(Extra)Ordinary Young People, (Extra)Ordinary Demands: Portraits of Four Black Men With the Baltimore Algebra Project

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(Extra)Ordinary Young People, (Extra)Ordinary Demands: Four Black Men with the Baltimore Algebra Project

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A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of Education of Harvard University in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Education

2017
Dedication

For Z and AK – you are why I do any of what I do.

And for Zach and Victorious – we only got to learn from you for a very short time, but your lessons will live with us forever.
Acknowledgements
(Shout outs)

Shout out to:
Comrade AKA CMG AKA ItsChris for never trying to embarrass me on the court and for inspiring this work.
Wayne AKA William AKA Lil’ Snook the...for so generously sharing your family with me and for teaching me what family could be.
X AKA Xzavier for constantly blowing my mind with your wisdom and also sharing your pain with me.
Chris AKA Big Chris for the hours and hours we spent and always keeping it 100 no matter the topic.

Props to:
Mrs. Goodman for sharing your home and stories with me like I was one of circle.
Mrs. Washington for all of the time and honesty about your kids.
Mrs. McFadden for opening up your immaculate home and your memories.
Bani for sharing your art, your journey, and your vision.
Hogs for letting yet another person into your house, letting me play with those amazing children of yours, and for your incisive analysis.
Ms. Kristina for laying out all of the good and bad and letting it all out.
Ms. Julie for turning the questions on me and thinking it all through with me.

Big Ups to:
Mama – this space could never do justice to what you have meant to me. You were my first hero and will continue to be my hero as long as I live.
Mama & G – you already know what it is – FOE! FOE! I am only who I am because of you.
LDaddy for paving the way and letting me know someone from the West Side could do this.
Dr. Jay for your mentorship and partnership, and for your loving way in the world.
Michelle for encouraging me to go all the way at the beginning of this thing.
SMG and Scott for always taking care of me in BMore, even when I just showed up!

Holla to my writing squad:
Marisa and Rachel, your transcriptions were invaluable at the beginning stages.
Gretchen, Luke and Paula, Margaret, Sherry I couldn’t have finished without your support.
Carla and Margaret, for fixing my backwards writing and doing it any time, all the time.
C & K, SPF is the best writing group there ever was – I know I was difficult to work with but I recognize the careful work you did of both pushing me forward and pulling me up.

Mad love to the DRP (Amanda, Anita, Ann, Carolyn, Cynthia, Connie, Helen, Karen, Keith, Kenneth, Malia, Mara, Mark, Paul, Roy, Soo, Soojin, Tiffany, Zenub) and to my HER people (Carla, Chantal, Christina, Gretchen, Irene, Sherry)

Just plain love to my partner in the work and in the world, Carla – none of this is remotely possible without you. You held me up in all the ways imaginable, kept me going when I was determined to stop, held it down when I was immersed, and believed in the work like no one else.
Respect to my incredible committee:

Professor Warren – I can’t say how much I appreciate you for having my back. You had me with the work, you had with the institution, you had me with all that faced my family. You are more than anyone could ask in an advisor

Professor Lawrence-Lightfoot – I have so much respect for the way you are able to hold my feet to the fire, while never letting me burn. The same can be said for so many of the rest of us when you were the only one for us to turn to.

Professor Ginwright – Thank you for teaching me through your scholarship and your action, and thank you for hearing my work in ways that had not been heard.
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Abstract

As long as there have been Black people in the United States, they have struggled for the recognition of their full humanity. From the insurrection of slaves to the organized efforts of the Civil Rights Movement, historians have documented the ways in which Black individuals and Black organizations made a “demand on society” (Moses & Cobb, 2001) to be treated as full human beings with full human and civil rights. Young people continue the historical struggle by making demands on society today for their rights to safe housing, affordable transportation, youth jobs, and quality public education.

This is a study of four young, Black men, former members of the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.), who have made a demand on society. The scholarship on Black males in education is overwhelmingly focused on documenting pathology, collectively painting a picture that is too flat, lacking the depth of “complex personhood” (Tuck, 2010). I turn to portraiture as my methodology for its nuanced focus on goodness and the complexity of the human experience to ask four questions: What role, if any, did the personal history of four Black men in the B.A.P. play in their ability and willingness to make a demand on society? What role, if any, did participation in the B.A.P. have on their ability and willingness to make a demand on society? How do these participants understand their role in society as actors on society?

The study ultimately finds that the young men have the requisite skills, knowledge, dispositions, and commitment to liberation. They are organizers, teachers, philosophers, poets, mathematicians, artists, problem-solvers, fathers, partners and leaders. But they do not possess the material privileges that allow them to experiment with employment, to make mistakes, or to choose an activist lifestyle without regard for economic realities. In the absence of certain privileges, each young man is trying to find a way to live as a constitutional person, a full human being committed to the full humanness of other beings. Each is working hard to find spaces and people with whom they can experience the freedom and power of their B.A.P. days.
The Worst Day: Losing Zach

It was the worst day for Xzavier “X” Cheatom – standing at the bus stop and watching his best friend Zach get shot in the head over a cell phone. A cell phone. Shot in the head. He watched him get shot in the head over a cell phone.

This day was devastating for X’s friends Chris “Comrade” Goodman and “Wayne” William Washington, as well.

“Worst? I don’t know… just off the top of my head, was when Zach was shot, that was probably the worst right there, when I heard about that.” Chris “Comrade” Goodman

“You know, a lotta my friends die, a lot of ’em. A lot of ’em pass away; a lot of ’em got shot. I’ve been blamed for my friends’ deaths because of, because of beef that I have … So, that’s tough, and, you know, I care about everyone who passes and I, you know, I want to support, I support them after in any which way I can, but, when Zach died, that was a very harsh day.” “Wayne” William Washington

This project is not supposed to be about a scene like this – a scene you expect to see on the evening news or your favorite cop show. Everybody knows “Zach.” Or at least they think they do: a young Black male, a high school drop-out, the ultimate victim of street crime. He fits nicely into the statistics. He fits nicely into mainstream media storylines, or the educational research storyline, or the storyline of the collective imagination of this country. But the truth is that you probably don’t know Zach. And that’s what this project is about.

Ordinarily Extraordinary: Being Zach

Comrade was the first to teach me that he is Zach – and Wayne is Zach, and X is Zach and Chris “Big Chris” Lawson is Zach. These four young men were all part of the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.), a youth organizing group working for educational justice, and they are the focus of this project.
Comrade was 16 years old at the time, and not “Comrade” yet; he was CMG or, sometimes, “Little Chris.” Representing the B.A.P. at an event, he told the audience that people think the young people in the B.A.P. are extraordinary because they go out to fight for educational justice by organizing rallies and marches, by performing teach-ins, die-ins and other forms of civil disobedience, because they have a keen political analysis, and because they are “so well-spoken.” But Chris explained that they weren’t extraordinary; they were just regular young people.

When we got in the car for our ride back to Baltimore, I asked Chris about this, assuming he was downplaying how wonderful they are. I was confused because they are extraordinary, and I told him so. “You all are amazing and keenly intelligent and brave and imaginative and persistent and just good human beings.” Chris agreed with all that, but then helped me understand that he just meant that all the other young Black people on the block – those who weren’t part of the B.A.P. – were also all of those things. They, too, are extraordinary.

So, he wasn’t downplaying his own merit, but lifting up those around him. He was talking about the Zachs. And if they are all extraordinary, and they are all Zach, then what does it mean that Zachs are dying by the thousands every year? And that people dismiss these deaths as regular – part of the national, normalized storyline about young Black men?

This project is not a counter-story. My purpose is not to argue that the usual story is about the pathology surrounding Black men and this story is about the goodness of Black men. People do get shot in the head in Baltimore. Young people do sell drugs. There is teenage pregnancy. Young people are pushed out of schools. But these characteristics neither define the young people or the city of Baltimore; these are things that happen as young Black folks make their way through The Struggle.
Remembering Zach

No human is flawless. We all have our warts; we all make mistakes; we all have regrets. It might seem untruthful to describe only the best traits of a person. But the following is how Xzavier wanted Zach to be remembered – especially by those who never had the privilege of knowing him. And I honor X’s truth.

Zach was always trying to take care of his family, especially his younger brother and sister and his cousins.

He didn’t live in the best house. Grew up with a single parent. She didn’t work, so he didn’t live in the best conditions. He had done every type of hustle or struggle anyone can think of in the city to do to try to get by and take care of his younger brother and sister. His younger brother was 7 or 8 and his younger sister was 2 or 3… I would go to his house and [his mother] would always assume he was just doing something wrong. But literally he was taking care of his family. On days that his brother was out of school, he [Zach] would not go to high school, and watch his brother when his mother was out… He also took care of his little cousin, who is around age 11 and his two sisters who were 8 or 9 and who were twins. His aunt wouldn’t take very good care of Zach’s cousins either. The situation that he was in, he would take care of them, as well. That’s something that a lot of people don’t know about. I’ve really sat back and watched him take care of all of these people with no job, no real high school education.

Zach was a hard worker, whether he was hustling to make it or volunteering at his church.

Mainly because Zach worked hard to get whatever he got. He put extra effort into everything. Anything he set his mind to he got. He would work hard and he would get it. One of the few people I ever knew that if he wanted something, he would only work for that and he got it. He never stopped. If he said something he wanted that
he couldn’t afford on his own which was because he didn’t have a job. He would find some work temporarily to get whatever item it was that he needed. Like if he wanted to get something for his little sister. Like he wanted to get school clothes for his little sister. He would tell me and my friends, “I gotta work all hard so I can get my sister some school clothes.” Because he knew what it meant to have brand new clothes when you start school every year…So yeah, he worked hard…

Zach was also physically attractive.

Also, he was kind of like a ladies’ man. So, he got a lot of girls, which also started conflict. He was about 5’ 11”, real muscular; he probably weighed like 180-190 pounds, but he was really buff for that size. Believe it or not, he was in comparison to MMA fighters. What do you call them? Light-heavyweight, that’s the weight division he was in. Or welterweight. He was built like that. He had long, hay-colored hair. And he had really light hazel eyes. So girls would just be on him. Like ridiculously. And so everywhere he went because girls liked him and like I say he was kind of built so he wasn’t no chump, he would always get in some conflict. And that would happen at school, as well.

And though Zach dropped out of high school, mostly as a result of the rough experience he had there, he was intellectually curious.

He was always studying. One of the things he used to tell me about the girls he would be with, they just like, really loved him because he could talk about anything because he spent so much of his time learning outside of school. Like, you know, things people do when they’re not at school is, they hang out at the libraries. They hang out at, you know, church programs in the city.

According to X, Zach’s resourcefulness was a way for them to be connected.

Whenever I needed anything, or like, when there was something I needed to learn that I couldn’t learn through the establishments that I was working with, he would know where I could learn that information. Shoot. Or maybe I was having some beef
around the neighborhood, he knew some moves he could teach me. What else? If I wasn’t making enough at the Algebra Project, where could I go to make some quick cash? Things weren’t always peachy for me, you know. Me and some of my other friends, as well. We would be down at the church helping out and doing work for meals with him. Or making a few dollars to get whatever we needed to get. So yeah, he helped me out; he shared a lot of advice with me. Gave me a lot of advice about girls. Shared all his workout tips with me... He knew how to get places. Places in the city I never been to… Me and him backed each other up.

And there was something special about Zach. He touched people in a particular way. Five years after his death, people still cry when they talk about him. They shed uncontrollable tears, sometimes falling silent and sometimes in great sobs. One of those moved to tears by Zach’s memory is Jay Gillen, founder of the Baltimore Algebra Project, and the lone consistent adult mentor/friend/ally to the young people in the B.A.P. He says that Zach’s death was the end of innocence for the Project; that the organization’s unbridled enthusiasm was tempered by the harsh reality its individual members experienced regularly.

But the B.A.P. faced death as they faced most injustice: with insightful analysis and dramatic action.

*Laying Zach to Rest*

The coffin was thrown down at the feet of the police, assigning blame for Zach’s death to the state. It wasn’t his actual coffin. Adorned with the iconic Baltimore Algebra Project’s red “X” symbol, spanning the tapered hexagonal “coffin” draped in black cloth, a picture of a smiling, cornrowed Zach in side profile had been taped to the front. The coffin was carefully made in the weeks following Zach’s murder. David Sloan, from the Maryland Institute of the Arts, helped the young people to fashion it. But before the dramatic
presentation to the police, they respectfully marched with it through the streets of Annapolis, with X in the lead. When they reached the end of their march through the gentile streets of Annapolis, a far cry from their usual marching grounds in Baltimore, the young people held a rally across the street from the Maryland State House. Before growing his dreadlocks and before the tattoos appeared, a young Comrade took the bullhorn – as was almost always the case in those days.

This is called CSI: Annapolis. This is a Crime Scene Investigation. This is where true crime takes place in the state of Maryland. We are identifying this place as a crime scene. By their underfunding – unconstitutional underfunding, illegal underfunding – of our schools, they murder us every day. Every year that they underfund our schools, they kill us… We took it to court; the courts have failed the young people. The courts have failed. It is up to us. The school board has failed – they have failed us. It’s up to us… [emphases in the original]

Charles was on another bullhorn and they took turns until Ryan got on. Ryan, with his nearly shoulder-length dreadlocks falling out of his beige safari hat, no stranger to the megaphone himself, made an important, but difficult to hear, point: “I feel for Zach, but I also feel for the young brother who killed him. What type of education does he have? What type of chances and choices and decisions did he have in his life?”

The plan was to take the coffin and present it to Governor (and former Baltimore Mayor) Martin O’Malley, or at least put it on the steps of the Maryland State House, where the governor conducts his business. The police would not allow the young people to carry the coffin across the street where they had been rallying, singing and chanting. Comrade was the first to cross the street anyway, urging people to follow him, while pointing out that the police were not allowing them access to a public building. He was the first to be put in
handcuffs, and sat down on the steps of the State House. Others followed, and a group rushed the steps of the now locked building. As they chanted *No Education, No Life*—evoking the most literal interpretation of Ryan’s logic—the police quickly approached them. Immediately they fell to the ground, staging a “die-in,” as they had done many other times, though the symbolism this time hit harder than ever.

Among those lying “dead” at the top of the steps were X, Jay Gillen and Jay’s son Sammy, along with 10 or so other young people. One by one, they were handcuffed and sat down in a row next to Comrade. No heads hung low. They were chanting, seated and handcuffed, as loud as ever with the crowd across the street—*No Education, No Life*. And as the chanting grew to a crescendo, one young man took the coffin on his own and threw it at the feet of the police officers, assigning blame to the state. He was promptly handcuffed and the coffin was carried away by two police officers.

This dissertation is about full humanness—the recognition of it in ourselves and the insistence (the demand) that others recognize it. Through portraits of four young Black men I share with you a glimpse into their full humanness, situating their stories in Black folks’ long struggle for freedom. In the pages that follow, you will learn about X and Comrade and Wayne and Big Chris. They will not be rendered in the same way X remembered Zach, free of flaws. You will see their frailties and contradictions, but mostly you will see their deeply human selves. And in seeing them, I urge you to heed Comrade’s lesson: that he is Zach and Zach is he. That even those who are statistics are extraordinary and have stories to learn and to be told. When we can see their human being, we will be able to stop failing them at every turn.
The People

I met all the young men featured on these pages ten years ago, when they were in high school. They were leaders and developing organizers in the B.A.P. and I was a Math Literacy Youth Organizer working for the B.A.P. I was helping X, Wayne, Big Chris and Comrade organize their peers. I worked most closely with Wayne and X, as they attended one of the two schools in which I was based. But I worked closely with all of them, as they were some of our fiercest leaders.

X was a mumbler – he mumbled when he spoke – and the removable “gold” fronts he put on his teeth to cover the effects of years of no dental coverage, and thus, no dental care, only made it harder to understand him. But when you could understand him, as is still the case, he made you think twice. Thin and wiry and strong at the time, he is now filled out, but he’s still deep; and a bit easier to understand after some dental work and his deliberate practice in enunciating. Wayne was also thin, very thin, and short. But he never carried himself that way – maybe that’s how he was able to garner the interest of Mahogany in high school. Today he and Mahogany are married with three kids. X and Wayne were inseparable back then and still are to this day. They live in the same house, and Uncle X is as much a part of the family as anyone.

Back then, when Comrade was still CMG or Little Chris, he was clean-cut, with short hair and always wearing a tie. These days, his dreads fall below his shoulders and you’re likely to see him in a t-shirt and combat boots. Back then, quiet Chris would get loud whenever he was on the megaphone; today, still quiet Comrade gets loud whenever he’s on the microphone spitting lyrics.
One of Big Chris’s adult allies said that his attention to detail made Chris seem like he was 15 going on 30 when he worked with her at an organization called Youth as Resources. He’s exchanged his jeans, nicely pressed shirts and cornrows for slacks and suits and an always-manicured, short haircut, but the attention to details is still there, and he’s still mature beyond his years.

All of these young men are different from who they were at 16 years old, but at heart, they are much the same.

The Place

At the age of 21, as I was finishing my teaching internship while studying at Michigan State University, I had to decide where to start my professional life. I knew I didn’t want to follow most of my colleagues by staying in Michigan, and I relied on my stereotypes to decide where to move next. I was done with the Midwest, which, in my mind, left the East Coast, the West Coast and the South. I thought the West Coast was too far and too weird. I was afraid of the South — afraid of being lynched, of being in a place where they flew the Confederate flag with pride. So that left the East Coast. I decided I would visit Baltimore, Philadelphia and New York to try to find a position teaching math. The first time I drove to Baltimore, I was shocked as I passed a sign that read “Mason-Dixon Line.” Wait, Baltimore is south of the Mason-Dixon Line? I was heading to the South despite my fears.

It turns out that Baltimore isn’t really the South (and the south isn’t really as scary as I imagined). McDougal, in his book, Black Baltimore, describes Baltimore this way: “Baltimore is the southernmost city of the North and the northernmost city of the South, its population and physical structure marked by the slave plantation, the merchant ship, and the factory” (p. 1).
Baltimore is a port city in the hub of the transcontinental railroad (the famous B&O Railroad is the Baltimore & Ohio Railroad). It is a place where goods, and people, were traded often and by many. So yes, I was south of the Mason-Dixon line, and yes, I was in a slave state, but Baltimore always had a unique feel. Maybe this was because of the influence of the many people who came and went and stayed. There is a slowness to the pace of things in Baltimore that feels like a southern influence, but also a very industrial city scene that feels like a northern influence.

Of course, by the time I arrived in Baltimore, slavery had been abolished for almost 135 years and the industries had changed quite a bit. By 2000, the city was almost 65% Black and almost all the rest of the city was White. Like most big cities, Baltimore is very segregated by both race and class. And, of course, there is overwhelming overlap between race and class. That is to say, you can find a gated, predominantly White community exactly one block west of a boarded-up, predominantly Black community. There are mansions in Baltimore juxtaposed with entire neighborhoods with completely derelict houses. And while the city has this particular sort of “diversity,” the public schools are largely homogeneous. Today, 84% of the school population is Black, despite the fact that the city’s population is only 64% Black. At the same time, only 8% of the school population is White, even though the city population is 30% White (6% of the school population is Latino). And by high school the majority of White students who stayed in the district attend the handful of magnet schools in Baltimore: City, Poly, School for the Arts, or Western. If someone is working in Baltimore schools, she works mostly with Black students. This was even more the case in 2000, when the “Hispanic” population was a mere 1.7%.

I don’t remember working with a single White student when I worked as an organizer at the zone school in Baltimore. Zone schools, unlike magnet schools, were
neighborhood-based and didn’t require a test for entry. We had a few White students project-wide at the B.A.P., as many of the tutors came from City and Poly, but the overwhelming majority of the young people in the Project were Black. But Jay Gillen, the Project’s founder, is White. The students often said Mr. Jay (adults in Baltimore are given the Mr. or Miss prefix for their first name – it’s kind of a southern, respect thing) isn’t really White. He’s different.

X, Wayne, Comrade and Chris all call Jay a mentor. I’ve heard Wayne call him a father-figure. They have all had beef with Jay over the years, but there’s no doubt they love him and they still call him for advice or to share big news. As they grew up in the Algebra Project, they grew up with Jay. I count myself among those who consider Jay a mentor to this day. Prior to coming to the organization, I had taught and coached Jay’s oldest son, with whom I continue to keep in touch. And Jay was and is a mentor, but we treated the work we did (at least the organizing work) as a partnership.

Jay worked with the tutors from City and Poly, and I worked with the tutors at schools 425 and 426 (new “small schools,” as part of the Gates era of breaking large schools into small ones). I was with teachers during the day, supporting math instruction, introducing Algebra Project Pedagogy, and assisting students. All the time, I was recruiting students to come to our after-school peer-to-peer tutoring program. The students negotiated contracts with the school system to pay them to come in after school to work on their math skills and help each other with math. We call this “knowledge-based” work (as opposed to working at McDonald’s), where they get to use their knowledge and intellect to do something valuable in the world. The model was slightly different at our middle school sites where we had high school students tutoring middle school students, but the overarching concept was the same.
X, Wayne, Comrade and Big Chris were tutors in the B.A.P. and moved into other leadership positions as they continued their work in the Project. In the design of the tutor space, learning from the national Algebra Project founder and Civil Rights Movement organizer Bob Moses, Jay made sure there were 30 minutes at the end of tutoring for a staff meeting. We did most of our organizing in this space. It was an intentional space for leadership development, where B.A.P. members practiced how to be in a real democratic space. Site leaders ran these meetings, and all four of the young men served as site leaders at some point in their time at the B.A.P. This was also the space that allowed for political action to foment. Once the drama of political action caught fire with the young people, it couldn’t be squelched. X, Wayne, Comrade and Big Chris have passed the legacy down, and the B.A.P. is still working for educational justice in Baltimore and nationally.

The Research

As interesting as the B.A.P. is, it is only a character in the stories of X, Wayne, Comrade and Big Chris. It is an important character, but only a character. I will introduce other players – mothers and brothers and partners and life-altering experiences and passions – to help answer these questions:

1. What role, if any, did the personal histories of four Black men in the Baltimore Algebra Project play in their ability and willingness to make a demand on society?

2. What role, if any, did/does participation in the Baltimore Algebra Project have on their ability and willingness to make a demand on society?

3. How do these participants understand their role in society as actors on society?
In the following chapters, I first detail my conceptual framework, in which I define the “demand on society,” and then describe Portraiture as my research methodology. Portraits of each of the four young men are followed by a cross-case comparison and, finally, some brief closing words.
A Framework: Three Tiers of Demand and Earning Insurgencies

Bob Moses served as an organizer with the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) in the early 1960s. Moses went down to Mississippi from New York as part of the sit-in movement. He was invited to return a year later to work on voter registration, and remained in brutally violent Mississippi for the next four years. In the early 1980s, while completing his PhD at Harvard in the philosophy of mathematics, he founded the national Algebra Project after seeing that the mathematics courses students in Cambridge were taking were stratified along lines of class and race. Coming out of his organizing work in Mississippi and with the Algebra Project, Moses developed a kind of theory of change utilizing the community organizing notion of demands. I begin with Bob Moses’s concept of a 3-Tier Demand to frame my study of how participants understand their roles as actors on society: demand on yourself, demand on your peers, and demand on the greater society.

Making a Demand on Yourself

In Radical Equations (2001), Moses and Cobb explain 3-Tier Demand through their time with SNCC working with sharecroppers in their struggle for the right to vote in Mississippi, as well Moses’s work on math literacy through the Algebra Project.

In the final analysis, as we’ve seen, the story of the voter registration drive in the South in the decade of the 1960s is a story of people struggling for greater control over the decision making that affects their lives, of people who learn to step forward to make a demand on society in their own voices. Ultimately, that is what must happen with our young people today, especially young people of color and young people from the poorest of our communities.  

- Moses & Cobb, 2001, p. 171
According to Moses, the first tier is the most difficult and the most important. There are always reasons not to make a demand on yourself. Making a demand on yourself takes courage and commitment. In 1960s Mississippi, it certainly took courage for Black sharecroppers to register to vote. Registering to vote meant facing down terror, losing your job, putting your family in danger, literally putting your life on the line (Moses, 2009; Moses & Cobb, 2001). It also took a different sort of courage – the courage to say I deserve the right to vote, to say that I matter just as much as anyone else.

In the Baltimore Algebra Project, it takes courage to face your principal as you walk out of school on strike or occupy a school board meeting. And it takes a different kind of courage to say I’m going to work on my math – to say I deserve to learn math and I can learn math as well as anyone else.

Facing the potential humiliation and physical violence to register to vote just once takes courage; going back again after you’ve been denied, or going back and bringing your cousin takes courage and commitment. To insist on and persist in your mattering means you are making a demand on yourself. To tell your friend that you can’t hang out on the corner because you are going to math tutoring – and then going to tutoring again and again – takes courage and commitment. When you do this brave follow-through, though, you can start to earn your insurgency, as Bob Moses calls it.

By all accounts, the SNCC organizers in the 1960s were insurgents with their sit-ins, Freedom Rides, and voter registration organizing (Clayborn, 1981; McAdam 1999; Moses, 2001, 2009). Bob Moses earned his insurgency through courage and commitment in the Mississippi Delta. Moses was arrested seven times, harshly beaten, and almost died as the car he was in was riddled with automatic gun shots. Moses was in the passenger seat when the driver, 22-year-old Jimmy Travis, was hit in the neck as they tried to drive from Greenwood,
MS to Greenville, MS to do voter registration organizing (Moses, 2010). The people in Mississippi saw what Moses risked, saw his courage and the demand he was making on himself. This went a long way toward earning his insurgency, but it was also his real organizing work. He earned his insurgency by sitting on porches and church benches, by eating supper and taking walks. It was through his courage and commitment that he could legitimately ask those sharecroppers to make a demand on themselves and register to vote.

This is the first step in what Moses calls “stepping into history” (Moses, 2009): when you stop passively allowing life to control you, and instead struggle “for greater control over the decision making that affects” your life. Historian, theologian and civil rights activist Dr. Vincent Harding wrote that the movement activists of the 1960s were the great-grandchildren of Harriet Tubman (Harding, 2009). One of these great-grandchildren was Bernice Johnson Reagon, one of the SNCC Freedom Singers. In her book, *If You Don’t Go, Don’t Hinder Me: The African American Sacred Song Tradition*, she wrote about her relationship to the spiritual “Wade in the Water” – a song used by Tubman to encourage slaves to shed their shackles and come with her.

*Wade in the water, wade in the water children.*

*Wade in the water, God’s gonna trouble the water.*

Tubman was asking them to courage “troubled water.” Reagon (2001) explains that it was probably easier for a slave to live the life one knew than to wade into troubled waters. Reagon remembers this feeling distinctly as she went to her first march in Albany, Georgia. As she deliberately waded into troubled water, she was stepping into history. What Tubman knew and what Reagon came to discover was that the “concept of ‘troubled water,’ once charged by the power of Spirit, has the power to transform and heal” (p. 130). Stepping into history by embracing troubled waters means stepping into the now and stepping into the long line of freedom strugglers from before Harriet to today.
According to Moses, making a demand on yourself, earning your insurgency, stepping into history is necessary for people to earn the legitimacy to make a demand on their peers. Demand on yourself is reflected in my first research question: *What role, if any, did the personal history of four Black men in the Baltimore Algebra Project play in their ability and willingness to make a demand on society?* It will be important to learn each participant’s personal life history as a way to understand how he started to make demands on himself.

*Making a Demand on Your Peers*

Making a demand on yourself is just the first tier. The second tier is making a demand on your peers. As much as Moses earned his insurgency, it was more effective when Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and other sharecroppers asked each other to register to vote. “This second level of demand on each other is a collective demand, a more political one,” (Moses & Cobb, 2001, p. 188).

When Mrs. Hamer, a sharecropper with a fourth-grade education, made a demand on her peers to register to vote, it was even more legitimate than Moses doing so. Moses could retreat to New York if he had to; Mrs. Hamer was born and raised in Mississippi and was not going anywhere. In the Baltimore Algebra Project, once you’ve risked arrest you can make that same demand on your peers. Once you have been consistently tutoring math, you can bring in your friends, siblings and classmates.

Moses writes that this is when you are in an “organizing mode.” Having made a demand on yourself makes it easier to organize, but does not make you an organizer. Being an organizer means asking someone else to have the courage and commitment to do something you can’t do for them. As Moses and Cobb (2001, p. 182) write: “And that really puts you in a different mode, because you’ve got the problem of convincing other
people…that the idea of challenging yourself and the system that defines your life is an idea to be embraced.”

As they make demands on each other, they can start to earn a collective insurgency (Gillen, 2009). In the 1960s, the prevailing sentiment was that the sharecroppers do not care about the vote – they are politically apathetic. Once large groups of sharecroppers made a demand on themselves and others and risked life and limb to register to vote, that argument no longer had weight. These same arguments are made with young people in Baltimore – they are apathetic students. Once large groups of young people are making a demand for a quality education, for example, those arguments lose weight. This is what Moses means when he says, “working the demand side of the equation.” When people make a demand on themselves and on their peers, they can earn their insurgency. They can take the next step into history. They can make a demand on society.

The demand on your peers is related to the second research question: *What role, if any, did/does the Baltimore Algebra Project have on their ability and willingness to act on society?* My study design includes an examination of the space that B.A.P. created, the relationships my participants established with their peers, and the actions they designed and took with their peers in the B.A.P.

*Making a Demand on Society*

According to Moses, the third tier – demand on the greater society – can happen once people have made a demand on themselves and their peers (Moses & Cobb, 2001). When Mrs. Hamer traveled to the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City in 1964 with delegates from the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party to demand to be seated at the convention as the legitimate delegates from Mississippi rather than the segregated
Mississippi Democratic Party, she was making a demand on society. This demand led to the reorganization of the Democratic Party, making the eventual election of President Barack Obama possible (Moses, 2009). More immediately, their demands led to things like the Voting Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965. American society could not ignore the freedom movement in the U.S. South because of the demands Black people were making on themselves and each other.

Young people in the B.A.P. have made important demands on greater society. For example, in 2004, they demanded that the state of Maryland pay $800 million owed to the Baltimore City Schools to provide an adequate education as mandated by the state constitution and by the state’s supreme court (Warren, Mira, & Nikundiwe, 2008). In other words, they insisted that the state recognize their status as full citizens of Maryland.

Making a demand on society can mean demanding legislation or resources, but it also means making a demand to be recognized and reckoned with as a full human being. It means to demand to be seen as a person who is not an apathetic sharecropper, to demand to be seen as a person who is not an apathetic student or – in the case Black men – as a thug or a criminal.

My third research question is designed to examine the process of making demands on society, as I ask: How do these participants come to understand their role in society as actors on society?

