There’s, there’s always gonna be confrontation. In the Heights? It’s not the Heights, it’s everywhere. It’s just awful. I don’t live in the Heights, I live outside of it, but even then, the Heights is awful. Never...
As Chris points out, a black person in Kingston does not have to be in the Heights in order to be subject to stereotyping. However, in neighbourhoods such as Rideau Heights, often criminalized in local media, the stereotypes of black criminality are easily amplified. To be a black youth moving through the Heights is, as Carl James (1992) put it, to automatically be judged to be "up to no good" and to put oneself at risk of harassment and violence.

Chris: Because like...no I can’t explain it. Because it’s like, it’s there. There’s no area I would avoid, you know what I mean, ‘cause of fear. You know what I mean, like, oh, I’m scared I’m gonna get killed. But there’s areas I would avoid for the simple fact that I know I would not be welcome there because I’m black. For example, Patrick Street units? I’m not going there. Like I’m not, you know what I mean? Like, cool, drive around it, I’m not going through it. Russell Street, I’m not, you know what I mean, ‘cause it’s, that’s what people call in Kingston “biker areas”, right? So if it’s biker areas it’s all a whole bunch of white people who you walk on the street and they stare at you all the way till you get off the street, right? But the...I’ve...I have no problems, though. I love Kingston, just I know, [racism is] there.

In the following exchange, Carver speaks of the north end of Kingston, including the Heights, as the place in which black youth are most likely to come to the attention of the police:

Carver: So, me...I had a girlfriend who lived in Cat Woods, so Bayridge area once again. Um, not once did a cop ever stop us, and really we could be walking home from somebody else’s house, like me and her were walking to her house with a group of friends...there could be a group of us like walking to her house, like three o’clock in the morning, actually. And did not get stopped by the cops. Like we seen cops, but didn’t get stopped. They’d drive right by. But down by like my old house, so towards like, um, like Weller and stuff like that, down there...

Shawna: The Heights.

Carver: …that way...um...

Tareq: The Heights are worse...

Carver:…we would have like three, three or four people. Just three or four people like we’re not big. And it’s like nine o’clock going home. And they, we’ve been stopped before. Just stupid talking, like asking for descriptions and stuff, but like “black hoodies”. Ok, so, three of us are wearing black hoodies, you want to pick one?
Stephanie: Yeah…

Carver: And all of us are black. Go ahead! Which one you gonna pick?

Here, Carver makes an interesting distinction between the northern streets of Kingston and the suburbs of Kingston – Cataraqui Woods, Bayridge – located in the western part of the city. Tareq also concluded that, compared to the suburbs, the downtown areas, including the north end, were where black youth were more likely to be presumed to be involved in criminal activity:

Tareq: I’m telling you if you’re at Bayridge… no one gets harassed at all, whatsoever. I mean obviously you’re in a wealthy neighbourhood, no cops go over there. But once you get like downtown, down to the middle areas of the town, you start to get harassed. Like deep downtown. I remember I was with two of my black friends and we all got pulled over. [The cops said] “What are you guys doing tonight?” [We said] “Um, we’re going to get something to eat.” You know, like…

Stephanie: Do you want to come? (laughs)

Tareq: And [they're] just like, “Nope, just wondering. We were looking for a suspect that’s wearing black shoes, white top, hat…” and, you know, description of whatever. And we’re like, “Well, we’re all wearing black, so… (laughs) well, you got the wrong description, sorry.” And um, it was just like, “well, you know, you guys have a good day and I hope not to catch you around again.” And I’m saying to myself and my boy, “Did you just hear what this fucking guy said?”…

The youth's narratives suggested that they were more likely to be stopped by the police in the lower income areas on the north end of Kingston than they were to be stopped in what is perceived to be the more affluent west-end. Their observations brought forward issues around the “localization of crime” and the over-policing of the poor in urban areas (Goldberg, 1993, p. 197). However, youth also pointed to the criminalization of black bodies and the higher risks for black youth located in or moving through marginal spaces (Goldberg, 1993; James, 1998; Solomon & Palmer, 2004; Tatum, 1997).
As Chris, Tareq, and Carver suggested, blackness was more likely to attract negative attention – from residents and police – in the downtown rather than the suburban areas of Kingston. Tareq's view was that police rarely attended the suburbs as the suburbs were perceived as affluent, largely white, and untroubled. In Carver's experience, when the police were present in the suburbs, they did not tend to notice black youth, giving some weight to the importance of considering class stereotypes when analysing black youth experiences.

However, black youth in Kingston spoke of the presence of more subtle, but equally virulent racism, beneath the veneer of acceptance on suburban streets. Within the suburbs, youth experienced a “disciplining of space for bourgeois respectability” that involved the exclusion of blackness (Johal, 1997, p. 197). While perhaps not attracting as much attention from police in the suburbs, black youth were viewed with suspicion by residents. Chris described his experiences at a party in Bayridge:

**Chris:** I went to a party in Bayridge two years ago with me and Flow. Flow’s from Bayridge, she’s this black girl. One of the many black families we have. Anyways we go to the party and we’re all sitting there and we’re waiting outside... And Bayridge is the very, umm, it’s suburbs, right, so it’s very, like, very white. And we go there and me and Flow were told at the party, "No blacks allowed". Now we’re sitting there like this... [and it’s] ...just ‘cause they thought we were gonna steal... So I got my buddies there, and he has his buddies. He’s like, "What do you guys want us to do?" They’re like "Well, let’s go somewhere else." ... I was like, "nah, nah", know what I mean? ‘Cause I was like, I wanted to talk to this girl. So I was like, "Ok, no, no, no, it’s ok, I’ll take her home", you know what I mean? So I let them go to the party but right then and there we were actually not allowed to go in that party because we were black.

**Stephanie:** Wow...

**Chris:** And it was in Bayridge, and in Bayridge that happens a lot.
Stephanie: Really! It’s that blunt?

Chris: Yeah, like, ‘cause they think you’re gonna s... like, there’s probably I think like 250 black families in Kingston. You probably have most of them in the Heights. Russell Street, downtown, so you only have probably four families in Bayridge, so when they see a new guy in Bayridge, they think something’s gonna happen because they automatically think that you’re gonna rob them. Guaranteed. Yeah. It happens...

Tareq also expressed discomfort with hanging out in Bayridge, though he did not present as graphic an example of exclusion:

Stephanie: Is there any place in Kingston where you definitely don’t feel comfortable? Places that you wouldn’t go?

Tareq: Bayridge.

Stephanie: Yeah?

Tareq: Bayridge. I don’t know why Bayridge, ‘cause it’s not like...I’m not in their league, you know what I mean? ...I have a few friends that live out there, yeah, but, when I go to their house, I just, you know, like, wow...you must have worked very hard to live up here, you know, like got a nice house, big car, you know, everything’s just great. And it’s just like, “Yeah, it’s ok. But I’m not happy.” And I was like, “You’re not happy? Are you serious? You wanna trade places for a day? I’m happy with that if you want.” ...And so it’s really uncomfortable ‘cause I can’t, I wasn’t born wealthy. I can’t come up to those expectations and what they have so...yeah...It’s bad enough to live back home where the village where you’ve got absolutely nothing. ...And then you say to yourself, yeah, it’s ok but you might wanna [be] in the bigger, nicer, rich areas, cause you know, like it’s quiet, it has no disturbance. But, yeah, that would be the place I’d be uncomfortable to be.

While Tareq was never explicitly told he was "not allowed" in Bayridge or that people feared he would steal, the suburbs for him were an enclave with borders delineated by race, class and ethnicity. Tareq perceived Bayridge as a place in which welcome was superficial and in which his reality as a black youth could not be appreciated.

Black in the Country
With his family, Carver had moved around quite a bit within Ontario and within the Kingston area. However, their latest move to a country home in a village on the outskirts of Kingston was proving an unmitigated disaster. Persistent acts of racist hatred against their property were prompting the family to consider leaving the area for their own safety. Carver described what it was like to live in the country as a black youth in a multiracial family, where their black presence troubled prevailing assumptions of white homogeneity:

Carver: It is ridiculous. Like I said before, um, the country… Like I love the country. It’s quiet. Like I’m a city kid but my parents love it which makes me have to love it. But just the fact of having to like, like going to a grocery store out of [the area and into], another part of the country, they are so nice. People are so nice. And I come back to my own town and it is ri-diculous. People actually stop in front of my house, honk the horn to give us the finger. Will stop in front of our house…and wait until they see us. It is horrible. It is horrible.

While Carver’s experiences in the country had not been uniformly negative, the hostility he experienced within his own community had completely tainted his view of the area. In the following exchange, he further described the sense of distrust and unease that came with living among even those neighbours who appeared tolerant but openly participated in white supremacist activity:

Carver: They had a festival down there, it was the Redneck…something. And, the confederate flag was everywhere. Everywhere. Like, the whole festival was the confederate flag…It was the Redneck Jamboree…

Stephanie: Oh my goodness…

Tareq: Holy …

Carver: Yeah. It’s horrible, eh?

Shawna: I didn’t know. And that’s in [town name]?
Carver: Yeah. Well, … I think it’s like on the outskirts of [town name], I don’t know, it’s just some place where they take everybody and everybody gets together. … It’s a whole festival as if it was like the Winterlude or something. Like if it was just… like you know the winter festival in Ottawa? As if it was like that.

Stephanie: That’s crazy. That is crazy. And everybody just accepts that more or less?

Carver: Yeah. Everybody’s all dressed up country and… they got all their trucks and…the confederate flag is painted everywhere. Yeah, there’s banjos there and stuff. They just follow the whole theme and… the thing is is that it was my little brother that came home and told me this. Like I didn’t see it myself. But my little brother like his friend, right, like his friend didn’t go but his parents went.

Stephanie: Wow.

Carver: You know? So how does that make you feel that, ok, so now I know that my little brother is sleeping over at these peoples’ houses when they are…

Tareq: Completely racist…

Shawna: Participating…

Carver: And it’s, the thing is that it’s not even like, they don’t even have to be racist. They’re just agreeing…

For Carver and others interviewed for this study, "the country", while pleasant in certain material respects, represented hostility and danger. While stories of black families in rural Canada are valuable counter-narratives to the persistent “belief that black Canada is only recent and urban” (McKittrick, 2006, p. 96), the country was clearly experienced by black Kingston youth as a domain of homogeneity in which the notion of “blackness and belonging” was contradictory and inconceivable.

Geographies of Kinship

Where, then, do young black women and men feel most welcome and able to be themselves in Kingston? As one might expect from adolescents and young adults, the youth expressed feeling most comfortable around peers and others with whom they shared core
experiences and values. Some, like Tareq, spoke of the home environment as offering a unique sense of comfort and belonging:

Tareq: Home is, my house is the best. It’s comfortable. It’s quiet. Well, not all the time. But I always pump music. I’d rather stay home than be at, you know a best friend’s house, or if I had a girlfriend or anything like that, I would rather be home because I know that I’m not only safe but it’s my home. And my dad lives there. And if I lived out on my own, if I wasn’t living in Kingston, I’d still feel...if I had people around me that are from my country I’d feel even more at home ‘cause I know that if I need to talk to someone it’s not gonna be only my father to phone...Like to be honest, me, my father and my brother are the only three [African country affiliation] that live in Kingston but, um ...Like, I love staying home. It’s the best moment. I can go sleep anytime I want. I can do whatever I want. Eat, talk ...anything, it’s just, feels very good.

Being one of very few people from his region of Africa living in Kingston, Tareq's home environment provided an important place of refuge and validation. Home was experienced as a locus of acceptance – a place in which one could eat, speak and be in ways not expected or accepted in a place with little racial/ethnic diversity.

However, besides home, there was no specific geographic location that best represented comfort and acceptance for black youth. Their sense of belonging came from being with people – often, though not exclusively, other black-identified people – who could relate to their experiences. For Renée, the literal "where" of comfort and belonging was synonymous with peer interactions:

Stephanie: Where do you feel most comfortable and able to be you?

Renée: With my friends...

Stephanie: With your friends?

Renée: No matter like where I am as long as I’m with my friends I feel really comfortable.
Stephanie: Mmhmm, are there any places in Kingston uh that you prefer to go? That you really like to go? With your friends?

Renée: Uh, I don’t know, I don’t really like...I don’t, there’s no specific place that I like to be with my friends that I feel comfortable. ‘Cause I, pretty much as long as I’m with the people that I know and like in a town that I know, like I feel comfortable...

Alicia's experience of friendship was also closely connected to her sense of place:

Stephanie: So my final question here is, where, at the end of the day, where do you feel most comfortable, most able to be yourself?

Alicia: Um, yeah, I would just say like around people who have similar values as mine, not necessarily religious but just similar values in general. And that doesn’t necessarily mean that they’re black. Because I have friends who I feel, you know, we have a lot in common and they’re not black.

While Carver, Shawna, and Tareq were also inclined to speak of the importance of their friendships with peers of all backgrounds, they nonetheless pointed to relationships with other black youth as having special significance:

Stephanie: Um, where do you feel most welcomed and respected in Kingston as a black person?

Tareq: When all the black people are together.

Carver: I’m not gonna lie. That’s exactly what I’m gonna say too. When all of us are together.

Tareq: When all, like we have, it’s just like this bond kind of thing and we…

Carver: I think what it is is because we’re so tired of fighting against everything else when it comes to having to fight against black and white. Then once we’re all together we kind of joke about the things that you know, that happen to us. Even though we know it’s not funny, the fact that we’ve been through it…

Shawna: Altogether, yeah that…

Carver: Makes it funny.

Tareq: For sure.
Stephanie: Yeah, yeah, yeah, exactly, exactly. Um, so what I’m hearing is that, it’s not a place. There’s no location in Kingston that…

Carver/Tareq/Shawna: No, no, no…

As Jacqueline put it:

Jacqueline: Like it’s just, you get that vibe when you’re like with them, so it just makes the conversation a lot easier, because like here [among white peers in school] they’re so afraid to say, like, even “black”, or like...even if they’re, like, explaining a colour, they’ll be like, “you know, dark, dark, dark brown...”. ...like they just seem so scared to say it and I’m just like...I don’t want to explain myself to say it’s, say "It’s fine"...If you really have that much trouble, ...what’s the point in that?

There is an ease of being that is embodied within bonds of friendship with other black youth that makes a black peer group an emotional space of understanding and welcome.

However, the youth were clearly uncomfortable with the idea of being locked into associations with only other black-identified people. Again, as noted in Chapter 5, their definitions of blackness referenced a freedom to defy externally imposed limitations and challenge conventional thinking. Carver summed it up with repeated insistence on the right to "feel comfortable wherever I am". For Jacqueline a strong black identity was connected to the ability to freely move within and among Kingston spaces:

Stephanie: Um, and where do you feel most comfortable and most able to be yourself, like, in Kingston? Where do you feel like Jacquie is really Jacquie?

