

Civic Actions with a Purpose

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I am a young 16-year-old Black girl just striving to make a change and make a difference in, not only my community, but my family's life, and make an impact on the world.

Layla

When we interviewed Layla (she/her) in July 2020, a Black, 16-year-old rising high school junior, her involvement in many different civic actions blew us away. She participated in the dance ministry at her church. She watched the news daily. She actively shared her views on issues via social media. She strove to do her best in school, as a dancer and a track athlete, acted as a mentor to her younger sister and cousin, and aspired to start a nonprofit organization to mentor Black youth. What inspired us most about Layla's story was not just *how* she was civically engaged, but *why*. Every action had a larger purpose, which she summed up as "to make a change and make a difference in, not only my community, but my family's life, and make an impact on the world." In describing her current and future actions, Layla emphasized uplifting Black children and her Black community. Based on her observations that "gentrification has, you know, taken over" her neighborhood, she was passionate about building capacity for Black-owned businesses and helping Black young people, who look up to her "for information and ask questions" about life. She believed that her own hard work to achieve in school and beyond provided a model for Black children around her and provided a foundation for her future plans to give back to the Black community. Her actions were also driven by the grim reality that "there is still racial injustice going on." Layla's daily news watching was an intentional habit she cultivated because, "being a young Black girl, it helps me navigate the world" and "keeps me informed on what I should be doing to make a change in the world." Especially in summer 2020, as the deadly brutality of police violence against Black people was on full display, Layla joined other Black youth in "fighting for the younger generation or my generation . . . to be in a world where things are equal." Layla believed that for her and other Black youth, it is "our duty to

carry the torch and pass it on to future generations. And then also in the midst of carrying the torch, making more differences at the same time.” Layla is clearly highly civically engaged. She is impressive but not unusual among her Black peers. Through Layla’s story and others that we share, the first central message of this chapter is that Black youth are civically engaged in many ways.

If we had simply asked Layla to list her various civic activities, we would have missed the larger purpose driving these actions, which was a passion for creating a world where Black people have equal chances to succeed and thrive. This intertwining of civic actions and larger purpose is precisely why we call the youth in our study “young Black changemakers.” We define changemaking as a set of civic actions that serve a larger purpose of improving something about community or society. The second central message in this chapter is that young Black changemakers take many different actions that have larger purposes, and these purposes boil down to wanting a better world for Black people. Many forms of young Black changemaking are efforts to resist and challenge anti-Black racism. The study of young Black changemaking is not new: A long legacy of Black changemaking is documented in the writings of Black liberation scholars and activists such as James Baldwin, Angela Davis, and bell hooks, and among contemporary scholars of Black youth liberation such as Drs. Roderick Watts, Shawn Ginwright, and Cathy Cohen.

To build on this scholarship and further understand what young Black changemaking looks like, we center the stories and voices of Black youth in Los Angeles. Youth self-selected into our study from recruitment materials seeking “young Black changemakers” between the ages of 13 to 18 years who identified as Black, lived in Los Angeles, and were highly civically engaged. A major goal of this book is to center Black youth’s voices and experiences, and so it is only logical that we would let them educate us on what young Black changemaking is. We start by describing the array of civic actions taken by young Black changemakers, to convey the point that young Black changemaking is not singular. We then name several larger purposes that drive youth’s specific civic actions to demonstrate that young Black changemaking, regardless of specific actions, is purpose driven. For Black youth in this study, their overarching purpose was to create a better world for Black people.

THE MANY WAYS OF MAKING CHANGE

This study builds on Drs. Laura Wray-Lake and Laura Abrams’ (2020) study of civic engagement among youth of color (who were primarily Black) in the urban center of Rochester, New York. There, we spent considerable time listening to and documenting young people’s definitions of civic engagement. This youth-centered analysis resulted in a robust way of thinking about civic

engagement that went beyond how youth civic engagement is traditionally defined. We used this prior work to inform the starting point for this study. Instead of starting from scratch in asking young people to define civic engagement or changemaking, we started with a checklist of 21 possible civic actions that came from our previous qualitative work (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). This list (shown in Appendix B) provided examples for young people and represented a jumping off point for them to reflect on their many ways of engaging in changemaking. We emphasized that youth were experts and should define changemaking in their own words, and we asked young people to add to the list by considering any of their civic actions that would expand the list further.

This is the only time in the book we present youth's responses in numeric form to provide a snapshot of Black youth's civic actions. By looking at young people's responses to the checklist, it is obvious how varied youth's civic actions are. Each civic activity was endorsed by 32% or more of the youth. The number of civic activities young people reported ranged from 2 to 21, with an average of 13 activities. Most activities were endorsed by 40% or more (often much more) of the sample. The most frequently endorsed activities were helping family (82%), helping others in need (82%), mentoring children or peers (82%), participating in a club or team (84%), and following the news and staying informed on social issues (82%). Young people were least likely to report campaigning for a cause or candidate (32%), or organizing or advocating for policy change (37%). From our observations, Black youth were just as likely to engage in these different activities across ages and genders.