This is not an attempt to test Moses’s framework. Rather, following Maxwell (2005) and Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997), I am using Moses’s framework to structure and focus my project and limit its scope. Further, to be clear, Moses’s framework in practice is a much more iterative process. For example, a young person may make a demand on her peers, and seeing the result may be inspired to make further demands on herself. I have presented it linearly for the sake of clarity.
Literature Review: Stepping into the Black Freedom Struggle

In this chapter, I argue the need for situating this study in the lineage of the Black freedom struggle, understanding these young men as stepping into history to do movement work through the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.), and to make a demand on society to be recognized as fully human beyond their time in the B.A.P. Rather than review the kind of literature that typically gives shape to studies of youth organizing – youth development work, educational literature about individual “outcomes,” civic engagement literature – I leverage scholarship on the Black freedom struggle and argue that youth organizing research typically fails to situate itself this way.

First, I examine a handful of first-person narratives that further illuminate the idea of demand on yourself and what it looks like to “step into history.” I follow with a review of the literature on the current incarnation of young people in the fight for freedom – youth organizing. Finally, I make an explicit link from Harriet Tubman to the Baltimore Algebra Project through historical accounts of the Black freedom struggle. Through this review, I offer a way to consider what it might mean to step into the Black freedom struggle, both historically and today, as a prelude to the ways in which the four young men in this study take their own steps.

I. Stepping into History

As explained previously, “stepping into history” refers to the act of struggling to be able to make decisions that control your life while recognizing this same struggle in the experience of others, both in the present and historically. In Reagon’s (2001) reckoning, stepping into history is about knowingly stepping into troubled waters – waters that have the power to “transform and heal.” In addition to Reagon, I consider four other accounts of
stepping into the Black freedom struggle through the lives and autobiographical words of Anne Moody, Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), Malcolm X, and Frederick Douglass. Considering how these individuals made demands on themselves offers insights that can support our reading of the four individuals in my study.

Anne Moody was a contemporary of Reagon. Her book, *Coming of Age in Mississippi*, recounts her life growing up in rural Mississippi and eventually being swept into the Movement while at Tougaloo College near Jackson, Mississippi. Moody recalls her family’s justifiable fear of her budding interest in the Black freedom movement, not only for Moody, but for the safety of the rest of her family. Her story is of a strong and headstrong young woman willing to fight for herself and others, illustrated in her moving out of her mother’s house to her father’s during adolescence, rejecting unwanted advances from men, standing up to her basketball coach, and leading a food boycott in her dorm at junior college in Louisiana. She finds herself back in Mississippi for her junior year at the center of the student movement there – Tougaloo. Despite her family’s explicit pleading, Moody dove headlong into the Movement. She earned her insurgency very famously at a Woolworth counter sit-in, being doused with food and condiments, dragged on the floor by her hair, and surrounded by a mob set on keeping Jim Crow the status quo.

Part of Moody’s willingness to endure this – and then go right back at it shortly after, leading to more injury and arrest – was her fundamental understanding that she was part of something bigger. She writes: “That summer I could feel myself beginning to change. For the first time I began to think something would be done about whites killing, beating, and misusing Negroes. I knew I was going to be part of whatever happened” (1968, p. 254). Moody made the conscious decision to “be a part of” the Movement, to step into history, having made a demand on herself and earned her insurgency.
Like Moody, Stokely Carmichael got a lot of his lumps in Mississippi. Unlike Moody, Carmichael was not from Mississippi. He was part of the second wave of Freedom Riders who, as a 19-year-old Howard University student, went to Mississippi by train after the buses used by the Freedom Riders had been burned and destroyed in Alabama by the Ku Klux Klan and their supporters. In his memoir, Ready for Revolution: The Life and Struggle of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture), Carmichael, born in Trinidad and raised in New York City, tells of his and his family’s lifelong desire for him to become a doctor. He entered Howard as pre-med and left a revolutionary. Carmichael deemphasized the physical courage it took to do Movement work down South as a college student:

Much has been written about the physical courage of the movement generation. But that is obvious. My brothers and sisters could not have gone the places where they went, nor have done the things they did, without considerable courage. But physical bravery is merely the ability to make oneself face the prospect of danger, pain, or bodily harm, the certainty of jail, or the possibility of death… Other qualities my brothers and sisters shared were as important as physical courage. One was the casual selflessness of purpose and a cheerful readiness to risk the things the society had programmed our peers to value most highly: education for personal advancement, jobs, careers, security, “the future,” all that we had come to college to secure. (2003, p. 136)

While Moody sheds light on the physical abuses one had to endure to step into history, Carmichael emphasizes the other ways in which one had to make a demand on him or herself – selflessness of purpose, and the willingness to risk the individual “successes” college was supposed to promise. Breaking his mother’s heart by abandoning medicine was difficult, but, as he said, “It would not be long before I’d be fully involved. Fully involved, almost consumed” (p. 154). Carmichael would return to Mississippi as a SNCC organizer, head a SNCC office in Alabama, become chairperson of SNCC, join and become “honorary
prime minister” of the Black Panther Party, co-write *Black Power*, and move to Africa, where he founded the All-African People’s Revolutionary Party. He spent the rest of his life committed to Black liberation. One of the most important thinkers of the Black freedom movement of the 1960s was a pre-med student, until he made a demand on himself and stepped into history.

A more widely recognized icon of the 1960s Black freedom struggle was Malcolm X. *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* has sold millions of copies and has had more than 45 editions published. It is the well-known story of a man who thoroughly reinvents himself twice: once from petty criminal to a minister of the Nation of Islam, denouncing the “white devils,” and then again from the Nation to a follower of orthodox Islam, who would “toss aside some of my previous conclusions” (1965, p. 340). Though much is made of his second transformation, it is his first that allowed him to step into history. Malcolm X exhibited a great demand on himself in prison as he embraced the Nation of Islam, giving up pork and cigarettes, re-teaching himself how to read and write. He became a voracious reader after copying the entire dictionary into notebooks to expand his vocabulary, according to his book. Malcolm X reports reading 15 hours a day at some points in his stint in jail. Influenced by his correspondence with Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, Malcolm X became obsessed with learning African and Black history. “Ten guards and the warden couldn’t have torn me out of those books” (p. 177). It was during this time that Malcolm X started to feel that he and the vast majority of Black people in America had been duped their whole lives:

It’s a crime, the lie that has been told to generations of black men and white men both. Little innocent black children, born of parents who believed that their race had no history. Little black children seeing, before they could talk, that their parents
considered themselves inferior. Innocent black children growing up, living out their lives, dying of old age – and all of their lives ashamed of being black. (p.181)

This link to Black people as a people led Malcolm X to step into history. He embraced his identity as a Black man and started recruiting for the Nation of Islam in jail. He says, “But when Mr. Muhammad’s teachings reversed my attitude toward my black brothers, in my guilt and shame I began to catch every chance I could to recruit for Mr. Muhammad” (p. 182). Malcolm would later reconsider his ideas about “white devils,” but never wavered in his insistence on Black freedom.

Aside from Harriet Tubman, one can argue that there is no one more closely associated with Black liberation than Frederick Douglass. The Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave is a rather short telling of an extraordinary tale. Two tales are particularly compelling as it relates to stepping into history. The first is of his organizing a school for fellow slaves to learn to read and write after teaching himself, despite being forbidden by his slave holders:

I look back to those Sundays with an amount of pleasure not to be expressed. They were great days to my soul. The work of instructing my dear fellow-slaves was the sweetest engagement with which I was ever blessed. We loved each other…I taught them, because it was the delight of my soul to be doing something that looked like bettering the condition of my race. (2003, p. 75)

The second story is one in which Douglass recounts his experience of “how a slave became a man” after he stood his ground when one of his slave holders came to beat him. This story lies in stark contrast to the one he recounts after one of his slave holders died and he and the other slaves were called to an accounting of property: “There were horses and men, cattle and women, pigs and children, all holding the same rank in the scale of being,
and were all subjected to the same narrow examination” (p. 49). In one instance he is property, no different from a horse or sheep or pig; in the other, he is a man.

Even the most extraordinary of people – the Anne Moodys, the Stokely Carmichaels, the Malcolm Xs, the Bernice Johnson Reagons, the Bob Moseses – are just ordinary people who step into history. Frederick Douglass, having escaped slavery, shared one such moment for him:

But, while attending an anti-slavery convention at Nantucket on the 11th of August, 1841, I felt strongly moved to speak, and was at the same time much urged to do so by Mr. William C. Coffin, a gentlemen who had heard me speak in the colored people’s meeting at New Bedford. It was a severe cross, and I took it up reluctantly. The truth was, I felt myself a slave, and the idea of speaking to white people weighed me down. I spoke but a few moments, when I felt a degree of freedom, and said what I desired with considerable ease. From that time until now, I have been engaged in pleading the cause of my brethren – with what success, and with what devotion, I leave those acquainted with my labors to decide. (p. 99)

Each of these narratives illustrates an important piece of stepping into history. Each of these ordinary individuals finds their extraordinary nature in the discovery of something bigger than themselves, something bigger than their current condition, and the recognition of their responsibility to become part of that larger struggle for freedom. They each understood that they had certain capacities, gifts and experiences to contribute to the struggle. And finally, they had the opportunity to find their way into the freedom struggle. One need not be predestined for greatness – a strong-willed basketball player from Mississippi, an intellectually curious New Yorker from Trinidad, an intellectually flexible petty criminal growing up in Michigan, an awkward-limbed slave from Maryland – all turned
out to be brilliant and brave, but it was this combination of analysis and reflection, recognition of self-worth, and opportunity, that was vital in their ability to step into history.

II. Youth Organizing as Movement Work

There is a long tradition of youth organizing (Clayborn, 1981; Cohen, 2006; Gillen, 2009; Gross and Gross, 1977; Marshall, 2013), yet “youth organizing” as a researchable phenomenon is relatively new (Delgado & Staples, 2008; HoSang, 2003). In one of the earliest research papers on youth organizing, Ginwright (2003) explains how youth organizing came out of positive youth development work through young people’s desire to effect social change. Ginwright explains that youth organizing works to develop two capacities in youth that are not addressed by traditional youth development models: sociopolitical capacity and community capacity. Sociopolitical capacity is a combination of political education, which “shapes young people’s world view about systemic and root causes of social and community problems,” and the opportunity to “work toward equity, fairness, and social justice” (p. 8). These closely resemble two of the factors discussed in the previous section: analysis/reflection and opportunity. In fact, in 2010, Ginwright evokes the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) as a model for youth organizing: “Similar to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee’s contribution to the Civil Rights movement, young people today are vital to social change on these issues” (2010b, p. 8). Yet Ginwright argues in the same paper that youth organizing has not yet effectively been incorporated into a broader “social justice movement.”

To better understand what might be missing, I look at how youth organizing is often conceived in the literature. In 2003, the Funders Collaborative for Youth Organizing (FCYO) published HoSang’s review of the field, which documented the kinds of groups
doing youth organizing and the types of work they do. HoSang reported that the three main sectors around which youth organized were public education, criminal justice, and environmental justice. In 2010, FCYO commissioned a scan of the youth organizing world and found that there were at least 160 organizations across the country involved in youth organizing, with the top issues expanding to include education, racial justice, community and neighborhood improvement, economic justice, health, immigrant rights, juvenile justice, and gender and/or women’s issues.

Ginwright, Noguera and Cammarota (2006), and a special issue of *New Directions in Youth Development* focused on youth organizing (2008), provide chapters and cases describing youth organizing. Almost all of these accounts were analyzed at the level of the organization – providing insights into ways that youth organizing groups helped young people develop social critique, civic participation, research and public speaking skills, and commitments to social justice. For example, Kwon (2006) highlights the work of Asian and Pacific Islander Youth Promoting Advocacy and Leadership (AYPAL) in the Bay Area, O’Donoghue (2006) features Youth as Effective Citizens (YEC) and Youth Supporting Youth Change (YSYC) in San Francisco, Warren, Mira and Nikundiwe (2008) showcase the work of Hyde Square Task Force in Boston and the Baltimore Algebra Project, and Snyder (2008) describes the work of a youth cohort from the Oakland Community Organization. In each case, the organization is the focus.

In 2008, Delgado and Staples laid out what they call “the method of practice” of youth organizing in a nearly comprehensive theoretical map of the field. They cover the historical background, its guiding principles and analytic elements, and highlight key tenets in youth organizing, including democratic participation and leadership development. According to Delgado and Staples, youth organizing is influenced by three related fields: community
organizing, youth development, and the field of youth-led work. The inclusion of youth development as a key component of youth organizing is persistent. Shaw (2011) basically defines youth organizing as “youth development plus.” That is to say, she believes youth organizing provides many of the same things that youth development programs offer, but that “youth organizing enhances youth development in its approach by working with young people to help them gain the knowledge and skills to understand social and structural inequities and engage in action that results in social change” (p. 4). In addition, based on a multi-year mixed methods study, Shaw and her colleagues found that youth organizing groups provide important opportunity structures, develop a sense of agency in youth, develop critical social analyses, engage in civic and political action, and help increase educational motivation and aspirations.

Taken together, these studies offer insights into what youth organizing is and how it is carried out. At the same time, they seem to be missing the spirituality of youth organizing. Delgado and Staples did not wade into troubled waters. This, one can argue, is not their intent. Most of the literature does not approach youth organizing from the perspective of youth organizing as coming out of a long lineage of freedom struggle. If we are to take up the question of youth organizing as movement work, it seems important to understand the ways the organizations are situated in the Black freedom struggle.

Ginwright (2010b) takes up the question of how to link youth organizing to a broader social justice movement. He proposes a fairly comprehensive model for what he calls a “Social Justice Pipeline.” This pipeline would take young people from an entry phase in the middle school years to the development phase in the high school and adolescent years to the transition phase in post-secondary and early adulthood. The pipeline must include a “hardscape” and a “softscape,” according to Ginwright. The hardscape includes the
community organizations, educational entities, and businesses that provide the young people with opportunities for training, education, action and employment. The softscape “can be more accurately described as the social capital required to link young people to meaningful leadership opportunities.” Ginwright’s model is trying to address three challenges he identifies: few pathways to post-secondary leadership development, thin organizational capacity to create pipelines to leadership, and shallow pools of youth leaders to fill future transitions. Ginwright argues that building a social justice pipeline and including the transition phase will make “progressive movement building an explicit, rather than implicit, outcome of the pipeline” (p. 20).

These recommendations from Ginwright seem necessary. They are logical and the challenges he identifies bear out in this study, as well. I contend that Ginwright’s recommendations, though necessary, are not sufficient to make youth organizing movement work. In other words, without following Ginwright’s pipeline we will not be able to utilize youth organizing to create social movement, but putting systems and relationships in place will not be enough. Youth organizing also needs to understand their role as stepping into a Black freedom struggle that has been ongoing for almost 400 years. They need to situate their work in that struggle, supporting young people to understand those who came before and those who will follow, while understanding their work to be not about individual campaigns for rights or reform, but about the larger demand to be recognized as fully human.

There are organizations that do so – Ginwright’s Leadership Excellence in Oakland sees itself as a legacy of the Black Panther Party (Ginwright, 2010a), Padres y Jóvenes Unidos in Denver explicitly comes out of the Chicano Movement (Warren & Mapp, 2011), and the B.A.P. recognizes itself as a SNCC legacy (Payne, 2010), to mention just a few. But
the research needs to reflect this, as well. That is, while I have just reviewed much of the literature on youth organizing to date, these studies fail to explicitly document the ways in which youth organizing is movement work – not just civic engagement or youth development work, but the work of young people stepping into history, recognizing their current campaigns as a demand to be recognized as fully human in the image of their ancestors in the struggle. New contributions from Mark Warren explore the idea of youth organizing as movement work (Warren, 2014; Warren & Kupscznk, 2016). This study moves with him in that direction. I am situating this study in the Black freedom struggle by documenting the ways in which the young men used the space of the B.A.P. to make demands on each other, and to the larger peer community of young people in Baltimore, to step into history.

III. The Black Freedom Struggle

As long as there have been Black people in the United States, they have struggled for the recognition of their full humanity (Harding, 1984; Tuck, 2010). I see the lives and work of the four men in my study as a continuation of this Black struggle for freedom. Historian and educator Charles Payne (2010) writes of the Baltimore Algebra Project, “they are a part of one of the most thoughtful, self-aware, and other-aware traditions of American activism – they are ‘organizing in the spirit of Ella,’ to borrow a phrase from Bob Moses” (p. 4). He argues that the B.A.P. comes out of the organizing tradition of the Civil Rights Movement, and specifically the work of Ella Baker, Bob Moses, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). Miss Baker taught Moses, who taught B.A.P.’s founder Jay Gillen; Gillen, in turn, is teaching the B.A.P. students.

Another of Mrs. Baker’s students was historian and social activist Vincent Harding (1981), who wrote about the insurrectionary nature of the Black organizing tradition in his
book, *There Is A River*. Gillen (2009) uses one of Harding’s frameworks to explicitly compare the treatment of slaves in the antebellum South to the treatment of poor students in schools today; in doing so, he links the slave revolts in Harding’s work to the current insurrectionary work of young people in Baltimore. If Baker was one of the great-grandchildren of Harriet Tubman, as Harding (2009) contends, and the young people of the B.A.P. are the grandchildren of Baker, as Payne (2010) contends, then the B.A.P. students are the great-great-great-grandchildren of Harriet Tubman.

Harding’s book comprehensively chronicles insurrections from the time of slave ships all the way up through the end of the Civil War. Meanwhile, Tuck’s (2010) work documents freedom struggles in this country that occurred in every year in every decade from 1861 through 2000. While Tuck’s volume is a survey, many others have made more in-depth examinations of the Black freedom struggle.

Throughout the history of the enslavement of Black people, different struggles rise to the fore and historians have tried to document them – some with a keen focus on the resistance and refusal of those enslaved. Jones, Jr. (1990) documents the dueling mechanisms of control and strategies of resistance during slavery in South Carolina, calling the time of slavery a constant “state of war” between slaveholders and slaves. In *Forging Freedom*, Nash (1988) illuminates the free Black community in Philadelphia from 1720-1840, one of several in the North that are often forgotten. Litwack (1977) describes relationships among former slaves, slaveholders, newly arrived Northerners and the various government entities directly following the Civil War.

After the war, too, historians document the struggle for freedom that has not yet come, with a sharp eye toward the insistence and demands of people to be free with the full rights they deserve. Lang (2009) examines the role of class politics in the Black liberation in
St. Louis between 1936 and 1975. Hall (2005) argues that the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s began in the 1940s with a confluence of forces committed to civil rights and labor rights. Morris (1984) identifies what leadership, structures and relationships were in place in the South prior to the mass movement organizing, which made clear Black people’s demands on society in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Clayborn’s (1981) in-depth look at SNCC’s history features the role of young people in the Black freedom struggle in the early 1960s, while Payne (1996) provides one of the most grounded takes on the Civil Rights Movement as he highlights the critical role of day-to-day organizing in the larger movement. The edited volume, *Freedom North: Black Freedom Struggle Outside of the South, 1940-1980*, directs the reader’s attention away from the southern location of the majority of historical accounts of the Black freedom struggle (Theoharis & Woodard, 2003).

What we learn from this survey of the literature is that different contexts and struggles required different kinds of actions, strategies, discourses and ideas. What Harding calls the central theme in Black history in this country, however, remains constant: “[the] active black struggle for freedom and justice” (p. xx). In all cases, the focus is on how Black people actively organized themselves into communities of resistance, insisting on the recognition of their full human being. My study documents how four young Black men today are continuing this tradition, demanding recognition of their humanity in social, political, and economic spaces. In this way, it contributes to the scholarship on the Black freedom struggle and the Black organizing tradition.

While historical accounts dominate this scholarship, ethnographic research documenting its modern incarnations is rare – particularly in educational research. The overwhelming majority of the scholarship on Black males and education focuses on the
“crisis” of Black males (Ladson Billings, 2011; Brown, 2011; Brown and Donnor, 2011) and not on their struggle for liberation. This research is dominated by what Eve Tuck calls “damage-based research,” (Tuck, 2009) seeking to document pathology. Even those committed to helping Black males, like Pedro Noguera (2008), frame the issue as in his book title, The Trouble with Black Boys. This approach to understanding young Black men is damage-based because it treats young people as objects in a system rather than as actors on a system. Situating this study in the Black freedom struggle, by contrast, approaches these young men as actors – as subjects stepping into history – from the outset.

A notable exception to the rarity of educational research that shares this approach is Shawn Ginwright’s (2010) book, Black Youth Rising. In this ethnographic study, Ginwright features Leadership Excellence (LE), an organization he founded in Oakland, California to define and promote the notion of “radical healing,” and to make the connection between this healing and resulting political action. Ginwright traces the roots of LE’s work back to the struggle for community autonomy of the Black Panther Party in Oakland in the 1960s and 1970s. Though Ginwright uses extensive quotes and experiences of young people, the story he tells is focused on the organization rather than on the individual members. My study will complement Ginwright’s work by examining how individuals understand their lives within and beyond an organization like Leadership Excellence.

In sum, I have argued that, as the great-great-great-grandchildren of Harriet Tubman, these young men deserve to be properly situated among their ancestors in the Black freedom struggle. Tracing how some of their ancestors made a demand on themselves to step into history, reviewing the ways in which youth organizing scholarship typically fails to document this lineage in practice, and situating this project in the freedom struggle rather
than damage-based educational literature, I prepare readers to understand the ways in which these young men take their own steps into history.
Portraiture: Adding Depth to a Flat Picture

Thinking of young Black men in Baltimore, many people conjure up images they might find on *The Wire*. HBO’s critically acclaimed television show portrays the vast majority of its young Black characters as habitual drug dealers or ruthless killers. This negative depiction is not limited to popular culture or mainstream media. As a teacher in Baltimore and a youth organizer with the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.), I heard countless adults refer to young Black men as threatening, destructive or lost. If this view were isolated to media and perception, research might be able to offer a different account, but, as I have argued in my literature review, the majority of education scholarship on Black males paints just as bleak a picture. The collective representation they illustrate, like images on the television screen, are too flat. The picture does not resonate with my own experiences working in Baltimore with these young men.

I do not mean to suggest that Baltimore does not have elements similar to those rendered in *The Wire*. There are over 300 murders every year in the city, where the majority of both perpetrators and victims are Black men. The high school graduation rate for Black men in Baltimore City is 35% (Schott Foundation for Public Education, 2010). These are deeply troubling realities, but they do not capture the full complexity of the lives of young Black men in Baltimore. I am not suggesting educational researchers are making up their data and findings; I am suggesting that there is more to the story. This is precisely why I turned to portraiture as my research methodology.

This study is not meant to be a counter-story. This is not educational research that extols the greatness of young Black men in Baltimore. That picture would be just as flat. Nor is this a study of exceptionalism. I am reminded of the following lines from the song “Thieves in the Night,” by rap artist Yasiin Bey, formerly known as Mos Def:
I find it’s distressin’, there’s never no in-between
We either niggas or kings, we either bitches or queens.

Bey is lamenting the fact that Black people can never just *be*. They have to be either criminals or exalted; they are not allowed to just be ordinary people.

This study is meant to be deeply human – to capture the ways in which four young Black men simply *be*. In this search for the human, portraiture thrives as methodology. As Lawrence-Lightfoot writes, portraiture is used “to capture the complexity, dynamics and subtlety of human experience…” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. xv).

In addition to portraiture’s strength as a methodology for adding depth to the picture, the stance of portraiture is to ask: “what is good here?” This question certainly needs posing and pondering in educational research on Black men, given the preponderance of damage-based research on this population. Even as a portraitist asks *what is good here*, she must attend to “vulnerability and weakness.” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 9). That is to say, even the good must have depth in portraiture. This will be especially important in this study because I admire these young men. I interloped in their lives for the purposes of this project. I care for these young men. I care about how they are portrayed. I feel a precious responsibility as I hold their stories. It is a responsibility to them, but also to the world. In order to carry out this responsibility – to the world, to them, and to myself – I have embraced portraiture, and have drawn out tensions and contradictions in the narratives to attend to their vulnerabilities and weaknesses.

*The Audience*

Portraiture gives explicit attention to three interrelated stakeholders: the audience, participants, and researcher (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997). Attending to questions of audience, I again return to the ways in which readers’ preconceived notions may be slanted. Given the perception of young Black men in Baltimore, some would argue that the powerful
organizing work these young men have done is extraordinary. Importantly, though, as human beings, they are just ordinary; that is, they have the same worth and specialness as all the other people in their neighborhood. In my view, portraiture is the best way to understand and portray the seemingly contradictory exceptionalism and normality of these young men, so that the reader might be able to feel “resonance and identification” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 15).

The Participants

Portraiture is also explicit in its stance regarding the participants. As Lawrence-Lightfoot describes seeing portraits of herself: “These portraits did not capture me as I saw myself…they seemed to capture my essence – qualities of character and history, some of which I was unaware of, some of which I resisted mightily, some of which felt deeply familiar” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 4). This is portraiture’s standard: a participant recognizing herself and learning something new, even as she questions the portrait’s accuracy. It is important to me that the participants recognize themselves and learn about themselves and their struggle – and that they are able to do so while feeling “fully attended to, recognized, appreciated, respected, scrutinized” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 5).

The Researcher

Additionally, portraiture is distinctive in the role and voice of the researcher in the work. I openly acknowledge that I care about these young men, so trying to do this project at an “objective” distance would not do justice to the science of social science. All genres of research are influenced by the researcher, “…revealed in the conceptual orientation, the disciplinary lens, the methods and design…” (Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis, p. 86). Portraiture embraces the researcher’s role and voice as present and transparent, but also
cautions it to be “restrained, disciplined, and carefully controlled” (p. 85). Restraint is particularly important because of my longstanding and deep relationships with the participants. At the same time, this relationship is a strength in the research. The famous case of Margaret Mead and the controversy over whether her “informants” in Samoa lied to her is illustrative. If Wayne tries to tell me that everything was peaceful and harmonious in the Baltimore Algebra Project, I will know I am being lied to. Mead’s, and indeed Freeman’s, objective distance was not a strength in this case. This is just one reason familiarity with the participants is important. In portraiture, I am able to be up front about my relationships with an expectation to include my own thinking about what’s happening. This transparency allows the reader to interpret the data with this fully acknowledged. By presenting the inherent bias, readers understand that this is my interpretation and not a universal truth, as is often presented in research.

Data Collection

I collected data over the course of two years. I spent at least three full days with each participant, observing them for 30 hours. I conducted interviews with each participant, analyzed their poetry and rhymes, and interviewed other key stakeholders.

Participant Interviews

I conducted three to five in-depth, semi-structured, one-on-one interviews, lasting one to two-and-a-half hours with each participant, using Seidman (2006) as a guide (see appendices). The first interview focused on the participants’ life stories, helping to inform reflections on my first research question: What role, if any, did the personal history of four Black men in the Baltimore Algebra Project play in their ability and willingness to make a demand on society? The second focused on their time at the Baltimore Algebra Project while
they were in high school, providing the data to explore my second research question: What effect, if any, did participation in the Baltimore Algebra Project have on their ability and willingness to make a demand on society? The third interview centered on the participants’ current work and life, in which they were specifically invited to reconcile some of their experiences within the context of their current circumstances. For Xzavier, I conducted five interviews over a five-year period, the last three coming in the two-year data collection period with the rest of the participants. I had more than six hours of interview data for each participant, resulting in hundreds of pages of transcript data.

One of the challenges I faced in conducting interviews was having the discipline to ask follow-up and probing questions without assuming the answers. Occasionally, participants said, *well you know what I’m talking about*, to which I responded, *I think I do, but please explain it anyway.* There were at least two off-the-record stories that informed the analysis, but were not included in the portraits.

*Participant Observation*

In addition to interviews, I visited their homes and places of work. I hung out on their porches, played with their kids, had meals with them, drove them around, listened to music with them. I observed their classrooms and meetings, and watched a video shoot and a drag show. I took field notes in these spaces on the things being said and not said; on their actions, gestures, and body language; on the physical setting and the historical setting; and on the gender relationships and racial dynamics. The data collected through these observations allowed me to see how participants “act on society” in an *everyday* sense. In this way, I as able to uncover some of “what is good here?” by noticing how they interacted with their partners, their children, their neighbors, their students. I was also able to look for their
frailties and for contradictions that might be hidden in their interviews. I could see how they reacted to criticism, disappointments, and setbacks.

**Document Analysis**

In addition to interviews and observations, I analyzed documents. In particular, I analyzed the song lyrics and poetry written by two of the four participants. Many of these works of art were made for public consumption and represent what the young men had to say to the world about themselves and about the work they do. In high school, three of the four participants were part of a group they started called the “Militant Advocates,” so these data span several years of artistic expression.

**Stakeholder Interviews**

Finally, I conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with other key stakeholders. I interviewed the mothers of three of the four participants. The fourth participant was both unwilling to ask his mother and reluctant to leave her out. He suggested using his sister as a go-between, but this did not materialize. I also interviewed the partners of the two participants who were in relationships at the time of data collection. In addition, I interviewed Dr. Jay Gillen, the only adult staff at the Baltimore Algebra Project. Finally, I interviewed two other adult allies of one of the participants. The stakeholders with whom I had a previous relationship – the partners and the adult allies – were more at ease and gave longer interviews.

**Data Analysis**

Portraiture methodology guided my data analysis. Among the analytic tools I employed were impressionistic records and analytic memos. Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis (1997) define an impressionistic record as “a ruminative, thoughtful piece that identifies
emerging hypotheses, suggests interpretations, describes shifts in perspective, points to puzzles and dilemmas (methodological, conceptual, ethical) that need attention, and develops a plan of action for the next visit” (1997, p. 188). Impressionistic records allow for an iterative and restrained analysis of data. They allow portraitists to ruminate on ideas that seem to emerge from the data, while their iterative nature helps to either solidify or refute these early analyses. On several occasions, I audio-recorded my impressionistic records immediately following an interview or observation. On other occasions, I wrote my impressionistic memos at the end of a day of data collection.

Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. Through thematic analysis, I identified codes and themes (Boyatzis, 1998). I used MaxQDA software to keep track of codes, themes, important quotes and analytic memos. MaxQDA facilitated my work by allowing me to merge codes and themes, as well as refine them. Coding was an iterative process. I started with some codes from the literature on youth organizing and added codes as I listened to each interview. As I analyzed more data, codes were refined. For example, I had “Family” as a code, but as stories emerged about the role of mothers, siblings and grandparents, I added more specific codes to capture that data. There were more than 40 codes in my code book and an additional 25 sub-codes. Each participant had specific codes assigned to him that emerged from the data. These codes were particular to their stories and helped to start shaping the narrative (Maxwell, 2005).

I wrote analytic memos to deepen insight as well as to question assumptions. The purpose of these memos was to begin the process of producing what was finally written in the portrait. Through these memos, I started to make connections among codes, impressionistic records and field notes to build an analytic narrative.
While impressionistic records, codes and analytic memos are useful tools, the process of analysis is about “deep contemplation and probing insight” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 189). Through the data collection and analysis, I tried to “listen for the story” (p. 12). The story was further developed by constructing emergent themes through listening for repetitive refrains, resonant metaphors, cultural and institutional rituals, through using triangulation, and by searching for patterns in contrasting and dissonant perspectives (p. 193). The purpose of this listening is to shape what Lawrence-Lightfoot and Davis call an aesthetic whole. The four dimensions I attended to in “weaving” an aesthetic whole were: the conception, or overarching story; the structure, or the elements that scaffold and support the story with resonant themes and metaphors; the form, or elements that give life and meaning to the structure; and coherence, or the “unity and integrity of the piece” (p. 247).