Jacqueline: Um, everywhere I go. I’m just, I don’t think I need to change my...I wouldn’t change myself for no one at all. Well, maybe [unless] some guy that’s trying to pick you up or whatever. [Then] I’m like, ok, "My name’s Sarah." (laughs)

Summary

Though the youth interviewed for this study tended not to explicitly reflect very often on how they were defined by spaces surrounding them, it was clear that Kingston did not represent neutral ground. For many youth, Kingston, with its various enclaves and communities, had been
spatially mapped according to such things as prevailing narratives about small city life and negative encounters they had had with other Kingston residents and such authorities as police. With little prompting, the youth were also able to tap into the more deeply seated emotional maps of their city – the places in which they felt centred and accepted and, by contrast, those in which they perceived their identities and bodies to be under attack.

In all cases, kinship and peer circles surpassed geographies representing welcome and belonging. Bonds of friendship with other black youth were specifically conceived of in terms of place and celebrated as spaces in which youth could, with less effort, experience personal validation. Above all, however, youth felt it important to claim their entitlement as human beings to move freely within the physical landscape of the city and the emotional landscapes of their interpersonal relationships. While this sometimes required the resolve to overcome challenges of racism, refusal of externally imposed limitations was foundational to the formation of their black identities.
Chapter 7: Life in Schools

Black youth in Kingston clearly identified schools as locations in which they felt their difference from white majority peers was very apparent. As the literature indicates, schools are places in which racialized students find themselves caught negotiating the contradictory discourses of potential and impossibility, belonging and unbelonging (Dei, 1993; Dei, 2008; Freire, 2008; James, 1997; Kelly, 1998; McLaren, 2003; Tatum, 1997; Walcott & Dei, 1993). Schools offer the possibility of self-fulfillment and positive self-development while at the same time acting as sites for the perpetuation of systemic oppressions.

Isolation

Many of the youth interviewed for this study were experiencing academic success in school and all valued public school education as a pathway to further educational opportunities, career advancement, and economic and social power. However, youth recognized that participation in the school system was not without significant costs, particularly for black children in small towns and cities. Some spoke of schools as the places in which they first became fully cognizant of their racial "difference":

Alicia: Well…honestly I wasn’t even aware of race when I was younger. I don’t think I, you know, I remember growing up [outside of Toronto] and you know I had friends of all different colours. But like it didn’t really matter to me or occur to me that, you know, we’re all different races or whatever. But then it was when I was in [small Ontario city] that I noticed that I was black I think (laughs), um, just because I was the only person who was black in my class for a long time.

Loneliness and isolation in classes were immediately named as significant issues affecting the way in which black youth experienced school:
Stephanie: Um, now go back up to some questions about school. What are, what are some issues facing black youth in schools, if any?

Tareq: Um, (pause) depends really…

Carver: Right away we’re looked at different, obviously, since you look at the population in the class and there’s a [maximum] of like three that you would ever see. And [even] that barely happens.

Stephanie: Are you surprised when you see another black kid in your class?

Shawna/Tareq/Carver: Yeah!

Carver: Absolutely.

Tareq: Absolutely.

Shawna: 100%.

Tareq: I think it was first semester in September…remember that Patrice guy? Tall Patrice, black…He’s like, he was here for a good month or two and then he just like vanished. It was like, what happened to this guy?

Everyone laughs

Tareq: It was just getting good, like…

Stephanie: Patrice!!

Carver: Patrice, where you at??

In this humorous exchange, everyone is able to relate to the feeling of being "the only one" and the anticipation that comes with possibly gaining a new peer with whom to share experiences.

The presence of two or even three black kids in a class, while still not very many, is enough to mitigate the pressures of being "looked at different".

Racial Exclusion and Hostility

The price for being visibly racialized in a predominantly white school was often to be subject to overt exclusion and racism. As Kelly (1998) discovered in her work with black youth
in Alberta, elementary school was often the place where children first encountered racist name-calling. During the interviews for this study, school was repeatedly associated with first experiences of alienation and blatant racial hostility. Renée’s single experience of exclusion on the basis of skin colour took place in a small-town school:

Stephanie: Um, have you ever had negative experiences because of your darker skin, your brown skin?

Renée: I...not as of, like, I don’t remember so, um, no. I wouldn’t say I have. Other than, I think when I lived in [town name] when I was in kindergarten someone said they couldn’t be my friend because I wasn’t the same as them. But that’s just like a little kid thing, so...

What Renée dismissed as a childish and isolated act was disturbingly common among other youth interviewed. Chris's first encounter with racism also took place in the schoolyard. Again, it was this incident of overt hostility toward his colour that became formative to the development of his black identity:

Stephanie: ...How did you learn what it means to be black?

Chris: I didn’t even know it. I was like five, I was in grade five at [primary school name] and I had this stupid kid. He was calling me the “n” word or whatever, but I was Spanish. I didn’t understand it, so I did not even know what this kid was saying to me, right? And he started saying it to me and then once I learned English and realized it, everybody was calling me that, and then I just went crazy and I started to fighting and, yeah...it’s...it [racism] is there...kids like...it’s there...

Carver also clearly associated an early name-calling incident with first memories of being marked as a black person:

Stephanie: ...You’re a black identified person. When did that come? Did you always know that you were, or was there some point when...

Carver: There was definitely a point,...

Stephanie: Yeah?
Carver: I’m gonna have to say grade two, no, maybe grade one. Because me and my family didn’t really talk about that, like I knew that I was black, obviously, right, but just, it didn’t really click in until I came home from school asking my parents what the “n” word meant because I was called that. So, we sat down and spoke about it and just, the way that they described it to me was it’s just somebody trying to be ignorant.

Growing up in a biracial home, Carver was familiar with skin colour variation. However, the negative valuing of his skin colour was something for which he was, understandably, unprepared. While Carver’s parents did their best to contextualize the racial epithet as an empty term, the damage to Carver’s self-esteem had been done. Because there was, ultimately, no reasonable explanation for the hatred behind the remark, Carver found himself resigned to putting the incident out of his mind:

Carver: Um, it was, it’s kind of hard just because, like, how do you explain that to a child? They have no idea what the word means which I didn’t. And...at first really, before I got home from school, I thought it was a nickname. You know, because I, you know, being new to school, you know, never hearing the word before because, you know, it was never mentioned before that. Just all of sudden. And the reason probably was because I switched schools. And the population of white was a lot bigger than the population of black. So, I don’t know, [my parents] just kind of told me to shrug it off. You know, don’t think about it. [The name callers are] the ignorant ones, if they want to try and call me ignorant. That’s the way [my parents] put it.

Stephanie: Right, right, and when you went back to school the next day or the next weeks or whatever, do you recall having a, um, a sense of...what was your feeling? Was it a sense of pride? Was it a sense of fear? Was it a sense of sadness?

Carver: Um, I was hurt, I was hurt that they would, after everything, like...grade one you make a lot of friendships, right, with everybody and for the word to come out of nowhere, I was hurt to the fact that they couldn’t look past that, right? Like I’ve been in that situation many of times, obviously, but that was the first time, so, which made it the hardest. Because I still couldn’t understand what it meant. Ok, so what? My skin colour’s a little bit darker, you know, ‘cause at that point, oh, well you’re dirty ‘cause your skin colour’s like...it came to things like that. And I was like, are you...really? Dirty? I couldn’t understand. So pretty much just had to shrug it off, right? Like I didn’t understand it so, just had to forget about it. That’s pretty much the way I see it.
Jacqueline also recalled an early first encounter with the "n-word" in a public school and the
dismissive coping strategy her brother had encouraged her to use:

Jacqueline: Like one time I was in...this was public school, and someone had called me
the “n” word, and I was like automatically got upset about it, but I didn’t know what it
meant. So, it just kind of, like it was weird. So then I talked to [my brother] about it and
he was like, it just, people are just ignorant and like, they don’t know what it means, you
don’t even know what it means, so why get upset about it? And I’m thinking, well, why
are you not standing up for me? Like, [someone] called me this and why are you just
blah, blah, blah...? And he was like, “No, like Jacquie you gotta like see it like that”.And I didn’t understand it and like now when I’m grown up I like totally see what you’re
talking about.

Like other youth who had encountered the "n-word" for the first time in school, Jacqueline did
not know what the word meant but knew instinctively that it was intended to be received as a
terrible insult. Her brother’s suggested response – why allow a meaningless word to have such
power over you? – was something that Jacqueline felt she was not able to operationalize until
later in her life.

Unfortunately, words do have effects. Senseless though they may be, words intended to
debase can be painful and confusing for a young person. In Carver's case, simply shrugging off
his experiences with epithets had limited effectiveness, particularly in situations where the words
were continually used. As he moved from school to school in which black kids were few in
number, his experiences with overt racism continued. He recalled one remarkably dehumanizing
experience during his brief time at a school in the province of Quebec:

Carver: It happens a lot that...people make me feel different, right, like so in my past,
um, like, when I moved to Quebec, right, which is mostly white people, I didn’t have one
black person in my school. It was just me. So, I probably heard the “n” word, I’m gonna
say like 400 times that school year. That one school year.

Stephanie: Wow.
Carver: I wasn’t accepted until they figured out I could do something cool. Like, I break danced a lot at that time, right, so when they realized and once they found out about it, all of a sudden I was cool. Wait a second! I’m still the same colour, what happened?

The sudden transition from "nigger" to "cool", black male offered young Carver an out – some welcome, albeit temporary, relief from a racist onslaught. However, Carver was aware that the tokenism he was experiencing as a break-dancer – acceptance for his ability to perform a media stereotype of urban, black masculinity – fell on a continuum of racist attitudes. While he was no longer being verbally attacked, Carver remained aware that negative perceptions of his race lay just beneath the surface within the culture of his school.

Encounters with School Authority

Youth narratives involving teachers and other school authorities, while less dramatic than those involving racist encounters with peers, frequently pointed to further perpetuation of tokenism, bias and marginalization in schools. As James (1997) observes, principles of equity remain unrealized in schools, often in spite of an abundance of policies. According to Chris, teachers were not likely to openly share negative attitudes toward black youth; however, their prejudices nonetheless surfaced in less overt ways:

Stephanie: Umm, do you find that other people have expectations of you as a black guy? So do they expect that...go ahead.

Chris: Instant failure. Like I had a teacher in grade 8 tell me just ‘cause I was black... - well I always say because I was black but I was a kid, I was like in grade 7 and she told me at [school name] to come talk to her when I graduated ‘cause she said I was gonna be a failure. So bluntly I didn’t know this teacher, like I didn’t know who this teacher was but I’m happy ‘cause I went and seen her after I graduated, you know?

Stephanie: Nice...
Chris: But, uh, yeah it’s just … you’re almost instant failure because teachers do treat you different, some of them. Not all teachers are good. But then they’re like, what’s the word I’m looking for? It’s like they’re intrigued by black. It’s like, wow! You know what I mean? They treat you different than every other kid in the class, do you know what I mean? And then, ...I don’t know...what’s the word? Yeah, like you’re an instant failure, you’re not gonna succeed. Like Obama had to climb Mount Everest to get where he got to, you know what I mean? …honestly a lot of people told me that I wasn’t going to succeed. And bluntly I’m trying to succeed right now and tell those people to BEEP BEEP BEEP! (laughs) You know? Yeah, but it’s...yeah, it’s failure. If you’re black, it’s like failure... Do I regret being black? No, but it is, it’s a failure.

As Chris explained, teachers did not need to exhibit open hostility in order for the effects of racism to be felt by black students. In fact, in Chris’s experience, some teachers who appeared to take a positive interest in blackness, merely tokenized their black students. In effect, they possessed an “uncritical habit of mind…that justifies inequity and exploitation by accepting the existing order of things as given” (King in Solomon & Palmer, 2003, p. 10). As a result, Chris found himself singled out and subject to stereotypes of black youth as academically weak and destined for failure.

As Shawna, Tareq, and Carver expressed, one of the things that they had come to expect as racial minorities in high schools was that they would be singled out by both peers and adults. One example given was the experience of being under the surveillance of school administration and “called down to the office” when there were behavior problems in the school. Life in school for black youth often involved the expectation of being over-policed and humiliated (Solomon & Palmer, 2004. As Shawna explained, to be present when something was “going down” at school was for black youth to attract unwanted attention, even when they were not known troublemakers:

Shawna: I remember when I was in grade 9 or 10, there was a fight in the smoking section and I happened to be standing near the smoking section at the time. And there
were literally like 11 or 12 white kids and I was the only black girl there. And I remember I… I have never been called down to the principal’s office once for anything, anything bad anyways. Like I was always like a prime student. Anyways, and so I’m walking down the hall with my headphones on. Someone taps my shoulder and says, “You got called down to the principal’s office, eh?” And I’m like “the principal’s office or the secretary’s office? The principal or secretary? There’s a difference.” “No, Principal’s office.” Ok… I go and there’s cops in the Principal’s office. I’m like, oh my God, what did I do? And then they’re like telling me I’m the only witness to this fight, that I’m the only person that they named. There was like 13 other people there and I’m the only one that they named! And I’m like, “Oh my God, really?” And I had to give a statement and everything. And it wasn’t bad or anything, but it was just that I was the only one that they named which really tripped me out because I know, I know there were other people that were there but I didn’t name their names because it wasn’t my place.

To be a black youth in Kingston is to easily find oneself in the wrong place at the wrong time. Shawna went on to say that she had been identified by other students from a yearbook picture. Interestingly, there were clearly white witnesses who, having seen Shawna at the event, presumably had seen enough of the event itself to provide statements. While Shawna’s description does not suggest that she herself was ever under suspicion of wrongdoing, being the only person identified as a witness put her at risk of retribution from her peers. Her story points, again, to the pressures associated with being visibly different within her school environment.

**Curriculum**

Misjudged and singled out for negative attention, participants found the almost complete invisibility of black people and subject matter related to black communities in the school curriculum very ironic. Youth described being exposed, for the most part, to a curriculum that reinforced white, middle class values (Codjoe, 2005, though they reported mixed experiences when it came to learning about black history in school. Andrew, for example, saw school as a place in which the contributions of black people were recognized although typically during just one month of the year:
Andrew: I’ve mostly learned about, um, blackness and black history through school, especially like the Black History Month where you can learn about different black people and how they’ve impacted the world. Umm, but I think you can learn some of this stuff, mainly on reading about it, just general interest research.

Andrew further described his school as one in which he “felt a sense of belonging” and where teachers “expose[d] you to different cultures, [using] the diversity of the school”. However, when later asked about what specifically he learned about black history in school, Andrew suggested the learning was “not really in depth or anything. Just like…basic, extra information”. Andrew acknowledged that even when possibilities for learning about black history or other cultures existed in school they were quite limited and the information given was superficial. Black history in schools lacked “insightful and comprehensive account[s] of the historic roles and achievements of people of African descent” (Codjoe, 2005, p. 103). As Codjoe (2005) observed, black Canadian youth interested in broadening their knowledge of their own culture or the cultures of others typically needed to do their own research. To quote Shawna, if you wanted to know about these things, “…you have to obviously do it on your own time.”

Many of the other participants agreed and spoke about black history as something that was generally not valued in Kingston schools despite its recognition across North America:

Stephanie: Ok…what about in the classroom? Do you learn about black people’s experiences or cultures or history?