THREE DOMAINS OF CIVIC ACTION

Possibilities for civic action are diverse and ever-changing, especially among young people, given changing technological innovations and platforms, shifting political landscapes, and human creativity (Levine, 2022). Because of the large and growing sea of potential civic actions, it is useful to have a way of organizing the many types of civic activities. Here, we take a deeper look into three domains of civic action: community helping (e.g., helping family, neighbors, and others); activism and organizing (e.g., campaigning, organizing, and protesting); and interpersonal civic actions (e.g., expressing opinions, posting, and educating others). These domains are a heuristic that offer a shorthand way to describe many different civic actions. All three domains were fairly highly endorsed across our sample of young Black changemakers, and community helping (69%) and interpersonal action (73%) were more common than activism and organizing (58%).

Another set of activities reflected participation in school or community-based organizations such as clubs, religious groups, the arts, and service or advocacy-focused organizations. We see these organizations as spaces where

changemaking is facilitated and where youth access opportunities to support their changemaking over time. Many civic activities take place in organizational spaces, although other actions are youth led or occur outside of formal structures. We focus on organizational contexts of youth civic actions in Chapter 7.

Before we explore Black youth's own descriptions of community helping, activism and organizing, and interpersonal action, we offer a few more numerical observations to help further contextualize these three dimensions of young Black changemaking. Young people can and do engage in civic actions across more than one domain. Over half the youth (55.8%) reported engaging in all three domains of community helping, interpersonal actions, activism and organizing; and additionally, nearly one-third (27.9%) engaged across two domains. No one behavior dominated these domains; instead, each behavior was relatively equally endorsed within each domain. Sometimes, civic actions that fell into different domains were closely connected. For example, speaking out against injustice, which we categorized as an interpersonal action, was also associated with behaviors in the activism and organizing domain. The fact that behaviors often work in tandem across domains shows how the three domains are not completely distinct categories. Rather, young Black changemakers utilize multiple forms of changemaking to achieve their larger goals. This quantified look at civic behaviors aligns well with youth's stories, showing that young Black changemaking is purposeful and includes many different civic actions all aiming to positively change the world for Black people.

Community Helping

Young people provided help for those around them in many ways, ranging from formal service through organizations to more communal activities and informal helping. Often their helping behavior was embedded in everyday life. Tom (age 17, he/him) helped his community by doing "just the small things, like [if you] see somebody who needs help, packing their groceries or something like that, you know, just making your community a better place to live." Some Black youth described helping as inherent to who they were as a person, conveying that they have always been helpers. T (age 17, he/him) shared about helping, "I've been like that forever." Similarly, Mia (age 16, she/her) articulated that helping is part of who she is: "Yeah, so I consider myself to be a really helpful person. I love to help people. A lot of the activities I do along with [a health equity organization and youth wellness program] really stem from my need to be an aid to others." Harvey (age 18, she/her) also felt like she had been a helper all her life, starting with family roles, saying, "I think that I just always had a role of responsibility just throughout my life, because I'm like an older sibling throughout my whole family." Helping is intrinsic to

these youth's identities, including how they see themselves, and how they interact with the world. Past research has shown that Black youth's helping behavior is often informal and deeply rooted in their local community (White-Johnson, 2012; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Some Black youth help their community to resist and challenge racial oppression (Lozada et al., 2017), a topic we return to later in this chapter.

Interpersonal Civic Actions

In interacting with peers and others in day-to-day life, Black youth are civically active through interpersonal actions that may go unnoticed. Interpersonal civic actions include expressing opinions, sharing information, and having conversations to spread awareness and educate others. For youth in our study, the main issue of focus was anti-Black racism. Thus, these actions align with what Drs. Josefina Bañales, Adriana Aldana, and others call *anti-racist interpersonal actions*, which are individual acts that occur in everyday contexts that respond to racism by challenging the words or actions of others, defending targets of racism, and creating dialogue about racism (Aldana et al., 2019; Bañales, Aldana et al., 2021). Interpersonal civic actions also include spreading awareness of racism to non-Black peers. These exchanges happen in person and on social media. Using social media, O.A. (age 15, she/her) raised awareness of racism in summer 2020, sharing, "I basically described how I felt about this racial injustice and ways that . . . my platform – basically my followers, something that they could do to help since this is something that really affects me as a person." Sean (age 16, he/him) took opportunities through class assignments to raise awareness about racial injustice to his peers, saying, "I made a Google slide presentation for my college summer school class about unjust justice systems . . . if you committed the same crime, it shouldn't matter what race you are, the punishment should be equal."