The conception for each participant’s story started to emerge from their life history interviews. Major themes such as music, family, humanness and belonging emerged from the initial interview through repetitive refrains. While the conception was fairly obvious over the course of six hours of interviews, the structure took much more time to develop. I looked for and created pillars that were a combination of themes and resonant metaphors specific to the participants, which could also serve as mechanisms to address the research questions. These pillars served as sections for each portrait, guiding the form that put the flesh onto the skeletal structure. The observational data as a form of triangulation were especially important in the form. To achieve coherence, the conception, structure and form all had to hold together in a way that would convey a resonating narrative. In addition, the tension and contradictions that often were uncovered through participant observation and stakeholder interviews helped to give coherence. That is to say, if the narrative held together too
perfectly, with no contrasting and dissonant perspectives, the sense of depth that is the aim of portraiture would be lost.

Portraiture gave me the opportunity to address my concern about adding depth to the flat picture of young Black men in Baltimore – to portray the seemingly contradictory extraordinariness and normality of the participants, to honor my participants and my relationships with them, while producing a piece of scholarship that extends the tradition of Black Liberation literature.

Validity

Maxwell (2005) frames the validity question as: how might I be wrong? Another way to ask the question is: how am I going to know that what I claim in my findings is credible? Maxwell identifies several ways to account for validity checks, which portraiture includes as part of its methodology, including: long term involvement; rich data; respondent validation; searching for discrepant evidence and negative cases; and triangulation. Portraiture extends Maxwell to a standard of “authenticity.” It asks the question of credibility and “resonance” to three audiences – the researcher, the reader, and the participants.

Checks for authenticity were built into my study design. I started even before data collection began by articulating theoretical frameworks and “registering [my] preoccupations” (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Davis, 1997, p. 213). The process continued through building genuine relationships with my participants. Through impressionistic records, I continually reflected on and was reflexive about the study.

My involvement has been long-term. I knew these young men for eight years before data collection began, and data collection was conducted over two years. The data I used were rich in that they were multifaceted – interviews of participants and related
stakeholders; participant observation at home with family, at work with colleagues and at play with friends; and participants’ essays, poems and rhymes. I used several sources of data, which allowed me to triangulate. Using these different sources – the reflections of the participants, the words of those close to them, the poetry and articles, my own observations – I was able to look for “points of convergence” leading to my conclusions and findings.

I attended to what Lawrence-Lightfoot calls one’s preoccupations – assumptions, discipline, theoretical perspectives, and intellectual interests (p. 93). My theoretical frameworks developed from the literature, from my research, and from my experiences aided in understanding the phenomena, rather than reinforcing my preconceived ideas.

Some Final Notes

Note on Voice

In the portraits, I have, at times, used “informal” language. Part of this choice has to do with portraiture’s stance on audience and resonance. I use my voice as a tool to help the reader understand my relationship with the participants and to get a feel for the way they be in the world, and how we be together. It is important to me that the reader is able to hear the ways I speak, particularly in conversation with the ideas in this work and with these young men. I am capable of using academic language; the way I use my voice in the portraits is an aesthetic and analytic choice.

Note on Block Quotes

Despite advice from my advisor and writing group members, I have decided to keep long block quotes in the narratives. I ask readers to read them and not skim or skip the block quotes. My voice is privileged in this work, as 95 percent of the words are mine. I am further privileged in that I had the power to choose which of their words to include. Block quotes are my way of giving their voice some space. It is also a way for readers to understand more
of the context of their words. Finally, it is an opportunity for many to hear more of the ideas of people they will never meet. Mathematically speaking, the length of a paragraph-long quote is the same as one of my written paragraphs. If one is to skip over their paragraphs, why not skip over my paragraphs, as well? My decision to undertake this project was centrally driven by my desire to allow others the tremendous privilege of “meeting” these young men, coming to know them to some extent. Listening thoughtfully and patiently to their voices is a key element of this opportunity.

Note on Memories

At times in the portraits I use my own memories to help readers “see” the young men when they were 16 years old. I did this to add context and texture, but did not use the memories as a basis for data analysis or drawing conclusions.

Note on Names

Most of us have different names depending on context and relationships. My given name is “Nkondo,” but most of the world knows me as “Thomas”; my mother and sister and those who knew me from back in the day call me “Tom”; to my kids, my name is “Daddy”; on the basketball court, I am “T” – and after the game I am “T-Money” or “T-Broke” depending on how well I shot the ball. Finally, to my participants, I’m “Mr. Nik.” Just as each of us have different names for different people and different contexts, Comrade, Wayne, X and Chris have different names. In the portraits, I sometimes use different names for the same participant. I have tried to use the name that was most resonant for that part of the story. For example, Comrade’s mother would never call him Comrade; she will always call him the name she gave him – “Chris.” In the part of Comrade’s portrait about his childhood, I call him “Chris.” Though it may be confusing initially, as you read on and come to learn them in all their different contexts, I am confident it will feel more comfortable.
I. “Huey”

It’s that Harriet, Marcus Garvey and Huey
Embedded in my brain and it’s runnin all through me.
Never been the same since they put me in them cuffs
Now I’m never giving up
no matter if they pursue me

I’m a muthafuckin movie in the makin
And I got them all shakin
cuz that glass ceiling breakin
Never been a fool
Never fill that prison pool
Never liked school but I always valued principles
RBG
Comradery
Pardon me
It’s been a part of me
That means it’s more than me
As far as the eye can see
We that deep
Filling every slum, hood, villa and backseat
When we marching we pack streets
Picketin so if it’s locked we kick it in
Through thick and thin
Comrades we gets it in
Let’s begin - unite within until the mission end

It’s that Angela, Che Guevara and Castro
Last hope
So loop the beat into an infinite lasso
If you aint kickin it raw, then what you rap for?
I do this for my Black folks that had to use the back door
I still don’t know my family tree
That’s gotta be connected to a branch of my insanity
Aint no substitution to the history of your family
I swear revolution be a good thing for humanity

Power shift
Cuz the people
with the power done power tripped
Still raising my power fist while loading up my power clip
Let ya dollar rip
Aint enough scholarships
They tryna devour shit, I’m tryna empower shit
Aint no polishing the wickedness
Paper over people
The evils we stay resistin it
Tryna stay peaceful when brutal police police you
This democratic equation is the furthest thing from equal for my people
Let’s go

Marcus Garvey and Huey
Marcus Garvey and Huey
It’s that Harriet, Marcus Garvey and Huey
Imbedded in my brain and it’s runnin all through me
It’s that, It’s that, It’s that
Marcus Garvey and Huey
Imbedded in my brain and it’s runnin all through me

Ah man,
we going in
Defying the odds.
We doin it.
Got on all black
Black masks
No pushin us back,
we the strongest,
Manifesto
in my hands now,
going for ours.
No handouts,
we strapped up,
booted out.
See the look on their face when we boot em out
“It’s that Harriet, Marcus Garvey and Huey.” There is no question that this is a political song from the first line. And, really, should there be a question about the political leanings of an MC named “Comrade”? But Comrade’s story and evolution are complex, and there were a lot of other songs he could have dropped as the first single from his *Comradery* mixtape. There are fun songs and love songs and even one that he thinks will be a hit song. But the first drop was “Huey.” Invoking the names of some of the greatest freedom fighters in history leaves little room for interpretation of intent in this song.

The word I got from Baltimore was that Chris (Comrade) had gone soft. That he wasn’t even rapping revolutionary and that his girl had gotten into his mind and taken him away from his old crew. When I heard “Huey,” though, I knew that I couldn’t take those rumors as truth.

Still, with the rumors in the back of my mind, I asked Comrade if his partner, Abeni Nazeer (Bani), was cool with his leading off with this song as his single. “Of course. She loves it,” he answered almost incredulously. Bani is not only Comrade’s partner in relationship, but his partner in all that they do. An extremely talented videographer, Bani creates the vision and direction for all of Comrade’s music videos and shoots them in a style all her own. In an interview with a hip-hop magazine, Bani says, “I love being a female and revealing a perspective and an image a man can’t really create.” ([http://streetsmartmag.com/?p=1764](http://streetsmartmag.com/?p=1764))

In the video for “Huey,” we see Comrade dressed in a camo vest and bare-chested – his chest, arm, and neck tattoos flashing whenever his clothes move with his understated dancing. Three dreads fall over his face, masking him just slightly. Images of Comrade flash on the screen – in different outfits, on the stage, in a back
alley, with his boys. There’s a chain link fence; a light flashes. The constant barrage of images, all in low light backed up by the militant baseline, serve to give the video a revolutionary flavor. “They tryna devour shit, I’m tryna empower shit.” Now

Comrade’s wearing the same camo vest, but with a shirt fashioned as an American flag with a big black X crossing out the red, white and blue stars and stripes. As the song fades out, one of the last images to flash on the screen is of a young woman, her hand inches from the camera with the following words scrawled in black marker: rebel, peace, Huey, kill.

This song highlights how Comrade thinks about the past, present and future. Like many rap songs (Perry, 2004), this one tells truths both about who Comrade is and who he wants to be. When commercial rappers brag about their first hit song before it even becomes a hit, they are both anticipating that hit and trying to will that hit into existence. This same phenomenon is at play in this song. This song is explicitly about revolution. “I swear revolution be a good thing for humanity.” It posits Comrade as a revolutionary. But Comrade admits that he’s rapping about revolution – not necessarily inciting revolution RIGHT NOW: “Right now I see this time period as like a cocoon stage. And things really going to turn up as far as me being active in the world. Instead of just putting out videos, I can actually get more hands-on in my message and activating the songs that I make. “

But there is also plenty of “right now” in the song: “When we marching we pack streets, picketin so if it’s locked we kick it in.” Here, Comrade is referring to the protest work engaged in and through the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.). The B.A.P. led a multi-year campaign to stop the building of a juvenile jail. They argued that the $110 million to construct the jail would be better invested in education and
youth jobs so that the jail would not be necessary. Working with a broad coalition, the B.A.P. served as a radical element that pushed action, even if it did not always seem sensible. On October 31, 2010, this coalition led a march to the site where the jail was supposed to be built. The gravel lot was secured by a gate with lock and chain. The picketers on the march held signs that read: “No to Youth Jails,” “Books Not Bars,” and “Educate Don’t Incarcerate.” The marchers were prepared for the lock and chain and for the legal consequences of their actions when they cut open those chains and planted their picket signs and scattered books in the gravel lot. “When we marching we pack streets, picketin so if it’s locked we kick it in.”

These life experiences, mostly with the B.A.P., but also with other organizations, largely inform what Comrade performs, who he is and what he wants to become. But these experiences are not the only factor. Since leaving the B.A.P., Bani is his biggest influence, and his family has and always will be a major influence on him. Still, Comrade contends, “most of my education is from the Algebra Project.”

Comrade started in the B.A.P. as a tutee at the parent- and teacher-led Stadium School. Jay Gillen, who went on to found the B.A.P., was also a founding teacher and parent at the school. The Stadium School was started by parents and teachers who felt that their children – children living in the area of the defunct Baltimore Colts stadium – did not have enriching educational opportunities. Well before the onslaught of charter schools, this was a school conceived and run by parents and teachers. The school was rooted in the community and espoused the values of community in the school itself. Teachers took on a learner-centered pedagogy where students were challenged to think deeply and divergently. A
The mainstay of the school was what they called “mini-courses.” The offerings were varied, based on a combination of student interest and teacher expertise. Mr. Marcus offered gardening and African drumming; Miss Diane offered mosaic art; Mr. Jay had chess and football; and there were many others. Tuesday and Thursday afternoons were dedicated to this enriching work. Comrade fondly remembers learning to play chess at Stadium School.

The Stadium School was also the incubator for the B.A.P. Long before they were protesting – throwing coffins and cutting chains – the students of the B.A.P. were engaging in peer-to-peer math tutoring. Comrade’s tutor was a former Stadium School student and the brother of one of his classmates. This idea of “keeping it in the family” was important in the early stages as the project built momentum.

The B.A.P. pays its peer tutors, and in doing so they enter their members into a “knowledge-based” economy. Like most young people who join the B.A.P., Comrade was most interested in this idea of getting a job. Comrade knew that as soon as he left Stadium School he would be eligible to become a tutor, just like Mildred’s brother. Having a job at 13 was important and impressive to him. In another one of his songs, Comrade raps, “Since 13 I earned cheddar.” And while a fair number of young Black men in Baltimore can make money at age 13, most can’t do it legally. And even fewer can do it legally using their knowledge of an academic discipline as the basis. “And my parents was cool with that ’cause it’s like, ‘All right, you have a job? That’s a good thing, responsibility, I don’t have to buy you no more video games, you can buy them yourself.’ So, you know, that was cool, open a bank account. My folks took me to open a bank account so I could start saving some money.”
Comrade was not necessarily typical in putting his money in the bank. Often on payday a group of students would pile into my car and I would drop them at a check-cashing establishment so they could turn their knowledge capital into cash. The check-cashing place was often situated next to a chicken box spot and liquor store. I would try to talk to them about just giving away some of their hard-earned money to the check-cashers, and they would put me off with a "yeah, I’m pretty sure I’m gonna get a bank account soon." We all knew that was unlikely, so we would just do the same song and dance two weeks later.

Comrade’s parents’ keen interest in his work was not necessarily typical for B.A.P. students, either. What was typical was students’ initial interest in a job expanding into the more political interests of the B.A.P. For Comrade, this political interest expanded as a result of two trips he took in his sophomore year in high school.

In cooperation with a nearby private independent school, students from Comrade’s high school went on a Civil Rights tour in the deep South.

The trip itself was interesting 'cause it was the first time, really, I was able to go outside the city for, like, a school-type of event. And when we would go to the museums and hear different people speak about the Civil Rights, it was like, it was cool because it wasn’t like a History Channel lesson or a textbook. It was like, you really, you feel like you’re right there, hearing it or witnessing it, and it helped me better understand, like, how the Civil Rights era really changed a lot of things but didn’t change a lot of things. And how the people who were struggling for a better life for us were young people.

One of the most important lessons for Comrade was the possibility and power of young people. It hit him that the Civil Rights Movement was often led by young
people. Becoming conscious of the struggle and then connecting the struggle with young people would push Comrade to then push other young people in the B.A.P. to keep taking action.

The second trip Comrade cites as important was one I arranged to visit a nearby suburban public school just outside of Baltimore. The purpose of the visit was to give the students some idea of the kind of schools that are possible. As we walked into the school, the students were immediately impressed by its cleanliness. It was both clean and functional compared to Comrade’s school, City, where we had broken toilets, decaying paint on some of the walls and a completely outdated library. As we toured the halls, led by an assistant principal and two students, we came to one impressive room after another. The engineering lab with a complete car in it and the kitchen/cafeteria were the highlights. What seemed to resonate most was that the students helped to run the lab and they staffed the cafeteria and helped make the food. Clearly a lot of resources had been invested in the school’s technology, its upkeep and curriculum. For Comrade, it created a dissonance that led him to analyze his own school situation. “So, I guess toward the end of my tenth-grade year, you and Jay took us to Eastern Tech, and that really changed my whole life right there.” The trip seemed to solidify the idea that people had been lying to him about how wonderful his schooling experience was at his citywide magnet school. Chris recalls that all the students on the tour were impressed with the condition of the school, the innovative courses, the great food and the student leadership.

I just always looked back to that as the moment where I realized - wow, people are really lying about City being so great because if City’s one of the top schools in the country, what is Eastern Tech?
… So, I was taken away by that, and I just felt like, “Okay, we have to do something about this.”

Further, Comrade started to see that there was more to his situation than simply being told a lie. He started to connect some dots and draw some conclusions about the intentionality behind these disparate educational spaces and experiences.

Once we started to ask, “Okay, how do we get into this school?” And I remember going into the office there and she showed us the requirements. I guess they have geometry and certain classes in middle school in order to even get into this school, and those courses are not offered to us in middle school, so it was like, I just took it in. “All right, it’s set up this way for us not to get into a high school like this, intentionally.” That’s how I took it.

Armed with a seeing-is-believing kind of truth, Comrade became more militant and radical, developing as a leader within the B.A.P. Comrade’s first experience with civil disobedience changed his perspective on how far young people needed to go to effect change. The B.A.P. students had been trying – unsuccessfully – for weeks to get a meeting with the CEO of the Baltimore schools to discuss the reasons behind a school budget deficit. The young people organized a rally of hundreds of students outside the district central office, while some students were going to sit-in in front of the CEO’s office until they were seen and heard. After going through civil disobedience training in previous weeks, a handful of students were committed to the sit-in. Comrade remembers entering the school headquarters, thinking, “there’s no turning back…” And for Comrade and his belief in the power of civil disobedience, there was no turning back either. The students were arrested almost immediately, after anticipating that they would be there for hours or even
through the night. They received media attention and the meeting with the CEO was set for the next day.

Well, I always encourage people to do civil disobedience cuz, like, I mean, how I felt about it was, Look, you know how much we need this. If we committed to, if a lot of us, not a lot of us, but if we decide to do this action, why not take it a step further and, you know, put our freedom on the line for a few hours to really show the world that we’re serious about our education and we don’t wanna just rally and go home? We wanna make sure that the message is set, that we’re dead serious about this issue. That’s how I felt about it.

Comrade’s militancy should not be confused with outward anger. Comrade is known for always smiling. Call him the “friendly civil disobeyer.” But whenever he grabbed the megaphone at a rally, the smile would disappear and Comrade made sure he projected the gravity of the moment and its consequences.

At the same time when Comrade was becoming more politicized and developing his leadership, he was writing poetry. This was poetry approaching rap, but he was not yet schooled in how to turn his poetry into hip-hop. Comrade was leading a strand of the B.A.P. called the Advocacy Committee. Advocacy had formed its own separate working group because the student leadership felt that the political organizing work was taking up too much space in their Friday leadership meetings. At the time, the B.A.P. had seven sites where they engaged in peer-to-peer math tutoring. The student site leaders and the B.A.P. elected leadership, as well as any other members who wanted the free pizza or to be involved in leadership, would meet every Friday for the leadership meeting. At these meetings, the students would discuss issues at the sites, including administrative, financial and pedagogical
concerns. The time meant for improving the quality of the site work was being crowded out by long discussions about political organizing. Consequently, a separate Advocacy Committee was created so they could work out details and make plans, and then bring their work back to the Friday leadership meetings to get feedback and make final decisions.

Advocacy met twice a week in preparation for these Friday meetings. Comrade and others from the B.A.P. were dabbling in hip-hop during this time:

“Around the same time, I met Wayne, Brian, X, I met them the same year, and they were into it, and Ms. Betty introduced us to Ms. Blue, Michelle Blue.” Ms. Blue ran a program called Follow Your Dreams. The Follow Your Dreams mission is “to empower youth by providing enrichment activities in a safe learning environment where they can express themselves through music, video and internet projects that will help develop marketable skills through arts-based media technology with the assistance of skilled mentors.” (www.followyourdreamsinc.org)

Comrade, Brian, X, Wayne, Chris Moser, Chelsea and others would go to Follow Your Dreams and learn about the roots of hip-hop, the culture of hip-hop, the business side, the production side; it was a combination of the artistic and the practical. Comrade talks about how the two programs – B.A.P. and Follow Your Dreams – worked in tandem: “But [Follow Your Dreams] was pretty much, it was an extension of the Algebra Project though, at the same time, cuz we would go right after the Advocacy meeting that was at the YMCA. So, we would just walk a couple blocks to the studio.” They were learning political education through the B.A.P. and getting experience in political action, and then expressing themselves immediately following their meetings in the Follow Your Dreams space. Wayne was the one who
taught Comrade how to change his poems into raps – how to structure his poems to flow and stay on beat. Comrade, 16 at the time, remembers it fondly:

Oh man, we was in it. So, we formed a group, Militant Advocates, ’cause we were already advocates and we were getting into what it means to be militant, how we need to take our actions to the next level ’cause talking to these politicians isn’t working, and we just expressed that through music and all the venues, all the space to do it was there through the Algebra Project, *Follow Your Dreams*. After *Follow Your Dreams*, we’d go to Chelsea house, we would all be there ‘til about 9 o’clock or later going over songs, different ideas, but it was all, like, rooted through the Algebra Project. And that was, that was cool. So, I really took it seriously. Like, we all took it seriously, and we started getting involved with performing through the Algebra Project, and Algebra Project allies. Oh man, that was fun.

While the other members of Militant Advocates still dabble in the art, occasionally recording something on their phones or computers, “Comrade” – the political musical artist – was born out of the Militant Advocates. For Comrade, it is unfathomable that the rest of the group stopped producing music: “I can’t stop doing it,” he insisted. For Wayne and Brian and X there are lots of explanations, and Comrade knows them – life events, such as children and partners and stress and work, pushed them away from the MC path. While life got in the way for the other members, Comrade made music his life. And not all of them left: Asa, Comrade’s brother, and their lifelong friend Chris Moser formed a group called TruSoundz. They continue to make beats to this day and often collaborate with Comrade. Comrade has matured and expanded his sound and content since then, but there is
no doubt that his identity as a rapper was the result of his time at the B.A.P. and as part of Militant Advocates.

While the B.A.P. gave him a certain exposure and literacy – in conscious activism and social change – as well as a sense of possibility, Comrade would deepen his knowledge as he grew out of the Militant Advocates. Comrade did well enough in high school to attend the flagship school of the University of Maryland system at College Park. College Park is a predominantly White state university. When my students at City went to College Park, folks celebrated because it was considered a prestigious school and it got young people out of Baltimore. The experience for Comrade wasn’t so celebratory. Jay tried to warn him that things may be disappointing at College Park, “He said something was gonna stand out or not be as welcoming as you expect… I remember, like, the cafeteria, well, it’s not a cafeteria, you know, dining hall, and there’s, you know, Whites over here, Blacks over here, so I guess it’s that type of thing.” The segregation was one thing, but Comrade’s main criticism was that the school did not resemble reality:

College Park isn’t real. It’s not a real place. It’s outside of reality. It’s like it’s in its own little bubble of imagination because there, it’s its own city outside of the world. Like, you have everything you need and you want – games, food, I don’t know, bowling, arcades, all that stuff on campus – it was just a huge transition coming from your mom’s house on Harford Road in Baltimore City to LaPlata Hall.

So, while his classmates were living in this “bubble,” outside his reality growing up in Baltimore, Comrade was doing his own thing. He would spend his days on the basketball court and evenings watching YouTube clips of Stokely Carmichael (Kwame Ture) and Huey Newton and Malcolm X. He would go to
Community Roots meetings – which described themselves as, “fundamentally an activist based group that intends to unite the many ethnic communities of the University of Maryland through activist work.”

(http://communityroots.wix.com/umdcp#!croots-constitution/c1enr). And he would perform at the College Park Juke Joints (open mic sessions for students).

Comrade was getting an education, but he wasn’t doing so by going to class.

Comrade left College Park after a year and a half, but not before he delved deeper into a connection he had made at the B.A.P. The B.A.P. was part of a coalition called the Baltimore Education Advocates. Among the participants were two Baltimore City teachers who also happened to be members of a communist party – the Progressive Labor Party. They engaged the young people in their ideas and gave them copies of their newspaper, The Communist, at our coalition meetings. Most of the Party activity, however, happened in D.C. When Comrade was at College Park, one of those teachers connected him to the Party, and he was able to attend their meetings and events in D.C.

When I was at College Park, they had a group in D.C. with the Progressive Labor Party, and I would meet with them and organize events. Like every May Day, we go to New York for a huge march and dinner and performances. So, I would perform after the march, speaking and rallying. And that’s cool too cuz we do a lot of traveling, like, we been to L.A. a couple summers, organizing students and workers down there to get involved with the communist movement and why we need a revolution, and why people should be educated on what’s happening, how the politicians aren’t really for the people.

His time with the Party helped deepen and refine his analysis of the political and economic systems that led to oppressive conditions in Baltimore and around the
country. That analysis sharpened his call for revolution. “Every time we would go on those trips, it was always fun cuz it was younger people, and we just have fun and have conversations about revolution and destroying capitalism and all that type of stuff.” Comrade credits his time with the Party for allowing him to grow beyond what he had learned at the B.A.P. He would eventually grow weary of the Party because, “it’s like the Party’s really more so based on talking.” Comrade was much more interested in action than in talking. He is still in touch with Party members and activities, and their influence on his political and social analysis is unmistakable, but he doesn’t place himself in that circle regularly anymore.

Comrade left College Park with a “1-point-something” grade point average and returned to Baltimore, enrolling at Morgan State University. Morgan is a historically Black university and Comrade says, “My experience was a lot better at Morgan than College Park.” Morgan was much more his style and pace, and he was able to engage in some meaningful organizing work again. Comrade helped form a group called Morgan United to get students involved in political issues. Many former B.A.P. students at Morgan got involved with Morgan United. They carried out a year-long campaign in support of food workers’ rights at the college. Simultaneously, Comrade was learning from an African-centered group, Solvivaz Nation, through another B.A.P. connection. One of B.A.P.’s most outspoken charismatic leaders, Ryan Mason, brought Solvivaz into contact with B.A.P. Comrade’s first tattoo was an ankh – an ancient Egyptian symbol that is used by many in the African diaspora and African-centered organizations to represent the spirituality and ingenuity inherent in African peoples. When he returned to Baltimore, he continued to learn about African and Black history and ideas about Black nationalism from them.
One can trace all these influences through the song “Huey” – the B.A.P. with its possibility and action; the Progressive Labor Party with its rhetorical and system-level analysis; and Solvivaz with its emphasis on Blackness and Africa. For a long time, music has been a political outlet for Comrade and it continues to be. For now, music is his medium of political action. “Huey” reflects where Comrade came from, who he is and where he wants to go – at least in political terms.

II. “88”

Born in 88, spent my whole life stressin
Young adolescent
raised in aggression
You aint on the same page
aint a thing you can tell us
Overly rebellious
Running with the fellas
Sitting in class about half of us failing
It’s cold world –
Muthafucka who you tellin?
Shit
Today I got hit with a repossession
Now my eyes blood shot
Looking like a possession
Gotta make ends meet,
Man, how we gonna eat?
With those kind of questions
Tell me how I’m gonna sleep?
Tell me how I’m gonna sleep?

“88” refers to a “young adolescent raised in aggression,” and there is no question that aggression surrounded Chris – “Comrade’s” given name – growing up. But aggression is not the immediate word that comes to mind in relation to his childhood. Even though Chris was surrounded by the corner boys – and the violence and police presence that accompany them – he was more likely to be calm and patient than aggressive. Sitting at the black table in Chris’s mother’s formal dining
room, a floor-to-ceiling hutch filled with decorative glassware to our right and a vase with artificial flowers between us, I feel privileged to have time with her and am eager to learn what she taught him as a child:

I tried to teach him patience and honesty. If you are not honest, even with yourself, if you don’t keep on putting it into the child that it is important, then they lose that sense of values that you supposed to have and you might go through life in the wrong direction.

Chris remembers childhood fondly, and his mom was no small part of that. Calling her the “matriarch” of the family, he credits the stability in his childhood to his mother’s being at home when he and his brother got home from school. “I guess a real big piece is my mom staying at home…It was always, my mom was always home. Food, dinner, breakfast, all that… But that was always something interesting and good and fun cuz mom’s always there.”

His mother volunteered at the school and sometimes substituted in his class. She would take them all to the gym to play sports. All of Chris’s friends loved his mom and still do. According to her, “They always came here, my door was always open and it still is always open [laughs]. It’s always open. And it’s good because I know where they are and they are like my children, too. And if it’s some place they need to be to calm down or whatever, just talk things out – then it’s fine.” Chris’s childhood home was a place of calm for him and his friends – an environment his mother intentionally created.

His mom sees herself as someone who is “very calm and very positive…some people say I’m too calm.” She taught him that same calmness and “learning not to be negative.” In fact, they both favorably compare themselves to each other. I ask if she thinks Chris is ever too calm, and she responds, “Well, I say he’s just like
me.” And Chris, in turn, says, “Well, I guess, my mom’s like, it’s hard to see her upset about anything, like she’s always had the quiet, cool, I guess kinda like me.”

Chris’s constant companion in those days was his younger brother Asa. These days his constant companion is his partner Bani, but his brother is a close second. You can still find them hanging out together in their mother’s basement, playing Madden or Grand Theft Auto on the PlayStation or making music with Asa’s beat machine. As half of the music production team TruSoundz, Asa and his other half Chris Moser make the beats that Comrade raps over. It’s as if they are still in the basement as kids.

In childhood, though, Chris and his brother were much more likely to be playing sports. Sports were a big part of Chris’s childhood:

I would say about five or six of us in the neighborhood, who, we pretty much grew up together and see ourselves like brothers, so we were always sittin’ on the porch, talk, chill, run around playin’ football like every day, basketball every day in the backyard, at the PAL center or at the golf course playin’, runnin’ around, but like on a daily basis.

Chris remembers the PAL (Police Athletic League) center especially: “The PAL center was very important to me.” He and Asa and the other neighborhood kids would go to the rec center after school; they’d start with homework and then play sports. Sometimes they would take short trips, and there were winter and summer programs when school wasn’t in session. Chris includes Officers Smitty, Bristow and Kanadow from the PAL center on a list of mentors growing up. “It’s weird that they’re officers…they were never like police officers.” The distinction he makes is important because Chris remembers these particular relationships and the
advice these men gave him “about sports, or what to do, or how to stay on the right path.” They weren’t “police officers” – they weren’t policing, they were mentoring.

Overall, Chris paints a picture of a fun childhood, one with positive peer and adult relationships. Elementary school is not featured prominently in Chris’s memories, though he remembers being a safety patrol and, of course, his mom taking his class to the gym.

Chris had other siblings, as well – older siblings who “were more like aunts and uncles, you know.” These older siblings from his mother’s previous relationship guided Chris and gave him people to look up to.

But, like my sister, LaShawn, she’s the type of person that gets stuff done. Like she’s really about her business. She’s successful, she went to college, she went to Howard. She’s one of the people I really look up to like, look, I can really make something of myself. My family does it all the time.

His brothers and sisters were role models in very concrete and attainable ways. “My family does it all the time.” His older siblings lived in Virginia, so they weren’t there on a daily basis, but were always there in the back of his mind as a point of reference, as a point of possibility. All of these strong relationships were vital in Chris’s maturation.

This does not mean that “88” is make-believe. Despite the good times, there was no shielding Chris from the realities of poverty in Baltimore. He didn’t hang with the corner boys, but they were right there:

I wanna say we were the, I don’t wanna say the good kids, but we weren’t the ones that was really on the corner or getting into fights. We were more into havin’ fun or, I guess, not getting caught up in any of those things, even though our relatives and friends were.
The presence of these elements looms large. Getting out of my car on Comrade’s block, I instinctively slow my walk – not wanting to seem in a hurry, making sure people know I feel confident about where I am and where I’m going. I keep my eyes open and wary, but take care not to appear to be on alert. It’s a way of being that I learned along the way and it comes back quickly.