Carver: Only in Miss Worthy’s class.

Shawna: Miss Worthy?

Tareq: Yeah, man…

Carver: Only in Miss Worthy’s class.

Shawna: Who’s she?
Carver: She is a great teacher that is very, very interested in other cultures. She loves other cultures.

Shawna: Oh, that’s good…

Tareq: I wish I took that course.

Carver: Yeah. She’s an amazing teacher. But like when it comes to, like Black History Month is never mentioned in school. Never. Unless one of us bring it up.

Tareq: Never…bring it up, yeah…

Stephanie: Wow…

Shawna: It’s true, well…

Carver: I’ve never. I’ve never, not one time have been taught about black history month.

Shawna: Me neither…

Carver: Not once…

Shawna: [And] I’ve graduated.

Carver: My whole, my whole like high school, elementary school, I’ve never heard it.

Shawna: The only word that I heard of it was from my mom buying me books and stuff.

Carver: BET. (laughs)

Tareq: BET, yeah.

Shawna: Yeah…(laughs)

Stephanie: That’s where you learn about black history month?

Tareq: Yeah.

Carver: Saves my life.

As noted in Chapter 5, black history was something youth spoke of learning about within the home environment. Youth also accessed “hegemonic representation[s] of blackness” from media sources such as the American television station, “Black Entertainment Television” (BET) (Kelly, 2004, p. 107). Like Andrew above, Shawna, Carver, and Tareq associated good teaching and
positive learning environments with the level of attention paid to diversity of human experience. However, there were few teachers like Carver’s Miss Worthy who had a passion for racial equity and social justice and were prepared to create conditions for “rupturing of [the] status quo” in classrooms (Dei, 2005, p. 102). Moreover, youth indicated that, while they were interested in exploring diversity, educators in the Kingston school system rarely had the skills to address diversity-related issues.

When asked whether he cared whether black history was taught in school, if this was an important topic for schools to address, Andrew replied:

Andrew: Mmm, yeah, I would care because I’d like to know how much we’ve progressed over the years. I’d like to know where black people came from, the struggles we’ve gone through. Yeah.

Stephanie: Mmmhmm. So if there was more of it in schools, you would see that as a positive thing?...

Andrew: …Mmm, yeah. I think so. It would certainly make things…a bit more interesting. I think that people would understand black people more….

Other youth echoed the interest in having more of their histories taught in schools but anticipated the backlash likely to accompany any attempts to reform the curriculum:

Stephanie: Mmmhmm, mmmhmm. Do you think that those things should be taught more in Kingston schools?

Carver: I think people would…I, I say yes because it’s a holiday, right? Like there is a day for it. But then you [you will get] the couple kids that are like, “Oh, well how come there isn’t a white history month?” That’s because…

Shawna: …it’s every one!

Carver:… 11 out of 12 [months] is yours!

Everyone laughs

Tareq: Exactly. Exactly.
Carver: So, what’s…? The celebration [of white history] goes on for 11 months. The youth expressed frustration over the fact that, problematic as it is to confine black history education to one month, there was little or no recognition of even Black History Month, a national observance, in Kingston schools. However, the youth were also aware that, as much as the implementation of black history education could benefit them, it would also likely cause friction between them and white peers who invoked discourses of “reverse racism or “special treatment” for minorities.

Summary

While some black youth reported being made to feel quite welcome in Kingston schools, others associated schooling in small towns and cities with very dramatic and emotionally damaging experiences. For these black youth, life in school meant having to deal with the constant pressure that came with being marked as different within a predominantly white student body. Standing out as different often led to circumstances in which the youth could easily be subject to negative attention and mistreatment from both peers and school authorities. When speaking of harassment, black youth typically described efforts to deal with situations on their own and their resolve to simply ignore racist comments and epithets, in addition to the use of their families as sources of support and information. None of the youth referred to resources within the schools to assist students who were being attacked or who felt they were unfairly treated. Though participants felt greater emphasis on black history and culture in the curriculum would improve school environments for black youth, they also observed that such changes would not come without challenges and that black youth themselves would likely bear the brunt of the backlash from white peers.
Chapter 8: Relationships with Peers and Others

The existence of racial differences within the Kingston community was generally viewed positively by black youth. As Kelly (1998) and Tatum (1997) found, black peer groups represent a place of safety for black youth; however, similar to black youth in Alberta, there was among these black Kingston youth “no prohibition against friendships with youth of different backgrounds” (Kelly, 1998, p. 87). Racial diversity was frequently cited as a potentially unifying force among community members and an opportunity for all people to learn about and appreciate each other’s heritages and cultures.

*Diverse Friendships*

Participants often spoke of the importance of having diverse friendships, though this was not always easily achieved. As Shawna pointed out, finding ethnic and racial diversity in Kingston neighbourhoods and schools could sometimes present a challenge. Consequently, Shawna’s lifelong involvement with a predominantly white peer group had more to do with Kingston’s demographics than her own desires:

Shawna: Yeah…I’ve got my one black friend who she’s been there my entire life and most of my other friends are actually just white as I’m thinking about it. I don’t have that diverse of a friendship [circle] but that’s only because of the schools that I went to, if you like. Like my school when I was growing up, from grade 1 to 6, I could count all the black people on one hand.

Interestingly, other youth, like Alicia, had actually come to view diversity as one of the benefits of living in smaller communities like Kingston. They had developed an ability to identify and value the cultural diversity available even where there was little of it. After spending some time in a U.S. city where *de facto* racial segregation was still prevalent, Alicia found herself
gravitating back toward what felt more natural to her - seeking out diverse friendships even in unlikely places:

Alicia: It was very easy to separate yourself because I went to a ... private Christian university from my church and they have like black church and white church which I hadn’t experienced before. I mean they kind of have that in Toronto but, you know, in a small town everyone worships together. So then because of that, you know I chose to sing in the gospel choir and everyone that I associated with generally was black. But actually, I think after the first few years then I sort of branched out and actively sought out making friends with people of other races because that was something that I grew up with that I missed from my childhood.

Andrew cited diversity as one of the things he enjoyed most about living in a Canadian community:

Stephanie: So you started to talk a little bit about your friendships and a diverse network of friends...Who are your friends?

Andrew: Like I said my friends, basically they’re very diverse. Like race, culture, yeah. But it’s not really a problem ‘cause I get to experience different cultures. That’s why I came to Canada mostly. And I get to experience...they get to accept me, so I get that sense of being as well, and with other groups as well.

Tareq, Carver, and Shawna pointed out that they did not discriminate when it came to friendships. Within their circles, diversity was the rule rather than the exception and was viewed as a sign of open-mindedness:

Tareq: For me? I have a very huge multicultural group of friends. I have Asian friends, Pakistani, Brazilian, whites, blacks, of course, and um, every type of culture you can think of. European, I have friends all over the world that, you know, certain places, that I haven’t even had a chance to talk to. And the majority of them they’re in North America, so...I feel good because, you know, I don’t always have to hang out with the same crew. ‘Cause that same crew ain’t gonna change. You gotta have different options and varieties. So, uh, I like all types of people. Like myself, I’m not a racist person. I’m a very easy going person.

Carver: I don’t pick and choose my friends. I’m very open in everything that I do. You know, everything that I look at, you know, it’s just me. Because I don’t look at
colour, I don’t look at what you look like. You’re my friend because I want you to be my friend. You know, everybody is my friend until they abuse it. So everybody in the world is my friend until they give me a reason not to [be their friend].

Shawna: No...I don’t think [colour matters with respect to friendships]. I see someone and we have good conversation and we can be friends, we’re compatible, so that means we’re friends probably. Doesn’t matter the colour of your skin. I’m not gonna shun them away or anything.

Renée also raised the fact that while one might appear to have mostly white friends, there could be considerable diversity within these peer groups as well:

Renée: I hang around with pretty much everyone in the school. So, well, most of the people in the school. But, um, a lot of people I know personally have different backgrounds. Even though a lot of them are white, they do have a lot of different backgrounds. So...

Stephanie: Right, right. So in terms of their ethnicity, for example. Is that what you mean? So they might be white Portuguese or something like that.

Renée: Yeah, exactly.

Intimate Relationships

While there was general agreement on the value of diverse friendships, there was no clear consensus around the importance of race to intimate relationships, particularly among the female participants. When asked if race mattered with respect to relationships, black male youth indicated that this was not a key consideration for them. As Carver put it, being black was important, but it did not factor in when choosing a life partner:

Carver: When it comes to relationships and stuff, it doesn't matter what you look like, who you are, you know? Like there's obviously some kind of connection there, so that's what I follow. I don't follow my eyes, I follow my heart.
Similarly, Tareq was very opposed to the notion that race should in any way determine the nature of personal relationships. In his view, the idea that people should choose life partners from within their proscribed racial group was related to antiquated cultural and social practices:

Tareq: Why bother having to recycle the same belief of someone else? Like today, you know, in the next ten years, what if I decided not to marry a black woman? What if I wanted to marry some intelligent, you know, Portuguese, or intelligent Brazilian or whoever I choose from? But if my father says, you know what, you have to marry a black woman, then I'm being forced to do something I don't want to. That's not right. You're still a human being...you're gonna feel bad and hopeless and miserable based on having someone else's decision to live by. No, no. Not a good idea...

For Tareq, personal freedom – of thought and of action – was the hallmark of his humanity. Relationships formed on the basis of race alone were seen to be both oppressive and ill-fated.

Compared to males, female participants in this study were notably more divided on the question of the importance of race in intimate relationships. It is possible that the caution with which some black female youth approached interracial dating was a response to a double-standard which allowed black men freedom to choose their partners while subjecting women to criticism as “sell-outs” (Kelly, 1998, p. 115). While Alicia gave a nod to the idea that race should not matter in cross-racial relationships, she observed that in reality, "there's a lot more conflict and challenge in that situation". For Alicia, one of the main reasons for opting for a partner with shared race and ethnicity was for the peace of mind of knowing that "your families aren't going to be necessarily opposed." Having the same background also meant having to do less work in order to negotiate intercultural differences. Jacqueline further suggested that, while she would consider dating white men, she was simply more attracted to black men and interested in raising a black family:

Stephanie: So [you mentioned] you want to have black children?
Jacqueline: I think, why not have more in the friggin' world? Why not? And just...I like black. I like blackness. I think that having a black kid would just be cute in general...Like, if it was a white person, well...as light as I am [the child] probably wouldn't [be black]; like that's not gonna change my love for [the child] or whatever. But if I was looking to go out with someone, I'd be looking more for a black person to have a connection with or have kids with than I would be a white person.

Like Alicia, Jacqueline felt that she was more likely to make an emotional connection with someone who shared her experiences as a black-identified person. She was enthusiastic about the prospect of an idealized "full-out [monoracial] family [where] you see a picture and we're all black and we're all looking happy. I think that would be just so nice. Really, really nice."

Jacqueline's dream was of a black family in which discussions about race and racism could be straightforward, relative, perhaps, to what she had grown up with as a biracial child.

Other observations about race and relationships among black female youth centred around perceptions of black men as aggressive and persistent. For Jacqueline, again, this perception of black maleness was idealized and spoken of as something she desired:

Stephanie: What's the different vibe [you feel] that you get when you go to places where there's more black people?

Jacqueline: Like so up front, come up to you. Like a guy wouldn't even hesitate, like just come up to you. Well some of them are just a little, trying to get whatever they're trying to get. But then other ones like come up to you, actually try to get to know your name, like I love that. Like here they just, they wouldn't even flinch to do that. So I like how that, I like the attention better than I do [in Kingston].

Shawna, by contrast, admitted that she had grown to fear what she perceived as the aggressive advances of black men from larger urban centres. However, she also realized her positive views on dating white men had likely been affected by the limited opportunities she had had to meet and date black men while in Kingston:

Shawna: I think that I’d rather date white people but I’m not sure because I’ve had more white boyfriends than black boyfriends. But I also think that’s because I live in Kingston.
and there’s not like any black people to choose from anyways. . . And so sometimes when I [went to Montreal] you know I’d see a lot more black people and I’d realize that the black men were really persistent and for awhile I was actually timid of black men. Like, whoever they were, I would, didn’t want to go near them because I was afraid that they’d try to talk to me and wouldn’t stop talking to me even if I told them I didn’t want them to talk to me. But now I’m, I’m ok because...I’m a woman and I can actually say yes and no instead of a kid being like trying to be polite and trying to say [yes and] no at the same time, kind of thing.

In these narratives, black female youth presented their ideas about intimate relationships as “in development”. While they were more easily able speak of the desirability of diverse friendships, they expressed mixed feelings on the value and emphasis to put on blackness when it came to matters of attraction, partnerships and families.

*Black is "Cool"

When it came to making sense of how others viewed them, several youth spoke of their blackness as something enjoyable – something that set them apart and made them special. For Andrew, identity formation as a black African youth in Kingston was a welcome process as it “made me feel special in a way that people…like, when I reach out to people they can accept me for who I actually am instead of [me] having to fake [my] way to making friends and stuff.” As Renée put it:

Renée: I think of [blackness] as a positive thing just because, like, not everybody’s the same and it’s good to be different, I think. And like, if there’s, like if there’s a school full of white kids and there’s like a black kid then that person’s got background and they got other things like in their life and stuff like that. So it’s not just like they’re from Canada and they’re English or British or whatever you wanna call it. So they have like different backgrounds, so I think it’s cool like to learn about stuff like that, so...

Stephanie: Mmhmm, mmhmm, um, so the person can bring like a different perspective...

Renée: Yeah, yeah...
Stephanie: ..to things that are going on.

Renée: And you always learn new things too from different backgrounds and stuff, so...

Stephanie: Yeah, you’re right. Do you feel cool because you’re black?

Renée: Um, maybe, just because I’m different… don’t know, I think it’s cool to feel different, [and]...I feel different so, I guess I feel cool. (laughs)

Both Renée and Jacqueline at times spoke positively about being ambassadors for blackness in a city the size of Kingston:

Jacqueline: Um, I think it's awesome. Like, I like being black especially here because I get to them like how...because they don't see it a lot. So when they're like, "oh yeah! I know her", and they know me as the black person. But then once they get to know me, they're like, "oh yeah, I know Jacqui...

As Tatum (1997) observed, black youth like Renée and Jacqueline played important roles as ambassadors helping to break-down racist stereotypes and foster cross-racial community dialogue:

Renée: I think, like, me hanging around them and them being white and me not being white then, um, maybe it will like give them a message that some people can be really racist because they don't have black friends or they don't have any different race of a friend. They're all just white so they think like, oh, [black] people are bad and stuff like that. But if I hang around them and they get to know me then maybe it'll help other people. They'll see not all people are bad and you don't have to be black to be bad.

Stereotypes

In spite of this positive attitude toward being few in number in Kingston, black youth also spoke of the many pressures associated with “visible minority” status and how they were perceived by members of the dominant white population. Like Tatum (1997) and Kelly (1998), Andrew identified stereotypes from peers as one of the primary issues affecting black youth in the Kingston community:
Andrew: Basically pressure from their peers. Because they usually give you the basic stereotypes so you'd want to play up to that stereotype just to impress them, I guess...that's the only problem that I have.