Some youth worked to spread awareness and educate others about Black history. Mea (age 16, she/her) was passionate about informing other Black youth on racist current and historical events and engaged in these interpersonal actions "because we need to be in the know, we got to know, man." Similarly, JD (age 13, he/him) spread awareness on a range of topics to his Black community members to get people "woke," saying, "I look up things that help out the South Central areas to get people woke up and see what's going on in the real life . . . it's like artifacts and websites for people to read about the community and how to make their life and their community better." Amir (age 13, he/him) spent time educating primarily non-Black peers and school administrators about Black history. In explaining why, he shared, "We need to inform the students about Black history because in our school, we don't really learn about Black history and if we do, it was very

minimal. And in our Global Studies term . . . , Africa was the last section to read about, and we didn't even have time to go through the whole thing.”

We observed that through these interpersonal actions, Black youth are playing the role of de facto educators to fill the gaps left by their school curricula. Evidence shows that US school children are woefully undereducated about the country's history of racism. According to a 2018 Southern Poverty Law Center Report on “Teaching Hard History,” a dismal 8% of high school seniors surveyed knew that slavery was a central cause of the Civil War, and only 32% of high school seniors surveyed knew it took a constitutional amendment to end slavery (Shuster, 2018). These statistics may not be all that surprising given that education on civil rights is not required in a growing number of states. Moreover, due to the attack on “critical race theory” by Republican elected officials in states across the country, since January 2021, 42 states have introduced legislation and 17 states have imposed bans or restrictions on teaching about racism and sexism in schools (Schwartz, 2022), with 84 other bills pending at the time of this writing (Johnson et al., 2022). Given this alarming situation, increasing numbers of Black youth are taking on the daily burden of educating peers about Black history and racism.

Activism and Organizing

Youth took part in national protests for racial justice as part of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) Movement and for other social justice issues such as women's rights and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer (LGBTQ+) pride. Tom described his experience of going to a BLM protest shortly after police officers murdered George Floyd, saying:

I was . . . tryin' to finish strong in my classes. But I felt like there was so much more important things goin' on in the world . . . I was literally writing essays in the car on the way to a protest. 'Cause I felt like I needed to be there, you know. I knew if I didn't go to any protests, I'd feel like I missed the opportunity to really be engaged in my community and really use my voice to create change.

Youth also participated in marches to speak out about local issues. Destiny (age 16, she/her), who lived in the Crenshaw neighborhood of Los Angeles, protested gentrification in her community: “We walked to the Crenshaw Mall . . . a different set of people were about to buy out the Crenshaw Mall. It was very powerful, us walking to the Crenshaw Mall and speaking up there and just speaking up – speaking in our community that's being gentrified.” Youth led or engaged in grassroots organizing campaigns, often to advocate for much-needed school or community resources.

Through community-based organizing efforts, youth sometimes had opportunities to advocate directly to local or nationally elected officials.

Cory (age 15, he/him) went with his organization “up to the LAUSD [Los Angeles Unified School District] headquarters. And I went, and I spoke to some board members on defunding the school police and puttin’ it more into . . . more . . . counselors and things like that.” Youth-led policy change in schools through school clubs such as Black Student Unions. As part of a healthy equity club, Mia led efforts to have menstrual products made available in school restrooms, saying, “We do lots of fundraising to make sure that we can fund the projects that we’re going towards, for example, getting the down payment for any period dispensers and making sure that we have the funding to present to our administrators to . . . back up what we’re advocating for.” Youth organized for electoral campaigns, such as voter registration and mobilization, and many expressed how voter drives and winning campaigns advanced community interests and larger movement goals. Kevin (age 17, he/him), in discussing his involvement with a multi-organization collaborative, shared, “We come together and work to . . . achieve plans . . . throughout the voting and to improve our community efforts.” As our quantitative analysis also showed, activism and organizing overlap with interpersonal actions, as online civic actions are part of both domains. Youth often used social media as a space for movement mobilization, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic when in person activities were limited. Drs. Roderick Watts and Carlos Hipolito-Delgado (2015) make the distinction that interpersonal actions are aimed at seeking justice via everyday interactions with others, whereas collective actions, which include activism and organizing, aim to change policy or institutional practices. Scholars and activists alike recognize the value of collective action for collective liberation (Freire, 1970; Garza, 2020; Taylor, 2016), and for Black youth, collective action toward racial justice deepens youth’s sense of community and Black identity development, topics we emphasize in Chapter 4.

ACTING WITH PURPOSE

Purpose can be broadly understood as a person’s guiding reason or objective for doing something, and developmental scientists also consider “purpose” as a key part of positive youth development. Dr. William Damon defined purpose as “a stable and generalized intention to accomplish something that is at once meaningful to the self and of consequence to the world beyond the self” (Damon et al., 2003, p. 121). Having a purpose means having a lasting goal that is pursued over the long term. Youth with purpose look to the future and are propelled to act in ways that make progress toward their larger vision. A purpose must deeply matter to oneself and be meaningful to the larger society. Civic action is a useful strategy to progress toward meaningful long-term goals that matter for society. Dr. Heather Malin coined the term civic

purpose to refer to “sustained intention to contribute to the world beyond the self through civic or political action” (Malin et al., 2015, p. 103).