These ways of being – for me, not acting like a mark but not pretending I’m a tough guy – are ways that protect us and they are dictated by our circumstances. On the one hand, it is no different from how many people have to learn to be in particular situations – a mother with her children, a professor with her students, a kid on the playground. That same mother is different with her sisters, as is that professor with her colleagues, and the kid at church. These people have all learned to adjust their behavior to particular contexts, and would behave differently in other situations. On the other hand, the particular stress involved with this other way of being in the streets is one that has a deep impact on young people – with implications for physical, emotional and psychological health. But the impact of this stress often is not taken into account when, for example, looking at the educational outcomes of these young people.

Growing up with the stress of the streets peppered the good times of Chris’s childhood with many difficult moments as well. Chris remembers an incident from a few years back when he and his boys were getting ready to play their annual Day After Christmas football game.

Me and my friends, my brothers, we were on our way to a football game – I think it was the Day After Christmas game. Yeah, ’cause it’s eleven-on-eleven, so there was a good seven of us – we walking,
‘cause we usually meet up at Chris Moser’s house, which is around the corner from my mom’s house – we all meet up there, get pumped up about the game, then we walk to Hopkins from there. So, two years ago, we were walking to the game, we didn’t even make it off the block yet, and the police pull up, sit us all down on the curb, and just start busting – we have a football in our hands, cleats on – and they’re just cussing us, start patting the guy, Rashad, down. I just felt so frustrated, like, it felt like there was nothing I could do. I mean, it really, I felt like I coulda did something, but I didn’t want to just go at it with the police at the time, so my decision to just try to make the process go by as fast as possible just made me feel so powerless.

Though disheartening and disempowering, these kinds of experiences also gave Chris fodder for political analysis and, in turn, for his music.

I started really writing as, like, a political release, like, releasing the frustration out through poetry and rhymes. So that’s where it came from. I had some funny buried stuff too, but it was mostly all related with why are things so messed up, you know, we need to do this and make it right, we need to fight back, we need to advocate, we need to be noticed.

This is what Chris meant when he said that college was a big transition from his mom’s house on Harford Road to the dorms at College Park. When he said College Park is separated from reality, this is the reality to which he was referring: the reality of constantly being on guard, the reality of police harassment, the reality of car repossession (“Today I got hit with a repossession/Now my eyes blood shot/Looking like a possession”). His car was repossessed the day he wrote “88,” and he spent the whole night trying to figure out how to get it back. So, while Chris is calm and quiet and patient and respectful on the outside, he is angry and
passionate and contemptuous on the inside. And that comes from seeing what he
has seen, learning what he has learned, and feeling what he has felt. And it comes out
in his music:

You aint on the same page
aint a thing you can tell us
Overly rebellious
Running with the fellas
Sitting in class about half of us failing
It’s cold world –
Muthafucka who you tellin?

In his song, I can hear the teacher saying, it’s a cold world out there, you have to pay
attention to me and do what I say, and try your best in school so you can be successful in life. And I
also loudly hear Comrade’s response: “it’s cold world – muthafucka who you tellin?”
The young people seated before the teacher know more acutely how cold the world
is. Chris has seen it firsthand. He’s felt that cold. He’s angry about it and about the
irony of the teacher preaching at him. He’ll sit there in class and discreetly roll his
eyes, but his music will call you out – and a muthafucka to boot. Anger, passion,
contempt – all sitting just below the surface waiting to come out.

His mother says that nothing about his music makes her uncomfortable.
Even his political action, including the civil disobedience, is fine with her: “It was
never too far – you have to stand your ground for that.” She admits she was initially
shocked by his political work with the B.A.P. – not because she disapproved, but
because he had always been so quiet. Chris’s partner Bani explains this phenomenon,
which those of us who know Chris recognize all too well:

We could be sitting in a room with a bunch of people and then he
will not say not one word. You might not even recognize him in a
room full of people because that’s how quiet and to hisself he is. But
as soon as someone call his name to come to the stage – whether it’s
speaking or performing a song or just introducing whatever – he just has this huge voice that comes from out of nowhere. But then right after he’s finished speaking, he’ll sit back down and be quiet again. You’ll be like “where did he go?” [laughs].

That huge voice inside him is fueled by the anger at the injustice in the world – in his world. His analysis finds its roots not only in the B.A.P. or at college or with the Progressive Labor Party or Solvizaz, but from his lived experience – a lived experience in which harsh realities are balanced against positive and healthy relationships. And his reaction to his experiences is informed largely by what he learned from his family. His childhood friends are his adult friends. The anger that incites him is tempered by the love that surrounds him. He can be outraged at the police who put his hands on him and still shout out Officer Bristow who put his arms around him.

III. “Walk Wit Me”

(CHORUS)
Ever since I was just a young boy I always chased my dream
I know ima do my thing
I know ima do my thing
So please don’t stand in my way
I know what I’m supposed to be
I hope y’all walk with me
I hope y’all walk with me

Used to recite it to my brothers to see if they like it
Now comrades overseas is saying they like it
Young one, look how far that I’ve come and overcame
There’s nothing that you can’t overcome
I poured the pain through my lungs
And I put them over drums
It all starts from the brain before it hits the tongue
A bum – what I coulda been
Or I coulda stayed in that cell they put me in
I rap for the trap
the woulda coulda shoulda beens
The hip-hop heads like yeah it’s getting good again

CHORUS

Mind over matter, nuttin else matters
Your voice so focused I’m rhyming over
the chatter
I stood tall in places where most men
would scatter
They reinventing the wheel, I’m extending
the ladder
I’m good man, that’s my last name
I know who was there before the cash
came
Don’t know the last time I watched
television
Cuz it’s tunnel vision in that fast lane
   It’s August hot on this April day in Baltimore as I sit on the porch of Comrade’s

mom’s row house on Harford Road with him and his brother Asa. Comrade and Bani have moved from their apartment into his mom’s house to save money to finance Comrade’s music career. Studio time takes money; production takes money; promotion takes money; daily subsistence takes money. His mother is happy to have him home, and Bani is willing to sacrifice for their dreams. The steady flow of traffic on one of East Baltimore’s busiest thoroughfares provides the background to our conversation. We wave to neighbors as they make their way on and off the porches lined to our left and right, each separated by the three-foot wall defining all the porches. We sit three houses into the row, facing the municipal golf course across the four-lane road.

I ask Asa how the music production is coming. Comrade nods along as Asa explains new techniques he’s learning and how his repertoire is expanding; these are nods of a proud older brother. Asa’s music is featured on several tracks on Comrade’s mixtape, Comradery.

Then Asa hits me with something that sits heavy on my mind: “You know, if Chris woulda done that college thing, I’d probably be tryna do college, too.” Asa is trying to make it in the music world because Comrade is. It seems to me a heavy burden for Comrade to carry. But as much as it might feel like a burden to have someone tied to your fate, it has also meant an incredible amount of support.
“Walk Wit Me” is an autobiographical track taking the listener from pre-music career Chris to music career Comrade – from “the megaphone to the microphone.” The hook of the track asks the listeners to walk with him. The thing about Comrade is that he already has people walking with him. He’s got a whole team of people willingly joining and supporting him in the uncertain dream of becoming a rap star. His very talented partner has her own dreams of making feature-length films, but has connected herself to this train. Asa is another who is all in on Comrade’s ride. If Comrade ever makes it, he’ll have plenty of people trying to latch on – but, as he says in the song, “I know who was there before the cash came.”

We head to the basement of Mrs. Goodman’s house for a little relief from the heat. The basement was cleared in recent years and the young men have set it up to write and produce music. Asa shows me his drum machine and digital audio workstation. He makes a beat for me, showing me how he integrates different elements, like the drums and the keyboard. We listen to a few of his produced beats, including some tracks from Comradery. It’s dark down there and dampish, like basements tend to be, but it has everything they need, including a PlayStation. They’ve set up a Madden tournament with a bunch of guys from back in the day – guys who all came with Chris through the Algebra Project.

But along with the four track, sound system and PlayStation, they affixed a poster from Comrade’s childhood to the wall. Once in his bedroom, this poster of historical Black figures is redisplayed in the revamped basement. By the time he was six years old, his parents were quizzing him on the people on the poster. His mother recalls: “He would know every single one. We made him know every single one. He went over each one, who they were. He could tell you – when you point to it, he could tell you each person.” As Chris calls out historical figures in “Huey,” I get the sense that Comrade feels that these historical figures are walking with him, as well.
With no hint of conceit, Comrade says if you are not in his circle it’s because he doesn’t want you in his circle, and if he wanted you in his circle he would do something about it, “If I wanted people around I would make them around. So if you’re not, it is what it is, pretty much.” This does not come off as arrogant; in fact, Comrade comes off as humble. Humility is part of his charisma. When the B.A.P. folks played basketball after meetings or during lunch breaks in the summer, Chris was always the best player on the court. He might cross you up and bury a jumper in your eye or blow by you and rise close to the rim with a layup. Guys with that kind of smooth athletic ability often let you know about it – vociferously. Chris would only flash a wry smile or chuckle softly to himself. It’s like Bani said: you might not notice him until he gets on stage and this huge voice comes out. Chris let his game do the talking.

Jay Gillen, founder of the B.A.P., says Chris’s “charisma and gifts” made him an ideal representative of the organization. People are drawn to Comrade. He draws people to whatever he’s involved in. Comrade takes credit for bringing his brother to the Algebra Project, as well as Chris Moser, Maurice, Matt, Ian, Shalia, Bani and Bacari (Bani’s brother). It’s fair to say that some of these people might have joined B.A.P. without Comrade, but he certainly piqued their interest. For Bani, Comrade was a major draw. After trying to get his attention for some time, she decided to join the Algebra Project. “I was like all right, let me just join Algebra Project. [laughs]. No, I’m joking, but seriously – that wasn’t the only reason, but that was one of the reasons [laughs].”

Chris had the attention of most in the Project at the time. One of his colleagues jokes, “It was like, ‘All we gotta do is get Chris Goodman fired, because all the girls is on him, and we got it.’ That’s how it was, just get Chris Goodman fired. This was before we was cool with him.”
All jokes aside, Comrade was not just boasting when he rhymed, “Fresh tattoo, leader of the popular crew, expressing our views, empowering youth, hooking school to rally, battling O’Malley.” He has the ability to attract people, to get them to stick with him, to persuade them to be on his team and move forward with him in his goals. Those goals included “hooking school to rally” in their battle with then Baltimore mayor and future Maryland governor, Martin O’Malley. These actions involved great risk, and he described how he would persuade people to risk arrest in the service of educational justice:

Well, I always encourage people to do civil disobedience cuz, like, I mean, how I felt about it was, Look, you know how much we need this. If we committed to, if a lot of us – not a lot of us – but if we decide to do this action, why not take it a step further and, you know, put our freedom on the line for a few hours to really show the world that we’re serious about our education and we don’t wanna just, you know, rally and go home? We wanna make sure that the message is set, that we’re dead serious about this issue. That’s how I felt about it, so when people would, a lot of times, some people felt like, well, they don’t want to get arrested, they don’t want it on their record, or their parents wouldn’t support it, and we would explain, you know, “Your record won’t really be tarnished or anything like that.”

Despite the significant risks, Comrade was able to persuade people to join him in his vision and his dreams – both politically and personally. The dream to become a big-time rapper is an improbable dream. Yet Comrade has the strong support of his circle in pursuing the dream – a testament to his ability to gather people toward a common goal. His mother says, “That’s his dream, so he will succeed.” His brother is sure Comrade will make it, too. Bani produces rap videos for other artists to make money for them to stay on the grind. Despite the long odds, everyone is all in for Comrade.

But there is more to “Walk Wit Me” than aspirations of stardom. I sit with Comrade in the basement of the Hostel International-Baltimore. Comrade works the 11:00 p.m.-7.00
a.m. shift. He calls it “the perfect job” for this moment in his music career. He can get most of his work done – laundering and folding bedding and towels, checking in late guests, taking phone and email reservations – within a few hours. He can spend the rest of the shift writing or researching on the internet or promoting his music on social media. The basement is what you might imagine for a hostel common area – a large sectional couch, a couple of recliners, a coffee table with current magazines. There’s a TV with a DVD player, a rack with old DVDs, a small bookcase to the right with well-worn books lined up in no particular order. It’s cozy and comfortable and chill.

Comrade says he is able to come down here and write, but it took him a while to feel comfortable enough in the space to do so. He used to go out on the front stoop of the hostel to write. Situated in downtown Baltimore, the hostel is right down the street from one of Baltimore’s busiest hospitals. The ambulance route goes right by the hostel – the sounds of the ambulance and traffic, but mostly the open air, help Comrade get into the right mode to write. He writes by typing the lyrics into a note app on his phone. He can then rap over a beat saved on his phone and record it instantaneously. If he likes it all – the lyrics, the beat, the hook he creates – he can save it to a computer. Later he can record it when he and Bani have saved up enough money for studio time. At the time of our meeting, he was working on two projects to follow Comradery. One is a mixtape featuring all Comrade/TruSoundz collaborations.

It’s about 1:00 am when we sit down to talk about his current mixtape – Comradery. He’s brought down the cordless phone form the small check-in area upstairs. “I could never write up there,” he tells me with a laugh. It’s too confined in that space. The phone rings just once in our two hours together.
We go through the songs on Comradery one by one – “Walk Wit Me” is track 17 of 19. He tells me it’s one of his favorite songs in the collection. “I hope you walk with me – like, I hope people support and understand and build with me,” he explains. It’s this last part that harkens to the organizer in Comrade. I hope people build with me. For Comrade, the dream is not just to make it as a rapper, but that he and his music are a part of making systemic change. “I want my music to be the soundtrack to the revolution.”

Relationship-building, a cornerstone of community organizing, comes naturally to Comrade. He uses these skills, along with his charisma and humility, to bring people onto his team and to keep them there for the ride. As Bani says:

His role for Black men in Baltimore is to organize them and bring everybody together. Because he’s good at that. It could be the Madden tournament or a big basketball game or the football game or whatever. He’s really good with males – getting males together or on the same page.

Comrade is driven by a vision of justice that he keeps intact. As his circle of support works to help him make it as an artist, he stays rooted in the goal of helping them use that art to make change in the world. He is not yet clear about how his music will be the soundtrack to the revolution, but that’s his idea. And even though some of his B.A.P. people were skeptical of Bani’s role in his life with respect to the organizing work, she is fully on board with this political aspect of the music project, and she works closely at his side and as his partner. After all, it was her idea to drop “Huey” as his first single from Comradery, and she thinks his role in society is to “organize [Black men] and bring them together.” Bani influences Comrade strongly, but she understands who he is at his core. She walks with him.
IV. “Go Getter”

Closed curtains puttin hella work in
My driver lost but at least I felt my purpose
Swerving
Never stuck well to the surface
Say what goes around comes around
This feeling like inertia
I’m a go-riller
<Realer>
She a go-getter
<Getter>
Put two and two together
And now our pockets more bigger
<big>

I’m a go-riller
She a go-getter
Put two and two together
Now our pockets more bigger
When I’m holding her
My soul goes in her
Every time we apart
Like we both grow thinner
With me since the beginning
My world is turning and spinning
Like we traded in my time for
Countless hours of spending
My power slowly diminished
When did we know we were finished?
God what is this?
Am I trippin
Thought love was richer than business?
<yeah>

It’s a blustery day – unseasonably cold for Baltimore in September. I am going to meet Comrade down in the Inner Harbor. The Inner Harbor isn’t a regular hangout spot for folks who live in Baltimore. People from Baltimore work there and go down there for a special dinner at the Cheesecake Factory, but it’s not a regular place to be for native Baltimoreans. It’s a tourist spot, a safe place to go when they are in town for a Ravens or Orioles game or for conventions or conferences.
But we are meeting there because Comrade’s partner Bani has a vision for the video she’s about to shoot. It’s not Comrade’s video that she’s shooting, though. This is purely business – the business that helps to keep their dreams of “making it” as artists alive. I walk around aimlessly until I see Comrade across the street. He’s heading my way, so I wait for him to reach me. I give him a pound and a hug and ask where Bani is. She’ll be here in a minute, he says. Comrade and I catch up a bit until I see Bani and a few folks walking behind her. It’s pounds and “what’s up, Comrade” all around. When I’m hanging with him in East Baltimore, it’s pounds and “what’s up, Chris.” But here it’s all Comrade.

Bani gives me a half-hug – she threw out her back and is struggling even to walk. But this is part of the grind. Despite the obvious pain, she’s still made up as usual. Her sometimes dyed red, sometimes dyed blond hair is black today. Well-groomed eyebrows frame her light-skinned face, the black eyeliner bringing out her hazel eyes. A strong lip gloss finishes the look.

We make our way up to an elevated crosswalk connecting one of the Inner Harbor hotels to its adjacent convention center. Bani has two assistants with her, a young man carrying the equipment and a young woman who seems to do whatever else might be needed on the shoot. The rapper who has hired Abeni Nazeer to do his video is there, too. A security guard stands outside a clothing store and we walk by as if we are supposed to be there, though I’m sure that Bani doesn’t have a permit to do a video shoot. Among our entourage is a woman Bani often uses in her videos – she’s to play the rapper’s love interest in the video. They set out a small stereo and the song plays while the rapper lip syncs to his own lyrics. During the editing process the actual track will be synced in. Bani will drop in effects of various types; she’ll darken or lighten the shot depending on what mood she wants
to set. This scene may be only a small part of the final product or she may cut to it several times throughout. For Bani, a lot of the video creation happens during editing.

If Comrade thinks of himself as an artist revolutionary, Bani thinks of herself as an artist – full stop. She grew up drawing and painting, and sees artistic creativity as her foundation. She was introduced to videography through an after-school program called *Kids on the Hill*. Bani got the videographer bug and was taught the basics at *Kids on the Hill*, but maintains that, for the most part, she is self-taught. Instead of relying on technical video skills, she uses her creativity and instincts as an artist, as well as trial and error, to hone her craft. Bani cares most about making good art. If she does a video for a rapper talking about drug dealing, she wants to make the best drug dealing video out there. If it’s a love song, she wants the audience moved by the story her video tells. If it is a party song, she wants it to be the most fun video you’ve ever seen.

Unlike Comrade, who has spent almost his entire life in Baltimore, and the majority of that in East Baltimore, Bani moved around a lot in her childhood. Born in Michigan, she went with her father after her parents divorced. Her father “is the kind of person who moves a lot,” and Bani found herself moving to different states every few years. She credits this roving life for opening her mind to new cultures and perspectives.

She brings this open-mindedness to her art and to Comrade’s art, as well, encouraging him to extend his themes and his reach. By his own admission, he would use the word *revolution* “every twenty seconds in songs.” Today his songs have more variety. Part of that change is his developing maturity as an artist, but there is no doubt about Bani’s influence:

’Cause a lot of the other people he works with or knows him or people he grew up with or just people like that, they’re not as open-minded and as experienced in different cultures and stuff like that. Sometimes I feel like
when he’s with them he’s kind of like in a box. And I try to open the box up so that way he can reach different audiences and different kinds of music, or just create his own kind of music instead of just making something he heard already. That’s my abstractness probably.

“Go Getter,” the song quoted at the beginning of this section, is itself a demonstration of Comrade’s expansion as an artist. Comrade’s music started as a means of political release, but now it serves as a place to release all kinds of emotion. The music is no longer limited to his expressions about the world. Bani encourages him to think about “different audiences and different kinds of music,” and the artist in her wants him to “just create his own kind of music.” Comrade talks about how Bani helps him translate his work for wider audiences:

I learn so much from her because she’s the type of person who catches on fast and can just create, create, create, and take things to the next level. So, right now, we’re in a relationship where the one drives the other. So, like, as far as the music goes, I’m the artist that comes up with the lyrics and the songs and all that, and she’s the artist who puts it in a way for people to see and understand… She’s a monster in video production, so she does, like, all my videos, and she has artists pay her to do videos, like, all the time… So, what she knows about music and video, she, I don’t know, she’s like a genius cuz she knows how to, I guess she knows how people think when it comes to music. So, I guess that’s how she can easily put stuff together, cuz she can make a video in a day, versus it would take other people weeks to put the stuff that she puts together. I mean, she learns so quickly. Like, a year from today, the quality, the sound, the look is just completely different than it was a year ago. And every video is to the next level. And now as far as marketing, like, as in Comrade Muzic just being recognized, she knows how to put this there, put that there, so that this person can see this, this person gets this from that, yeah. So, it makes my job a whole lot easier. A lot of times, I’m supporting her on what she’s doing because my
part isn’t, to me, is not as difficult as the part outside of, I guess, post-production type of work. It’s amazing, it’s weird, it’s cool.

Bani is a big influence on his life outside of music, too. In the stereotypical artist way, Bani is not at all organized – she can go with the flow and doesn’t mind changing plans midstream, and often does! She says Comrade is the complete opposite, “He’s focused and organized as crap – everything has to be written down.” One morning Bani thought she had a 1:00 p.m. doctor’s appointment, but it was actually at 11 a.m. Comrade was supposed to drive her to the appointment. For Bani, it was no big deal – they would just go at 11 instead. But for Comrade, it messed up the entire plan for the day. He couldn’t find his keys or the papers he needed – he was completely unsettled by the sudden change. His attention to detail is the one quality that she finds “irkky” about him. She even tries to fuss with him about it, “but he don’t fuss.” That’s not to say there is no arguing or tension, but manufactured tension doesn’t happen. While Comrade has a strict plan, Bani infuses the plan with her creative flair and wider perspective. Often this difference between them works, though, offering advantages to the work they do together. To take one example, Comrade cites the addition of something they call Comret Rebella into his music. The Comret Rebella is the “smart, sexy, radical woman.” There are at least three songs on Comrade’s mixtape that are about or that feature Comret Rebella. It’s sort of a marketing ploy, and an organizing idea to get women into the Comrade Muzic movement. Comrade feels that the term “Comrade” is gender neutral, so it’s unnecessary to create the female counterpart image of the Comret Rebella. For Bani, though, it is a creative way to speak directly to women and to bring them in. The tension between attention to detail and flexible creativity is one that Comrade holds as he expands his music, his sound and his audience.
Bani has encouraged him to pay attention to his image and has influenced it as well: “Before he didn’t care what he even wore, but now I’m like maybe you should wear this.” At one time, Comrade was only concerned with his content, but Bani has put an emphasis on the total package.

Their partnership worked really well in 2012, when they won the Baltimore Music Awards Best Music Video of the Year award. Bani was also nominated for BMA Best Music Video Award in 2013 and 2014 for her work with other artists. Bani explains how they work in tandem:

It kind of works how I explained – the organized and unorganized things. I think that’s how it works good. He has a plan of how he’s going to do everything with the music or what he plans to do with the music. But I’m really spontaneous. A lot of people that we meet that help us with the music, like stuff that we can’t do – I usually meet people really fast. And do things really fast and then he kind of organizes everything that I just threw up there in the air. And I think that’s how we have so much success in what we do because it’s like it balances out.

Comrade says that Bani gives him ideas for songs all the time. And when she can, she encourages him to go outside his comfort zone. Sometimes he makes what she calls an “awkward song.” This is the kind of song to which she refers when she says she wants him to create his own kind of music. About a recent awkward song Comrade made, she says, “it sounds like maybe he was in a different country when he wrote it – like from a different perspective of sound.” Bani says that when she persuades him to make an awkward song, he has to go back and produce a more classically Comrade song for balance: “If he makes an awkward song, he’ll love it, but then he’ll always have to go back to balance, I guess, his Blackness.”
The song “Huey” is an example of Comrade’s going back to balance his Blackness. The Black songs that balance the awkward songs seem more authentic and real to Bani because of the emotion that Comrade puts into them. Where an awkward song is not easily recognizable as having its origins in this country, much less in Black Baltimore, Comrade goes back to what Bani says he’s rooted in: “Cuz that’s what’s rooted in him – is his Blackness. Even though he’s more communist, which is not racial, but I still think the Black nationalist is like the base of his emotion.”

As strong and symbiotic as their relationship is, there is some question about whether there is a cost to it. As with most couples, their relationship gets strained during tough times and over tough questions. There was a year when Comrade was out of work and they couldn’t pay rent on their apartment. That year he shoveled snow, delivered newspapers and was employed by unions to hold signs outside of stores lambasting their employment policies. The financial difficulty and the physical strain of the job put stress on their relationship. It was an extremely difficult year for them. The issue of children is also a topic of discussion. Comrade wants to be financially stable before they get married and have children, while Bani has come to the conclusion that her purpose in life is to raise the children she’s going to have with Chris. Perhaps this is another example of Comrade’s careful planning in contrast to Bani’s spontaneity.

But beyond these typical relationship strains, there is another important tension at work. Comrade has a strong team on his side, which he leans on for support even as he leads that team. But, as he evolves in this personal and professional relationship with Bani, creatively exploring new themes together even as that exploration makes him a bit “awkward,” some of his old relationships have become strained. His team of folks from the B.A.P. struggle to work in sync with the partnership Bani and Comrade now share. Comrade
and his B.A.P. crew used to be inseparable, but now they see each other only occasionally. Wayne says, “Me and Goodman – we don’t hang out a lot, but whenever there is something that’s going on and he texts me, I’m usually attending.”

As Bani says, “sometimes I feel like when he’s with them he’s kind of like in a box. And I try to open the box.” For her, part of that means creating music and art, beyond and outside of his comfort zone, branching out beyond his B.A.P. roots as Black, as political, as revolutionary. For the people who knew him as Chris before Comrade, moving away from those roots has disconnected him.

Comrade credits his time with the B.A.P. for so much of his life, as do Bani and his mother. There is no denying the strength of those roots. Still, his relationship with Jay Gillen has changed tremendously. Of course, as people get older or find themselves in new situations, relationships are bound to change. But there was a closeness between Chris and Jay that I would have predicted would evolve rather than become strained. Jay still remembers Chris as a sixth-grader. He says he can see him in his mind’s eye – just a little guy at the time. For almost a third of Comrade’s life, Jay was one of his biggest influences. While both still have tremendous respect and admiration for the other, that closeness is gone. This isn’t to say that Bani is at fault for the strain in their relationship, but there might be a cost to Comrade’s focus on her – to his willingness to take her lead in leaving his comfort zone, exploring beyond the box of his roots.

For Bani’s part, she feels that the Algebra Project people secretly don’t like her. Her sense is that Chris used to put others first, always – personally and politically – and that’s what they miss about him. In the story she tells from her perspective, they resent that she has made Comrade less selfless: “Being more – thinking of hiself more. Because before, he was selfless 100% when I met him, and now I think he’s at least 20% selfish. But I don’t
know if that’s bad or good.” She thinks there is good in that change – that he needed to think about himself more. Certainly, making it as an artist requires some selfishness, given the demands of music as an industry. Bani is well aware of those demands and, as the song captures, she is undoubtedly a “go-getter.”

Jay says that he loves Bani and feels no animosity toward her. Similarly, Bani says she felt a close relationship with the B.A.P. people at one time. So there is a lot of love and a desire to be closer from all sides.

But there is still strain. The oversimplified narrative is that Bani came between Comrade and the people with whom it seemed he would have lifetime relationships. It’s true that Bani is Comrade’s most cherished relationship (besides his mother). Theirs is a partnership that continues to grow, despite the tension it creates. But the narrative is not simple. In some ways, the tension their partnership has caused is a reflection of the evolution from Chris to Comrade – his evolution from the megaphone to the microphone. That evolution, like any, is a complex and sometimes painful one.
V. “Dawn”

Just put down Othello
Thinking about who my city got
Carmello
Sam Cassell, Mugsy Bogues, Monique,
Oprah
So much culture could be more hopeful
Living on Druid Hill listening to Dru Hill
Gotta old soul with a new appeal
No deal and I’m so left field
You can look me in my eyes
No lie, you can see the real
So proud, that’s why I’m saying it loud
Everything they owe we want our share of it now
Before giving up be willing to tear it down
Leap bounds, get through it and do it like
Kev Liles
This hip-hop amazing
When a dream dies just repopulate em
My motivation – Tupac and Jada
Will I be a part of that list of trailblazers?

CHORUS

I’m talking about the lows, the highs
The lows, the highs,
The lows, the highs,
Don’t let it be your demise or downfall
Will you ever know when you had it all?
Let it all go and it goes in the catalog
So much more
than what’s on shore
the world’s at war
and the music my camouflage

And they aiming
Looking like a target when facing that arraignment
I said my future then I claimed it
Reached for the stars
dark matter attaining
Sounding so bizarre
My thought pattern’s amazing
The war is in your mind
Lifetime of training
Staring at the wall better yet a painting

Funny when they left is when the pain came in
Ever smiled when it’s raining?
Dark clouds
Move low as you walk ‘round
Old jokes aint a joke now
Used to be close, we barely talk now
This is what I think about when I get up
If they all count on me
Who can I hit up?
For real doe. Feeling real low.
Who there to pick up?
No matter what, never give up.

CHORUS
Carmello, Sam Cassell, Mugsy Bogues, Monique, Oprah, Dru Hill, Tupac and Jada. These are folks with Baltimore roots who “made it.” In part, these cultural and sports stars fuel Comrade’s aspiration: “Will I be a part of that list of trailblazers?” In truth, he covets the fame and fortune that come with this stardom, as well. Those aspirations – financial dreams in the image of capitalism – are in tension with Comrade’s communist leanings, his unselfish justice work, his natural humility. In some ways, those aspirations reflect his appreciation for Bani’s influence as a “go-getter,” someone who encourages him to have what she considers a healthy dose of selfishness. “Put two and two together and now our pockets more bigger.”

That desire for fame and fortune is a source of tension for Comrade. He names the obvious contradiction between being a famous and wealthy star and a revolutionary:

But yeah, it’s like a big contradiction, and then writing music I try to avoid – I try to get away from talking about money as a good thing, but sometimes I guess it just comes up, I guess, just as a rapper. But yeah. I don’t know. But as times progress and I do start making money it’s going to be interesting also, because being more mature I can kind of see how money makes people conservative. Because you want to keep making money, because when you have a bunch of money you can do a lot of things you want to do. You don’t really want to change things too much in your life [laughs]. If I’m making millions of dollars a year, why would I want to risk my life as a revolutionary? [laughs]…I don’t know. It’s pretty crazy. And then being who I am and my name and what I represent, it’s like a contradiction. Like, why do you wanna be this rap star if you’re such a comrade? You know? So yeah, it’s crazy. Pretty crazy [laughs].

He holds to his communist beliefs. As he says, it’s even in his stage name. But the pull of stardom is strong – as is the ability to “do a lot of the things you want to do.” It’s a
conception of a kind of self-determination, the ability to do what you want because you can afford to. But it’s a conception that contradicts his leanings as a revolutionary: Comrade is participating in capitalism, even as his very identity as an artist and a citizen is in direct opposition to capitalism. There is inherent tension in rapping revolutionary while trying to sell that music within the industry.