Like other black male youth, Andrew spoke of assumptions other young people made about his athleticism and his musical interests:

Andrew: Like when I went to do sports, people used to ask me, am I good at basketball? Because I'm black and I'm tall. But, in fact, I actually told them that I'm actually liking soccer batter than basketball.

Stephanie: Mmhmm. And how do people react to that?

Andrew: Um, most of them are shocked, they're surprised. Yeah. But it's also...centred around music as well. Like they usually think that I'd be able to rap or [be] more into the hip-hop area, but my vision of music is more diverse. Like, I like rock, I've liked hip-hop, reggae. Soft classical a bit....

Although, like Andrew, Carver was actually good at sports, he recalled with irritation, assumptions that, "...because of my skin colour I shouldn't be smart or I should be more involved with sports" and being bluntly asked by peers, "Why are you so smart?" He also tired of friends singling him out because of his natural, afro hairstyle:

Carver: Ok, so just by asking to want to touch my hair. Um, why? "Well, because it's just poofy, it's..." Oh, so you're making me different which is being racist. They're like "No, no, no, no, I'm not being racist." No, you are being racist because you're separating me from everybody else. Why don't you want to touch that [white] person over there?

Youth like Renée and Jacqueline spoke of assumptions from peers and others that, as black females, they would be able to sing and that, similar to some black women seen in music videos, they would dress "slut". Jacqueline also spoke of the assumptions people often made about her being a stereotypically angry, black female. In bell hooks’ *Ain’t I A Woman?* (1981) historical characterizations of the “Sapphire” – an “evil, treacherous, bitchy, stubborn and hateful” black woman – are contrasted with those of the beloved, subservient, and nurturing
black “mammy” (p. 85). In the following passage, Jacqueline notes the difference in how people relate to her and her white mother:

Jacqueline: Like [my mom] has a very strong personality and like, that's where I get my fight for sure. Like just the way that she comes across is the same way I would be coming across. But it seems different because I'm black so the way I come across in saying the same [thing] she does, it makes me seem more bitchy or whatever, but the way she comes across it's kind of natural...but like, they're ready to run when I say something.

Though black youth spoke most often about conflicts with white peers because of stereotyping, Shawna also spoke of the pressures that sometimes came with feeling one was not measuring up to black community standards. Shawna had grown up believing that black people from larger urban centres and black communities were "blacker" than her and would judge her negatively because she had been raised in a small city:

Shawna: Do you ever feel among your friends or perhaps even in your relationship that there are expectations associated with being black?

Shawna: Umm, I never really did, but, um, my cousin...'cause she's...I can't even really explain to you...a lot more black than I am. Like I like to call her my gangster cousin...she's my "g" cousin. (laughs) And, sometimes I feel like I have to, I don't know, dress a certain way when I'm with her 'cause she used to tell me how to dress and stuff and try to tell me to be black and how to do my hair. As far as expectations...that's pretty much all I can think of...

Shawna: From other [black] people...exactly...

Shawna went on to describe occasionally feeling awkward and shy around other black people whom she felt expected her to conform to a particular standard of beauty, especially when it came to hair:

Shawna: [If] I happen to see another black person or...if it's a black girl who seems dolled up, her hair is done, she's wearing nice clothes, she obviously cares a lot about her appearance, I automatically assume she's going to see my hair and make fun of me. (laughs) Like 100%. Every black girl that I see I'm just like, oh, no, my hair. (laughs)
That's pretty much the expectation to be a black woman is like nice hair, 'cause they won't...you have to have nice hair. My mom always says that people will make fun of me if they saw me walking around like that. But the white people don't understand so they don't...it doesn't matter, basically.

In the passage above, Shawna describes the difficulty with maintaining a certain image as a black person when living in a city in which certain services, such as beauty salons specializing in the care of African hair, are not readily accessible. Due to these limitations, Shawna at times felt excluded from discourses of “stylish solidarity” she felt were accessible to other black youth (Kelly, 2004, pp. 165, 176). Though Shawna was not totally disinterested in trying and adopting black styles, she resented the continual pressures associated with being judged "black enough". To avoid the judgement of family and black friends, Shawna ultimately found some relief in hanging out with white peers who did not know enough about such things as black hairstyles to comment on her appearance.

Conflicts with White Peers

Participants described their relationships with white peers as complex. Clearly, in a predominantly white city, black youth could be expected to have at least some white friends. Indeed, friendships with white youth as well as youth of other races and backgrounds were valued highly. As Chris put it, "I don’t hang with straight black kids and walk down the street in a black crowd. No, I, I’m multicultural (laughs), that’s the word I’m looking for, yeah." When speaking of the party scene, Tareq acknowledged, "We have fun. And, um, like there's a bunch of white boys that we know that, you know, we like to joke around with too sometimes." However, these discourses of multiculturalism sometimes served to mask important differences between the participants and other youth (James, 2003; Kelly, 1998; Kobayashi & Johnson, 1997; Walcott, 2003). Many of the youth recognized that while it was possible for them to
experience welcome and acceptance among white peers, they could at other times be turned on and subjected to overt racism. Tareq commented that, although he had found it possible to develop close bonds with white peers, there were times when being a racialized minority in a crowd of white youth made him feel unsafe:

Tareq: Sometimes I do feel uncomfortable....if I have a black friend with me and there’s a bunch of white boys, I’m going to feel uncomfortable, yes! Because then I won’t have, there’s nothing, me and that person may not relate, you know. It’s like, ok, this is an awkward moment. You know? [I’ll say to my black friend] “Yo, you wanna go, man? I’m not feeling this vibe. Come on, let’s go.” But if you [as a white person were to] come up to me and introduce yourself and say, “Hey man, my name’s Josh” or whatever, I’d be like, “Oh, ok, cool man. My name’s Tareq, you know, what’s up?” If we spark that... friendship or whatever that might become that bond, then that’s cool. Because then I won’t feel as left out or uncomfortable. So yeah, but yeah, at times I do feel uncomfortable, you know, so...and most of the time I just don’t say anything. I’m just quiet. I just sit there and don’t say a word. Yeah.

When "outnumbered", Tareq's strategy for avoiding the potential for conflict with white youth was to keep communication to a minimum in order to escape notice. Chris described the use of the "n" word as something that frequently came up in social settings, creating immediate division between white and black youth:

Chris: I love Kingston, just I know, [racism] is there. Do you know what I mean? ...I know there’s people who won’t stick up for themselves that experience it every day. Because they won’t say nothing. You know what I mean? Like I can’t take it. Somebody calls me, like, the “n” word? We’re fighting. You know what I mean, like we’re fighting. Like it’s not...I’m not thinking about it, it’s happening. You said the word, the punch flew (laughs), you know what I mean? I can’t, I can’t handle it. ‘Cause people say it, people call you a nigger because they don’t know what that feeling is. You know what I mean? They’ve never been put in that position of being not liked just for your skin colour. So they say it like it’s nothing. Me? I felt that feeling. I’m a let you say it and I’m waiting for it, ok, and then... then I just get in trouble. I get in trouble because of racism.
Participants were not in complete agreement about the use of the "n" word by other white youth. Some felt that it was a term that had crossed over into urban culture through media such as rap music. As such, it had become so prevalent that it was permissible for white peers to call them this, as long as it was intended "to mean a term of respect." However, the youth felt it was easy to tell through "tone of voice", "actions" and "gestures" when white youth were using the term against them in a negative way. In his relationships with white peers, Chris had simply come to expect that the "n" word would be used against him as a racist epithet and that he would need to defend himself against its use emotionally and physically. Chris had also come to expect that using physical violence to defend himself against racism was more likely to bring him into conflict with authorities than to resolve the problem. Carver similarly spoke of being subject to epithets by white peers and sometimes being at a loss for how to react:

Carver: Um, it’s hard to think that people can be so hurtful and painful for no reason, right? To look at me, ok, so he’s a different colour so let’s make fun of him. Like this summer, um, we were playing a rugby game and somebody thought it was funny to joke around with their friends or whatever, yell out on the field and call me a monkey. Ok, so, then I obviously, rage was running through my head. At the age that I am at now, it wasn’t at the point of, what does that word mean? What are you trying to say? It’s, I know what you’re trying to say and, you know, why [would you say that]? What’s the point? So, it’s hard to go through life and think that there’s always people who are going to think bad about you.

Faced with the irrationality of racism from white youth in the community, black youth could choose to either fight or try to ignore negative comments and perceptions. Black youth were also able to take some comfort in the camaraderie that friendships with other black youth offered.

Safety of Black Friendships

Though cautious about admitting it, youth like Chris often found their friendships with other black youth an important source of support in terms of both validation of identity and
opposition to racism. In Chris's experience, friendships with all people were important but it was friendships with other racialized youth that ultimately offered the greatest degree of safety:

Chris: I think what happens is eventually...eventually you just don’t trust nobody. That’s what happens. Like I honestly, eventually, like after all the racist jokes and the stupid situations, you eventually, you know who’s good. Like me, I’ll be straight up, I don’t talk to nobody unless I need to. Like I have my crowd of people and over the years you find out that this guy might have been racist or that this guy did something to this guy, or...and you just stay selective. Like, at, even at school when I was a little kid, like I have my crowd. Those black kids? Those are my kids, that was my family then. It’s cool when you stick by your...stick with your...(whispers) colour...

Stephanie: Mmhmm...

Chris: When it comes down to it, you stick to your colour. It’s bad. I hate talking like that but it’s the truth. Like people who don’t say it are naive. People that say that don’t go to the bar. Don’t go to parties, don’t see it. I go to all those places and it’s definitely the way it is.

Carver suggested that, while many of the offensive things said by white peers were forgivable as expressions of ignorance, it was sometimes important for black youth to socialize with others who understood the dynamics of racism. As Kelly (1998) points out, black Canadian youth value opportunities to be regarded as “just another person” among peers without having to worry about being hurt by racism:

Carver: Um, when it comes to black kids I think we just joke between each other, you know, as in, just things that happen in life, right? Because so many people have told us that we can’t do it, you know? So, we know that we can do it, but some people have told us that we can’t do it. So, pretty much when we joke between each other, saying that you can’t do it. You know, knowing that we can. You know, and as all the white friends that I have they don’t mean to put it in that perspective, it’s just, you know, it’s a joke, but some people don’t understand that sometimes jokes hurt. You know, even though you don’t mean it to hurt, sometimes it does.
Here, as in Chapter 6, Carver describes black social spaces as places in which stereotypes are overturned and black youth are able to use humour to counteract the negative emotional effects of racism.

Summary

In Kingston where black people are few in number, the black youth in this study learned to value friendships with young people from various racial and ethnocultural groups. Black Kingston youth defined themselves as "multicultural" in their dispositions and attitudes and considered themselves able to move easily within and among different crowds. Standing out within social groups as being among the few black kids in a school or in a neighbourhood, black youth often came to see their blackness as special and sometimes even an important vehicle for broadening the perspectives of white peers. However, black youth had also learned that standing out among their peers could leave them vulnerable to racist attitudes and behaviours, sometimes from their own friends. Countering the everyday effects of alienating and dehumanizing treatment led black youth to occasionally seek out the safety of black peer circles in which experiences of racism could be defused using strategies such as humour. When it came to intimate relationships, black youth generally idealized interracial companionship. However, black female youth were more likely to speak of the greater potential for comfort and safety within monoracial relationships and families.
Chapter 9: Life in the Community

As discussed in Chapter 6, many of the youth interviewed for this study reported feelings of ambivalence when it came to living in Kingston. Even among youth who had lived in Kingston most of their lives, statements of allegiance to the city were often qualified i.e. "I love Kingston, but...". One key source of discomfort with living in Kingston was the perception that the youth were continually being watched and judged because of their colour.

"Under the Gaze" in Public Spaces

Black youth spoke of many instances in which they received unwanted attention in Kingston from other community members as well as community authorities. In many instances youth found themselves under this kind of scrutiny while engaged in very routine activities such as walking from one public location to another (as discussed in Chapter 6) or shopping. In other studies, harassment from mall security is identified as a major bone of contention for black youth in large urban centres (James, 1998; Kelly, 1998). In his study of the policing of black youth in Toronto, James (1998) refers to the “roofed streets” of the mall where security personnel monitor and discipline in a manner similar to police on outdoor streets (p. 162). Black youth in Kingston also spoke about their experiences in malls, but suggested that security was much less of an issue for them than everyday interactions with white patrons. Tareq recalled one instance in which he realized he was being watched while walking through a local shopping centre:

Tareq: So I’m with my friend Eddie and we’re walking down and there’s like a caf[eteria] as you’re walking out through the doors. And he was, I wasn’t paying attention but he was looking at everyone else that was staring at me and it was just like, I felt this vibe. Like a wrong vibe coming from that section. And then Eddie just like basically yells out, “All these f---ing people! Like, why are they looking at you, man?” And I’m like, “What? What happened? I missed it. What’s going on?” And he’s like,
“Man, all these white guys are just, all these white people were basically looking at you. Like just staring you down like they’ve never seen a black person ever in their life.” And I’m like, “Well man, what can you expect? Maybe ‘cause they’re, probably they’re from World War II where back then like if you were black it wasn’t right, kind of thing.” So…like I, I don’t blame then but at the same time it’s not right. Maybe they should just focus on their own, you know, business, like eat your food, don’t…You don’t have to stare at me because, you know, it makes you feel, um, weird or unsafe to [see] some[one] else as basically a different race. Like (laughs) it doesn’t make no sense. Like, why?

In this situation, Tareq’s friend, who was not racialized as black, was taken aback by the glares he and Tareq were receiving in the food court. Evidently he had not experienced this kind of attention when walking alone and knew instinctively that the stares he and Tareq were receiving had to do with Tareq’s colour. By contrast, Tareq described himself as someone who had been through this many times and was, therefore, relatively unfazed by the stares of the white people around him. His coping strategy was to dismiss the looks as byproducts of ignorance. However, he also indicated that it was difficult to continue to justify this kind of behavior at a time when acceptance of differences is the professed norm. Carver also recalled being subject to scrutiny in the mall, this time by mall staff:

Carver: So we were in Jean Machine or something like that, or Stitches? Anyways, we were in a store and this lady comes up to us or whatever and she was like, “Um, do you need help?” And I was like, “No, I’m fine, I’m ok. I’m just looking around and stuff.” And she didn’t ask anybody else, right, like there’s all kinds of us in the store. There was like ten of us there going to the mall. And she didn’t ask anybody else. So I was like, yeah alright…cool. So I just kept going, kept walking around. She said, “Are you sure you don’t need any help?” I’m like, “No, it’s fine. I’ll let you know if I’m looking for something.” And she’s like, “Ok, well just make sure you let me know.” And the whole time I was in the store she followed me. I was like…what are you doing?...And at first like nobody…understood what I was talking about until they caught on and everybody was like laughing. They’re like [saying], "as if this girl’s actually doing this". It was like, some people are nuts when it comes to stuff like that. I’m not trying to steal from you. I’m pretty sure your buzzers will go off if that happens. ..You know?
The surveillance to which Carver was subject as a black male youth was carefully cloaked within the language of polite concern. One of Carver’s key observations was that what was easily identifiable to him as racial harassment from store staff was not noticeable to his white friends until he pointed it out to them. Although he and his friends were later able to make light of the situation, Carver’s awareness of being treated differently than others in the community was a burden he carried alone.