Civic purpose became clear in our conversations with young Black changemakers. As we saw in Layla’s opening story, young Black changemakers are not just remarkable for what they do but also for why they choose to engage. Young Black changemaking is rich with purpose and entails many different civic actions aimed at making positive change in the world. Three main purposes of changemaking reflect many young Black changemakers’ experiences and encompass multiple domains of action: (1) redistributing resources for racial justice; (2) navigating an anti-Black world; and (3) giving back to the Black community. These are not the only civic purposes that guide young Black changemaking, just the most salient in our study. Some young people emphasized a single purpose, whereas for others, more than one purpose figured in their larger vision for the future. Across the three civic purposes, there was a common thread: Black youth seek change in different ways, but they share a passion and commitment for creating a better world for Black people.

Redistributing Resources for Racial Justice

A 2021 report by the University of California, Los Angeles’ Center for the Transformation of Schools examined data from 14 school districts in Los Angeles County and found that compared to other students, Black students in Los Angeles experience disproportionate rates of poverty, are more likely to reside in neighborhoods with polluted air and water, and have much higher rates of contact with school police (Johnson et al., 2021). Young Black changemakers keenly observed the stark inequities between schools and neighborhoods in Los Angeles, which reflect deeply rooted and enduring racial and economic divisions. To catalyze change for the Black community, Black youth understood that they needed to redistribute resources for themselves and for their Black peers and community members. Thus, youth often took action through local grassroots efforts to convince policy makers that investment in Black youth and communities is an essential priority. To illustrate this purpose in action, we share Quinn’s story. Her changemaking to redistribute resources for racial justice included activism and organizing as well as community helping.

Activism and Organizing Quinn (she/her) was a 16-year-old eleventh grader attending a large public school in South Los Angeles. As a resident of a majority Black and Brown LA community, Quinn witnessed firsthand that her public school lacked resources compared to neighboring, wealthier, and whiter communities. Based on her experiences, she believed “we could, we should just do better” to rectify these inequities. When Quinn was in ninth

grade, she became involved with a grassroots organization in South Central LA with a deep history of community organizing. At this organization, Quinn cultivated a passion for improving educational equity and opportunities for her peers and for future generations. She explained:

I want to be able to have the same opportunities as everybody else. And I want people in my younger generation status, same opportunities too . . . I don't want us to go through all these budget cuts and we not have books and all this stuff . . . so we have a better chance at doing what we want to do in the future.

To pursue this vision, Quinn worked closely with the organization to advocate for local policy change. Through an organizing campaign, she and her peers tried to convince elected officials to invest in local schools to address inequalities. She recounted one episode from spring 2020:

We went to LAUSD to protest . . . There was a board meeting, and our group went and gave our speeches and . . . talked to the whole board about the way they spend their money and how . . . the new rule they're trying to put out would take money from, you know, schools in not as good communities and give it to you know, the wealthier schools.

Black youth like Quinn advocate for school funding redistribution as a larger racial justice goal, in part because of their personal experiences of contending with unequal resources. Success with Lex (age 18, she/her) emailed the LA mayor because "I just see so many other communities that have what I would like my community to have." Through an English class assignment, Cory wrote to a local official "about how schools in my area, they get less resources than schools like Palos Verdes and how it was unfair." Collectively, this group of youth saw contacting elected officials as a route to achieving a more equitable distribution of resources in their schools and communities.

Black youth also described challenges to their advocacy that are rooted in structural racism and ageism. Quinn explained how young Black change-makers constantly contend with negative stereotypes that shape elected officials' and societal views of Black youth. For example, in advocating to the LAUSD school board, Quinn reflected:

Well, I feel like, honestly, we didn't impact the person that we were aiming for, because she kind of took us as a joke, but I felt like we got our voice out to the community, to everyone else. So they know that we actually care. And that we're not just trying to go to school just to go to school.

In part due to these types of setbacks, these youth emphasized that change-making is a long-term endeavor. One's civic purpose is not achieved overnight, and young Black changemakers such as Quinn remained committed to racial and economic equity, regardless of setbacks. As a testament to her long-term vision, Quinn aspires to be President of the United States. Young Black changemakers were driven to activism and organizing to fulfill their hope and desire for racial justice for all Black people. These young Black changemakers

understood that protests, organizing, and other advocacy strategies of racial justice movements are effective ways to create societal change. As Dr. Daniel Gillion (2020) argued in his book *The Loud Minority*, social movements such as BLM and others have changed policy through influencing elected officials as well as voters.