The ambiguity is clearly reflected in his changing music. As Comrade and I go through Comradery track by track, he uses a variety of adjectives – that’s a fun song, outside of the box, angry type song, straight raw, commercial feel, politically agitating, album type of song. There is even a “secret weapon” song that his brother Asa feels is going to be a huge commercial hit that’s played around the country by DJs. The secret weapon is the song that will make Comrade a star. Even as Bani pushes him to expand his genre, to try new ideas, to make “awkward songs,” there is another pull – the pull of songs that will get radio play. DJs don’t play political hip-hop anymore. He says when he does have a song ready for the radio, he doesn’t want it to be one with a “commercial feel.” He wants to be introduced to the wider world with a more political bent. He cares about how he is first understood in the music world, even as he expands the styles of songs he creates.

On a track titled “Comradery,” he features three other MCs from Baltimore. It was his way of bringing the city together, yet he laments not having a female rapper on that track: “I wish I had a female on the song – that would be more comradery. That’s one, I guess, criticism that people in the Party would say – I can imagine them talking to me like, Chris, one criticism I have is that it's all guys on the song Comradery.” I am struck that the Party still features in his thinking with respect to his music. The push and pull of branching out is there, but so are the roots that hold him in place.
“Dawn” not only names the star aspiration (“I said my future then I claimed it/Reached for the stars dark matter attaining”), but also the pushes and pulls that weigh on him (“This is what I think about when I get up/If they all count on me Who can I hit up?/For real doe. Feeling real low.”). Comrade feels a great deal of responsibility. And that responsibility ranges from a sort of small-r responsibility to a big-R Responsibility. He feels a responsibility to his family:

But also, the *family* role as a Black man is to provide, and be like, the center, but it’s hard to do that. And to, you know, be in your children’s lives and to stay with your spouse. Like those are the pressures that you’re under as a Black – those are the things you gotta accomplish. I feel like, those are the things you gotta achieve: have a family, be together, not break up, get money. I mean, you could say the same thing of other races, but it just feels like it’s more as a Black person you gotta go through, as a Black person in America.

This sort of everyday, small-r responsibility is influenced by a big-R Responsibility: a Responsibility to the Black male community. These everyday responsibilities (to have a family, to be together, to not break up, to get money) feel heavier because he’s a Black man. Because a perception exists that these are responsibilities that Black men fail to meet, he feels a greater responsibility not to fail.

His older sister LaShawn tried to persuade him to finish his degree at Morgan. She argued that his hostel job was the perfect job to have while finishing school because he could get his work done during the night shift. She asked him, “What will you tell your children?” In her question, she was raising his responsibility to finish college as a Responsibility he has to his future Black children. Though he doesn’t really think he will finish, he felt he had to tell her he might. His mother wants him to finish, too. It is an
internal conflict for Comrade. It’s something he feels he should do, but something he is not feeling particularly compelled to do.

Additionally, he feels he has a Responsibility because of what he has learned, both in knowledge and skills, at the Baltimore Algebra Project:

It’s like, I feel like I have a obligation to do stuff. I feel like I know a lot about, you know, what’s going on. And that I have the ability to help with making things better. And right now I’m not really doing nothing to do that, so I always feel guilty…The responsibility I think I have is to – I think my responsibility is to be someone who pushes. Someone who pushes things to the next level. I guess to be like, a fearless soldier. I feel like that’s kind of my responsibility, in a sense. I mean, I think that’s what it feels like to me, because that was kind of like my role in the Algebra Project. So, I feel like I can do that on – in different ways, in different aspects.

But because he is concentrating on his music right now, he isn’t really fulfilling these Responsibilities. He clearly envisions his music as a means to both ends – to fulfill his family responsibilities and his community Responsibilities. Of course, the music industry is a long shot, which is partly why his mother and sister want him to finish his degree.

Despite these pressures, the title of the song “Dawn” suggests an oncoming light. There will be “the lows, the highs/Don’t let it be your demise or your downfall.” Through the pressure and weight, Comrade sees himself as an actor in the world with a role to play.

I would like to be here in the world to push the Movement forward. Overall, that’s really what I want to do. To the most of my ability. I guess, without being depressed or like, angry and alone. But I would really like to be an artist, living the life, and at the same time, inspiring people to acknowledge the power they have to change their lives. Yeah. I would say that’s – I would like that to be my role, in this movie. Because I always wanted to be an organizer, to make a living as an organizer. So, if I’m not doing that, then I’ll
be an organizer as an artist. Organizing on that side of things. In my own way.

VI. Outro

In some ways, the storyline is clear: Comrade, the artist revolutionary, armed with the skills and knowledge from his youth organizing days, with his partner at his side and the support team allowing him to reach his dream of providing the soundtrack to the revolution. That story captures who Chris has been in the past and what Comrade wants to be in the future.

But that storyline doesn’t really capture who he is in the present – in the everyday struggle and tension of trying to transition from past to future. Is he an artist revolutionary or a night shift worker at a hostel? Is his team a source of support, freeing him to reach for the stars, or a source of burden and stress to meet his responsibilities and his Responsibilities? Does his partnership with Bani allow him to flourish in ways he couldn’t have imagined, or does it strain the important relationships at his roots? Do the knowledge and sense of possibility found through his work with the B.A.P. give him a pathway forward, or a feeling of responsibility he can’t fulfill while also trying to afford to live?

If we take the best of all these options, maybe we have the Comrade the world needs and the Comrade he wants to be. But these are not either/or questions. They are much more both/and realities. Whichever way things swing on these and other questions, it is clear that life is not just happening to Comrade. He is an actor in the world, grinding his way through the struggle.
Wayne William Washington: An Architect of Family

I pause to look around, standing outside Wayne’s apartment. To my right is a large door to the front of the complex for those who come by foot; to the left are three more identical doors leading to his neighbors’ places. A strong waft of marijuana hits me from somewhere to the left. The complex is three stories high, not including the flats on the basement level. I knock on the door, expecting Wayne or his wife Mahogany to answer. Instead I am greeted by a blast from the past – Fernandes Harlee. Fernandes was brought into the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.) by his good friend X, but had made fast friends with just about everyone. I hadn’t seen him in several years. Dressed sockless, in mesh shorts and a T-shirt on this winter day, it was clear that he had been here all night. He flashes his small but inviting smile and gives me a hug.

As I step inside, I look to my left and see a young man, fast asleep on the L-shaped sectional couch against the far wall, dressed in sweats and a white tee, with dreadlocks covering his face. Adrian, Wayne’s brother, works the midnight shift at a factory. Adrian has his own place, but he likes the company at Wayne and Mahogany’s because he’s on such a different schedule from most people. Lying on the coffee table in front of Adrian are various toys, remotes and a couple of PlayStation game controllers. The 27-inch TV sits on a stand lined with DVDs and PlayStation games on either side. The bright covers of the Disney movies sit prominently on the right side. Those belong to Jaelyn and Toryn, Wayne and Mahogany’s two girls.

Wayne is sitting next to Jaelyn, his oldest. The colorful beads on the ends of her long braids bounce playfully against each other as she explores letters on her LeapFrog game – a laptop for kids. Her skin tone is much closer to her mom’s butterscotch than her father’s chocolate complexion. Her resemblance to her sister Toryn is obvious, despite Toryn’s
shorter braids, done much closer to her head. Toryn waddles between Fernandes on his computer and her big sister on hers – responding to prompts to press the symbols corresponding to the letters the LeapFrog is pronouncing.

Wayne proudly watches his girls interact; he looks up to greet me and to give me a pound. Above Wayne are some of the many family photos hung on the white walls of the living room. These are of Wayne and Mahogany at the prom – a reminder that, while in some ways they are worlds away from their high school days, they are also not far removed from that time. In the photo, Wayne is wearing an all-white tux with red accents, and Mahogany matches him in her red and white dress. The dreads that now fall to the middle of his back were just mini-twists at that point. In one of the framed pictures they stand cheek-to-cheek, Wayne’s darker skin pressed affectionately against Mahogany, both standing at about five-feet, six-inches tall. Mahogany’s significant rose tattoo on her upper right arm has not yet been inked in this picture, nor has the tattoo on her inner wrist.

The rest of the walls hold other family pictures of Wayne, Mahogany, Jaelyn and Toryn in various combinations. I walk through the living room to the dining room. The four-by-four dining room table and its four chairs take up most of the space. Mahogany is fixing the girls chicken nuggets in the small, vinyl-floored kitchen that completes this part of the two-bedroom apartment. Though Adrian is asleep, and Wayne and Fernandes are still dressed in their sleepwear, it is noon and time for the girls to have lunch.

At the time, Wayne and Mahogany’s two-bedroom apartment was home not only to the two of them and their two girls, but also to any one of the many friends and family who needed a place to stay. Fernandes would stay just a week this time, but a couple of years later, moved into their house for months. Adrian slept there for the company on this occasion, but later moved in for a few weeks when he broke up with his girlfriend. And a
few months after this scene, Wayne’s best friend X moved back from Arizona and stayed with Wayne and Mahogany’s family for years, even when they moved to a new spot. You never know who you will run into when you go to Wayne and Mahogany’s place, but you can count on the fact that it won’t be limited to just the two of them and their kids.

I. William

I mean, that’s how my family has been, too. Always have. It’s been really just my household against the world, you know? I’ve always been taught that.

– William Wayne Washington

Beth Washington, Wayne’s mother, describes herself as a worldly woman – a military brat who traveled all around the country. “I’ve given my kids a broad upbringing,” she says. “I didn’t want them to be biased or prejudiced against anything – not just people, but opportunities or music or anything.” Her second youngest, whom she calls William, takes after her in a lot of these ways – open-minded, quirky, well-rounded, a know-it-all – all adjectives that she ascribes to both herself and William. Mrs. Washington was not from Baltimore and says she “didn’t do anything along the lines that other Baltimore women do.” She kept to herself and tried to insulate her children from the often scary outside world. So, she filled her basement with toys and movies and told them, “Nobody will back you like your siblings. Stick together.”

She recalls easing down the steps one day to find her kids playing doctor – William the surgeon, his little brother Adrian, his assistant, and his sister Jazmin, the youngest, as the patient. They had lined up boxes all around for the operating room as Jazmin lay on newspapers for a bed. “They were running around yelling, ‘she’s losing too much blood!’ – just having such a good time,” Mrs. Washington says. This was exactly the kind of moment Mrs. Washington dreamed of when she told her kids to stay in and be each other’s best
friends. “I love my kids. They turned out to be fantastic people. Loving and caring,” she states proudly.

Scenes like this one – three kids safe in the basement, in their own world, unaware of what else is happening – come to mind when William says, “The thing with my household, it always felt like I was safe. I was warm, so I was able to ignore those conflicts that I had, once I got to the house.” William grew up in a modest-size house with a lot of people staying at various times throughout his childhood. The core was William, his older sister Amber, Adrian, Jazmin and his parents. But at various times his godfather lived there, two of his uncles, his nephews, Amber’s partner, Adrian’s partner, his wife Mahogany, and their daughter Jaelyn – all these people, at one time or another, took up residence with the Washingtons.

The surgery scene in the basement, however, took place in a simpler time – before any of the Washington children had their own children. Mrs. Washington worked at a corner store and Mr. Washington worked at the McCormick Spice factory. I always knew William as “Wayne,” but everyone in the Washington family calls him William. Still under the effects of the epidural after giving birth to William, his mother told the nurse his name was William. Apparently she wasn’t clear in her enunciation because the birth certificate read “Wayne.” So all of his official documents say “Wayne,” though he is known exclusively as William in the family.

Mrs. Washington worried for her children, especially her boys. “These streets is mean.” And she worried for William, in particular, because of his size: “That was my worst fear, that he would be picked on because he was small, slight, big-eared and I was worried he would be bullied or picked on.” In fact, William does describe his childhood as one full of bullying and being picked on. His house backed onto the schoolyard of his elementary
school, but he would not join the kids in the yard before school. Instead, he waited until lineup, or even after lineup, to run from his back door to the school door. After school, he would play with his brother and other kids outside, but would always relish his return to the safe haven of home.

Sometimes, I didn’t see what was going on just because I’m already in my safe zone. I was already comfortable and free to ignore such situations. I was able to play, or I was able to draw, or I was able to play the piano. I was able to do all these things instead of worrying about what these people outside did – so it was just easier. I always felt like it just took it outta my mind soon as I went to the door. So, that was very helpful.

Not everything was idyllic at home. Despite the fact that his father was “never out of work” and his mother took odd jobs to supplement the family income, they were always “just above broke,” according to William. He remembers times when there were no lights or when the gas bill went unpaid. One of his uncles who stayed with them developed a habit of stealing from them. His mother had trouble hanging on to money because she liked to gamble. Life was a struggle in the Washington household, but it was a safe struggle. And it was certainly nothing compared to the struggle outside of the house. William and his little brother had to navigate bullies early in life, and then drug dealers and gang members as they grew up. They weren’t always able to avoid these obstacles, but coming home, everything felt right.

Once home after school, William played video games or watched TV or movies, or played games with his brother and sister. His older sister Amber wasn’t very interested in their play, and was considered different because she was in charge. “Amber would just watch us, my older sister. She only a couple years older than me, but if we got in trouble, she would
run to the corner store – cuz we couldn’t cross the street – so she would run to the corner store, tell on us, and come back with a note from my mom saying, ‘Do this,’ or ‘Do that.’”

William credits his love of games and movies to his mom: “My mom hobbies is the hobbies I got. My mom likes to play RPG games, that is what I want. Movies, that’s what I want.” And she credits herself for making him open-minded, open-hearted and responsible. She also says he’s like her because she is a talker and a “know-it-all.” She tells me, “His know-it-all attitude irked me! But I had the same thing.” And even as she names some of his faults, there is a pleasant look on her face – a half smile and an upward gaze – as if remembering fondly.

In those early days, home wasn’t the only safe place. Despite the teasing and bullying outside of school, William remembers times inside of elementary school more fondly. In particular, he recalls the Paper Airplane Club run by Miss Wondusbar. The club was just an after-school activity in which the kids made paper airplanes. Reflecting on the experience later, William says,

This lady brought me in... she brought me into a paper airplane club that I did not want to be involved with. She just was on me.... She made all these kids think differently than how we normally think every day, because what we thought was school ends out in the street, just run around. Let’s hide the money for the drug dealers. Let’s hold it for them. Let’s do this for this. Let’s cooperate with the lookout. She took us away from so many things.

A significant moment for William was when Miss Wondusbar invited a pilot to speak to the club about real airplanes. According to Mrs. Washington, “He took a real shine to William for whatever reason.” Mrs. Washington explains that adults were always drawn to her son. She says, “I used to call him the pastor because it seemed like he could talk and get people to follow him. He draws people to him, and positive people.” Jim Catrick took such a shine to
William, in fact, that he offered to pay for dental work. Though Mrs. Washington was suspicious of Jim Catrick, she says he never asked William to come to his house or be alone with him. William reports that Mr. Catrick simply said, “You’re going somewhere, you need a smile.” For Mrs. Washington, it is an example of how adults are drawn to William, but for William, Mr. Catrick made him feel special and like someone saw something in him.

The times outside of school and home were rough for William and they got rougher as he got older. Things became particularly traumatic when he was just eleven years old and an older teenager called William and his brother over to him. They knew him as a cousin of a friend of theirs. What Wayne describes is unthinkable:

And he was like, “All right, I need y’all to do exactly what I tell y’all to do, and if you wanna go play somewhere, if you wanna go hang somewhere, you need to come ask me. Every time you see me, you’d rather do it this way.” He pulled a shotgun out, and we had to turn round, face the wall, and tell him, “Father, or Daddy, may I go this way, or may I do that, may I do that.” Wayne was afraid to tell his parents for fear of retribution against them if they went to the authorities. The worst part, though, was not being able to protect his brother:

I felt bad because I couldn’t help out, I couldn’t help my brother, you know. He was right next to me, and he had to go through it too. And that’s probably why we missing some screws now, is because of that situation. It was a very hurtful situation. We was really young, we didn’t do nothing, we didn’t mess with nobody, we didn’t bully nobody, but we always got into a situation with him, and it was just not cool. So yeah, it was very hurtful.

The best William could do was to let Adrian run away first when the guy released them.

Eventually the terrorism stopped, but it obviously had a long-lasting impact.

When William started sixth grade and headed to middle school, the terrain between home and school widened greatly and was much more dangerous. The only way to get to school was to go through the territory held by the Bloods. If William was caught walking
alone, there was a good chance he would be assaulted by some Bloods. That reality mattered in several ways, as William explains:

So, I’ve been chased by cars, I’ve been shot at, I had to fight some Bloods cuz that was Blood territory. So many things because of that radius, and it wasn’t just like all this stuff happening to me cuz someone else that I know or don’t know, I could see them going through the same situation. And a lot of times, some of the people I seen go through the same situation, I ended up becoming friends with cuz I knew that they went through it… so when I see someone go through that though, that pushed me to talk to ’em, you know? I been there, I know what’s going on. And I don’t even know how I approached, I don’t remember if I pulled that “I been there” card or if it was like, he’s on the ground, I’m help picking him up or something like that. I don’t know what it was, but I open up or talk to him when we became friends. And because of that I start building friends, you know, start having friends, more friends that wasn’t around my area, which meant I started traveling a little more to hang with friends, which was cool.

His newfound solidarity and peer group led to significant changes for William. With his confidence up and people surrounding him, William started to develop more of an “aggressive attitude.” He started holding drugs for drug dealers and serving as a lookout when he got home from school. Though these were low-level activities in the drug world, he became known as an asset in the streets. This put him into contact with guys who were five or ten years older than he was. He says he “learned a lot” from these guys and it affected how he conducted himself. His newfound confidence is illustrated in the story William relates:

What happened was, one time, this one dude try to mess with me, and I didn’t care no more and I just went off. I beat him up, I was surprised cuz he was just cocky and I was all scrawny, you know, beat him up. I went home, I ran home, ran home cuz, uh, I didn’t wanna get banked [jumped]… I ran home, and I went in the house, my
uncle was living with me, my uncle was living with us at the time, he was like, “Uh, what’s wrong? Are you all right?” I’m like, “Yeah, I’m just outta breath.” He was like, “Well, why are you bleeding?” I said, “I’m bleeding?” I took my shirt off, and I wasn’t bleeding, it was blood from whoever I was fighting. And the sad thing was, was that was a celebration, my mother, my uncle, all of us was like, “Yes,” you know, “I finally beat somebody up, man, I’m not taking it no more.” So, then it was like that, “I’m not takin’ it no more.”

William’s family celebration feels almost like a rite of passage. From then on, he would no longer be the bullied William; in fact, he even became something of a bully himself. The money William was making holding drugs was not big-time, but it was enough to buy food for his friends or new clothes for himself.

By the end of middle school, William had joined a group called the Park Boys, who went around looking for people isolated or smaller to beat up. He had turned 180 degrees and was inflicting the terror he once faced on other young people. But William says his conscience got the better of him, and before he entered high school he “just stopped hanging with everybody.” William explains that he felt like he let people down with his behavior:

After going through that phase, I just stopped hanging with everybody cuz it wasn’t me, and I felt like I was lying to my mom, lying to my dad, being that or doing that after they helped out so many times or tried to prevent that situation to happen. So, I just stopped.

William’s decision to step away from trouble didn’t mean that his troubles stopped. For high school, he submitted his name to a lottery for a brand new school outside of his neighborhood, but was not selected. He was relegated to his neighborhood school. This wasn’t all bad, though. High school still meant new faces and new opportunities. His
newfound confidence and the little bit of money in his pocket meant that he was more attractive to some girls. As Williams says:

So, I’m there having a little bit of fun, you know, nicer looking girls than middle school and elementary and a lotta other faces, a lotta other people, a lotta other sense of humor in Southwestern. So, I was quiet, but I had fun.

William was trying to keep a lower profile and just “stay quiet.” After a while, he found a crew of people to walk home with and it seemed like life was becoming more peaceful. He and another young man in the group, Marquis, became fast friends. They had each other’s backs and, according to Wayne, were anointed by their group as the leaders. This was a mixed group of young men and women who just liked hanging out; it wasn’t a crew like he had with the Park Boys. One of the crew was a young woman who caught William’s eye. Unfortunately for William and Marquis, however, she had also caught the eye of one of the BG Boys – another West Baltimore gang. This created a longstanding and dangerous beef between William’s crew and the BG Boys. And though William and Marquis could handle themselves in a fight, the BG Boys outnumbered them. The BG Boys went up to their school to fight Marquis and William so often that the principal told them they had to leave the school.

This beef with the BG Boys would haunt William long after he tried to leave the street life. At the time, though, Marquis and William decided to use their expulsion to live freer lives. After attempting to attend a couple of other Westside schools, which ended the same way their previous schooling experience had, Marquis and William stopped going to school altogether.

I had to leave, so my day became just roaming the streets, knowing about, I mean, not on purpose, but just knowing the streets, so that I wouldn’t tell my mom I got
kicked out. So, I would roam the streets a lot and to the point where, you know, we would roam and not have no money, so we’d be hungry, we’d be thirsty, we’d start robbing stores. Not gunpoint or anything like that, but we would just grab something and run out. That’s just how it was cuz we were hungry, we felt like school’s not meant for us at that time cuz this happened and that happened. This is what we got… We just didn’t go [to school]… we just didn’t, like, we just didn’t go. We just didn’t feel like going, you know? Because we been going from school to school, we got so used to just being on the streets.

Their life wasn’t carefree by any stretch of the imagination. They had to be on the lookout for BG Boys and they still had to go home to their parents and pretend to be in school. Eventually, they realized they needed to go to school, but also knew it was too dangerous to stay in West Baltimore.

William felt all of this had to be kept from his parents. He had moved away from what had once been his place of safety, his place to get grounded and forget about the harshness of the world. The more William hid his other life – his life roaming the streets – the less he felt connected to his family. While his love and loyalty never wavered, he felt something was missing.

Realizing they had to go to school meant that William and Marquis had to leave the streets. And by leaving the streets he learned that being in the streets is something that someone does, not something he is. It’s easy for people who have never lived that life to think of people in the streets as street people (read: thugs, criminals, gangsters), rather than people – human beings – who are in the streets. But for William, the streets were something he could and would eventually “grow up from.” He was able to leave the streets and bring the lessons he learned to the rest of his life. His time on the streets taught him that “the streets”
are not a preordained path – that given the opportunity and knowledge, people can walk a path of their choosing.

The path William was on is troubling, but I wonder what I would have done in his place. Once, at age thirteen, I was walking to a new friend’s house to play basketball. I was approached by a young man who was older than I, backed up by three friends. I was just two blocks from my house, but because of the way the lines were drawn for schooling, it was not a part of the neighborhood I ever frequented. The young man stepped in front of me. As I tried to walk around on the grass, he snatched my brand-new Michigan State baseball cap off my head, put it on his head and walked away. I half-heartedly followed him, telling him to give me back my hat. He hurried his step and when I turned the corner, he had gone inside a house. His boys asked, why you just let him take your hat like that? I knew what I was supposed to do. I was supposed to fight him, but at the time of reckoning I couldn’t well up the courage. When I saw him at our high school football game a few weeks later, he was wearing my hat. This time I had my boys with me. Should I have done what William did and fight him? What would that have done for my swagger? Instead, I walked by him pretending not to see his smirk. The way William tells it, standing up for himself changed his life, but it also almost ended it. I can justify my passive response with this rationale, but I still feel some type of way about that moment.

In the first chapter of William’s life, the idea and the importance of family was ingrained through how his family took care of him, how his family provided him with a sense of peace and calm, in relationships that would stand the test of time. And though his family buffered him from the cold world just outside their doors, it could only do so for so long. William would need to grow up quickly and find new ways to feel that he could make it
in the world. The streets gave William a swagger and confidence and it opened up worlds from which he had been previously sheltered.

II. Wayne Washington

I was really thankful they fell into [the Algebra Project]. I really was. In fact, I think it might have saved their lives. These streets is mean.

– Beth Washington (William’s mother)

Using Marquis’s grandmother’s address, Marquis and William enrolled in school in East Baltimore. Every day they made the long trek from West to East Baltimore. What would take 20 minutes by car took two hours by bus, including having to change busses two or three times depending on the time of the day. Their dedication to making the trip to school didn’t translate into a dedication to school. Most days after first period, Marquis and William would cut school to meet up with friends on the East Side.

They no longer had to worry about running into the BG Boys, but there were other obstacles. William remembers being caught by the truancy police:

We got caught, and it was a very brutal capture. We got caught and we both had knives on us, but that’s cuz that was when pocketknives was a trend, not because we expected to stab anybody, but it was a trend. So we both had knives, and while we had knives, the cops caught us and took the knives and was fussin’ at us and all that. Didn’t take, didn’t lock us up to, like, baby bookings [juvenile detention], just took us to this place where, I think, where they catch people hooking and give ’em this ID, so if they get caught again it gets worse or whatever. But in the process of getting a ID, now, I told them my real name. Marquis told them a wrong name, and they was like, “That name is not in the system of the school.” He was like, “Well, I just got there.” They was like, “Well, it would still be in the system,” and he was like, “Whatever.” Guy got mad, you know, and pulled him down on the ground and started stepping on him. And I didn’t like that, so I got up, and I tried to fight, they pulled me down. They put their feet on both of our heads to keep us calm, like it was
a calming, but it actually made me even more mad. Then they handcuffed both of us. They handcuffed me to a pole where we had to take the pictures for the ID, and they took my picture. So, my ID – everybody used to make jokes – but my ID was all yanked to the side, and my hands was all to the side like this, takin’ my picture.

I am struck by this moment and reminded of Jay Gillen’s essay, “An Insurrectionary Generation,” in which he draws a comparison between students in poverty and slaves; and then schools and slave holders. It seems like a dramatic comparison, except that he uses a list compiled by historian Dr. Vincent Harding, which describes strategies for how the slave system controlled human beings. He inserts “students” in Dr. Harding’s list for “slaves” and “schools” for “master.” The list read this way is not dramatic, it is merely accurate. Could we not substitute a plantation overseer for a truancy officer in Wayne’s scene? The third strategy reported by Dr. Harding and adapted by Jay fits the scene well: “3. The development of raw fear to awe them with a sense of the school’s enormous power.”

Incidents like this one and some attention by a few key adults started to change things for William. By the next school year, William was on his third try as a ninth grader. His first year on the West Side was a wash; he only went to first period when he moved to East, and thus failed his classes. However, that first period teacher, Mrs. Gunn, was intrigued by Wayne. (To school officials, “William” was “Wayne” since that was on his official records. And at East no one besides Marquis knew him as William.) Mrs. Gunn told Wayne that the remedial math class in which he was enrolled was too easy for him. She told his math teacher the following year, Mrs. Brown, about Wayne’s mathematical abilities – and about his penchant for leaving the building.

I happened to be working with Mrs. Brown at the time in my capacity as the Baltimore Algebra Project’s (B.A.P.) Math Literacy Youth Organizer. I was placed in
classrooms in two different schools. Twice a week I was in Mrs. Brown’s class. From her perspective, I was there as someone to assist in the class, but from my perspective, I was there to engage students in after-school peer-to-peer tutoring – the work of the B.A.P. (and to assist in class). My role with the three or four teachers with whom I worked varied depending on their experience, their confidence, their openness and their teaching philosophy. In Mrs. Brown’s room, I was an assistant – she taught and I helped students. It wasn’t long before I noticed that Wayne would have all of his work done quickly and then put his head down to sleep. I started to engage him in the math and grew fond of him immediately. He was very charismatic. I felt what Mrs. Washington described when she said adults were drawn to Wayne. Given some attention, he was eager to please and easy to work with. It also didn’t hurt that he was good at math. I’m a sucker for someone with strong math instincts.

Mrs. Gunn was a very sweet woman and cared a great deal about the students at the school. She was nearing retirement and had seen enough in her many years on the job to know that caring for students was one of the most important things a teacher could do. Mrs. Brown, on the other hand, would not be considered a sweet woman. Standing all of five feet tall with rich brown skin accented with black freckles high on her cheek bones, Mrs. Brown was nothing like sweet. A fiery woman, yes; a passionate woman, yes; but she would not be thought of as sweet.

Like Mrs. Gunn, Mrs. Brown had come out of the time when Baltimore was producing Black teachers who stayed in the profession, and in Baltimore, for the long haul. Mrs. Brown was also openly political in ways that Mrs. Gunn was not, and cared greatly for Black people. Her caring, though, did not translate into being nice to students. She would tell it like it is. She told Wayne that he needed to get himself together – that people recognized
his talents, but that he was wasting them. She also told him about the B.A.P. With Mrs. Brown and me double-teaming him, Wayne couldn’t help but check out our project.

I had been encouraging Wayne to help other students with math when he finished his work, rather than going to sleep. Mrs. Brown took it a step further by having Wayne plan lessons with her during his lunch period. Wayne recounts his thoughts at the time, referring to me as Mr. Nik:

And through that process of helping other people, Ms. Brown had decided that, well I’m not eating lunch like that, I go to sleep in my class, maybe I should just help out in her class, because Mr. Nik is already making me help everyone, and on top of that start helping with the lesson plan. So, um, with both of that going on, helping Ms. Brown with the lesson plan and then Mr. Nik pushing me to help the groups that I was in in the class, Mr. Nik advertised Algebra Project to me—and I went. I tried it out, and, I liked it. That’s how it started.

Although Mrs. Gunn and Mrs. Brown and I were all important in getting Wayne into the B.A.P. by leveraging his talents and potential, there were other key factors that kept him in the project. As Wayne was deciding whether to join, he was approached by another teacher – the Spanish teacher – “We used to call her Miss Señorita,” Wayne says. This teacher wanted to start a poetry club and had heard through another student that Wayne wrote poetry and raps. Wayne decided to check out the after-school poetry space, where he met Xzavier Cheatom – or X, as he’s known to most. X had Spanish last period and was just hanging around helping straighten out the room in an attempt to delay his trip back to the West Side. As they sat down to share their pieces, X joined the small group and shared his writing, too. “X used to stay on love raps at that time,” Wayne says.

After they were finished with poetry club, they left to go home and noticed that they were catching the same bus. They decided to sit together and, according Wayne, X talked his
ear off. Little did they know they would be starting a friendship that would last for years, and advance to become a truly familial relationship.

When Wayne next saw X, he told him about the Algebra Project and asked him to join with him. In my experience, it has always been easier for young people to enter a new space with someone at their side. It feels much less scary and intimidating. Wayne’s initial experience in the Project was formative, as well. After a few weeks of coming consistently, students could interview to become tutors. In high school, the clear tutor/tutee model that worked well for middle schoolers with high school tutors, was much muddier. A “client” (the person being tutored) would often know just as much or have even stronger mathematical instincts than the “tutor.” It wasn’t exactly clear who should be getting paid and who shouldn’t. And they all wanted to be paid, so we had to tweak the model that was so successful at the Stadium School where the B.A.P. started. Young people who did not want to show up twice a week consistently or did not want to stay for the staff meetings, did not become “tutors” and just came for the help they needed (and the snacks). Those who could commit had the opportunity to be tutors and joined a study group – all of whom were being paid to study math after school and help each other improve.