Jacqueline, too, spoke of the familiar feeling of finding herself under the gaze of dominant group community members when going about routine activities such as going to school or shopping in the mall:

Jacqueline: …like if I go to somewhere with a friend that’s white and they know the whole people and I don’t know anyone, it puts me weird ‘cause like I know that I’m the only black person there. It doesn’t, I don’t think of that first but I look around and then I know that they notice that I’m the only black person there. And like if I’m with my black friends like Carver or Debbie, we’ll go to like a school, we’ll be like, we’re the only three black people in here and like we’ll just be laughing about it. But it’s different when you’re by yourself, when you know that people notice it. So it’s just like, that’s exactly how it is when I’m at the mall or at the store. Like you go and you’re like, it’s automatically what you notice, like you’re the only black person there.

Like Fanon, who famously described seeing his distorted reflection in the eyes of the white child who first observes “a nigger” (Fanon, 1967, p. 112), Jacqueline described the disorienting sensation of noticing people noticing her blackness and conferring on her an externally constituted identity. While usually able to put her difference out of her mind when spending time with white friends, the weight of being noticed and having others assume to know her as “the black person” inevitably affected her experience of living in the city. The looks on the faces of people around her, while still noticeable, felt less hurtful when Jacqueline was out in Kingston with friends who shared her identity.
However, participants were quick to point out that the sense of safety in numbers they sometimes experienced had its limits. When asked if they would find Kingston a more welcoming place if there were a central place in which black youth could meet and interact, the participants were not enthusiastic as they felt this would make them even more vulnerable to scrutiny:

Carver: Well ‘cause really you don’t feel safe, like you don’t feel safe in a specific spot, it’s specific people…

Shawna: Especially a group of black people in one spot.

Tareq: That’s it.

Carver: Exactly. And exactly with all of us all together? Oh, no…

Shawna: We’re pushing it.

Tareq: Oh, no…

Carver: Oh no, you know cops would be surrounding that place like mad.

Tareq: You’d see cruisers around the corner just waiting.

Carver: Just chillin’.

Tareq: Exactly. Exactly.

Stephanie: Yeah, yeah. So, a black, like a drop-in centre or a, you know…

Carver: Yeah, a community centre.

Stephanie: …some kind of a community centre. That’s not gonna work?

Carver: They would never allow that. They would never allow that.

Black Kingston youth enjoyed the sense of security that came with being around people who shared their identity, but realized that the numerous presence of black youth in any given location would result in their movements being even more closely monitored. They described sports events as the only places where one might find many local black youth together under one
roof; this they felt was permissible only because, in these venues, they were subject to positive stereotyping as athletes:

Carver: The most place that you see black kids all at once is probably like, as a community centre, was probably like Knights of Columbus when we were all playing basketball.

Tareq: Yeah, yeah…

Carver: When we were younger. That was probably the most population you ever seen in a community centre of black people.

Tareq: Or if we ever go watch a game at like Queen’s or college…

Carver: Yeah, exactly. Like nowadays like the time that you would see us all together is like… in Kingston? It’s hard though but it’d probably be sports events.

Tareq: Yeah, mostly sports events. That’s true actually.

Carver: Because nobody looks at us like…

Tareq: There’s nothing wrong!

Carver: …in that place all of a sudden. Yeah, exactly. But in that place all of a sudden we’re like gods because black people are supposed to be so amazing at sports, so…you know?

With the exception of sports events at which the black athlete image afforded social capital (James, 2003; Tatum, 1997), participants were self-conscious about having a conspicuous public presence. When asked a question about black-focused schools, Chris initially indicated that he was in favour of institutions and curriculum designed to meet the needs of black students. However, he was equally adamant that he would never attend such a school in Kingston:

Stephanie: Yeah…what do you think about it? Do you think…do you like the idea of a black school?

Chris: Like…late…I think it’s too late. Because if they have so many white schools, why couldn’t they have a black school years ago? Especially in a place like Toronto where
it’s more blacks than whites. You know what I mean? It’s way, way, way too late. Way too late.

Stephanie: If there was a black school here, would you go?

Chris: No.

Stephanie: No?

Chris: Because then that’s racist. Bluntly, anybody that actually wants to go to an all-white school’s...an all-black school’s a racist. I’m not saying that...like I support Toronto having one because there is white schools and this makes it somewhat equal but I don’t...nah. No, I would not be going to one of the black schools, no, ‘cause you’re bluntly making a statement. I’m racist and I’m not going to school with white people or any other race. No, I would not do that.

While a place in which black identities were predominant could be accepted in theory, Chris was unable to reconcile the possible benefits of black-focused schools with the likely disadvantages of being further segregated within a white community. Though one could argue the existence of "white schools" in the Kingston area, concern with being exposed and judged to be racist among white community members accounts for tensions within Chris's views on black schools.

*Responding to the Pressures of the Gaze*

Participants spoke of different ways in which they and other black peers responded to the intense scrutiny that came with being young and black in Kingston. Occasionally the youth’s narratives referred to peers and family who had attempted to find relief from the pressure of a gaze “that makes subjects wish for invisibility” (Kelly, 1998, p. 19). Shawna spoke with sadness about a sister whose strong affinity to her white peer group was leading to increasing estrangement from her black family:

Shawna: And that’s the problem. My little sister...oh! Poor girl. She is just *lost*. And her, all of her friends are white. Every single one of them. Every single one of her
friends are white. And now my sister does not treat anybody with respect. And I’m not, really, I don’t know who to…

Carver: Where’s the [---unclear--] been.

Tareq: No, her, her behavior is as a white person.

Carver: Yeah…exactly.

Tareq: Um, like, it’s not her fault…

Shawna: It’s true…

Narratives of black youth who had somehow “gone astray” and were strenuously attempting to be accepted within the white community were something to which participants could easily relate. Carver compared his experiences as a black-identified male to those of a peer intent on "fitting in" in order to avoid negative attention:

Carver: Yeah… ‘cause it’s uh it’s the blending in thing. Because at my house there’s a kid…and um he, he’s lived there a long time, right? And he is blacker, like blacker than black but when you like, when you like listen to him and look at his personality, he is white.

Shawna: He’s gone.

Carver: He is white. He’s whitewashed. Absolutely, absolutely. And it’s wanting to fit in, right? Like he goes to [rural highschool name] and stuff like that, right? So he’s had to find a way to make himself one of them. And now, like ‘cause like, at the beginning, it was just as bad for him as it was for me… But, seriously now…they look at him as if he’s one of them…

Whereas situations in which black youth attempted to disavow blackness altogether were offered as extreme examples, conscious decisions to "tone down" what might be considered stereotypical black dress styles and "black behaviour" were described as more common means of escaping negative attention in Kingston. Chris explained that, after years of dressing in an urban style made popular by African American hip-hop artists, he felt compelled to make a decision about altering his look:
Chris: I, honestly, I like wearing baggy jeans and stuff but I won’t because, like what? You get judged as...a gangster, you know what I mean? A kid with your pants hanging to your...no, so I don’t...I just dress like a prep everywhere I go. This is my style. 24-hour prep. Like I’ve worn du-rags, all that, it just...it’s prejudice. ‘Cause, yeah, you could look good in it and everything, but people are judging you instantly for wearing it. So there’s no reason to. It just draws attention in Kingston.

Though Kelly (2004) has suggested that “prep” style is likely to become the next “site of contestation” as it is adopted by hip-hop artists such as P. Diddy (p. 180), Chris believed there was an assumption of respectability associated with prep that purchased him some acceptance in the eyes of the white majority.

Similarly, Tareq and Carver disclosed conscious decisions they sometimes made to avoid black style in favour of what might be considered more generic clothing. For both youth, this choice was dictated by a desire to challenge stereotypes of black men as ignorant and thuggish as much as it was a strategy for avoiding trouble in the community:

Tareq: Well, there’s a respectful black person and there’s always an ignorant black person. So if you get those two mixed up, people are gonna assume, “oh, no, he’s an ignorant black guy.” He’s gonna be the one running round the streets doing, you know, acting like a thug. Or if you dress properly and you speak, you know, politely to others, they’re gonna assume that, you know, “oh this guy’s down to earth. He’s not those type of people…”

Carver: …just like, Tareq said, people look at us and they’re like, “oh…yeah…that’s another gangster on the street. Ten bucks says he’s going to jail, before highschool, before the end of highschool.” Well why would you say that? So that’s why like I’ve noticed that I’ve changed my wardrobe and stuff too, but not to fit in, just to be more proper, right?

Though black female youth also referred to efforts to sometimes tone down traits associated with blackness, their concerns had less to do with dress style than with how others might react to their perspectives as black people. Jacqueline, though adamant about not
changing her style for anyone, was admittedly careful about drawing too much attention to her interests and experiences as a black person when among white people, including family members:

Jacqueline: We’re the only ones that are mixed in the family. ‘Cause the rest of my cousins are all white and everything. So it’s kind of more stuck with us ‘cause …especially in Kingston, they’re really not gonna know anything about [blackness] ‘cause it’s not brought up anywhere. Like I’ve never been in one class that’s talked about [it]…except, um, Miss Worthy …So I wouldn’t expect them to really know….I’m not gonna bring up something that they’re just gonna be like, “what?”’ They’re gonna know about [President Barack] Obama clearly. Like that’s just, everyone should [know that], well like because it’s common. But like we kind of just don’t really talk…

…I think if I was to be like, oh yeah! You guys, blah, blah, blah, this black person, they’d kind of be like, “what?” “Why?” Like they probably wouldn’t even know what to do with the question, so…they’d probably be smart about it, like they’re all very smart people, but, they’d just kind of be weird about it. I could see it getting a little awkward. And then I would probably feel awkward asking it ‘cause I’d feel like, why am I asking this when … they see me as no different from their niece or anything …

While Jacqueline at all times presented as a person who was very comfortable with her black identity, she was also clearly selective about when and to whom she spoke about her realities as a black youth. In her experience, such discussions merely accentuated her difference and made interactions with white people awkward.

By contrast, participants remarked on the tendency of some black peers to “turn up” their blackness as a way of returning the white, dominant gaze or of “glaring back”. Jacqueline recalled the situation of an acquaintance who responded to judgment of her black identity by adopting exaggerated, stereotypical black dress and speech:

Jacqueline: [This girl] was very "white" and someone had said something to her like, “oh you dress so white!” And then she tried everything she could do to just not dress like that. And she got this somewhat of a black image, probably watched too much BET
music videos and just went totally down… Like she was a very nice person, like nothing was wrong with her and it just went like slut, like, was not… pulling off some Beyoncé outfits, like…something that they’d be doing in their videos and she just went a little too crazy.

…after awhile people would be looking at her… kind of like, “what are you doing?” So she kind of toned it down and like went back for a way, but then her talking started getting different. And it was like the people that look like they’d go on YouTube and try to pronounce it. Like, or actually watching these videos and like, oh yeah! Like those, you know those tapes that like try to teach you how to speak French? It’s kind of like she bought a tape on how to speak ghetto…

As Jacqueline explained, performing blackness “as seen on TV” tapped into mainstream stereotypes about black identity and was a means through which some black youth sought recognition and acceptance. Speaking in a “contrived African-American” dialect was an attempt at connecting to a social position that might afford youth greater social standing among peers (James, 1997, pp. 24-25).

In other circumstances, this hyper-performativity resulted from the internalization of low expectations of black youth. Among young, black males in particular, the adoption of a “gangsta” persona was the response to pervasive assumptions of their criminality:

Tareq: Doesn’t make any sense. Why? Are we supposed to run and go outside and shoot and steal…

Carver: Grab a gun?

Tareq: …and be at your house when you’re not there or something? Like to make you feel that, “oh yeah, that’s a typical black guy there!” You know what I mean? Which you see everyday. You know? No…no it’s not like that.

Carver: And the thing is, some people actually do that to be like, “Oh yeah? That’s what you want me to be? Then watch me do it.”

Tareq: Cops [need to] stop pulling over black people……in the street.
Carver: Yeah, stop pulling...you wanna know why...we get so bad? It's we're always getting pulled over. We're trying to give you a reason to pull us over.

While several participants spoke of a personal commitment to breaking down stereotypes of black people, youth also acknowledged the temptation to confirm stereotypes and, in the process, to exchange marginality for the glamour of a non-conformist black masculinity (Skeggs as cited in Nayak and Kehily, 2008).

*Interactions With Police*

The continued presumption of black criminality was identified as a key issue contributing to the marginalization of black youth in Kingston. Though few of the participants were aware of the Kingston Police Data Collection Project or the events surrounding it (described in the Introduction), several, though not all, had stories to share about negative encounters they or their black peers had had with Kingston police. Often these encounters involved being stopped for “WWB” or “walking while black”:

Stephanie: …Do you think that, you know, black youth being stopped [by police in Kingston] is a problem?

Carver/Tareq/Shawna: Yeah, yeah!

Stephanie: Or do you think [individual stops are] just a one off?

Carver: Yeah, I see it absolutely. Because I, for some reason, I feel that they would look at us for doing something wrong, obviously before they look at somebody of another group. Right, like when they look at us, “oh, you got drugs”, automatically. You gotta be a drug dealer. Why? I’m a drug dealer because I got nice shoes on? What are you trying to say?

Tareq: Right, because I have a knapsack? It matches what I wear? Like…

*Everyone laughs.*

Carver: My clothes are matching!
Shawna: They’ll see that earring in your ear and, oh, they’ll think you’re a drug dealer.

Carver: No, no, that’s stolen!

In these encounters, black youth “visibility assures the hold of the power that is exercised over them” (Foucault, 1995, p. 187). Consistent with James’ (1998) observations, youth with expensive clothing were particularly vulnerable to police stops on the basis of the presumption that the clothes were not affordable for them and so must have been acquired by illegal means).

Though Shawna had not personally had many run-ins with the police, she was able to recall a very recent situation in which she and her white boyfriend were stopped while walking on a downtown street:

Shawna: I got pulled over while walking…

Stephanie: You were pulled over while walking?

Carver: (laughs)

Shawna: While walking. Me and my boyfriend were walking downtown and we were right in front of my house actually. And an unmarked cop car comes and it’s, “hey, how are you? How you doin’?” And me and my boyfriend looked at each other, we’re like, what’s going on? We’re like…I used to live beside actually in an actual crack house, like crackheads actually lived there. And I thought, oh, you’re cops…you want the crackhouse beside us. You don’t want to talk to me. And they’re like, “actually, can you come here?” And we’re just like, why? And they were like questioning us, asking where we’re going and stuff, asking what’s in my backpack, and we’re just like, what’s going on? …like my house was right here like I was in front of my house about to go in and they’re just, they’re like, “well we got a call about a boyfriend and girlfriend having a fight on Princess Street” and we’re just like, ”We’re not fighting. We were just…”

Stephanie: Does it look like we’re fighting?