Community Helping In working toward racial and economic equity through resource distribution, Black youth also engaged in community helping, which sometimes intersected with activism and organizing. Quinn intertwined community helping with organizing, describing how both support the community: “We do a lot of protests. And then we go out to festivals and other group activities. We’ll go to schools and talk about what we do and try to find ways to fix the school or the community. [We do] a lot of outreach programs.” Quinn found great meaning in helping as part of her activism, sharing that “I’m really all about helping, fairness and stuff.” For Quinn, it was not always easy to disentangle specific efforts to help the community from organizing to create policy change on behalf of her community. These actions are connected by a larger purpose of redistributing resources to improve the world for the Black community now and for future generations.

Some young Black changemakers channeled their desire to change racial and economic inequities into directly helping people marginalized by these inequities. Youth primarily did this work through formal and organized volunteer activities, and most commonly, by volunteering to help people who were unhoused. The number of people who are unhoused has become a crisis of epic proportions in Los Angeles. Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, over 66,000 people were counted as without housing in Los Angeles County; the second largest number of any major area next to New York City (Chan & Maxouris, 2022; City News Service, 2021). By engaging in this type of community helping, young Black changemakers in Los Angeles are focusing on one of the most pressing community problems facing the city. James (age 16, he/him) was compelled to help people who were unhoused in LA because it was such a salient local issue, saying:

Living in LA, there’s always been just a sight of seeing homeless people . . . I just found myself always curious as to how they’re treated and why they live the way they are . . . Being there was something I wanted to do. It was a chance for me to show that I care for another group of people.

Youth’s reflections on helping unhoused community members were often lengthy – they described their contributions in detail and reflected on the meaning they derived from their work. For example, Tom discussed how he volunteered at a shelter as part of a Black leadership group:

We would work at homeless shelters . . . and we were serving food. But I remember we split up into groups and like, I remember my job was like, going through the food and seeing . . . what food is bad and what food is good and we were having to sort food and

throw it in the dumpster. And we were helping people. It was a place . . . homeless people could come in. And they had a shop for them where they could come, just have clothes. And it was really cool . . . So, it was kind of giving them a place where they could feel, you know, like, normal . . . and it was . . . really good. I really enjoyed [it].

Tom also recounted a specific time when he remembered “seeing this homeless lady wearing my sister’s jacket. And she was like, so happy.” Tom goes on to say that it made him realize “it’s not that hard at all to change somebody’s life, you know, because for us that was just like an old coat but for her that’s . . . something that was really important.” Tom further reflected on his own socio economic advantages and how important it was to use his advantages to help other individuals in need, saying: “I’m using my talents, using my abilities and my position in life, to, you know, help others. [It] makes me feel like I’m really taking advantage of the position I’m in, you know, because I am blessed to have these opportunities to . . . help other people.” Community helping was a tangible, concrete way of seeking to redistribute resources to communities in need.

Activism and organizing and community helping are different ways of changemaking that can align with the same overarching purpose. Black youth like Quinn who engaged in organizing to redistribute resources were seeking to change the systems that harm Black youth. They are pursuing lasting policy change, and this work is difficult and comes with many setbacks. They do not often see immediate results and must rely on a longer-term vision and hope for the future. Quinn, Tom, and others engage in community helping to distribute needed resources to people, seeking change in the lived experiences of people who are suffering. They see more immediate impacts of their helping behavior when individuals get much-needed resources, and, as we describe further in Chapter 7, seeing the impacts of civic actions propels Black youth to continue changemaking over the long term.

Navigating an Anti-Black World

Black youth are growing up in a deeply antagonistic racialized society with constant affronts to their humanity. Based on youth’s personal experiences with anti-Blackness, many chose changemaking actions that helped themselves and their peers navigate contexts of racism, minimize the burdens of anti-Black racism where possible, and rewrite negative narratives about Black youth. We highlight how interpersonal civic actions and community helping advanced this civic purpose, starting with Destiny’s story of striving to help peers navigate the anti-Black world through interpersonal civic actions.

Interpersonal Civic Actions Above, we shared Destiny’s deep commitment to her community through protesting gentrification of the Crenshaw Mall. Destiny channeled this same commitment to racial justice into helping her

peers navigate anti-Black racism through interpersonal civic actions. Like many Black youth, Destiny's purposeful commitments to changemaking are rooted in her personal experiences of racial injustice and racial trauma. Destiny was once held up at gunpoint by police officers in her neighborhood, which is why she felt strongly about protecting Black youth from police violence. Destiny recounted how the police "... pulled a gun on me ... and my cousin and my friend – we were just walking – goin' to school in the summer." For many Black youth, the threat of police violence is ever-present: According to a national study, Black youth experience alarming rates of police contact. Nearly 42% of Black boys and 20% of Black girls have been stopped by police; 80% and 79% of Black boys and girls, respectively, have witnessed police stops; 43% of Black boys and 37% of Black girls have been searched by police; and 15% of Black boys and 14% of Black girls have personally experienced the use of police force against them (Del Toro et al., 2022). As we will further describe in Chapter 4, this is one of many forms of racism Black youth endure, and these harmful experiences can lead to changemaking for racial justice.