Wayne credits his trainer, Monet, for helping him stay engaged in the B.A.P. initially. In his two weeks of training, she helped him get acclimated to the culture and expectations of tutoring and prepped him for his interview. Although Wayne was confident in his mathematical skills, he failed his initial interview because he “choked” on the teaching math portion of the interview. Wayne had his own unique way of understanding math, but he would need to work on his ability to teach others. Monet coached him; he got a second chance, and was hired on the second try. He would spend eight years as an employee of the B.A.P.
Once Wayne became committed to the Algebra Project, he soared within the organization. We had been in his school for just over a year and it was an important step for the organization’s goal of trying to engage young people like Wayne. Previously, we had worked primarily with students who attended the Stadium School as middle-schoolers – a homegrown, progressive school founded by parents and teachers – and who were currently enrolled in the more prestigious citywide high schools. Continuing to serve only those students would cause people to think of us as a niche program; we would be able to advocate citywide, but not organize citywide. Wayne’s school was our first foray into a zone school, or neighborhood school. Engaging young people like Wayne – for whom poverty, support, and school lotteries prevented access to magnet schools – meant we were a program that could organize for all of Baltimore.

Wayne took an initial push from supportive adults and continued support from key peers, and turned it into the kind of participation that characterized a sense of ownership in the organization. Wayne remembers when he really started getting excited about the B.A.P.:

As time went on, well, one, they had me and X go to a Friday meeting. And when I went to the Friday meeting there was two thoughts in my mind. One is, this is a lot of beautiful girls around here. Second one was, why do Chris got all those girls around him? So those were my two thoughts. Real stuff.

For Wayne, what started as a nice place to meet pretty girls and eat free pizza turned into a passion that carried him all the way through adolescence. In Wayne’s view, the political work of the organization (what they call “Advocacy”) is what hooks the young people in for good, whereas the academic work on site was limited by its one-on-one nature:

The [tutoring] site, because each person had to deal with their own person, there was no unity with everybody coming together dealing with a problem. Most of the times, at the site, if you was part of Advocacy it was easier for you to build that family aura
that I talk about all the time with the Algebra Project than it is at a site. Most of the people that keep, that stay around, has been a part of Advocacy. Bottom line. I don’t know, everybody that basically stay around for the Algebra Project for over their years, has been part of Advocacy… The ones that got with Advocacy stayed for years, I mean, I seen some of them gone now, but, they stayed for more than a year to do that. That’s my family. But it was like, I get the importance of why that needs to be. But I want to be in Advocacy. So, Advocacy was more a family. That’s what advocacy was. It was a family and it was a career. To me, I had a mission and my mission could not be accomplished in this year. I can't get the money for all my people this year. I have to go next year. I have to fight the year after that. Maybe the year after that we get more people. And then when we get more people we gonna do more things. When we get more funding we gonna do different things, you know. But it wasn’t like that with the site.

Wayne equates his experience with the Baltimore Algebra Project with the feeling of family – something that has been extremely important to him throughout his life. He argues that those we managed to get into the political work often stayed on for years. They joined the family.

We met at City, which was already a trip for some of the young people – the hallowed halls of City, one of the more prestigious magnet high schools. The first order of business was checking in with the security guard – tell him you are there for the Algebra Project. He would direct you to the teachers’ lounge where we held our meetings. The young people would go in and find their people – people from their school or tutoring site, or who they had come up with. Groups of young men and women would form in clumps with the occasional couple sitting much too close to each other. It was a room full of young Black bodies ready to assert their leadership.
I didn’t run the meetings, and neither did Jay Gillen, the adult founder of the B.A.P. The young people ran the meetings from start to finish. Jay and I would raise our hands if we had something to add, just like the other folks in the room. The young people new to the B.A.P. gave our words special weight, but the vets took them as just one more opinion to consider among equals. “But Mr. Jay said we should go directly to the teachers,” one newer member might protest.

“We heard Mr. Jay,” an elected leader in the organization would respond, “but our proposal is to get the principal on our side so that the teachers don’t have an excuse to not help us. Is there anyone who can’t live with that proposal?”

The room was made up of the B.A.P. elected board – president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, human resource officers and historian – along with 30-40 additional people attending the leadership meetings. The first order of business was always pizza. The rule was that everyone got one slice before anyone got two. The very hungry would take two or three slices from the beginning, but it usually didn’t cause static unless someone was left with none. And, even in those cases, someone would give up or share their slice.

After pizza, the president led the group through an agenda and facilitated the discussion of any decisions that had to be made. Then they broke into committee work – advocacy (political work), pedagogy, and handbook (the determination of rules and regulations).

Wayne joined the Advocacy Committee. Because the political work became so heavy and important that it could no longer be contained during the brief committee time on Fridays, the Advocacy group started meeting twice a week beyond these Friday meetings. Wayne spent two after-school days at his tutoring site, an additional two days at Advocacy
meetings, and Fridays at the leadership meetings. Within less than two months of being hired, Wayne became a site leaders at his school site, along with X.

It was all Algebra Project all the time for Wayne. Even when he wasn’t doing B.A.P. work, he was with his B.A.P. people. After Advocacy meetings, he and X and their new partners in rhyme, Chris Goodman and Bryant Muldrew, went to a youth program called *Follow Your Dreams* (F.Y.D) to learn the art and business of hip-hop production. After FYD, they’d go to their homegirl Chelsea’s house. It was as good a life as Wayne could imagine at the time.

We hang out, we would be like, we would go to a Friday meeting. First of all, all of us was in [leadership] positions so we would go to a Friday meeting, run the Friday meeting, and after be like, “And we just recorded our track, we going to the movies,” and have the whole Friday meeting go to the movies with us. So, to me, that was life man. As a kid, I had, I was doing positive things, I had a group behind me, and I was feeling my hobby, I was doing what I wanted to do at the time. You know, as a young Black dude, which is very limited, but that’s what I was doing. You know? I was happy. And, we was rocking out. Friendships was good. Everything was good.

Importantly, the B.A.P. served a function for Wayne similar to the role his home and family played in his childhood. The B.A.P. was a place of refuge, a place to become whole again.

And it was a big escape because the other life was connected to struggling, just like my home was struggling. You know? And in the Algebra Project, regardless if we was struggling with money or not, just like how you forget about, you know, or you ignore that you’re struggling when you’re young with your mom and dad, you know, they put it out there or they don’t – you can tell, you know – but you ignore it. It was the same thing, I just completely did not care about budget problems or anything. They [at the B.A.P.] wanted to talk about budget, that was boring to me. Because I didn’t care if I was getting paid or not getting paid. I just enjoyed being part of the Algebra Project. It was the only thing that made me feel like that.
At the B.A.P., Wayne was a leader with a positive focus. He had the respect of his peers and adults around him. He was even able to contribute to the household income, however begrudgingly. For Wayne, the legitimacy of his work was relieving and refreshing. He no longer had to lie to his mom.

I wasn’t sneaking nothing. I was able, everything that I was doing at the Algebra Project I was able to go to someone else and be like, “Guess what I’m doing?” That was easier. There wasn’t no monkey on my back. And I felt like that with everything I was doing with the Algebra Project. I felt like that with telling my Mom that I was going to be out late, or that I would be here tomorrow, or I’m gonna be in D.C. for a couple of days. Whatever it was, you know what I’m saying, instead of having to lie to her and be out in the world, I could tell her the truth. And I could tell my friends. And I could tell my brother and sister…

According to Wayne, though, the B.A.P. also provided something missing from his home life: autonomy, recognition and a sense of importance in the world. It’s not that he wasn’t a person who mattered in his household, but in the B.A.P. he mattered in the world.

Wayne was also gaining a political perspective and new and different interpersonal and practical skills.

I learned how to speak to people. Like, that’s something that, my mannerisms and stuff like that. I learned how important it is… But, I wouldn't have had those skills if it wasn’t for the tedious trainings and repetitive meetings that we had in the Algebra Project. That’s how I felt about them, but now I know how important that was. Like really, really, really. I feel like I learned rhetoric just by hanging around Jay too long. I’m like, I got it now.

Wayne says that he applies what he learned at the B.A.P. to his current job at a hotel every day.
With the B.A.P., Wayne was able to have the independence and recognition he sought when he pulled away from home in favor of the streets, but without putting his family and himself in danger. Once he was in the B.A.P., he made it his family – not as a replacement, but as an extension. While Jay Gillen contends that the B.A.P. is not a family – that there are too many people to be a family and “family” is the name that folks like Wayne are assigning to a healthy community – Wayne is clear about why he defines it as family:

I just felt like just how my life was at that time, for all the problems that I was having, knowing that there was no solution at the time anywhere else. In my eyes, I got connected to a job in the Algebra Project. I did not feel like it was a job. I felt like it was a family. I felt like everybody didn’t just want to work together to get the job done, they also wanted to make sure that I’m going to go to school and do good at the end of the day, period. That just started from just somebody waiting on the bus all day for me, to someone picking me up from my home when I couldn’t make it, to someone talking to me when I was failing or doing wrong instead of just trying to dish down on me, to eatings, to outings, to events, to family events, to introducing my family into your family. It just became a family.

Feeling that he had found something different and necessary, Wayne jumped into the B.A.P. with both feet. This new path, however, was not without consequences. His relationship with Marquis became strained.

Because everyone else that I knew as a friend was an easy excuse to not be doing the Algebra Project. I was hanging with the guy Marquis, we had each other because we came from the West, we came from so many different problems. And when we got over East, it was like we have each other’s back. And I really felt bad and upset because when I started doing the Algebra Project that means I had to stay, I had to go to after school, it means we wasn’t walking the train tracks together, that means I wasn’t seeing my girlfriend at the time as much as, you know. Marquis and me, we did that as a crew thing. It wasn’t just with the girlfriend, when we were young it was the crew. So that was my crew. And I just wasn’t around like that. And as time went
by, it affected, it affected everything. It affected my friendship with him, and it affected my relationship with my girlfriend at the time, and it affected my crew.
The strain in the relationship hit a breaking point when Wayne was not there to have Marquis’s back when he got banked by the BG Boys. When Wayne went to visit Marquis in the hospital, Marquis accused Wayne of betraying him. Wayne tried to win back the friendship, but a trust had been broken that was not easily mended. Wayne feels regret and guilt to this day about how things went down with Marquis.

In addition to the tension created with Marquis and Wayne’s girlfriend, Wayne’s newfound sense of self put him in conflict with his family. While he no longer had to lie about his whereabouts or where he was getting his money, his experience in the B.A.P. expanded his sense of independence. Wayne had respect, position and power he didn’t have before.

Now, we had meetings with all of us with other people. And those were powerful, like when we had a meeting with Mayor O’Malley, who is the governor now. I don’t know, that was overwhelming. We came in there, he had a big portfolio. First of all, he had to see us. Because this is one of our big events, we had a three-day strike, and we had people there each day. The people died off, per day, but it still was a lot of people each day. To the point where, he was like, I gotta see them. So we came in there. He came with this big portfolio explaining everything that we knew and how we were right, and then told us he couldn’t agree to it. Like, basically, but, how he, like the approach, like it was a real meeting. It was like the oval table type, like sitting in the room, here’s where you’re sitting, your bottle of water is right there, here is your portfolio… But it was like to me that was the most professional meeting I’d ever been in. It was very fast and simple. We didn’t get what we wanted, but just to be able to take that step to get there was a lot.

He also had knowledge about political systems, history and organizing that he didn’t have before. As Wayne puts it, “I guess I was feelin’ myself.” By that he means he was feeling like he was important and he was starting to act like he knew more or better than his mom. The
confrontations were serious enough that Wayne often got put out and would have to stay with Chris Goodman for a couple of weeks or with his grandmother for a few days.

Despite the tension it caused with his family, including his chosen family like Marquis, Wayne still made the B.A.P. a family affair. Wayne brought both his younger brother and sister into the project over the years. And Wayne’s mother never blamed the B.A.P. for Wayne’s actions. Quite the contrary, she says, “I was really thankful they fell into [the Algebra Project]. I really was. In fact, I think it might have saved their lives. These streets is mean.”

And though Wayne still feels regret and guilt about not being there for Marquis, he has made peace with his choices and doesn’t at all regret the path.

So, years later, I decided I’m gonna go down there. I’m gonna knock on [Marquis’s] door, I’m gonna talk to him. I’m gonna see what’s up. I went down there. I didn’t even knock on the door, because him, his cousin Martez, and our homeboy Ernest was sittin’ on the stoop. And I went there and they was like, “What’s up? What’s up? What’s up?” Pass me the blunt. Easily, just passed it to me like it was another day. And we talked and we chilled. But, we talked and chilled the exact same way that we always did. And, after that, it just made me realize, sometimes you just gotta move on. Like that’s a muse to your life, it’s not – it’s not waste, it’s not nothing bad, it’s just a muse. You had that, you grew from it, this helped you, and now you’re here. You’re not there no more. And that’s what it was. Because when I went there it was really, like déjà vu. It felt like I was stuck between the hours of twelve and three, every day, the same day. And that was just one time being there. And I really felt that way. I felt that way to the point where as soon as I went to Hogs, cause we were together at the time, I went straight to her, I was like, “Yo, I thought that wasn’t going to be like that, but it was just like that. I guess that isn’t where I’m at no more.” And it wasn’t.
For Wayne, the Algebra Project was a step forward from the same day every day. While he perceived Marquis as stuck in that same place, he felt that he had moved forward. Through B.A.P. experiences, he gained knowledge, confidence and skills. Most important, though, he expanded his definition of and the members of his family. When his family said, “We have to have each other,” that sentiment now applied to his B.A.P. family.

I love the Algebra Project. I would not be where I’m at, I would not have the friends I’ve had, I would not have the knowledge, or be able to protect my babies from society if I didn’t have the knowledge that I have from being through the Algebra Project.

For all the ways in which the B.A.P. enhanced his life, Wayne points to the ability to protect his babies as its greatest contribution to his life. And Wayne took his conception of B.A.P. as family and made it literal when he married fellow B.A.P. member Mahogany Bosworth.

III. William Wayne

He’s my superman. – Mahogany

While Wayne and his compadres were building a site and a B.A.P. culture at their own zone school, the majority of B.A.P. members came from City or its archrival, Poly. Poly is the math and science magnet school in Baltimore and the most difficult in which to gain entry. Poly students had the reputation of thinking they were smarter than everyone else. And within Poly there was a group of students who might be known as “pretty Poly girls.” There was a stereotype that the light-skinned girls from Poly were especially stuck up, drawing from the notion in the wider Black community that light-skinned people think of themselves as superior.

Mahogany Bosworth was one of those “pretty Poly girls.”
Despite the stereotype, Mahogany’s story is not about arrogance, privilege or superiority. Hers is a story of loss and survival. Her mother died when Mahogany was five years old. Her mother’s suicide brought Mahogany and her father very close. The suicide hit her father hard because he blamed himself and turned to drugs to cope. Despite the drug use and its resulting relative poverty, Mahogany and her father always had each other. She says, “He was like my friend.” And she cherished that relationship even though she was able to “run all over him.” The close bond they formed made it even more difficult when Mahogany lost her father at age 12 to a drug overdose.

Mahogany’s father made his brother Alan promise to take care of Mahogany if anything ever happened to him. She went to live with her uncle and his wife, but their household was very different from the one she had known. The friendly adult-child relationship between Mahogany and her father was replaced by a very strict, no-nonsense structure. Mahogany had her material needs cared for, but missed the closeness with her father. Her uncle laid down several stipulations to her living with him; among them was that under no circumstances was she to become pregnant, or she would no longer have a place to stay.

Her uncle’s strictness, coupled with the fact that in this new situation she had significantly less responsibility for the household, meant that Mahogany could concentrate on school. Mahogany ended up at Poly and, once at Poly, was introduced to the B.A.P. She and Wayne first met at B.A.P.’s summer training. During the summer, B.A.P. takes a small group of students who take on the work of bridging the Project from the end of one school year to the beginning of the next. This group is responsible for evaluating and reshaping policy, for creating new curriculum, engaging in political education, and designing and conducting training for a new group of tutors for the fall. A few weeks before the school
year started, Wayne, who was on the summer bridge team, was excited to see who the new tutors for the school year might be. He was particularly interested in training new young women – including Mahogany.

Wayne and Mahogany noticed each other, but played a game of not being into each other. In fact, Wayne was supposed to be talking to a different “pretty Poly girl” during that summer training. I remember being confused by these girls’ interest in Wayne. Wayne was short and thin with half-fixed teeth. I was a big fan of Wayne, but wasn’t sure why he was such a ladies’ man. And Mahogany, for her part, was talking to another guy outside of B.A.P. Despite their apparent indifference toward each other, they exchanged numbers and occasionally talked. It wasn’t until one of the B.A.P.’s Advocacy Through the Open Mic events – a youth-led conference followed by an open-mic and party – that they let their guards down to really talk to each other.

Our Advocacy Through the Open Mic came up and Mahogany was there, and she [was babysitting a little girl] and I love kids. She had a little girl named Chees, and I was playing with Chees. My intention wasn’t to use Chees to talk to her or anything like that, I was just playing with Chees. And Mahogany had, um, I think she caught interest from me playing with Chees. Then she told me to meet her at the playground during the break cuz she wanna take Chees to the playground – Chees like playing out there. And I went to the playground with her, and all the dudes was looking for me – “Where’s Wayne? He tryna be sneaky.” I went to the playground, I was talking to her about Chees, we was having a good conversation about Chees, that’s it. But, I think because of the interest that was there that we didn’t really speak of, everybody else seen it, they was pushing, “Aw, you tryna be sneaky, I see what you doing,” you know, all that stuff. And, you know, sometimes that pushes you to realize, you know, what it is yourself, and realize we had interest [in each other] now.

What followed was a pretty typical high school romance – fast and furious – moving from I like you to I love you in a short time. And, as odd as I might have thought the match,
for Mahogany’s uncle it was completely unacceptable. Somehow, through some means unknown to this day to Mahogany, her uncle found out about Wayne’s now ex-girlfriend and his dealings in the street. He forbade Mahogany from seeing Wayne. This didn’t mean that Mahogany stopped seeing Wayne, but it did mean she was sneaking around to see Wayne. And, as Wayne puts it, “the sneaking around just made things feisty and intimate and, you know, things happen.”

The sneaking and the resulting “feistiness” resulted in the one thing her uncle most strictly forbade – pregnancy. Mahogany was scared to lose yet another set of parents and felt wholly unprepared to be a mother. She was doing excellently in school and couldn’t imagine how she would take care of a baby and continue school if she were put out of her uncle’s place. She wanted to have an abortion. For Wayne, this was not a bearable option. He told Mahogany that he would do anything to keep the baby, including taking care of the baby so Mahogany could finish school. According to Mahogany:

But he was real adamant about me keeping it, about me going to school. That he would help me. That I didn’t have to work – or that I could just work at the tutoring site, and I could have that money as my money, as pocket money, and he would take care of the baby. He would watch her while I was in school. So that’s what happened.

No longer allowed to live with her uncle, another of Mahogany’s aunts agreed to take her in – as long as she contributed to the rent via the Social Security check Mahogany got from the deaths of her parents. Unfortunately for Wayne and Mahogany, new stipulations started coming each week from her aunt limiting their access to each other. Wayne got extremely frustrated because the whole point of moving into her aunt’s house was so they could stay together. He persuaded Mahogany to move in with his family instead. Despite the financial hardships, the Washingtons welcomed Mahogany with open arms. Since Mahogany
was a minor, though, she was compelled to move back with her legal guardian – her aunt. Wayne discovered that since she was 17 and he was 19, they could be legally married and, once married, he would technically be her guardian. So Wayne and Mahogany were married at a courthouse in opposition to her aunts and uncles.

Soon thereafter they welcomed their first child – Jaelyn Washington. And, though the Washingtons made Mahogany feel at home, it was not an ideal living situation.

It was co-op living. Everyone was putting in. They gave us a roof. And it was only three rooms. Oh god, I be thinking about this now it was crazy. Raymond and Beth was in the master room. That’s his parents. The second room, which is the middle room, the smallest room, had me, William, Jaeyln and Jazmin – his sister. That was Jazmin’s room, but we took over. So Jazmin still had her stuff in there, but she didn’t sleep in there. Amber was in the third room, Amber and Leon, and their two boys. Amber had just had her baby two weeks before I had Jaelyn. Then downstairs on the couch was Adrian and Shadonna and Jazmin. It was really crazy. Everything about that. How did we even have food every day to feed everybody? That’s a lot of grown people to feed. Yeah. I don’t know how we managed it.

Mahogany would get up early to beat the morning rush in the shared bathroom in order to get to school on time. She spent her days continuing to excel in school. William was at home with Jaelyn. Back at his parents’ now, Wayne became William again. And Mahogany calls him William to this day.

Though William credits the B.A.P. for putting him on the right path, it was not able to keep him in school. The habit of hooking school was too ingrained, and even as he was making his way into leadership at the B.A.P., he left school before graduating. By the time Mahogany became pregnant, he had dropped out of school and got his GED. So William was free to take care of Jaelyn while Mahogany was at school.
Both Wayne and Mahogany contend that this early bonding time made William and Jaelyn extremely close, and they remain that way to this day. Mahogany was keenly focused on her schooling. When she got out of school, she hurried home to take care of Jaelyn while Wayne went to B.A.P. to do his after-school work. The B.A.P. – once a place of growth and possibility – now became a very necessary job. After work, William came home to take over so that Mahogany could finish her homework and get ready for the next day at school.

Once Mahogany finished high school, William and Mahogany felt that they needed to stretch. The Algebra Project, now very much youth-led, had developed some positions for recent high school graduates. Mahogany was hired as the office manager and William was a human resource officer. Though these positions paid more than tutoring positions, there were many B.A.P. graduates to sustain, and only so much money to go around. This meant that William and Mahogany were unable to sustain the cost of a household of their own.

For William, the solution was easy – co-op living with other B.A.P. “family” members. William’s definition of family meant that it was quite logical for the three of them to move in with other B.A.P. folks. For Mahogany, this proposition was much harder to accept because she had learned through her childhood to count only on herself. Despite her instincts and her preference, Mahogany agreed to move in with another B.A.P. couple with a new baby. That arrangement lasted only a few months. They traded that arrangement for another co-op living scenario with X, another B.A.P. and Militant Advocate member, Bryant, and a couple of X’s and Bryant’s friends. For the guys, the arrangement was pretty fun – plenty of time was spent on video games and drinking. Walking in the front door of the row house in one of the tougher neighborhoods in East Baltimore, I can immediately tell a bunch of young men live here. The couch is set directly in front of the TV – two PlayStation game systems sit in the console beneath the TV. To the right of the television, the guitar and drum
set from the video game *Guitar Hero* are set in place. With the plates and bottles lying around, it rivals any college dorm setup you might find at College Park.

It isn’t a dorm, however - Jaelyn lives here, too. A walk up the stairs into the narrow hallway reveals William, Mahogany and Jaelyn’s room. It is the biggest of the three bedrooms in the house, but it still seems to be bursting at the seams as it struggles to contain the stuff of three people. Jaelyn’s toys lie scattered – some on the floor, some on the bed they all share. Wayne’s growing DVD collection is similarly dispersed. The room feels like chaos, but it also feels like closeness. It looks and feels like two very young parents trying their best to make it together.

There was nothing idyllic about the living situation. They were in it partly out of necessity – the shared cost of living made it possible to raise a child on two limited incomes – and partly out of Wayne’s desire to engage and define some members of B.A.P. as family. Mahogany tolerated the circumstances in an attempt to stretch her understanding of family and in support of Wayne’s notions.

Directly after graduating from high school, Mahogany attended Towson University – a predominantly White institution just north of Baltimore City. After a year at Towson, she transferred to Morgan State University – an HBCU in the heart of Baltimore – and enrolled in a nursing program. The difference in tuition was a major factor, but the flexibility and understanding of life circumstances at Morgan also played a role. Wayne continued to earn money and put his schooling aside so Mahogany could pursue her education. According to Mahogany, William always makes things seem possible, and that sense of being taken care of is part of the reason she calls him her “Superman.”

During this time, Wayne had the unique opportunity to become a classroom instructor. Jay had persuaded the school that Wayne had dropped out of to give Jay a cohort
of students to whom he would teach mathematics for four years and he would co-teach this class with former B.A.P. tutors. Wayne was among these classroom teachers, along with X and Bryant and a young woman named Chamir. Chamir was at Morgan; X and Bryant were supposed to be at Baltimore City Community College; and Wayne planned to go back to school after Mahogany finished her degree.

The transition to classroom teaching was particularly difficult for Wayne. The preparation and responsibility for both the mathematics and the relationships with the students were a heavy burden on someone who was already carrying a lot of weight. Wayne and Mahogany couldn’t afford a proper daycare near them and they didn’t have a car. Wayne had to get on the bus early in the morning with Jaelyn and take her to a less expensive, family-type daycare north of the city. He would then ride back, prep for class, teach, help run after-school tutoring, and meet up with Mahogany and Jaelyn.

Wayne had good math instincts. On one of my visits to his classroom, I learned a completely new way to think about the sum of the interior angles of a polygon of \( n \)-sides. I would teach my students this insight in my own geometry class years later. However, Wayne’s formal mathematics education was limited. He never took high school seriously and only had to know enough math to earn his GED. This affected his teaching and his confidence:

When we were teaching, we had this setup where there was me, X, Chamir, Bryant, Jay teaching in a class, every lesson plan I personally had to look at what we was teaching, teach myself what we was teaching – cause it was different – and then teach it to the kids. So, it was a good and bad thing. I actually liked it, 'cause I was learning and I didn’t like being in the shoes that I was in, I didn’t want to tell everybody this is what I’m doing every time because I would be home, like, all right this what I need to do now, or this what I need to learn before tomorrow start. But everybody didn’t know that that was going on with me.
So to me, I was trying to rebuild this relationship with math, which was kinda hard, because I didn’t have the time to just sit back and embrace what I learned. As soon as I learned, I had to teach it. So it became, it became a real 9 to 5. It really became like, all right, I got to come here, I got to learn this, I got to do this, and I got to teach it. And then I got to be worried because if I teach it and my people are wrong, then it’s all on me, and I feel bad because I should have been knew this. Now their [the other teachers’] stuff is going to be great. Now I’m competing against, in my mind I’m competing against, Bryant, X. It just – it just became too much real fast. Real fast.

In addition to his struggle to stay ahead of the students with respect to the math content, Wayne was also struggling to meet other demands of the job. These students were particularly dependent on a loving, consistent relationship. One of the factors that played into the school’s allowing Jay to take on a four-year cohort was that he said he would take the most challenging students, all in one class. The students in their class had the worst attendance records, the worst disciplinary records and the worst academic records. One student said, “Mr. Jay – you got the worst luck – it’s like they gave you all the baddest kids.” The students, themselves, didn’t know they had, indeed, been labeled as the “baddest kids.” To take advantage of all the teachers in the room, each of the former B.A.P. tutors was assigned a group of students to lead. According to Jay, Wayne’s students flourished when he was teaching them. Unfortunately, though, too often Wayne didn’t show up.

As Mahogany describes it, Wayne would often stay home with Jaelyn rather than go to work at the school.

Yeah, so William had [Jaelyn] a lot during that time, too, because it was just a lot just to get to work. I don’t think he realized, or it was hard to realize that this is what everybody is doing out here. Getting up extra early to drop their kids off and get to work on time. Because he didn’t have to be there till like 1, but he was – he would choose to stay home with her, so they would be home together a lot.
While Wayne struggled as a teacher, he flourished as a father. Mahogany says his bond with Jaelyn is incredibly strong and she attributes it to all the time spent with her in those early years. “She is still, to this day, a daddy’s girl. Jaelyn watches anime with William, she plays the game with William. She’s a daddy girl. I don’t do none of that – I don’t play the game, but she is a daddy’s girl. Everything William does, she does.”

It was not long, however, before Wayne and Mahogany had a second child – Toryn – and the financial burden on the family grew. Wayne had to get more serious about work and more thoughtful about their living arrangements. Wayne, Mahogany, Jaelyn and Toryn moved into a two-bedroom apartment after a break-in at the co-op house. The circumstances around the break-in were suspicious, with Mahogany certain that it was orchestrated by one of their housemates, and Wayne unwilling to accuse his friends. The arrangement ended sourly.

With their own two-bedroom apartment and a fourth mouth to feed, Wayne was feeling pressed for money. Though he was more consistent and feeling more comfortable in his role as a teacher, the financial pressure was such that he felt he had to make a move. He left his job co-teaching with Jay and the others from the B.A.P. for a higher-paying job as a paraprofessional – a job Chris Goodman helped him secure.

His decision left his teaching colleagues and his students in a tough situation, but he needed to do what he thought was best for his family. Wayne called me at the time to talk about the decision. Possibly sensing the disappointment in my voice, he said it was like when I left the project to go to grad school. All of them felt left behind, but eventually understood that I did what I felt I had to do. It was a jarring moment for me because I felt guilty for
leaving them. It also helped me realize that Wayne understood the consequences of his decision, but he still had to make it.

With two children, Mahogany had to alter her plans, as well. School became a third priority after the kids and work. Despite all of Wayne’s efforts to protect Mahogany’s schooling and professional aspirations, life was steadily getting in the way. The pressure of raising kids and their financial reality put pressure on their relationship, as well.

However, that “family” Wayne had built in and around the Algebra Project helped get his own family through their struggle. Mahogany easily lists numerous people whom she and Wayne invited into their home who now helped with the kids – babysitting or picking them up from school or baking cupcakes for a party or taking them on outings. She says, “So anybody who made this house feel like their home would do anything to help us as much as possible. Which is good. You need that. It takes a village to raise a family, to raise some kids. It’s a lot of work.”

People treat Wayne and Mahogany’s house almost like some kind of community house. Their Algebra Project colleague Maurice stayed at the house for a week when his girlfriend was out of town; Fernandes, another B.A.P. buddy, came home from his trips abroad and stayed with them for weeks; Wayne’s brother Adrian stayed with them for months; and X lived with the Washington/Bosworth’s for years.

This constant influx of people took some getting used to for Mahogany, but now she appreciates it – especially after having their third child, a son named Peighton. Wayne took a manual labor job at a major hotel chain, again for financial reasons. He worked long shifts to help support the family financially, and Mahogany often found herself alone with the kids. But, thanks to the community of family they built, she isn’t often alone, even if the constant visitors are perplexing to her:
You would think that three kids would get on everybody’s nerves, but that’s not really the case, and I don’t know why that is. I guess it feels like home. I don’t know. I cook every day. So everybody wanna come. Everybody eats my food. Everybody likes the kids. I don’t know. I really don’t know, because if I was an outsider I would not wanna go sit in the house with me and my three kids.