Shawna: (laughs) Like, we were holding hands walking to my house. Like, I don’t even know what was up…This was like, not even four months ago. Pretty recent.
In this circumstance, Shawna viewed the police officer’s apparent concern for her as a woman possibly involved in a domestic dispute as a pretense for stopping and searching her on the basis of her skin colour.

An incident with police that stood out for Carver had occurred while he was walking home from high school one evening. In this situation it was not what the youth was doing, but his inactivity that became suspect (James, 1998):

Carver: Ok, so I think this was my grade 9 year. I was walking home from school. It was right at the beginning of the year. Um, so I was walking with my best friend Ian, and everybody thinks we’re like identical twins. So then we’re walking, walking…so then he goes to his house. So like there’s a cop car following us, right? Like it wasn’t really following us, it was just behind us. So we paid no mind to it, right? So then he goes into his house and my house is just down the street. So I kept walking and then as I’m about to cross the street, they pull around and stop right in front of me. Like, oh…oh, ok….So, I’m a really polite child, so obviously I’m like, “Oh hey officers. What’s going on?” Right? They’re like, “Where are you goin’?” “Uh, I’m going home. I just got off school. I’m going home now.” They’re like, “Did you do anything bad today?” or something like that. I’m like, “What are you…? I’m going home”

Shawna/Tareq: (laugh)

Carver: I was like, “Why are you pulling me over right now? Is there a reason?” Uh, and they’re like, “Well not really. Just we heard some bad stuff was going on around here so we just wanted to check it…” I was like, “You’re pulling me over because I’m black aren’t you?” They’re like, “well, maybe that’s some of the reason.”

Tareq: Whoa!!!

Stephanie: You’re lying!

Carver: I was, “Are you serious?” So I went home, I was like, “mom, the cops just pulled me over. I thought I was gonna get arrested or something”. [She was] like “what’d you do?” “Noth…I was walking home!”

Carver, Tareq, and Chris had all had experiences in which they had been stopped for fitting the general description of a suspect or because their appearance had caught the attention of white
police officers. Tareq, who had previously been in conflict with the law, recalled an incident during which he felt police powers were abused for the purpose of intimidating him and possibly getting him into further trouble:

Tareq: I got pulled over when I was like in a vehicle. And, uh, I was going home from a friend’s house. They checked everything except the trunk of course and the glove compartment because they’re not allowed. And I had curfew… at the time I was, you know, I was on probation. So long story short, I told the cops nicely that I had to go home. My curfew’s 9 o’clock and it was 8:30 at the time. So, it took them 15 minutes to search the car and I’m thinking to myself, they’re doing this on purpose so after 9 o’clock they’ll arrest me for breach. So, it was 9 o’clock and then I got worried… then they told me they’re like, “well what do you have in your pockets?” I was like, “well, what do you think, man? You can search me all you want. I don’t have anything. I’m just going home and you’re stopping me for no reason. Like this is not right.” So they said, “Well, you have your curfew. We need to get you going then.” I was like, “Yes, thank you” …They didn’t get nothing from us and I’m thinking in my head, like, I can’t wait to tell my dad this story. I thought I was gonna go to jail that night. I’m like, ok, I can’t get out of this. So, finally after like quarter after nine, I get home and then my friends are like, "man that was the [most] racist thing ever. I think you should literally call up your lawyer right now and tell them what happened. " So I called them. I was like,” yeah, basically I got pulled over because I’m black and they didn’t even let me go for no reason, searching the vehicle for absolutely stupidity…I want to know what’s going on." And my lawyer’s like, "we can’t really do anything because, the cops usually lie. They’ll lie about anything. And you know the court’s gonna believe what the cops gonna say, so there’s no point fighting it." So, I told my dad and he’s like, you know what? I think it’s best for you to just stay home and go to school. Study, do what you need to do. Go to work and then come back and, and just stay home ‘cause (laughs) there is no point in you going outside. You’re just gonna get pulled over everywhere.

Chris had also had the experience of being in conflict with the law and understood the costs of being a black man known to police. He described a life-altering exchange he once had with a white man during a bar altercation and how the inequities of the justice system and Kingston policing became clear to him:

Chris: You know the greatest thing a white guy said to me at the bar? He goes, “I’m gonna call you [a nigger] and I’m gonna fight you.” I go, “You don’t want to fight me,
buddy, I box‖. He goes, “yeah, I’m gonna fight you because even if I lose I know you’ll go to jail and I won’t.” That’s the best thing a white guy said to me at the bar! You wanna know what I did? I stopped going to the bar. Done with dancing. That’s exactly what he said - even if you and I fight, I know at the end of it, [you’ll] go to jail and I won’t. That was the best...that was a lesson in life for me, right? I was like, whoa! ‘Cause I used to, I was going in and out of jail for assault charges. Not because I was selling drugs, ‘cause I used to fight for my friends. Like, if I have a crew of people and someone picks on one of my friends, I get hurt, right? I hurt them for hurting my friend. I was like a stupid idiot. But when this guy said to me like, 2 ½ years ago, he’s like, “listen I’ll fight you right now, I don’t care,” he’s all drunk, he said “‘cause even if when I fight, I know you’re going to jail.” I stopped. I stopped. I got my act together… That guy changed my life, ‘cause it’s true, you know what I mean? It’s honestly true. But it’s the deepest...I’ll never forget those words (laughs).

During his interview, Chris indicated that he had been in many situations in which his aggressive reaction to racism on the street, in bars, and in other public spaces had led to police intervention and to the labelling of Chris as a troublemaker. According to Chris, this pattern of reaction to racism resulting in police involvement was a familiar one for black youth in Kingston. He cited the recent murder of a white Queen’s student, Justin Schwieg, in a local bar by a black Brampton man (McMahon, April 18, 2005) as an incident in which he felt the dimensions of race and racism had been overlooked:

Chris: When it, when it comes down to it, you stick to your colour. It’s bad. I hate talking like that but it’s the truth. Like people who don’t say it are naive. People who say that don’t go to the bar. Don’t go to parties, don’t see it. I go to all those places and it’s definitely the way it is. Like definite. Like, yeah...like I know all the black families and that whole thing that happened with that Queen’s student, that was awful!

Stephanie: Who would be...

Chris: The football player...

Stephanie: Oh, yeah, yeah, yeah...

Chris: Yeah, but like, bluntly, like it was awful, but bluntly the guy was like calling them a nigger and shit. You know what I mean? Like, like it’s, it’s wrong, incredibly wrong, but...
Stephanie: But there’s two sides...?

Chris: This guy could have been called a nigger his whole life and he would have just snapped that day, you know what I mean? I don’t really know Fuzzy well, like, I don’t know his name. I call him Fuzzy ‘cause he used to be a rapper and stuff. And I was but, uh...yeah and, even then, over a girl. Nigger.

Here Chris presents a version of the Justin Schwieg story contrary to police allegations of an unprovoked attack. Racist epithets and a fight “over a girl” were not reported in the media.

While not disputing the tragedy of the Queen’s student’s violent death, Chris was confident that racism was at the core of the Schwieg murder and felt able to sympathize with the need to defend oneself against racism in Kingston:

Chris: I have fought over racism. I mean, I have, I’ve gotten into trouble, you know what I mean? Like it...over racism, you know what I mean, like I don’t...I’m not crazy. I just, over time I just didn’t take anybody’s S-H-I-, star, star, star. I didn’t, you know what I mean? [If] they hated me just for being black, they were getting knocked out. In fact, when I walk out of here today, that’s the way my mentality is and Kingston did that. ‘Cause my mentality should not be like that. And I know it shouldn’t be like that, but you have to think...Like I think every white person is racist...

For Chris, being black in Kingston meant always being on guard in the event of a racist incident. Not being able to rely on anyone else for help, Chris felt justified in taking steps to protect himself.

*Lack of Community Support*

Carver, who had also experienced many blatant acts of racism in the community, including vandalism and epithets, described his family’s attempts to actually bring concerns of racism to the police rather than take matters into their own hands. However, to the family’s disappointment, working with police to resolve these issues brought no justice or relief. Carver
recalled several situations in which he and his family were targets of hateful acts but received no response from police:

Carver: Nothing ever happens…The whole racism thing that happened to me in the country? Like they killed a beaver and put it in my driveway…

Tareq: What…?

Carver: Beat its face in, like it…the beaver is a Canada animal. You’re not supposed to do that. It’s against the law to do that. You know? They did so many things to my house and we had all kinds of cops come out. And, ok, so [someone] did donuts on my front lawn. Um,…

Shawna: Really?

Stephanie: Donuts are like driving a car…

Carver: Yeah, with their four wheelers on the front lawn…

Stephanie: Right, right, right.

Carver: Ok, so, we called and the cops came. And then, they did it again, right, but like later on…they did it at nighttime when I guess when we were sleeping or something. So, then I called, I called again the next morning and I called, I actually called at like 2:00 o’clock in the afternoon. They didn’t come to the house until the next day, 12 o’clock.

Stephanie: Oh my gosh.

Carver: And…I was like sleeping when they came. My sister’s like, “Uh, the police are at the door!” I’m “Ok…”, so I come up there and they’re like, “Oh, ok, we’re coming for that complaint…” [I said] “I called yesterday!”

Everyone laughs

Carver: What if somebody was in my house with a gun? I called yesterday. And then they’re like, “Oh.” So then he had seen the spots on the road, right? He’s like, “Well maybe you should have called earlier because these look a little old.” …[I said] “I called you yesterday! You’re here now! So, what’s this?” And he was just giving me all kinds of attitude. And so …we got really angry or whatever and we called like the head chief of racism or something like that. And he couldn’t even do anything for us. He just said that he was gonna put cameras outside our house. That never happened. So we had to buy our own cameras.
Despite the open and egregious nature of the racism directed at them, Carver and his family had also learned that they could expect no support or assistance from neighbours in the same community:

Stephanie: And what do you think people around you, like in [village name] think about this? Or do you have the impression that people are really of one mind when it comes to racism?

Carver: No…there’s some people, there’s a lot of people that feel sorry for us and I know that they do because they, a lot of them are always telling us that, right? That they feel bad that we have to go through all this. But, because they know that there’s only a couple of families there that are actually racist, you know, so…

Stephanie: Yeah…so they tell you…do they tell anybody else? Does anybody speak about race and racism in [village name]?

Carver: Probably not, because you know obviously if, um, no one’s gonna say that they don’t agree…when everybody’s around.

Although Carver felt that the majority of people in his community was actually opposed to racism, neighbours were reluctant to speak out for fear of being associated with the family and becoming subject to harassment themselves.

*Outsider Status*

Almost all participants suggested that they had, at one time or another, felt unsupported and marginal to the experience of community in Kingston. For some, like Carver, marginality was experienced through harassment and the community’s silence around blatant hostility. Other participants were conscious of the more subtle ways in which they remained outsiders. Shawna remarked on ways in which she felt people in various community roles – store keepers, employers, teachers, etc. – altered their behaviour when interacting with black people. In her experience, “…sometimes [people will] favour me because I’m black ‘cause they don’t want to
feel like they’re not favouring me, you know what I mean?” Though “being favoured” is something one might initially consider a benefit, for Shawna, this was an example of being treated differently and an indication of un-belonging. Similarly, in Andrew’s experience, white community members either avoided interactions with black people or behaved awkwardly around them:

Andrew: Um, I think that people should just like be a bit more comfortable around black people. They shouldn’t try too hard. Um, they should speak their mind, but not as in like, to say something wrong or something. Yeah.

Though the youth were sometimes able to regard awkward interactions between black and white Kingstonians as a failure of ethnocultural and race relations, at other times it appeared the mere presence of blackness was experienced by white community members as “unpleasant, conspicuous, unbalancing” (Williams, 1991, p. 117). Often youth perceived white avoidance as calculated. Concerns around rank-closing were most clearly expressed when youth spoke of the challenges with finding and keeping employment in Kingston. In Chris’s view, black people were shut out of full participation in the life of the community because they were not part of a small network of white families that drove the local economy:

Chris: In Kingston it’s harder to get a job if you’re coloured. Like, ‘cause it’s a town. Everybody’s family. Everybody’s family, know what I mean? The [name of Kingston family]? It’s 50 of them, it’s a hundred, they’re all family so...it, uh, it’s a controlled town. I honestly feel that this town is controlled for that group...

Chris’s theories around the exclusion of black people in Kingston were confirmed in his mind by his inability to find work:

Chris: It’s a hick town, ok? It’s a hick town. Like, if you weren’t born in Kingston and your roots...like if you honestly have no roots in Canada and you were not born in Kingston, you migrated to Canada, and you don’t have ties in Kingston, you’re done.
Because you need to know somebody in this town to get somewhere. There’s a reason why I got a job, I got the job at Queen’s right now is because I knew somebody. And I handed out resumes for like 7 months. I had mad references everywhere, I didn’t get a job, you know? So, I’ve only ever gotten a job through someone that I know. And all my friends that still do crime, I feel bad for them ‘cause it’s like, [people tell them] “get a job”. They can’t. I’ve watched them handing out resumes, I’ve watched them…it doesn’t happen. It doesn’t happen. They will not get no job (laughs), so they’re bad…

In this statement, Chris illustrates how continued marginalization strengthens the resolve of some of his peers to become non-conformist and “bad” (Kelly, 1998, p. 17).

Carver had also known of black youth being rejected for positions that were eventually offered to white applicants:

Carver: Ok, so this didn’t personally happen to me…it happened to my friend Walker. Um ok, so the new mini-mall thing they built down on Division? Ok, so he applied to all of the stores in there. Like two or three times. And his, like I read his resume and his resume is great. He has so many different skills on there. Um, and he did it the first time or whatever and then he didn’t get any reply back two weeks later so he did it all again. Didn’t get any reply back. And then a couple of our friends that are white went there and got a job like the next day….And, you know, you gotta think does that involve because he was black or…you know? Because his resume is great. Is great. So I don’t understand why they would pick a white person over a black person when it comes to something like that. Like does, do you think that it came to that point where that person’s looking at your skin colour, like, “I can’t have you in my store.” You know, like do you feel that when you’re walking around a store that they’re looking at you more than they’re looking at anybody else?

Even when successful at gaining employment, youth still perceived that they were not truly accepted by white co-workers. Chris reported feeling like he was “treated like their slave” while working for one family in Kingston. Alicia suggested that her visible minority status was one factor that relegated her to the margins of her workplace:

Alicia: I would say that, like I don’t consciously think about it but one thing that I think affects me on a daily basis is that where I’m working right now, I feel the people that I work with generally are nice… very nice, but I’m the only minority there. Also I’m the
youngest - most people I would say are in their 40’s and 50’s - and I’m the only one with a Master’s [degree]. And …my supervisor who I don’t get along with really has spoken to me about, you know … that I need to make a stronger effort to socialize with my coworkers. Even though on the work level she can’t criticize me. But socially I don’t really fit into the environment. So I think that in that case like my skin colour, unfortunately, might have something to do with that. As well as those other…like it’s just one thing out of many that makes me different from everyone else there.