Destiny's experience with police violence compelled her to educate young Black people about their rights and how to protect themselves from the police by organizing "Know Your Rights" workshops to educate Black and Brown children about "what happens if a police pulls you over." When asked why she did this work, she succinctly responded, "Because I'm a Black girl in America, and that's my community that I'm standing up for." Destiny believed that this work was vital because her peers "don't learn about it. Their parents tell them, maybe, but they don't learn about it in schools ... They don't teach you about Black rights." In pursuing this civic purpose, Destiny had a long-term vision, seeking to "educate kids on that and educate my own kids on that when I get older." The "that" to which she is referring is both knowing your rights as a Black young person and also, "valuing Black lives. A lot of kids don't understand how precious a Black life is or how precious their life is." Looking to the future, Destiny talked about how she intends to raise her children. Destiny emphasized how important it is to prepare youth for "some bad things going on." Destiny does not want her own kids to grow up thinking "the world is all sunshine." For Destiny and other youth in this study, helping Black youth navigate hostile climates and policies are long-term commitments that can benefit current and future generations.

Community Helping In working to help Black youth navigate an anti-Black world, some young people prioritized helping other Black youth break out of a cycle of disadvantage or injustice. For example, Sa'Myah (age 18, she/her) was actively engaged in helping members of her community daily, such as by looking out for elderly neighbors and younger children. Sa'Myah referred to

her neighborhood as “messed up,” and said that “stuff can be dangerous,” but she tried to help others as much as possible. Helping Black youth get on a different path, for her, was aimed at navigating the anti-Black world and was part of a larger goal of pursuing justice: “Everybody thinks the gangbangers be wrong and stuff. But you know, they don’t always be wrong. I’m not gonna say I fittin’ to help everybody get out but, you know, just need some type of justice.”

Some young Black changemakers engaged in community helping to disprove stereotypes about Black youth, which is part of navigating an anti-Black world. KJ (age 16, she/her), who participated in a service organization for Black youth and families, reflected that civic engagement for Black youth is distinct because Black youth need to show that they can help others rather than receive help: “So, I feel like for other races, they’re probably thinking that the only people who need help is African American people . . . well, that’s not true because we’re going out to help other people who aren’t just African American people, but people of many colors, shades.” She further referred to how:

Everything portrayed on the media, really . . . what happens with . . . Pop Smoke, XXXTentacion, Nipsey Hussle. All of those deaths . . . the Black community in the Crenshaw area . . . when you go down there, it’s not just everybody there is Black. There’s all types of races. But what’s portrayed on the media isn’t that there’s all types of races. It’s, “Well, let’s help our African American group who is in poverty.” And I’m like, “That’s not necessarily true.”

KJ and other youth see and hear the portrayals of Black youth and Black communities as impoverished and needing help. Through their community service, these youth are working to change these narratives, rooted in anti-Blackness, by helping improve the lives of other Black people and by demonstrating that Black youth help others in their communities regardless of their race or ethnicity.

Negative stereotypes about Black youth, rooted in racism, are perpetuated in different ways across many contexts of everyday life, producing almost inescapable injustices for Black youth. For example, in 2020, a National Public Radio poll of 1,400 diverse US residents between the ages of 18–54 years found that 66% of individuals believed that the media portrayed negative stereotypes of Black people, and 83% of Black people surveyed felt that way (Variety, 2020). Previous research has documented various ways that Black youth challenge and resist negative stereotypes (Rogers & Way, 2016; Smith & Hope, 2020). Young Black changemakers are battling to transform narratives of Black youth and help their peers navigate this anti-Black world in the meantime. Seeking a world where Black youth are safe from anti-Blackness – whether through community helping or interpersonal actions or other actions – illustrates how young Black changemakers take many different civic actions in striving for racial justice.

Giving Back to the Black Community

Another civic purpose for young Black changemakers is giving back to the Black community. This purpose, like others, manifests as a longer-term vision for change. Although many civic actions advance this purpose, here we focus on a civic action we have not yet discussed: bettering oneself to better one's community. Bettering oneself to better one's community is a form of community helping. This action, however, only becomes understood as a civic action when done in pursuit of a civic purpose. Youth make personal investments in building their own strengths and skills to reach their maximum potential. Typically, this means striving to do well in school and beyond. What makes this activity a form of changemaking is that youth see these actions as advancing the larger purpose of giving back to the Black community; they hope to gain education and skills to enable them to offer substantial support and resources to their community. When enacted with this larger purpose in mind, bettering oneself also helps one's community over the long term. Doing well in school and planning for a career are important in themselves and well-studied by researchers. Yet, rarely do scholars or others consider academic success and career goals to be part of civic engagement. Nonetheless, for some Black youth, these activities can be a core part of their changemaking (Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Bettering oneself to give back to the Black community represents a unique intertwining of civic action and purpose, and we share several youth's stories to illustrate this.