This is how the young couple tries to make it – work hard, party on the off nights, count on extended family to support it all. Wayne admits that love aside, originally the marriage was a means to an end – a way to get Mahogany free from her aunt. But, he says, “now, the marriage is all for love.”

Mahogany confirms that the struggle to make it includes the struggle in their relationship. She says, “I mean it’s good, I mean it’s not everything. It’s not what you see. But, I think William has a really good concept, or is really dedicated, and really wants to make this work. So I guess it’s not all – everything’s not perfect like what you see.” The financial strain, the stress of raising children, the dreams deferred would take a toll on any couple. She qualifies the admission of the struggle, though, sounding a lot like Wayne in the end:

But we’re both getting to the point where we’re really gonna make this work for us and for the babies. So that they can have a good life, so that we can have a good life. So we won’t have to struggle forever. You know what I mean? That’s it. It’s not as good as it sounds. But we gonna make it work. Because we got to. We don’t have nothing else. You don’t have nothing but your family.

IV. Daddy

The best day of my life was seeing Jaelyn trying to teach Toryn how to walk, and Jaelyn was talking to Toryn the same way I talk to [Jaelyn]. And it was very cute, I mean, it brings tears to my eyes [eyes welling up], that’s how cute it was.

– William Washington (Father to Jaelyn, Toryn and Peighton)
I get to Wayne and Mahogany’s house at about 2 p.m. Wayne, Mahogany, X, Jaelyn, Toryn and Peighton moved to a new place in Northeast Baltimore. They live in a neighborhood consisting entirely of townhomes. The house, covered with white-painted wood siding, is connected to identical-looking houses on either side. Two side-by-side windows framed by decorative black shutters give it a look one would find in a classic kid’s house drawing.

While these features contrast significantly with their old apartment, walking in feels very familiar. Upon entering the living room, the weathered white carpet has far fewer toys littered around, but other than that it looks as though their old living room has largely been transported here. A 42-inch television is the centerpiece of the room. In the media stand holding the TV, I see a PS3 and a Wii U console. The PS3 is used to stream Netflix movies and TV shows as much as or more than it is used to play video games. The familiar DVD stands are placed on the wall to the right. A new blue sectional couch replaced the old gray one. X spends some of his nights on this couch, though some are spent on the floor so as not to dent the new couch too much. Though there is no doubt that X is an integral part of this family unit – having lived with them for so many years – there is little that indicates his presence in the house. The TV and PS3 belong to him, but none of the many photos displayed are of him or his own family.

Wayne is trying to herd Toryn, his now three-year-old, and Peighton, the newest Washington at just over a year old, into their Nissan Sentra. X grabs one of his plain black tees from a large black garbage bag recently carried to and from the laundromat. He throws it on, as is customary on days off from work. I expected to find a groggy X and Wayne because I knew they had worked pretty late the night before. Instead, I find a bustling house
with a full agenda ahead of us. First on the list is to pick up their checks from the hotel; then pick up Jaelyn from daycare. As we are all getting ready to head out, Wayne tells me how well he’s doing at his job at the hotel, including winning a service award. It’s somewhat awkward because X also works at the hotel and is not sharing similar news.

By the time we all pile into the car, it’s too late to go all the way downtown to get his check and then return in time to pick up Jaelyn by 3 o’clock. So instead, we pick up Jaelyn early from school – Wayne and I are in the front seat; Peighton, Toryn, Jaelyn and X in the back. Only Peighton has a car seat; Toryn is buckled into the middle seat, and Jaelyn and X share the remaining spot. As we head to the hotel, Toryn says, “Look, Daddy, Peighton is knocked out in his car seat.” Peighton was fast asleep and stayed asleep until the end of the car ride.

When we arrive, we park behind the hotel; the employees are required to enter through the back to get their checks. Wayne, seemingly aware of the negative connotation of having to go in the back way, says that being required to go in the back kind of sucks, but “it is what it is.” X and Wayne head into the hotel while the kids and I stay in the car. X comes back sooner than Wayne and sits outside of the car, smoking a cigarette. Meanwhile, I kid Toryn about being greedy because she drank all of the smoothie that Jaelyn decided she didn’t like. Later Mahogany would tell me that Toryn likes anything Jaelyn doesn’t.

As we wait, Jaelyn tells me proudly that she can read. “Oh really?” I say and try to find something on my phone that she could try to read. By the time I can find a kids’ story online, Wayne and X are back in the car. I really don’t know the extent of her reading abilities, so I give her the phone and ask her to read the story I found, but she isn’t able read any of the words – which isn’t a surprise given that she’s still in preschool. I tell her that when we get home, she can read one of her books to me. Wayne tells me that she frequently
tries to read, but that she gets very frustrated when she isn’t able to do it. “Just like her mom when she can’t do something,” he quips. Later when we get home, she “reads” three books to me that she picked out. She clearly felt proud.

On our way home from the hotel, I mention that I had been hanging out with Chris Goodman and that I had his new mixtape. Wayne responds that he loves his family and that means he can’t do certain things like be more serious about rapping. He has to have a job and when he gets home from work, he can’t just say, “okay bye, I’m going to the studio now.”

Wayne drops X and me at the house and takes the children to get Mahogany. X and I mostly talk about movies and finish watching a Bruce Lee flick he was watching when he fell asleep after he got home from work at 3 a.m.

Upon the family’s return, the movie stays on in the background while the girls play, eagerly engaging me. Toryn pretends to be a doctor, giving me shots. I play along enthusiastically by screaming, then trying to stay calm, and eventually crying with each injection. She must have given me 30 shots. Jaelyn was playing with us as well, but seemed bored after a while, and Peighton loves my yelps of pain every time I get a shot.

The girls and Peighton have pretty free rein, and the house is not exactly “baby-proofed.” There are no protective bumpers on corners or covers on outlets or gates on stairways. That’s not to say that Wayne and Mahogany (and X) are not strict. They are firm and tell the kids what to do, but the adults just do whatever it is that needs to be done while the kids do what they need to do. A repeated refrain throughout the day was: “Where did Peighton go?” At one point, he had made his way to the bathroom and was throwing toilet paper in the toilet. My sense is that Wayne expects Mahogany to keep watch of them when they are both home. Or maybe it was just because he had been with Toryn and Peighton all
day and felt it was Mahogany’s turn. There was no talk about who should be watching Peighton.

I had promised Jaelyn that I would listen to her reading when we got home and she made sure that I kept my promise. Unfortunately, I was still playing patient with Toryn, so I had to keep yelling out in pain every once in a while, even as I try to listen attentively to Jaelyn’s reading. She seems quite tolerant of my divided attention. She brought three books: a “Princess Polite” book (which features the Disney princesses saying polite things, such as “please” and “thank you”); a numbers and colors book; and one of the books I had sent the kids for Christmas. She definitely has the entire Princess book memorized. She also has the numbers and colors book down quite well. She wasn’t as fluent with the last book, but I am surprised at how well she remembers most of the words.

It was getting to be dinner time so we mobilized to go out to eat. Earlier in the day, Wayne and the girls had decided that we would go to Chick-Fil-A – a family favorite. The Washingtons ride in their car, and X and I take my rental. We talk about hip-hop on the way. The Chick-Fil-A is one with a kids’ play area inside – made up of colorful tunnels and a slide. I take the girls in and find a table for us. As Mahogany brings in Peighton, I grab a high chair for him. The girls immediately go for the play area; I wasn’t sure where they were headed, so I follow them (my worries unfounded, as Wayne and Mahogany knew exactly where they were going). Posted on the wall outside the play area is a set of rules, including the requirement that an adult must accompany kids at all times. So I go in and sit on the bench while they crawl on the climbing/tunnel слайд structure.

After several minutes, Wayne comes and sits next to me. He pats my knee familiarly, and we sit for a few minutes. He looks admiringly at his girls and tells me that he found the perfect explanation of his girls’ differences in an anime film he had recently watched. The
movie centers around two sisters, of whom the older one is the fighter and the smart one, and the younger one is the emotional one. Jaelyn is the older of Wayne’s daughters and the one he often compares to himself, while Toryn is the younger, emotional one, whom he often compares to Mahogany. He really wants me to see it, but hasn’t been able to find it since he first watched it.

Wayne tells me to go ahead and order, as they had already ordered. X was already about to dig into his food, the only one freed up enough to relax and enjoy his food. Mahogany and Wayne are switching off between minding the children in the play area and setting up the table for them. When the food arrives, the girls are allowed to continue playing until they’re ready to come to dinner on their own, at which point they sit at the table behind us by themselves. They quickly eat and go back to playing. Wayne feeds Peighton from his own waffle fries. Mahogany asks Wayne if he’s feeding Peighton his chicken, too, and he laughs and says no. So Mahogany gives Peighton some of her chicken. I give Mahogany one of my barbecue sauces and she’s freely dipping in my ketchup. It feels like family. Mahogany and X get shakes and the girls get ice cream, play all the way until it’s time to go home and then eat their ice cream in the car. As I am putting Peighton into his car seat, Wayne tells Toryn that she will be sharing her ice cream with Peighton. She seems unfazed. I think about my own children and the kind of fuss they would put up with that suggestion.

We stop at a liquor store so Wayne can cash his check (and so X can pick up a fifth of Jack Daniels). Mahogany and I talk, car-to-car, since we’re parked in adjacent spots, and she tells me that though she hasn’t gone back to school as she hoped, she’s planning to return in the fall. She says that the three kids and work just felt like too much for her to add school again. She thinks she might not work next year, and instead return to school. She
reveals that she was also scared that she wouldn’t be able to succeed at school anymore. She feels so worn out with work and with coming home to three kids that she can’t imagine adding homework and papers to that mix. Mahogany laughs a lot when she speaks. It’s not like a nervous laugh, but it is a laugh that fills space.

From the liquor store we go to the playground close to their house. X tells Wayne, as he gets in the car, that that liquor is just for the three of them and not to be shared with all the people who come through the house. At the playground, we play a lot of chase, and we keep losing track of Peighton. As Wayne tires from chasing the girls, they ask me to take his place. I play chase with them for a good long while, having a good time. Peighton got as far as the open gate to the fence – twice – as the four adults all failed to track him.

Peighton’s favorite activity is the slide, but he doesn’t like climbing the stairs and structure to get up to the slide – so Mahogany and Wayne alternate between refusing to carry him up and then carrying him up. He took a couple of hard spills and the two of them just laughed. Peighton responds by not crying at all; the laughing seems to put him off crying, and he just keeps going.

Leaving the playground was the first and really only sign of petulance I see all day from Jaelyn. She says that she isn’t leaving and asks who was going to make her leave. Mahogany just laughs at her and they say goodbye and walk to the car. Jaelyn follows walking slowly toward the car, stubbornly with her arms folded. Wayne hops the fence between us and Jaelyn, runs up behind her, grabs her up and hugs her. Jaelyn laughs and they get in the car.

The night isn’t yet over. Mahogany, Wayne and the kids head over to her aunt, who stays in a shelter, to drop off some household items. X and I head back to the house and watch some Kung Fu movies until everyone comes home. As the evening continues, X gets
ready to go out to hang with his uncle and I stay in with the Washingtons. The girls continue to play, and Peighton continues to have free rein of the house.

Eventually, Jaelyn convinces Wayne and Mahogany to put in the *Just Dance 4* video game on the Wii. They clear out the coffee table and pick up the toys and books to set up the dance area in front of the TV. Apparently Wayne always wins this game, but he encourages Jaelyn to go for second place, because he won’t ever be beaten. Wayne, Mahogany, Jaelyn and Toryn each hold a Wii remote as they follow the digitally animated dancers on the screen, each real player following the moves of a digital dancer on the screen. “Perfect!” it flashes above Wayne’s dancers as he mimics the moves – if not the enthusiasm – of his digital model. Jaelyn is getting a lot of “OK’s” and “Good’s” above her dancers – and an occasional “Perfect!”

“Did you see that, daddy?” she asks, when the round finishes. They all crack up laughing. Wayne gives lots of encouragement to the girls and tells them to keep practicing and they’ll get better, but he can’t resist adding that they still won’t ever beat him.

A second round begins. I’m sitting on the couch enjoying the show when I notice Peighton about to climb over the back of the couch. I grab him and put him back down. Mahogany laughs and says she just lets him do things like that because he won’t learn not to do it otherwise. The family plays several more rounds before Wayne tells the girls they have to stop and go to bed. The girls are quite disappointed, but don’t make a big fuss.

It’s after 10 by the time the kids are ready and settled into bed. It has been quite a long and full day. I have a few quiet moments to myself while Wayne reads to the girls and Mahogany puts Peighton down. There hasn’t been much quiet for Wayne or Mahogany all day. We hang out after the kids have gone to bed; I don’t leave until after midnight. Though I am not a usual part of the day, I imagine that all the people who visit their house play a
similar role – being with the kids, fitting in with the family, contributing here and there, and feeling like they belong with this rag-tag bunch.

The very full day just described was a day “off” for Wayne. Most days – if Wayne is lucky to be in a busy season – he finds himself setting up conference rooms, wedding receptions and convention spaces at the hotel downtown. It’s a hard job, a tiring job – physically, not mentally. He misses organizing and teaching, but he could only do a job like that “if it gave me what I got now, which is the hours of paid leave, the sick hours, the health care, the dental care.” As much as the B.A.P. was a family, it could not provide him all that he needed to support his growing family. And as much as he wants to be doing political work, he says, “I’m at the point now where I have to put most of my wants to the side to make sure my team can get from one phase to the next.”

Mahogany, noticing him putting his wants aside, could not have imagined how far he’d go in his sacrifice. She explains something for which she is most proud of him:

But now that he’s working at the [hotel] his job is all manual labor. And it’s at least 8 hours a day. He’s on his feet all day. Which is not what he was used to, and he did it. He grinded it out. And I didn’t think he’d be able to do it. And he cut his hair. That was a big thing for him… I don’t think I realized how much he cherished his hair. But he did that. That was a big deal. Cutting his dreads. And just, being consistent at work… Yeah, just doing the manual labor. I remember that first two weeks he was coming home with, you know, just limping around because his feet was hurting. His body was hurting. He hurt himself a lot at work, in general. But he don’t be wanting to say nothing because he don’t be wanting to be having to leave work, and miss out on hours and go try to go to the hospital and all that stuff. So he be hurting himself a lot at work and don’t be saying anything, just be working through it.

Wayne comes home exhausted – more tired than X, who works beside him at the hotel. They have different stakes in this game. For X, it’s a job that he feels is beneath him –
a position that treats its majority Black crew much more poorly than other departments; one that doesn’t challenge him intellectually, and isn’t helping him develop as a human being. X won’t break his back for a corporation that doesn’t really care whether or not he exists.

Wayne is as astute as X, had the same political education as X, and the same experience of being an important leader, thinker, organizer and teacher with the B.A.P. as X, and has the same assessment of their work conditions. But they respond very differently to conditions in their workplace. Wayne explains:

X also learned through Advocacy in Algebra Project, fuck that shit. Man, fuck that. I’m going to do this, man. Forget that, we’re going to do that. That’s how you feel like at work because the attitude is, Fuck them. Let me just do what I’m going to do – whatever. I can go somewhere else. I know how to look for other jobs, fuck it. If this is how they’re treating me, I’m going to do what I’m going to do… That’s how he is, like I am defiant – I have a cause. I’m not just standing there just for the simple defiance. I’m going to fight for what it is from the family. He don’t need that right now. He just wants a job.

X can’t possibly imagine himself still working at this hotel in five years, but for Wayne it is explicitly in his plans. Wayne wants to move up in the company – move out of his manual labor position and into other areas of hospitality. All of this is decided with his family in mind. In fact, he says the most important thing he does on a daily basis is his work because it keeps the family afloat. He doesn’t want his kids to feel financial strain. This role of provider is something his father offered his family, and now Wayne is taking that up:

I took that from my father. That’s how I’m always doing it. I always have to work because if I want to do it, if I don’t want to do it, if it’s what I want in my life or not – I always got to make sure I’m working for the family.

But unlike his father, Wayne also makes time to be with his kids. In this way, he is a lot like his mother. As Wayne puts it, “Their pros and cons is what made me.” His role in
the family is earner, but it’s not his definitive role. He takes very seriously the responsibility of teaching his kids. Mahogany reflects on Wayne’s early influence on his daughters:

So by 2, she was – he was teaching [Jaelyn] the alphabet and the numbers and all that stuff. We didn’t really do that with Toryn or Peighton, but we didn’t really have to because Jaelyn is teaching now [laughs]. But all of the basics of what Jaelyn is teaching Toryn – like her numbers, her alphabet, how to read them, how to write them and recognize them – William taught that to Jaelyn. Jaelyn was 1! Like, Peighton’s age. Cleaning up all her toys by the same. Toryn won’t do that now. If Jaelyn’s not cleaning up, Toryn’s not cleaning up. And Peighton’s definitely not cleaning up (laughs). So, Jaelyn was doing it by herself at like 18 months, cleaning up all her toys by herself. Yeah, it’s really amazing, actually. When I look back on it. Because I wasn’t really involved. I was focusing on my school stuff.

Recounting “the best day” of his life, when he witnessed Jaelyn teaching Toryn, Wayne was overwhelmed with emotion. This moment matters not only because it is extremely touching, but because it is a source of pride, as well. Seeing his older daughter teach his younger daughter is beautiful, but he emphasizes that it is “the same way I talk to [Jaelyn].” It’s not only the teaching, but the way she’s teaching and that it’s his way of teaching that fills him up. Reflecting on this moment, Wayne says, “And that made me realize, man, that I really do be touching people, I really do, they really get that knowledge that I be trying to give them. And I try so hard in life to make sure that that happens.”

Watching Wayne parent, one easily feels the respect he has for his children as full human beings. Wayne speaks to his kids in calm and serious tones that reveal his understanding that they are rational beings who have ideas and instincts of their own. That is not to say power is wielded equally in the home, just that Wayne takes his children very seriously as people in the world. Mahogany explains how this manifests itself in the difference in how they discipline the children:
He talks to them like they’re adults.... Like they can understand and relate to what he’s saying. He’s very calm. Like, I get frustrated so fast because they’re so good, and they know what the right thing to do is, but sometimes they choose not to do it. So I get frustrated. And he always tells me like, “you can’t get mad, cuz they’re you. They do exactly what you woulda been doing at that age, so I don’t understand why you get so mad.” So when I be fussing, I be mad. I be fussing with emotion. And he be fussing he don’t be mad, he just be doing it, like, fussing so that they think he’s mad. I guess to put the intimidation and that fear. When I fuss, I’m yelling. Which he always tells me not to do, because that just goes in one ear out the other. So you can’t yell. You gotta talk to them like they’re people. Like why are you mad? He’s like “Whenever they do stuff I’m not really mad, really, because I expect them to do stuff. So when I’m talking to them I’m talking to them.” So it’s just a big difference between how we discipline. He’s always calm, he has a lot more patience.

There is evidence that Wayne sees himself in his kids when he says, “they do exactly what you woulda been doing at that age…” He sees his kids as leaders and is proud of what he and Mahogany have done to nurture this. He’s especially proud of the kind of leadership he sees from Jaelyn:

Jaelyn is top-flight in her class right now. She’s leading. She’s not just being at the top and breathing all this fresh air like I’m on top of the mountain. She’s actually being up there. She’s pulling people – whoever is seated next to her she’s helping. I’m like that’s nice because I wasn’t doing that. I was sitting there quiet. I already feel like what I have learned is already being pushed on them at a young age. It’s working out. They are doing a great job at school…They’re leaders. They are leaders.

Wayne observes that she is farther along than he was at her age. Understanding what the Algebra Project unlocked in him, he sees great potential in his own kids and in all kids. One of Wayne’s dreams is to start a daycare, a politically-oriented daycare:
I want to build leaders. I feel like to build leaders, you got to start from the bottom. I’ll start as young as they come. I would be a hypocrite if I wasn’t doing that to my kids that I have now. That’s exactly what I’m doing with them.

Wayne is a provider and a nurturer. He is very proud that he is a dad, and of the particular kind of dad he is. When Mahogany was pregnant with Jaelyn, her family didn’t want her to keep the baby and she was disposed to agree with them. It was Wayne who insisted on keeping the baby and who promised to do whatever it took to take care of her. Wayne was committed to fatherhood before Jaelyn was even born. Wayne has had to mature, to change his priorities, and to set aside his own wants to stick to his commitment, but he has done so – and proudly.

Having kids propelled Wayne’s project of creating family. Of course, it literally meant building a family, but having the children also means creating a tie that binds him to Mahogany, inviting the “village” of extended family that the kids require, and even reigniting ties within their own childhood families. Mahogany’s aunt and uncle have come around to accepting Wayne and the children, and his commitment to them has played no small role in that. Wayne’s family has been supportive, but there was a time when he was branching off on his own. Now his children offer a reason to come back into the fold – but as a man with his own family, a large one tied by blood and not blood.

V. Daddy Washington

You don’t need to fall into a trap just to get what you want or to have your dream come true. My dream is to have a daycare. My daycare would be political.

— William Wayne Washington
William Wayne Washington defines his role in the world as someone who creates and maintains family. The roots of his focus on family come from his own family experiences and his mother’s teaching. Wayne expanded on his mother’s conception within the Baltimore Algebra Project when he was a teenager. In fact, he says he learned to create family at the Algebra Project. Wayne continued to build family by starting a traditional family – though his family is far from traditional, as he has persuaded his partner to welcome as many people as possible into their family.

Wayne has a very public conception of family, where most people have a private conception. He has a collective notion in which he defines family by a collective struggle:

Families work because of something that’s obligated, that’s obligated regardless. That’s how families work. I don’t need to say it’s love. I don’t got to say it’s blood or whatever the obligation is to stick through thick and thin, whatever it is, families have one main obligation that keeps everything tied together.

Wayne points out explicitly that neither love nor blood define family; rather, it is about taking care of each other and about being of one accord moving toward the same goal.

It should not be surprising, then, to learn that one of Wayne’s dreams is to open a daycare. Wayne sees himself as a caretaker, nurturer, a builder of leaders. This dream accounts for both his desire and his skill as a parent. It reflects his instinct to take care of Mahogany, and it even encompasses his inability to protect his brother when they were young. Wayne makes it clear, though, that “my dream was never just to have a daycare to watch this age.” In other words, he isn’t interested in just babysitting little ones. His vision is actually far beyond a daycare. Wayne describes creating an entire pipeline of leadership development, starting with the very young.

That’s important because I feel like if I had gotten everything that I got earlier to experience this through the Algebra Project, through everything that comes with
those two, I think that it will help a lot with building people to be knowledgeable and passionate, way more passionate in life than how people are now… That’s important because I have my dream… I know that it’s a daycare that’s supposedly between a certain age, which would start like one to five would just be the daycare part. Then from six to eight or six to 10 will be the big sib part. From 10 to 15 to have a relationship with organizations like a peer-to-peer type of thing where those kids at 10 to 15, not 15 to 20 but 10 to 15, to be able to be involved in knowledge-based jobs. Then from that going up, being able to have youth-run organizations or be the beast in school or having heard this guy, this young man standing up at Memorial Hall doing a speech at 20 or 21... My dream was to have the ultimate rack of being, from being babysat to being big sibs to working at other organizations.

From his description, it is easy to see the various influences in Wayne’s life. The caring and respect for little ones that he exhibits with his own children is there. The idea of “big sibs” that he sees play out with Jaelyn and Toryn and again with Toryn and Peighton comes out. The knowledge-based jobs he mentions come straight out of B.A.P. vernacular. His own experience with youth-run organizations is reflected in his talk. And he sees all of this manifesting in the kind of leaders he thinks society needs – the kind of leadership he developed at the B.A.P., but starting much younger.

Wayne believes his life experiences have equipped him well to run such a leadership development pipeline – all of his life experiences, including, and maybe especially, his time in the streets.

I want to be known as someone going against the odds…My role is to show that you can be knowledgeable on both sides and choose to make a pavement of road that will benefit you in the outcome…. My role is to show that you do not need to be completely political. You don’t need to be completely the gangsta. You don’t need to fall into a trap just to get what you want or to have your dream come true...
As a Black man, I’m supposed to know why these guys can’t make it up there. What’s the trap? Why are they trapped? What’s advertised? What’s in them to stay down instead of trying to climb up? At the same time, that’s the knowledge I need to know. I need to know the knowledge of how it is to fight. I feel like everybody can have a chance to get both of that knowledge. Everyone has that chance.

No one gets the Mr. Niks and Dr. Jay that I got because I didn’t even know that that was possible until I met Mr. Nik and Dr. Jay. My role is to be open to the knowledge that you can get and to take what you have to, to pave your own destiny, your own road. I don’t need everyone to follow my road; I just need everyone to follow the point of being able to make your own destiny… I feel like I’m a good example of at least having the knowledge of both worlds. Then paving my role because of the knowledge that I have… Because people want to have this type of lifestyle too, they want to pave this road. They want to do this, that what I learned from the Algebra Project. It helps me let them know that it’s doable. You don’t just need to be frustrated because you’re in the streets. You don’t need to cry. You don’t need to go with the program. You could be enlightened and move forward. You can grow up. You can do what you need to do to make your road.

Wayne sees himself as a role model, not because he made it out of the mean streets of Baltimore – as someone sensationalizing his story might say – but because he feels that he represents the fact that no path is predestined for anyone. Given the right support and the right opportunities, people can make their own way through a path of their choosing. If they choose the streets, that’s fine as long as they know they made a choice rather than being “trapped.” The dream of this pipeline is about providing the support and opportunities to have a choice.

In his ideal image, Wayne is a selfless man – someone who would do anything for anybody. He sees himself as a provider – providing love, protection, and a comfortable life
for his family. He sees himself as a partner who defers his own wants for her happiness. He sees himself as a street-smart, politically-educated caretaker *striving for the ordinary*.

I always feel like everyone’s extraordinary, and they don’t see how ordinary they are. They don’t see the everyday how compared, how they can compare themselves to everyone else on that everyday... Everyone has the talent to, everyone has the talent to learn, and to learn goes a long way. From birth, you can do whatever you want, you know? Everyone has that talent to learn, so I would never say someone’s not extraordinary, everyone is extraordinary, great. But what people don’t see sometimes is how ordinary they are to the next man, how typical they is to the next man... But what they forget is they come out of someone else, you know, they still a daughter or a son to a parent, they still can make kids, they still can teach, they still can learn, they still can progress, everyone can change, everyone can build. Everyone’s extraordinary, but they always forget that ordinary part. So, that’s how I see it.

The understanding Wayne offers here is really about the fundamental kernel we all share as human beings. Wayne believes that as special as we each are, if we instead focused on our base likeness as human beings we would be in a far better place. This idea allows him to see the potential in both the youngest kids and those in the streets who are so quickly and easily discarded by society. It helps explain why he opens his house, despite the great deal of negativity he has seen from fellow human beings – from the guy who held a shotgun to his and his brother’s heads to the beef he had with the Westside gangs, to the stealing from his co-op house to the government’s refusal to adequately fund Baltimore’s schools. Even given his enormous potential to be mistrusting, he chooses to see “how ordinary they are to the next man.”

Wayne does hit on those ideal images – all of them are rooted in who he is. But as with all of us, he often falls short of his ideal self. Wayne knows he dropped the ball and failed to follow through on his obligations as a classroom teacher. As a son, he feels
regret for all that time he lied to his parents about being in the streets, even as he values what he learned there. Wayne says that his mom was proud of his work at the B.A.P., but he knows she would be not proud of him, in equal measure, if she knew he had been in the drug game. He also feels bad that he didn’t graduate from high school, because it was one of the few things that his parents asked of him.

As a “brother,” Wayne still feels acute pain about losing Marquis as he immersed himself in the B.A.P. Marquis had been with him through so many battles and so much time roaming the streets, and then Wayne wasn’t there when Marquis got banked. It killed Wayne. Marquis didn’t even want to talk to Wayne when he visited him in the hospital. For someone who thinks of himself as selfless, he feels leaving Marquis was selfish.

Wayne left the streets for the B.A.P., but didn’t completely leave the streets out of the B.A.P. His final time with the organization was marred by a violent conflict with a fellow member. An argument over hours and position – essentially over money – led to a physical fight with one of the B.A.P. leaders in the generation behind Wayne, X and Chris.

The part of his life that Wayne cares most about – his family – is also not immune from his shortcomings. He can’t be the father he wants to be because their financial situation requires that he work long hours as often as possible. He wants to give Mahogany a dream wedding and a dream life, but knows it will be years away – if he can provide it at all. Wayne’s life is one of survival – of making it day-by-day. So, while it’s a struggle to realize his imagined self, he is still an actor in the world.

Until he is able to open up his leadership development pipeline daycare, he will continue to affect the world through his everyday work. He will keep raising his kids to be thoughtful and strong leaders. He will continue to support his partner in her dreams and
grow a family with her. He will keep the doors to his home wide open to care for and be
cared for by those who have touched his life.

Following the murder of Freddie Gray by the Baltimore police, I called Wayne to
check on him and his family amidst the uprisings. He told me the most difficult part had
been explaining to his girls how the looting was wrong, but the anger that led to it was
justified. I couldn’t think of a person I would rather have weaving that difficult story to
young, impressionable, intelligent and vulnerable children.
The Pedagogy of X

I don’t know, it’s just like, I honestly really don’t wanna be considered a citizen. You know? I think that, I guess the subculture I’m part of, I consider as my own nation, that’s my people. So, it’s like you can get – you can get with us – you can step up or step off, pretty much. That’s what I pretty much advocate for. Self-reliance.

Like, we don’t need them, we don’t need nobody’s help. We can do it on our own. It’s just that we need to recognize the power that we have. You know? Cuz in the end it’s like, in the end they need us, we don’t need them.

So, it’s like you can treat people better, but if you don’t – we just - once people understand the meaning of that – of a parallel society, I call it parallel citizens, parallel government [laughs], parallel everything – it’s like, cuz in a way we are full citizens. We are. We’re just not recognized as that. So it’s like, once we recognize that ourselves, the full power of a full citizen – I think people should use that. And I don’t know, take advantage of the power within themselves.

-Xzavier Cheatom

The darkness is just barely penetrated by the light of a single candle, but the room slowly comes into view as one candle lights the next. “You know, Gandhi says: ‘A single candle can push back the darkness.’” A young woman’s voice sounds out loudly from the dimly-lit room, “But I think if we don’t pass the flame on, the light will die out.” The stillness of the candle-passing ceremony is broken by the clanking of a jar being placed over a different candle as the camera pans to an educational space.

“How long … does it take… for a candle to burn… in a 5-liter jar?” The voice comes in halting, yet confident, speech. The rhythm of the young man’s words is deliberate, pausing – is it for dramatic effect, or is it just his reflective style, his carefully selected words?