Though Alicia felt competent at her job, she nevertheless felt singled out and made to bear responsibility for an environment that was not accepting of differences.

Summary

For black youth in Kingston, living in a small predominantly white community meant having to endure the pressures of life under a microscope. In public spaces, in the malls, on the streets, youth were acutely aware of being noticed, scrutinized and at times judged by people around them. Often the pressures of being “under the gaze” caused youth to feel vulnerable and to be strategic about being openly black-identified. The adoption of a “gangsta” persona was regarded as one means of speaking back to attempts by authority figures to judge and to regulate blackness. Though it appeared to participants that local police were quick to assume black criminality and carefully track the movements of black youth, police were considered to be less than vigilant about stopping race-based harassment and assaults. Youth considered Kingston their home, yet their experience of differential treatment from police, employers, neighbours, and others caused some to question the degree to which they were truly part of the community.
Chapter 10: Conclusions

Kingston, like other small Canadian cities, currently faces the challenge of how to create and sustain vibrant local economies and cultures by welcoming people of diverse backgrounds and skills into the community. Faced with worker shortages in various areas, researchers, municipal planners, and frontline service agencies are turning their attention to how Kingston may better attract newcomers and immigrants by creating conditions in which all people can meaningfully participate in community life. To do this, Kingston will need to transform its image as a homogenously white community insensitive to the interests and concerns of, among others, racialized Canadians. It must also be prepared to confront the reality of racism in the city and the effects racism continues to have on the lives of its residents, including racialized youth.

The Kingston Police Data Collection Project conducted in 2003 confirmed what many community members already knew but so many more were unable to accept – that racism, direct and systemic, was having a tangible effect on the lives of racialized youth in the city. Racially biased policing in Kingston was resulting in the harassment of often innocent black youth and, in rare but significant circumstances, placing youth at risk of violent confrontation with law enforcement. As Beverly Tatum (1997), herself the mother of black children, expressed:

When I, the middle-class Black mother of two sons, read another story about a Black man’s unlucky encounter with a White police officer’s deadly force, I am reminded that racism by itself can kill. (p. 13)

In this study, eight black youth, female and male, of varying socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds, were interviewed about what it is like to be black in a small, predominantly white Canadian city; how did they experience participation and belonging in a place in which resources such as role models and educational materials were not available to help guide them
through the natural stages of identity development? All the youth interviewed defined themselves as black due to their physical characteristics, state of consciousness, or a combination of both factors (Kelly, 2004). For a few of the youth interviewed, participation in this study was the first opportunity they had had to safely reflect on their position within a white-dominated space. Others who were experiencing ongoing situations of racial exclusion had, for their emotional health and physical safety, already been forced to think through complex issues of group formation, affiliation and gate-keeping. Regardless of their degree of racial consciousness, all participants offered remarkable insight into the interior rhythms of local black community life and the dynamics governing the black youth peer scene in Kingston.

As discussed, the aim of this study was to analyze youth narratives about life in Kingston at the level of discourse, not to determine their “truth” (Kelly, 2004, p. 135). Several key themes emerged from the participants’ stories: the sense of Kingston as “home” though within a broader diasporic context, the sense of place as an important factor with respect to where youth felt safe and most able to be themselves, the lack of resources available to Kingston youth with respect to the development of positive black identities, and the tremendous pressures of the white-dominant gaze that caused youth to seek invisibility or assume an oppositional, non-conformist stance.

*Experience of Kingston as Home*

For the most part, black Kingston youth were resolute in their claim to Kingston as their home. In spite of the many situations of exclusion and hate several of the youth had experienced, Kingston was associated with comforting familiarity. Though not an ideal location in certain respects, Kingston was simply the place the youth knew best. Youth who had been born and/or raised in the community suggested that they might be interested in one day moving
to other larger cities to experience a more vibrant urban scene. However, participants generally felt anchored in the city and expressed that they considered Kingston a viable option for raising their own families. Some participants who had lived in other places had concluded that racism against black people was likely to be present in any Canadian city and on that basis alone felt Kingston was as good a place as any in which to settle.

Life as a black person in Kingston was rendered more tolerable through connections to black communities elsewhere. Youth felt revived and invigorated by diasporic interactions with family members and friends located in larger cities, other provinces, the United States, Africa, the Caribbean, and South America. They spoke of reunions with family in which their ethnocultural identifications were strengthened through the practice of language/dialects, the sharing of food, and the adoption of cultural fashions. Youth were also bolstered by a sense of “stylish solidarity” (Kelly, 2004) that came from exposure to urban African American culture as experienced through media such as U.S. television stations. Access to televised information about prominent black (primarily African American) figures instrumental to black human rights struggles further aided participants’ attempts to contextualize their local experiences of inequity. Though participants appreciated that their lives were much easier than those of forebears subjected to de jure discrimination and segregation, they considered themselves connected temporally and spatially to a culture of black liberation struggle that infused with deeper meaning their identification as black Kingstonians.

*Spaces of Safety in Kingston*

Though sometimes difficult for youth to articulate, the spatialization of Kingston in terms of racialization and racism was significant to the daily lived experiences of black Kingston
youth. Participants wished to regard themselves as welcome wherever they went; however, they acknowledged that they were, at times, careful about where and how they moved through Kingston. In fact, there were distinct areas of the city which they would avoid, or which they had been warned to avoid, as black youth. On reflection, participants could name no physical place in Kingston that represented safety and belonging for them. The northern areas of the city were identified as places in which black youth were at risk of overt hostility and violence from white residents and of race-based harassment from Kingston police officers. In the downtown areas, participants were prepared to encounter racism on the street and had learned to move cautiously through these spaces, particularly at night. Rural areas, which were perceived to carry explicit assumptions of white homogeneity were viewed as hostile and dangerous territory. Despite outward appearances of respectability, the suburbs of Bayridge and Cataraqui Woods were considered class and race enclaves in which the presence of blackness was regarded with quiet suspicion by white residents. Ultimately, black youth located the experience of belonging within the bonds of family and black peer groups rather than in any literal location. As participants repeatedly suggested, it was who they were with, not where they were, that made a difference to them. Being around others who could relate to their internal struggles and external conflicts grounded the youth’s sense of attachment to place.

Resouces for Positive Identification

Outside of family and peer circles, youth reported that there were few resources accessible to them in Kingston with respect to the nurturing of positive black identities. Narratives in which youth frequently found themselves in the role of countering stereotypes of black people among white peers and neighbours were suggestive of an environment in which
racist misinformation abounded with little to correct it. The schools were identified by youth as a logical place through which Kingstonians might access better information about diverse peoples and cultures. However, youth were, for the most part, disappointed with the lack of attention paid to diversity and social justice issues in school though some were able to cite rare examples of school events in which diversity was acknowledged and celebrated. Events such as Black History Month, when marked at all, were reportedly brief and superficial. Youth also perceived that there were few educators in their schools with the competency, knowledge, and desire to build diversity and social justice into their curricula.

Moreover, schools were, sadly, associated with many of the youth’s first experiences of racist hostility and exclusion. While it is not clear from the youth’s narratives what, if any, resources youth were able to access to address these problems in their schools, racism in school was typically viewed as part of the youth’s everyday realities. Again, in the face of both blatant hostility and a paucity of information about black cultures and contributions, black youth believed they had little choice but to seek out information about their identities on their own and without community support.

Under the Gaze

One of the key issues youth felt set them apart from their white Kingston peers was the degree to which they were scrutinized by community members, authority figures such as police and school staff, and employers. For the youth, the pressures of this gaze, though sometimes subtle, were relentless. In certain instances, youth were able to view their conspicuousness positively, in effect as an opportunity to be “emissaries” charged with dispelling myths about the black “other” (Tatum, 1997). However, at certain times, the youth felt quite burdened by
peoples’ expectations and judgments. Under the gaze, youth found themselves the objects of benign ignorance and curiosity as well as the targets of discriminatory and harassing treatment. Experiences of negative and objectifying attention caused the youth to be strategic in how they lived and performed their black identities. One typical response to feelings of exposure and vulnerability was to consciously tone-down behaviours that youth perceived would cause them to attract too much notice in public spaces. This was not viewed as a means of disavowing blackness; rather, it was consciously adopted as a means of rupturing racist assumptions of black ignorance and criminality. Alternatively, some youth, female and male, opted for a hyper-visible black identity that symbolically aligned them with an oppositional black culture that defied regulatory authority. A decision to “turn up” one’s blackness immediately put one at risk of conflict with community members and police. However, participants perceived these risks to be balanced against the promise of greater recognition and respect among peers and the white majority population.

**Directions for Future Research**

This thesis was intended to provide a glimpse into the daily lived realities of a small selection of black youth in Kingston. As a researcher I was, at all times, conscious of the limitations of the study. However, I hoped it might, nevertheless, contribute to a foundation from which further work on racialization and racism in Kingston—as well as in other smaller communities in Canada—might be launched. While I was truly privileged to be introduced to the lives of eight remarkable young people, speaking with them made me even more deeply aware of the innumerable ways in which identities are constituted, learned, and lived even in what appear to be unlikely places.
A more broadly conceived study would have allowed me to spend some time with parents and caregivers, some of whom were required to consent to their child’s participation in the research. Families were identified by the youth as central to the development of their black identifications. Off-the-record, I received a great deal of encouragement from parents to pursue this research as a means of ensuring that the voices of black Kingston children were heard. Some, based on their experiences with neighbours, police, schools and others, commented that Kingston was a very difficult place in which to raise black children and that they sometimes regretted the decision to have their families here. By contrast, I also know of black families who have been quite successful at raising healthy and emotionally well-adjusted children in Kingston. It would be interesting to explore what accounts for these different experiences and what insights caregivers have to offer about creating opportunities for black Kingston youth.

Though efforts were made to ensure gender parity in this study and to attend to the views of female participants, more time needs to be spent with black female youth learning about how they make sense of gendered roles and expectations in relation to their black identities. Certainly, there is also more that could be done to open up conversations about sexualities in a way that shifts heteronormative frames of reference that tend to overwhelm studies such as this.

I believe further inquiry into the dimensions of race and racialization in Kingston would also benefit from more focused discussion with biracial children, adolescents, and adults. As the number of interracial unions in Canada steadily increases, the voices of biracial people will provide invaluable insight into the changing complexities of racial identification and, in the specific case of biracial-black youth, into the broadening of diasporic consciousness.
Recommendations for Action

The need for further research into racialization and racism issues in Kingston should not preclude those who are interested in creating a safer and more welcoming environment for youth from taking action. Indeed, as often happens with social justice issues, we may already have the information that we need to react to certain issues of inequity in the community but somehow fail to move forward. For example, in spite of clear indications of racial bias that came out of the Kingston Police Data Collection project, little work was done to improve the situation of black youth in the community. When asked what could be done to improve the environment for black Kingston youth, participants were vocal about the need to end racial bias in policing. Carver put it in no uncertain terms: “Cops [need to] stop pulling over black people in the street”. In spite of the resources expended to gather data for research into this issue and the emotional toll taken on the Wallen family, concerns around racism and policing still linger. This is an issue that deserves a community response. We might begin by ensuring appropriate representation of racialized youth and adults on police advisory boards. We could recommend ongoing monitoring of complaints involving racial profiling by a community ombudsperson. We could encourage ongoing efforts to make the local police force more representative of the Canadian workforce population and insist on more equity, human rights, and multicultural competency training for officers.

Youth also spoke of the need for more educational opportunities in Kingston through which youth and other community members could learn to appreciate and respect diverse identities. Through educators like Miss Worthy, they had experienced the potential for schools and classrooms to become discrimination-free zones and safer spaces for dialogue about
difference. Indeed, there are many school board resources available to educators wishing to incorporate social justice themes into their curricula and to contribute to the creation of anti-discriminatory school environments. Educators should be supported in their efforts to seek out and make use of such resources in their classrooms. Similar to police, teachers and school administrators should be recruited keeping in mind the diversity of the Canadian population. Students and staff in schools should be well informed of anti-discrimination and harassment policies; hateful behavior of any sort should not be tolerated within schools.

Youth further proposed the organization of ethnocultural festivals in the city as a non-threatening means of getting community members to positively engage with difference:

Shawna: I think we could have, um, a, some sort of festival for us. Like, where you can go and eat like Jamaican food and eat…

Tareq: Like Caribana?

Shawna: Yeah…

Carver: Caribana, like a Caribana in Kingston…

Shawna: A mini Caribana in Kingston would be sweet! Just, I think that would be a really… eye-opener. Especially for the white people ‘cause they…

Carver: Yeah, exactly! Exactly!

Shawna: …could come and finally experience…

Carver: Exactly, they could come and see what it is like for us.

Shawna:…and see what it’s like. Find, get some history on us and, you know? ‘Cause we know everything about the white culture. We know everything about Canadian history. We know everything about European history because that’s what’s taught in our schools…that would be like the bomb. Just like amazing. An eye-opener for everyone.

Carver: I see that, yeah. It would be a huge eye-opener. Because there is all kinds of other cultures that are fond of our culture. Like they like us, right? It’s just…
Shawna: Or just, um, multicultural…a multicultural festival would be good…

Carver: Yeah, like even, like even a multicultural thing would be good. Just to show everybody else that we live here too, you know? This is what we do. Like we know what your…history is. How about you guys find out…

Shawna: Know about ours.

Not to be confused with conventional reference to the three pillars of multiculturalism –"food, fun, and fashion" – the "multicultural festival" these youth envisioned offered a means of educating the community about black realities. A festival, while celebratory in tone, represented possibilities for cross-racial/cultural dialogue and equality with respect to how cultural knowledge is exchanged and valued.

The narratives of black Kingston youth are rich with insight that could benefit a community attempting to become a place of welcome to all people. Given the opportunity, a seat at the table, black youth promise to bring much to the reimagining of their city:

Shawna: We could bring diversity and we can bring equality and…

Tareq: Exactly…

Carver: We can bring, we can bring the vision of hope, really…
Epilogue

To the participants in this study and all black youth in Kingston:

I wanted to dedicate something especially to you within the body of this paper. The lyrics below were written by Shad, a Canadian rapper born in Kenya and raised in London, Ontario. When I hear these powerful words, I am reminded of you and the challenges you have faced growing up in a small town. You are more of an inspiration than you could know. Keep "doing you".