Phea (age 17, she/her) engaged in many civic pursuits including informal helping, volunteering, electoral campaigns, and protesting. A thread that wove together Phea's activities was her passion for becoming a businesswoman. In fact, Phea already ran her own nonprofit where she created t-shirts and donated the proceeds to a tree-planting organization in Africa. This cause was personally meaningful, as Phea's mother was born in Senegal. About the funds she raised, she shared, "I would . . . take it over there to Africa, and they were doing a little organization thing where they were helping plant some trees, so \$1 would be like a tree." Phea's goal was to be a Black woman with a business degree, and with her business degree in hand, Phea envisioned, "I'll be able to . . . serve my community also, actually help my community by having that degree, being in school, and graduating as a Black woman." Phea further contextualized her personal educational pursuits as part of the purpose of shifting narratives about Black people: "Black women . . . are the most, you know, educated now, when it comes to . . . going to school and stuff like that. And I'm really proud about that, too, and I wanna, you know, add more onto that statistic." Phea aspires to become a successful businesswoman to give back to the Black community and change narratives about Black women, demonstrating that civic purposes can be intertwined.

Other youth shared their visions for future impact, aiming to be successful financially and give back to the Black community once they've established themselves. Kobe (age 17, he/him) envisioned himself making money as the boss and "giving out backpacks . . . cars and shoes and stuff like that," and Sean similarly envisioned a time when he could give back to his community through "charities" and "school giveaways." Youth explained that their self-betterment could create broader community change by inspiring others. According to Bree (age 15, she/her), focusing on being her best self inspired others to follow her example: "I like to focus on myself a lot because I feel like if you better yourself, then other people will look at you and then better themselves, and then it just builds. Like, it just gets bigger and bigger. . . and then it just . . . makes your community better." Returning to Layla, she emphasized working hard to get good grades and stay focused to serve the larger purpose of starting a mentoring program to give back to the Black community. For Layla, these were smaller steps she could take on a long-term path toward addressing bigger community issues like gentrification:

For me to really better my community, because . . . where I live, it started off as, you know, a Black community. And then . . . gentrification and everything has brought other races into the community. So, it's kind of hard to really help where I live, personally . . . because gentrification has, you know, taken over . . ., it's not much I can do. But – where my church is and stuff – if I better myself with getting good grades and staying focused and on track . . . and I start this mentoring program, it can show people like no matter where you come from, you can always succeed, and no matter what the color of your skin, you can always succeed no matter what anybody tells you.

By developing skills and resources in the short term, Black youth like Layla and others are positioning themselves to give back to and uplift the Black community over the long term.

THE TAKE-AWAYS

Young Black changemakers are civic actors with purpose. Their changemaking is aimed at long-term, big picture visions for a racially just future. Changemaking is not fleeting or spontaneous, but rather thoughtful and purposeful. Changemaking for racial justice is a big tent, and within it, Black youth have different visions for changemaking that can improve the world for Black people, ranging from resisting and seeking to change unjust systems to uplifting Black youth and communities now and into the future. Black youth are not siloed into one domain of civic action or one way of changemaking. Instead, there are overlaps and complexities across the ways of changemaking, which serve as powerful reminders that each young Black changemaker is charting their own path.

Contributions to Research

This study illustrates the value of considering civic actions in tandem with civic purpose. We not only need to know what civic actions youth undertake, but why. Researchers must more deeply consider whether to study, support, and encourage civic actions undertaken for any purpose, or to focus more specifically on actions that uplift communities and seek justice and liberation from oppression, which were these young Black changemakers' big picture goals. Changemaking, as we described it for Black youth, aligns well with sociopolitical development theory's description of actions youth take to challenge oppressions they face (Watts & Halkovic, 2022). Our study shows that this model can be even better represented by research that examines youth's civic actions in the context of their civic purpose.

We also expand the conceptualization of civic purpose in a way that better captures the experiences of Black youth. Previous theorizing and research on civic purpose, which has not focused on Black youth, emphasized that purpose must "go beyond the self" (Damon et al., 2003; Malin et al., 2015). In contrast, we found that for Black youth, civic purposes can center the self while also extending to communities and to future generations. Indeed, in racial justice pursuits, personal liberation from oppression is and must be bound together with the liberation of the collective. A stark distinction between individual and collective goals is not needed – and not appropriate – for characterizing Black youth's civic purpose. Notably, research has been documenting the civic purposes of Black youth – and their social responsibility, communalism, and racial justice motivations – for a long time without using the term (e.g., Ginwright, 2010a; Watts et al., 2003).