Brother (Watching)
By Shad

I try to hold some hope in my heart
For these African youths
Coming up where I'm from
Many traps to elude
Surrounded by
Mostly white and affluent dudes
And somehow, you expected to have
Mastered this smooth
Swagger and move
With the right walk, the right talk
Fashion and crews
Souls subtly attacked and abused
And what's funny's being black wasn't cool
Where I'm from til suddenly
You started hearing rap in the school
Hallways
Amidst this madness I grew
With knack for amusing through this little skill
For rappin at dudes
An' we all like to laugh at the truth
But when you young and same facts
Pertain to who you rappin em to
Well, I opted not to bring
That to the booth
But after a while, it sort of starts naggin at you
The crazed infatuation with blackness
That trash that gets viewed
And the fact that the tube only showed blacks
Actin the fool and I was watching...
And it’s sad cause that naturally do
Sort of condition your mind and over time
That’s what’s attractive to you
So young blacks don’t see themselves in
    Scholastic pursuits
Or the more practical routes
    It’s makin tracks or it’s hoops
Or God-forbid movin packs for the loot
Even with this music we so limited - it's rap or produce
And that narrow conception of what's black isn't true
Of course, still we feel forced to adapt to this view
Like there’s something that you're havin to prove
    Now add that to the slew
    Of justification the capitalists use
        For the new blaxploitation
        Many actions excused
    In the name of getting cash
    That's adversely impactin our youth
With mental slavery, the shackles is loose
And it's hard to cut chains when they attached at the roots
    So what the new black activists do
    For our freedom is just being them
    Do what you're passionate to
Not confined by a sense that you have to disprove
Any stereotypes, so-called facts to refute
Or match any image of blackness
    They’ve established as true
Perhaps we’ll break thru the glass ceilings
    Shatter the roof and emerge
From these boxes that they have us in cooped
And grow to smash the mould that they casted of you
    I’ll keep watching...
References


Appendix A

LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR PARTICIPANTS

{Date}

Dear _______________ {prospective participant}

My name is Stephanie Simpson. I am writing to ask you to consider assisting me with my M.Ed thesis research at Queen’s University. The title of the study is BLACK IN KINGSTON: YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON “BLACKNESS” AND BELONGING IN A SMALL ONTARIO CITY. My primary focus will be on gaining information on the experiences of black youth growing up and living in Kingston, Ontario. I would like to learn more about what it’s like for black youth to grow up in a small city in which there are few black people and what effect, if any, this has had on their self-development and sense of identity. The information for this study will be gathered through first through semi-structured individual interviews and then follow-up focus group sessions. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to attend a one-on-one interview session with me at a date, time and place mutually agreed upon. I estimate that our one-on-one interview will take approximately 1-1 ½ hours to complete.

With your permission, I will then contact you to invite you to participate in a focus group session with other black youth who also will have been individually interviewed by me for this study. There will be approximately 4 youth (including yourself) in total in your focus group in addition to me, the researcher/moderator of the session. Your focus group session will take approximately 1 1/2 -2 hours to complete. Both the one-on-one interview session and the focus group session will be audio-recorded in order to help me transcribe what is said into notes.

Prior to each session I will provide you with a list of some discussion questions I wish to ask during the sessions. This will give you a chance to think about possible responses and what, if any, questions you would prefer not to answer. I will ensure that, at all stages of the research, writing, and publication process, confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible.

Please note the following:

- There are no foreseeable risks of this research.
- Participation is voluntary; as a participant you would be free to withdraw participation at any time, with no effect on your standing in school, your job, your membership in a community group or client-status with an organization.
- Should you choose to withdraw you may request removal of all or part of the information you have provided.
- You will not be obliged to answer any question you find objectionable or that makes you uncomfortable.
- Names of participants will not appear in any publication created as a result of the research.
- Pseudonyms (made-up names) or numbers will replace participants’ real names on all
data they provide in order to protect their identity and provide confidentiality.

- Data, including the list of pseudonyms/numbers will be secured in a locked cabinet in my private office. Access to the data is restricted to the researcher and to my supervisor only. Audio recordings containing the interview sessions will be transcribed.

- This research may result in publications of various types, including my thesis, journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, books, etc. Names of the participants and schools or other affiliate groups will not appear in any publication created as a result of the research. A copy of a report from this research will be made available to you should you request it.

If you have any questions about this research you may contact me, the researcher - Stephanie Simpson, ((613) 533-6000 ext. 75194; stephanie.simpson@queensu.ca) or my supervisor, Dr. Magda Lewis, Professor, Faculty of Education, Queen's University ((613) 533-6000 ext. 77277; magda.lewis@queensu.ca).

Should you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081 (chair.greb@queensu.ca).

If you agree to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it to me. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.

Sincerely,

Stephanie Simpson
M.Ed Candidate
Faculty of Education
Queen’s University
Kingston, Ontario
Appendix B

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

For: Stephanie Simpson, M.Ed. Candidate, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University

Study Title: “Black in Kingston: Youth Perspectives on “Blackness” and Belonging in a Small Ontario City”

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return it to Stephanie Simpson. Retain the second copy for your records.

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning the study “Black in Kingston: Youth Perspectives on “Blackness” and Belonging in a Small Ontario City”, and all questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this study. I have been informed that I will participate in an individual interview with Stephanie Simpson at a date, time and place that is convenient for me, that the session will be between 1-1 ½ hours long, and that it will be recorded by audiorecorded for later transcription. I have been informed that, with my consent, the researcher will then contact me to invite me to participate in a follow-up focus group session with other study participants. I am aware that the focus group session will be 1 ½ to 2 hours long and that this too will be audiorecorded.

I have been notified that my participation is voluntary, that I may withdraw at any point during the study and that I may request the removal of all or part of my data without any consequences to myself. I have been informed of the steps that will be taken to ensure confidentiality of all information.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact the researcher, Stephanie Simpson, at (613) 533-6000 ext. 75194 (stephanie.simpson@queensu.ca), or her supervisor, Dr. Magda Lewis, at (613)533-6000 ext. 77277, (magda.lewis@queensu.ca). I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081 (chair.greb@queensu.ca)

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

With my signature, I agree to participate in the study “Black in Kingston: Youth Perspectives on “Blackness” and Belonging in a Small Ontario City” and acknowledge that I have retained a
copy of the detailed Letter of Information.

Participant’s Name: ______________________________________________________

Signature: ____________________________________________________________

Date: ________________________________________________________________

Postal Address: _________________________________________________________

Email Address: _________________________________________________________

Telephone Number: _____________________________________________________

I permit the researcher to contact me to invite me to participate in a focus group for this study.  
Yes _______  No________

I wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.  
Yes________  No________
Appendix C

BLACK IN KINGSTON:
YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON “BLACKNESS” AND BELONGING
IN A SMALL ONTARIO CITY

LETTER OF INFORMATION FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF LIMESTONE DISTRICT
SCHOOL BOARD STUDENTS UNDER THE AGE OF 18

{Date}

Dear PARENT/GUARDIAN OF _____________________ {prospective participant}

My name is Stephanie Simpson. I am writing to ask your permission to allow your child to participate in my M.Ed thesis research for Queen’s University. The title of the study is BLACK IN KINGSTON: YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON “BLACKNESS” AND BELONGING IN A SMALL ONTARIO CITY. My primary focus will be on gaining information on the experiences of black youth growing up and living in Kingston, Ontario. I would like to learn more about what it’s like for black youth to grow up in a small city in which there are few black people and what effect, if any, this has had on their self-development and sense of identity. The information for this study will first be gathered through semi-structured individual interviews and then follow-up focus group sessions. Participation in this study is entirely voluntary.

If you allow your child to participate, your child will be asked to attend a one-on-one interview session with me at a date, time and place mutually agreed upon. I estimate that our one-on-one interview will take approximately 1-1 ½ hours to complete.

With your/your child’s permission, I will then contact your child to invite her/him to participate in a focus group session with other black youth who also will have been individually interviewed by me for this study. There will be approximately 4 youth (including your child) in total in the focus group in addition to me, the researcher/moderator of the session. The focus group session will take approximately 1 1/2 -2 hours to complete. Both the one-on-one interview session and the focus group session will be audio-recorded in order to help me transcribe what is said into notes.

It is possible that your child will find some of the interview/focus group questions sensitive or personal. Prior to each session I will provide your child with a list of some discussion questions I wish to ask during the sessions. This will give your child a chance to think about possible responses and what, if any, questions she/he would prefer not to answer. I will ensure that, at all stages of the research, writing, and publication process, confidentiality will be maintained to the extent possible. If your child chooses to participate in the focus group,
her/his identity will be known to other participants in the focus group. However, all participants will be asked to respect the confidentiality of the other participants and not to reveal their identities.

Please note the following:

There are no foreseeable risks of this research.

Participation is voluntary; as a participant, your child would be free to withdraw participation at any time, with no effect on her/his standing in school, her/his job, her/his membership in a community group or client-status with an organization.

Should your child choose to withdraw, she/he may request removal of all or part of the information she/he has provided.

Your child will not be obliged to answer any question she/he finds objectionable or that makes her/him uncomfortable.

Names of participants will not appear in any publication created as a result of the research.

Pseudonyms (made-up names) or numbers will replace participants’ real names on all data they provide in order to protect their identity and provide confidentiality.

Data, including the list of pseudonyms/numbers will be secured in a locked cabinet in my private office. Access to the data is restricted to the researcher and to my supervisor only. Audio recordings containing the interview sessions will be transcribed.

This research may result in publications of various types, including my thesis, journal articles, professional publications, newsletters, books, etc. Names of the participants and schools or other affiliate groups will not appear in any publication created as a result of the research. A copy of a report from this research will be made available to you/your child should you request it.

If you have any questions about this research you may contact me, the researcher - Stephanie Simpson, ((613) 533-6000 ext. 75194; stephanie.simpson@queensu.ca) or my supervisor, Dr. Magda Lewis, Professor, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University ((613) 533-6000 ext. 77277; magda.lewis@queensu.ca).

Should you have questions, concerns, or complaints about the research ethics of this study, please contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ered@queensu.ca, or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081 (chair.greb@queensu.ca)

If you agree to permit your child to participate, please sign the attached consent form and return it me along with your child’s written consent form. Please keep a copy of this letter for your records.
Sincerely,

Stephanie Simpson  
M.Ed Candidate  
Faculty of Education  
Queen’s University  
Kingston, Ontario
Appendix D

BLACK IN KINGSTON:
YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON ‘BLACKNESS’ AND BELONGING
IN A SMALL ONTARIO CITY

CONSENT FORM

(FOR PARENTS/GUARDIANS OF LIMESTONE DISTRICT SCHOOL BOARD STUDENTS
UNDER THE AGE OF 18)

For: Stephanie Simpson, M.Ed. Candidate, Faculty of Education, Queen’s University

Study Title: “Black in Kingston: Youth Perspectives on “Blackness” and Belonging in a Small Ontario City”

Please sign one copy of this Consent Form and return it to Stephanie Simpson. Retain
the second copy for your records.

I have read and retained a copy of the letter of information concerning the study “Black
in Kingston: Youth Perspectives on “Blackness” and Belonging in a Small Ontario City”, and all
questions have been sufficiently answered. I am aware of the purpose and procedures of this
study. I have been informed that my child will participate in an individual interview with
Stephanie Simpson at a date, time and place that is convenient for my child, that the session
will be between 1-1 ½ hours long, and that it will be audiorecorded for later transcription. I have
been informed that, with my and my child’s consent, the researcher will then contact my child to
invite her/him to participate in a follow-up focus group session with other study participants. I
am aware that the focus group session will be 1 ½ to 2 hours long and that this too will be
audiorecorded.

I have been notified that my child’s participation is voluntary, that my child may withdraw
at any point during the study and that my child may request the removal of all or part of her/his
data without any consequences to her/himself. I have been informed of the steps that will be
taken to ensure confidentiality of all information.

I am aware that if I have any questions about this project, I can contact the researcher,
Stephanie Simpson, at (613) 533-6000 ext. 75194 (stephanie.simpson@queensu.ca), or her
supervisor, Dr. Magda Lewis, at (613)533-6000 ext. 77277, (magda.lewis@queensu.ca). I am also aware that for questions, concerns or complaints about the research ethics of this study, I can contact the Education Research Ethics Board at ereb@queensu.ca, or the chair of the General Research Ethics Board, Dr. Joan Stevenson, (613) 533-6081 (chair.greb@queensu.ca)

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With my signature, I permit my child, ___________________________ {child’s name}, to participate in the study “Black in Kingston: Youth Perspectives on “Blackness” and Belonging in a Small Ontario City” and acknowledge that I have retained a copy of the detailed Letter of Information.

Signature of parent/guardian:_______________________________________________

Date: ____________________________________________

Postal Address: __________________________________________________________________

Email Address: __________________________________________________________________

Telephone Number: __________________________________________________________________

I permit the researcher to contact my child to invite her/him to participate in a focus group for this study.

Yes _______ No________

I wish to receive a copy of the results of this study.

Yes_________ No_________
Appendix E

BLACK IN KINGSTON: YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON “BLACKNESS” AND BELONGING IN A SMALL ONTARIO CITY

Sample Individual Interview Questions (following a brief introduction to the objectives of the study)

General (icebreaker questions)

• In what area of Kingston do you live (e.g. south-side/north-end)? How long have you lived in Kingston?
• How do you like living in Kingston? What are your likes/dislikes?
• Are you still in school? If yes, how are you enjoying school? What are your likes/dislikes? If no, how long have you been out of school?

On “Blackness”

• How do you define “blackness”? What, in your opinion, makes a person black?
• When/where/how did you learn about what it means to be black?
• Is being black important to you (do you think about being black)?
• Is “blackness” something that’s discussed among your peers/in your family?
• Do you view blackness as a “negative” or a “positive”?
• If you were one day to be responsible for caring for a black child, what, if anything, do you think you would teach them about “blackness”?

On Friendships

• Who do you hang out with? Do you have friendships/relationships with people from diverse backgrounds?
• Does being black matter with respect to friendships/relationships? What, if any, expectations are associated with being black?
• Have you ever experience belonging/not belonging within your peer circles?
• Where do you feel most comfortable/most able to be yourself?

General – Are there any other types of issues (related to identity and community) that you think are important and would like to discuss?
Appendix F

BLACK IN KINGSTON: YOUTH PERSPECTIVES ON “BLACKNESS” AND BELONGING IN A SMALL ONTARIO CITY

Sample Focus Group Questions

(following a brief introduction to the objectives of the study)

On School and the Community

- How would you describe black experience in Kingston?
- Where do you feel most welcomed, accepted, respected in the community as a black person? Where do you feel most alienated, misunderstood, disrespected?
- Have you had experiences with Kingston police? If yes, how would you describe these interactions?
- Do you feel that where you live has affected your experiences with authorities like the police?
- Does being black matter at school?
- What are some issues affecting black youth in schools in Kingston?
- Is racism an issue in school/the community? If so, how does it come up?
- Is safety an issue for you as a black youth in Kingston?
- How does being black affect your relationships with teachers/other community officials?
- What do you learn about black peoples’ experiences, cultures, histories, etc. at school/in the community? Is this important to you?
- What are your plans after public school?
- Is Kingston the place where you imagine yourself settling down, working, etc.? If yes, what attracts you to this place? If no, what makes other places/opportunities more attractive?
- Do you feel that there's anything that needs to be done/could be done to improve life for black youth in Kingston? What power do you have to effect such changes?

General – Are there any other types of issues (related to identity and community) that you think are important and would like to discuss?