Our work continues to highlight what is unique about civic engagement for Black youth. Research has recognized the importance of understanding what civic engagement means and how it is expressed in different racial and ethnic groups and community contexts (Gordon, 2007; Hope, Cryer-Coupet et al., 2020; Wray-Lake & Abrams, 2020). Our qualitative methods revealed under-recognized forms of changemaking for Black youth, such as bettering oneself to better the Black community, which was only identifiable by examining action alongside purpose. Our findings also show how strongly racial justice and equity guide how Black youth think about and make choices concerning civic actions. Not all Black youth express the same civic purpose; for example, some youth are more explicitly justice-seeking than others. Yet, young Black changemakers framed their civic actions and civic purpose from their personal and collective experiences of being a young Black person. Other scholars have similarly noted that individual and collective experiences of oppression are drivers of civic action (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Hope, Smith et al., 2020), and this is a principal idea of socio-political development theory (Watts & Guessous, 2006). We will continue to

explore how racism, racial identity, and changemaking are linked in Chapters 3 and 4.

Finally, we name what may have appeared to be lacking in this chapter, which is the term *political*. Our team had some internal disagreements about whether and which of these youth's civic actions fall under the category of political actions. On the one hand, scholars of civic engagement and political science generally agree that political behaviors are actions that pertain to exerting power or influencing people or institutions with power to make decisions about social issues (Hope, Pender et al., 2019; Wray-Lake, 2019). Thus, scholars might understand many of the youth's interpersonal civic actions, activism, and organizing as political. Yet, others on our team asked whether it was fair or right to politicize actions Black youth were taking to ensure their own survival and humanity. Often, these youth were fighting for themselves and others to be safe from harm and treated with respect and fairness. We pondered whether Black youth themselves used the term *political* to describe their actions. Some did, but many did not. We also recognized that racial justice efforts are political in our society whether we – or Black youth – want them to be or not. It should not need to be a power struggle to ensure Black people in the United States are treated with dignity and equality across societal institutions, but unfortunately, that struggle has persisted for centuries. As the classic mantra from the feminist movement says, *the personal is political* (Hanisch, 2017). Political actions become necessary when individuals personally experience injustice and dehumanization. As long as white supremacy and racism pervade the institutions of our society, racial justice work will include a political agenda. Yet, it is vital to not forget that these are people's lives we are talking about. Black youth are more than simply political actors or objects; they are people who deserve much better.

Practical Insights

Understanding Black youth's civic actions and purpose can help dispel assumptions and stereotypes of Black youth. Public discourse about Black youth's civic engagement is often fleeting, narrow, and largely negative – attending to certain actions at certain points in time that uphold a racist narrative about Black youth, which is often a narrative about deviance and violence (Kilgo, 2021). Not recognizing or understanding Black youth's civic actions is another way in which society silences Black youth. Our findings present a different, youth-driven narrative of young Black changemaking. Black youth engage in many forms of changemaking, spanning from helping as a core part of how youth define themselves to involvement in organizing and activism; from informal everyday actions to formal civic spaces in schools and community-based organizations. Their purpose-driven civic actions

deserve to take center stage in media messaging and public discourse about Black youth.

Young Black changemakers are doing critical work to move us toward a better world for Black people, and they should not have to do this work alone. Anyone reading this book can look for ways to support and be authentic allies on the road to racial justice with young Black changemakers. One step is to learn and practice how to be an anti-racist, and for this wisdom, we recommend the seminal work of Dr. Ibram X. Kendi (2019). Another avenue to support young Black changemaking, for those with the resources, is financially supporting community-based organizations that serve and support Black youth. These include organizations focused on service, mentoring, educating for social and racial justice, and grassroots organizing. Investing in initiatives led by Black youth would be particularly valuable, whether through supporting a young entrepreneur, donating to Black youth-led efforts, or attending protests, marches, or events organized by Black youth.

Community-based and school-based organizations can create rich opportunities for Black youth to pursue their civic purposes through offering varied opportunities for community helping, organizing and activism, and interpersonal civic actions. Such opportunities will likely appeal to Black youth if they align with youth's guiding purposes such as redistributing resources for racial justice, navigating an anti-Black world, and giving back to the Black community. Black youth must be viewed as visionaries and capable leaders within civic spaces. In Chapter 7, we offer more insight about how community-based organizations can support Black youth.

Finally, it takes only time and openness to appreciate and celebrate Black youth's accomplishments – in civic action and otherwise – and to listen to and value Black youth's perspectives in school, community, and civic spaces. We hope that hearing Black youth's stories of purpose-driven civic actions can inspire others to do their part to improve the lives of Black people and challenge racial injustices.

Up Next

A central idea of this chapter was that Black youth's civic action is driven by the pursuit of racial justice. Young Black changemakers are future oriented and are fighting for racial justice in different ways. Sociopolitical development theory tells us that experiences of racial oppression often drive the process of becoming a changemaker who challenges racism and seeks racial justice (Anyiwo et al., 2018). In the next chapter, we delve into Black youth's experiences of racism and resistance to anti-Black racism. Schools were a salient context for experiencing racism for these young Black changemakers. Thus, Chapter 3 focuses on schools – and particularly non-Black school spaces – as sites of racial oppression and resistance for Black youth.