The voice belongs to Xzavier, speaking here in a documentary about the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.), its pedagogical model and advocacy activities. He is reciting the five
steps of the Algebra Project Pedagogy in the same deliberate, confident cadence used while posing the problem about candles and oxygen, volume and time, power and fullness. He’s brown-skinned – not light like his Puerto Rican mother, and not dark like B, his roommate and colleague. A thin line of a beard outlines his high cheek bones, which make room for his generous smile when he’s moved enough to flash it. He names the five steps of the pedagogy: Physical Experience, Pictorial Representation, People Talk, Feature Talk, Symbolic Representation.

X knows these steps better than he knows his own rap lyrics. Through his years with the B.A.P., X has become the organization’s expert on the pedagogical model developed by Civil Rights Movement organizer and math education innovator Bob Moses. Through its peer-to-peer knowledge transfer model and explicit political activity, the B.A.P. makes room for many of the young people it enfolds to move from young students seeking assistance in math to fulltime education organizers. X is one of the young people with whom I organized, under the mentorship of the senior organizer and project founder Jay Gillen.

If you didn’t take the opportunity to read the opening quote carefully, I invite you to do so now. Read it carefully and patiently. Find X’s rhythm, his self-interrupting style. X is a thinker. Witness his thinking as he speaks:

I don’t know, it’s just like, I honestly really don’t wanna be considered a citizen. You know? I think that, I guess the subculture I’m part of, I consider as my own nation, that’s my people. So, it’s like you can get – you can get with us – you can step up or step off, pretty much. That’s what I pretty much advocate for. Self-reliance.

Like, we don’t need them, we don’t need nobody’s help. We can do it on our own. It’s just that we need to recognize the power that we have. You know? Cuz in the end it’s like, in the end they need us, we don’t need them.

So, it’s like you can treat people better, but if you don’t – we just – once people understand the meaning of that – of a parallel society, I call it parallel citizens, parallel government [laughs], parallel everything – it’s like, cuz in a way we are, we are full citizens. We are. We’re just not recognized as that. So,
it’s like, once we recognize that ourselves, the full power of a full citizen – I think people should use that. And I don’t know, take advantage of the power within themselves.

He lays out some of the themes that define how he moves in the world – self-reliance, community, education and power. But one must be patient with X’s words, listen carefully, wait until he’s finished speaking. His halting, sometimes mumbling, speech can be difficult to follow, but it is worth it for the wisdom he often drops. He sees the world in ways that most of the rest of us don’t – thinking and talking about what it means to be a citizen, about parallel institutions, and about the power we have to live as what Bob Moses calls “constitutional people.” His philosophical take on the world seems to come naturally, and, as is the case when listening to any philosopher, it is important to patiently let the words sink in.

*The Pedagogy Metaphor*

It’s the summer of 2009 in Houston, Texas at the *Free Minds, Free People Conference*, where X and Chris Goodman are leading a “pedacacy” workshop. The crisp air conditioning pumping through the convention center keeps the heat of Houston in July at bay. I find myself in a well-populated room. The participants in the workshop are both young and old, and have come from all over the country. X and Chris are at the front of the room, while I’m in the audience as a participant, having left the project to pursue graduate studies. X and Chris were 16 when I left the B.A.P., and I am struck by how much they have grown as they lead this workshop at a national conference a few thousand miles away from home. Their confidence and presence is palpable; they seem comfortable both with the content of the workshop and with being in front of a room full of strangers.

*Pedacacy* is the merging of pedagogy and advocacy – an organizing process that mirrors the five-step process Moses developed for learning math content. It’s emblematic of
the innovation of the young people in the project. They once created the Maryland Freedom Board of Education – a spin on the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party of the 1960s (also in part created by Moses). The Maryland Freedom Board of Education was a board of education parallel to the Maryland Board of Education that represented what the young people thought the Board of Education should actually value. X refers to this kind of parallel institution in the opening quote.

It makes sense to start X’s story with the Algebra Project’s five-step pedagogy because not only was he steeped in using the process for math instruction after school, he was also instrumental in transferring the concept from math learning to a strategy for organizing. Here, I briefly sketch each of the five steps of the math pedagogy, as background context for the ways in which each step is metaphorically represented in X’s experience and development.

The first step in the pedagogy is the “Physical Experience.” The Physical Experience grounds the learner in a concrete experience that will serve as fodder for later reflection and analysis – an experience that provides the context to mathematize later in the process. The Physical Experience molds what the learner is able to make sense of later. In X’s story, his experiences growing up provide the Physical Experience.

The second step is “Pictorial Representation.” Pictorial Representation allows the learner to represent her experience artistically, providing an opportunity to express what was most important about the Physical Experience. Pictorial Representation is a different modality that starts the process of translating a Physical Experience into a representation of a Physical Experience. It provides another piece of material for reflection and analysis. The Pictorial Representation is a learner’s artistic expression of the Physical Experience that leads to further analysis. X uses hip-hop to artistically represent his life experiences.
“People Talk” is the third part of the pedagogical process. People Talk begins the mathematizing of the Physical Experience. It involves producing mathematics, but in a language familiar to the learner. Mathematics is essentially a language, so it is important that the concepts and content are first understood in the learner’s native language – his everyday talk – so that it is more easily translated into the more restricted and precise language of mathematics. Most of the conceptual understanding is generated in the stage of People Talk, and it is required before moving to the next step – Feature Talk. The way X’s mother taught him served as People Talk for him.

The penultimate step, “Feature Talk,” is the process of translating People Talk into mathematical language. Feature Talk is more precise and less colloquial. It strips away the extraneous fillers needed to be understood in People Talk in order to focus on the important mathematical features in relationship with each other. Once this Feature Talk is understood, the students can make other comparisons of the same construct, abstracting the particulars into mathematical relationships that are then more generally applicable. Feature Talk is a translation of People Talk, using precise language to formalize what they’ve learned, and in this way it codifies and allows learners to apply it. X learned to translate his mother’s People Talk into Feature Talk through his work at the Baltimore Algebra Project and in other justice-oriented experiences.

Finally, the last step is “Symbolic Representation.” Symbolic Representation is what most people think about when they think about math (beyond arithmetic). Familiar examples of Symbolic Representation are \( a^2 + b^2 = c^2 \) or \( E = mc^2 \), known better by their symbols than by the Feature Talk that accompanies them. Symbolic Representation strips Feature Talk down, regaining some of the ease in communication that characterizes People Talk, but that sometimes gets lost in the formality of Feature Talk. Symbolic Representation facilitates the
communication and application of the often awkward Feature Talk. For X, Symbolic Representation is a metaphor for how he combines all of his experiences into the idea – the symbolic concept – of full citizenship and what it means to be a constitutional person.

In their pedagacy workshops, the B.A.P. uses the five-step math pedagogy as a metaphor for the organizing process. In this portrait, I use it as the metaphor for X’s story.

I. **Physical Experience**

“No Physical Experience is a way to get you involved and active in the problem. You want to start with the Physical Experience because it gets you motivated. It’s presented in a fun way, so it’s not really ‘work’ per se; it’s just you learning the way you want to learn.” – Oshai Robinson, former B.A.P. fundi

Sitting in a recessed alcove of Los Amigos, a restaurant adorned with Mexican-themed paintings on the three walls, I ask X what it was like for him growing up. As always, his answer doesn’t start with the question posed; instead he starts with a story about his grandmother in Puerto Rico. She met his grandfather there while he was stationed with the U.S. Army. Though it is important for X to establish these roots for me, he has been told little about Puerto Rico. For this reason, in recounting the story, he moves quickly from Puerto Rico to New York City, where his grandmother relocated at the end of his grandfather's army tour.

X’s grandmother, Carmen Quiñonez, was a woman who defined community. According to X, she raised not only her daughters and their cousins, but anyone and everyone in the neighborhood. People were not only welcomed, they were taken care of in her house. Before X could talk or walk with any proficiency, his mother and father moved to Baltimore with a wave of other New Yorkers heading south to establish new roots. The neighborhood in which they settled was full of other New York transplants, mostly Latino and Jamaican. Patricia Williams, X’s mother, ran her household very much as her own
mother did, “so I grew up seeing that way of being a community,” says X. “That’s why I started with my grandmother when you asked me that. Seeing that was part of how I grew up in New York and Baltimore.”

X’s earliest experiences are defined by his interactions with his mother. By age three, his father was no longer in the picture and would stay out of frame from then on. Ms. Williams raised X, along with his older sister Tay and his younger sisters Nicole and LaShierra. X remembers his early days positively:

My mama, she was modeling and ... I knew she was a model because she would come home with pictures from photo shoots… [and] we always had a lot of good Christmases. That's the one thing I remember about it. We always had good Christmases when she had that job.

Beyond the Christmases – that is, beyond the economic security he felt in his early life – X remembers how important his mother was to his early education. He explains, “When I was real young, before I went to school, my mother taught me everything. I knew how to read. I knew how to write before I went to school.” In fact, he compares his mother to Jay Gillen, who would later serve as a parental figure for X.

When we was young, before we started school, my mother would give us things like books and instruments. Kind of like what Jay would give Matteo. Not a lot of toys and stuff, but just things to help us learn.

Learning is a value that became a constant in X’s life. He credits his mother with instilling this value. He makes a concerted effort to talk about his mother in a positive light. He admits that physical punishment was her key parenting tool, but points to the resulting lessons as evidence of its efficacy.
Another sideline story that was even that young I remember my mom used to beat us all the time. We had to be perfect; I never got into too much trouble. If I would have looked at an adult wrong, after the first time I did it, it was the last time, because it would be that bad. That's how I learned how to read. That's how I was able to read before I went to school. She taught me like a teacher would teach you in school, but you would avoid trying to make too many mistakes with her. First mistake it was like, "Stop playing." Second mistake is, "You testing me." The third mistake is, "Don't do it again." Don't do it again because you got a whipping. I learned a lot of things pretty fast even then. Once I went to school, everything was great. I was in kindergarten for about a month before they skipped me to first grade... Even though she beat us into those type of people we are. We never got in much trouble. The most trouble we got into was because bad people wanted to break us or we was trying to help somebody out.

Although the life lessons, often imparted through stiff consequences, continued through X’s childhood into his middle school years, he can point to a distinct moment when things really changed for the worse in his household. When he was just four years old, the Christmases started to be less cheerful. Ms. Williams made ends meet through her career as a model. The photo shoots stopped, however, after a serious car accident damaged her face. "That's when everything started to be blurry to me. Everything changed after that," X reflects.

Unable to provide financially in the same way, her family suffered for many years. The lack of job prospects and the pressure of raising a family led to years of struggling with alcohol addiction. When X was five, it hit a particularly low point when he and his sisters were spilt apart and put into foster care.

X doesn’t remember going to school during his time with his foster mother, so he thinks it must have been just one summer until he was back with his mother. The incident
that sent them into foster care, according to him, was that a teacher at his school saw his
three-year-old sister eating grapes from a trash can. When asked why she was doing this, the
three-year-old said it was because she was hungry.

My mother told me the real story. I believe her. It was that my mother gave her some
grapes. My sister was dropping them on the floor, so she threw them in the trash.
When [the teacher] saw my sister standing by the trash can eating grapes and looked
in the trash can, she was making up her own story. Which is real messed up. It's
ridiculous somebody can do that. My mother was feeding her; she was eating grapes,
but she was wasting them on the floor, and so my mother had throwed them in the
trash. The whole story don't make sense. After that I came back to my mother’s.

Child Protective Services would have had to investigate and find some justification
for taking the drastic step of removing children from their home. X likely would not have
known about any additional factors that led to this decision, but whether or not it is plausible
that one incident of a child’s eating grapes from a trash can would be enough for the state to
intervene is not the point. The important point is that the incident provided X with what he
considered his first concrete encounter with racism.

Some big thing broke out at the school over that. We all got separated, me and my
sisters. I can say that’s one example of racism I saw… What happened? It was pretty
much this White lady over my mother's word. This is like, my mother's more into
her culture. She's Puerto Rican. I guess because in Dundalk around that time I went
to Holabird Elementary…which was definitely majority White. Me and my cousin,
who also went to this school, were like the only two Black kids in that kindergarten.
Then I got promoted and he was the only one, and then I was in that class and I was
the only one. I smelled it then.

At age five, X “smelled” the racism. Maybe he couldn’t see it, but the stench was
unmistakable.
After his time in a foster home, X reunited with his family and he, his mother and his sisters moved in with his grandmother on the East Side. X had to change schools and described it as an awful experience:

They held me back, wouldn't let me go to second grade. Something about they don't have to go by the other school rules. That was horrible because during that time I definitely wasn't learning anything. [The school] was ridiculous. It was loud, kids playing everywhere; I had relatives there, so I didn't really take the school serious. I was in first grade. I did everything; there was nothing you could put in front of me and then they were putting a lot less in front of me. Then class was always loud. I could never focus. It was like hanging out in a gym all day. That's how a normal day in the classroom was for me at that age. The work was like kindergarten work in that first grade.

X found the work too easy and the environment distracting. As a curious learner, who had been taught to read before school even started, it felt like a complete waste of time. His mother, too, was profoundly affected by the combination of losing her modeling career and losing her children to foster care. X explains:

My mother went through a lot during that time. Things were a lot worse than they were before we got separated. My mama started drinking more. I hardly knew my mama drank that much when I was living with her at first. Then my mom was always looking for a job.

After a year, they moved back to the West Side, but his mother still struggled with alcoholism. X describes times in which the family spent weeks without electricity. He and his sisters had to contribute to the family income in any way they could as they grew older. There weren't many options for a young Black person in Baltimore to generate supplemental
income, so he sold drugs for a short time. This short stint in the underground economy was nothing compared to that of his cousins:

They weren't even ... I'm trying to think the oldest maybe was 15, 16. The younger ones were like 12 and 13. I grew up three, four, five watching them terrify, terrorize grown adults. Ridiculously. Pretty much because they had poor supervision, they ended up getting involved in the crime life at a really young age.

X’s cousins had a reputation for robbing people, beating up people, stealing from homes, as well as working in the drug game. Though X, for the most part, didn’t participate in these kinds of activities, he has a strong identity of his family – and by extension, himself – as people not to be messed with. He carries this sense with him all the time. He was involved in a lot of physical altercations in his life and doesn’t remember being bested in a one-on-one fight. “I've been robbed and shot at in middle school, but I've never been beat down.” As he remembers it, most fights were in self-defense or in the role of defending others:

Mainly because I was used to just always defending people, basically. Growing up I used to have people defend me. Then I grew into like a defender role, watching the people that watched over me like my older sister, or my uncle who was with my cousins. They would always protect me, and as I got older, I decided to start protecting them, the other kids.

Despite all the hardships – his mother’s dependency struggles, the poverty, crime and fighting – X mostly remembers the good that came from his family’s influence. He most identifies his family as rooted in community. Returning to his family’s time in New York, he recalls stories not only about how his grandmother took care of all the kids in the neighborhood, but how his grandfather fed the kids that frequented the arcade he owned:

When my grandfather got older and he started making money and his own businesses ... he used to run the arcade called Fat Albert's in New York City... He
would serve pork and beans out there for the kids at the school. It was kind of like him giving back...He used to do it too. My grandmother used to do it when she came and my mother used to do it in the neighborhood. Me and my sister grew up and we started it. Now I do it with my friends and family.

Even as his family struggled, his mother made sure to be generous with the neighborhood. X was told to take a plate of food to an elderly woman down the street, or when they had money, his mother hosted cookouts for the neighborhood.

While X’s mother helped him to understand the importance and necessity of community, she also instilled in him a definite sense of individuality. In the first grade, he was supposed to wear a dashiki as a part of a Black History Month celebration, but his mother wouldn’t allow him to participate. X interprets her refusal as an effort to resist his being essentialized or defined by others in narrow terms.

The significance of people being individuals, of just being true to themselves, is reflected in the people with whom X surrounds himself. At Lombard Middle School, Fernandes and Zach were X’s best friends. He loved them partly because they marched to the beat of their own drum – especially Fernandes. When it was time to go to high school, the three friends went to three different schools – Zach to Patterson, his Zone School; Fernandes to New Era Academy, a school owing its existence to the Gates small school movement; and X to Mervo, a citywide school emphasizing practical job readiness education. Traveling from the West to the East Side on Baltimore’s woefully inadequate bus system often takes two hours. X woke up at 5 a.m. to meet Zach and Fernandes to take the bus down to South Baltimore where Fernandes went to school. Zach and X provided backup protection for Fernandes when he had beef with students at a neighboring school.
X’s view of himself as a protector of people who are true to themselves also played out in his own school:

Up at Mervo, it used to be a whole bunch of followers tryna act like they tough, but wasn’t really tough; they just wanted to act that way. I’m not gonna stunt, me and my friend from my block used to chase [name of student] home every day. That’s because [name of student] used to pick on people that wasn’t even having nothing to do with his life. People that reminded me of Fernandes, just cuz they were like real people.

X was able to avoid suspension because “my mother taught me how to talk my way out of certain situations.” He would talk to the administrators and convince them that in-school suspension was preferable, asking them, “Are you saying that you want me to go home? How am I supposed to get an education?”

Eventually, X was put out of Mervo because of his altercations and his poor performance in class. He really wanted to transfer to New Era to be with Fernandes. He was afraid to tell his mother about being expelled from school and, at age 14, went to the district offices on his own to turn in his forged transfer papers. The official, however, wouldn’t process his request without his mother’s physical presence. With her presence being out of the question, he went on the search for a new school that would take him in. Still, it was up to X to find a school on his own.

The school transfer dilemma is emblematic of the many times that X’s mother – both explicitly and implicitly, both intentionally and unintentionally – developed his self-reliance. He recalls that, at times, this self-reliance was necessitated by the reality of their situation:

I don’t know. I guess it was just a habit my mother developed. Not trying to say anything negative about my mother, but when she used to drink a lot, I guess it stems from then, like, when she used to drink a lot, like, I would assume that she
never helped me and my sister with anything, was because, I guess she's too drunk to
do it. Up until then, like me and my sisters had got along well. Like I was saying
earlier, that, like Jay used to help me out when I needed like a guardian, support with
like any type of paperwork or anything. That was still, probably like, maybe three
years after my mother had been clean from drinking alcohol. I honestly really don't
know why. She used to always say like, she just want us to be independent, but that
wasn't really always an excuse.

There were plenty of times, though, when X’s mother intentionally challenged him to
be independent. Often, she pointed him and his sisters in the right direction, but refused to
do the task for them. This kind of challenge made him independent at an early age:

I’m not gonna stunt, my mom’s an amazing cook. She can cook anything that
someone else cooks, only she make it better. And if it’s not better, it’s still
real good. My mother would get the ingredients to whatever and leave them
on the counter for me. She would be like, there’s some stuff in the kitchen
for you to make. And I would say, “How do you want me to fix it?” and she
would ask, “You don’t know how to make [so and so]?” And if I answered
no, she would fuss me out, saying, you know, I was being selfish and didn’t
want to do work like everyone else in the house. So I would just, you know,
figure out how to put the ingredients together.

Along with these lessons in competence and self-reliance, X learned from his mother
to be an advocate. His mother told him stories about the racism and xenophobia she faced
and, coupled with her examples of standing up to authority, these stories gave him a sense of
his own importance as a person in the world and his responsibilities to others. He says he
watched his mother “have words with the police,” and from that he learned that he should
stand up for himself and others:

I guess my mother's experiences taught me how to advocate. She used to advocate
when people would get locked up and stuff like that. She used to advocate when
people were hurt and needed medical treatment. Say one of my relatives got shot in a bar fight and went to the emergency room. They told him he had to wait, I guess there was some issue with the person not having insurance or something, maybe my mother was drunk. Her and her people that were at the bar and had came down to the hospital were picketing to get them treated as soon as possible. When my cousins went to jail, my mother used to wake us up out of bed and take us down to the jail to protest to get my cousins out. I remember a day when we were all picketing in front of the jail, I was only like five. Usually my mother and her friends might have been partying the whole day, then when they found out somebody got locked up, everybody just left the party to go down to the jail and protest.

In these everyday experiences, in the things his mother would say to him, in the examples she provided him, X came to understand that community matters, that he would often have to rely on himself, and that he would need to be the kind of person who stands up for others.

As he grew older, he increasingly put these lessons into practice. Returning to X’s search for a new school after being expelled from Mervo, he went to the principal of School 425 (later named Heritage High), to petition for a placement. This was a “small school” like New Era, but it wasn’t a hot destination like New Era was. School 425 was housed in one of the largest and most notorious former school buildings in a city with one of the worst reputations for education. The principal, Mrs. Lawrence, welcomed Xzavier to the school where he would eventually be introduced to the Baltimore Algebra Project.

The story of X’s work to find a school is not solely one of self-reliance, but of the critical role that education plays for him. He did not decide to drop out or fake going to school; instead, he went to great lengths to find a new school. His mother, who was now
successfully participating in an Alcoholics Anonymous program, eventually found out about X’s removal from Mervo and castigated him for it:

So my mother punished me for the rest of my life. I couldn't hang out with my friends. I had dreads during this time, but I had dread it myself for the whole summer, like I was just growing them. The school year start, people were just like, “Oh, snap. I like your dreads,” and this and that. My mother was like, “By the end of this week I want to see your dreads cut.” … Yeah, my mother just kept coming up with different punishments like every 30 minutes when I got put out of Mervo.

Not wanting to further disappoint his mother, X became a star student at Heritage, excelling particularly in math. Initially, his motivation for staying after school to participate in B.A.P.’s tutoring program was to avoid his mother – “I just didn’t want to go home.” He certainly didn’t need the tutoring. In fact, despite not having the title (or pay) of “tutor,” he often found himself helping other students.

I met X in that room of Black students staying after school to work on their math – students at one of the city’s least reputable schools making a demand on themselves to get their math together. In my experience as a youth organizer, participation often starts this way: don’t want to go home, staying for the snacks, there’s a cute somebody staying, need a job. But for many people, and for X in particular, the experience turned out to be a lot more. During his time in the B.A.P., we moved from a tutor/client model of peer-to-peer math tutoring to a cadre model, in which students work together, collectively in a small group, to figure out some math. X became a cadre leader and quickly was elected to be one of the site leaders for 425, alongside Wayne. Neither was technically qualified, according to the policy set forth in the student-produced *Baltimore Algebra Project Handbook*, because they hadn’t held the position of cadre leader for the required time. X and Wayne had to petition the officers of the Project for exemptions from this criterion. As site leader, X was required
(or had the opportunity) to attend weekly leadership meetings. His knowledge, his education, expanded beyond the goings-on of his individual site to issues the entire Project faced – citywide and state-level issues.

X’s “Physical Experience” has been laid out here – *the Physical Experience molds what the learner is able to make sense of later*. Though making sense of the Physical Experience will come later, it is clear that the lessons of community, independence and self-reliance, advocacy and education, along with experiencing the pain of racism and poverty, are important in his early formative time. He came to talk about and define citizenship based on the foundation laid by these experiences.

II. Pictorial Representation

“Where *they* draw a picture of the way they see the problem.” – Faye Brown, former B.A.P. fundi

“It also lets you know what they saw during the experiment – what they were thinking about.” – Xzavier Cheatom

The Algebra Project takes the artistic side of the pedagogical process very seriously. In translating from everyday to mathematical language, finding ways for students to express their experiences in as many ways as possible is imperative – including through art. In the pedagogy of X, his MC-ing is the artistic expression that best captures his experience.

Rap is not the primary way that X moves through life, as it is for Chris Goodman. For X, it is more a way to reflect on and express his truths. As early as middle school, he and his friends were rapping about what they saw every day:

We did that every day in middle school. In middle school, we would only rap about stuff we knew about…. I would freestyle my real stuff like, "Yeah, I just woke up this morning, stepped over like two bodies, watched the police through a raid for
child support,” because we used to do that when I was in middle school. We used to write about stuff that we saw, and if we saw it that morning, like part of freestyle in the middle school was like the news. We would freestyle about the most gutter thing we saw on our way to school in the morning, because that’s when everything would come – everything would happen at night, and then when you wake up, 7:00 in the morning, the police still processing the scene. I was in middle school, I get to middle school I’m writing about – it takes a lot of skill to write about something that just happened a couple of hours ago, and then you aint write nothing down, it's all off the dome.

Just as the “police still processing the scene,” the raps X and his friends engaged in helped them process the scene of their everyday lives. Considered “gangsta rap” in popular lexicon, this kind of rap emphasized the crime and violence of poverty-stricken neighborhoods in big cities. For X, this is “stuff we knew about” – it was his everyday reality. Rapping it was an artistic representation of his day-to-day struggle.

One can imagine a 13-year-old walking to school, passing a crime scene and needing an outlet to relieve some of the stress it inevitably causes. In cash-strapped schools, where there are no mental health or social work resources, and with teachers pressured to focus on content to produce test results, young people like X often turn to rapping as a way to both process and express their lived experiences.

Of course, as middle-schoolers, part of their everyday experience included a budding interest in love and sexual relationships. When X first met Wayne at Heritage High, they initially bonded through their mutual interest in rapping. Wayne recalls that X’s rap notebook had mostly love songs when they first met:

We would sit down, we would tell each other poems here and there, and at first it wasn’t even X, it was just us. And X would come and he would sit down and just pull his book out and was like, “Y’all want to hear something.” And it was like,
“Yeah, what’s up?” And he would just rap this love song. He kept on love songs at the time. I’m not saying that he wasn’t doing anything else, but as advertised in his music, he kept doing love songs.

Increasingly immersed in the B.A.P. – more politicized and engaged in political education – their raps became politicized, as well. Turning his musical attention to matters of justice, X’s raps became more in keeping with what is known as “conscious rap.”

I look at the clock as I sit in my old neon green Nissan Sentra parked across the street from St. Mark’s Lutheran Church. Darkness is quickly descending on this brisk Baltimore night, the clock reads 5:37 and the meeting of the Baltimore Education Advocates started at 5:30. The young man in the passenger seat, a clean-cut Chris Goodman – before he was dreadlocked “Comrade” – is not making a move to get out of the car. Neither are his four comrades squeezed in the back seat designed for three. Chris (“CMG”) has already spit his verse, as have Lil Snook, B and Ace, we’re just waiting for X to bring us home on the new joint they put together about Katrina. As X finishes up, we pile out of the car knowing that what he had just felt was more important than being on time (or less late) to this meeting. “We run the meeting anyway,” B quipped, as a familiar face allows us into the side door of the church. The adult faces turn and it’s all love as we enter the room. “Let’s get started then,” a smiling man says, as he passes out copies of the monthly worker’s party newsletter to each of us.

With a shared interest in both rap and justice, X joined fellow B.A.P. members to form the Militant Advocates (MA). MA consisted mainly of X, Wayne (a.k.a. Lil Snook), Chris Goodman and Bryant (a.k.a. B). Other members included Chelsea, who performed spoken word, Asa (Chris Goodman’s brother) and Chris Moser, who both made beats, and later, Wayne’s brother Adrian, who also rhymed. MA performed at conferences that the
B.A.P. hosted and at meetings held by other groups working for progressive change. They even had a few paid gigs, but mostly they reveled in their own stardom among their B.A.P. peers and the chance to perform whenever they found themselves in the company of social justice-minded people like themselves.

One night, at the house he shared with Wayne and Mahogany, and in the company of their childhood friend Sean, and Bryant from the Militant Advocates, X shared with me one of the rhymes he performed at a farmworkers’ meeting in Florida. The song is entitled, “The Struggle Waits for No Man.”

The struggle waits for no man,
what I need y’all to do – y’all need to get with the program.

No time to hold hands,
the struggle waits for no man.

I won’t settle for they claims
they’re planning to feed off brains,
bread would keep us entertained,
from every last dollar to every bit of change
I use my power to make change at the top
Ima take ’em out to pick
I’m about to use crop
they got food on the ships like some load on the docks

And as for the cops they gonna have to pick a side
they gonna have to choose the people in order for us to ride
as for suicide –
that is not an option
around every corner the government’s plottin
dead and forgotten
mortars be droppin
Join me
cuz I ain’t pickin’ cotton

In this first verse, X’s experiences are reflected in the artistic expression. The notion of community is squarely embedded in the lines: “they gonna have to choose the people in
order for us to ride” and “join me.” X is also explicit in establishing his belonging to society by rejecting the ultimate act of citizenship denied – slavery. “Cause I ain’t pickin’ cotton.”

The refrain of “get with the program” reflects X’s understanding of self-reliance, as does his reference to the “plottin” government, implying that we cannot rely on the government to take care of us. The song clearly reflects X’s evolution from a middle-schooler recounting his everyday experience to an artist expressing a strong political analysis of the world and his place in it. He implores his listeners to join him as constitutional people (“join me, ’cause I aint pickin’ cotton”). The 13th, 14th and 15th amendments were attempts to make Black people constitutional people. Here, X – as a leader, as a person who matters – declares he is a constitutional person and wants his listeners to join him.

The struggle waits for no man,
what I need y’all to do – y’all need to get with the program.

No time to hold hands,
the struggle waits for no man.

Let me tell you what the government do –
they’ll take everything if the payment is due
I aint havin that
tyey aint taking what’s mine
I don’t know what it is but the feds done lost their minds

Heck yeah in the streets organize
that’s my grind
Will I sign over?
Hell naw that’s a crime

Hell yeah for my people, put it all on the line
So where my people standin at?
where my rebels with the bat?
Vicious ladies in the front
All my fellas in the back
If you’re real then keep it real there’s no need for that act

Keep your eyes on the prize
Cuz the feds got contraps
If you bad make ’em mad
and watch ’em snap

The struggle waits for no man,
what I need you to do – you need to get with the program.
No time to hold hands,
the struggle waits for no man.

In this verse, X makes an explicit overture to educate his audience: “Let me tell you what the government do.” There is an embedded distrust of the government and the “feds” in X’s experience. This distrust manifests itself in a rejection of participation within the government, “Will I sign over? Hell naw, that’s a crime.” In the process, he redefines what is criminal. X rejects what the state finds criminal, and instead says signing over to the side of the state is the crime.

The evolution of X’s music – from relaying his experience to analyzing it – is the same evolution he makes as a person in the world. The artistry of his version of a Pictorial Representation – rap music – allows someone interested in learning about X to trace his development and his own evolution. He goes from rapping about stepping over bodies and the police processing a crime scene to actually confronting the police more directly: “as for the cops they gonna have to pick a side.” This harkens back to watching his mother challenge the police. He is no longer simply reporting the pain of his life and community, but evolves into his ability to make connections to the structural systems of oppression that caused this pain, and ways for organizers to combat these systems.

His music reflects the importance of community, self-reliance and education in his world sense. In his song, we hear the declaration of himself as a full citizen – a constitutional person. As defined previously, Pictorial Representation is a learner’s artistic expression of the Physical
Experience that leads to further analysis. For X, hip-hop serves as this artistic expression of his Physical Experience.

III. People Talk

“People Talk is the next step in Pedagogy. Basically, it is where everybody talks about the math, but not in math language. It’s easier to communicate the math with each other when you do it in your own words. Pedagogy builds a lot of confidence and encourages them to be able to speak publicly what they feel is right and on their opinions.” – Xzavier Cheatom

In 2010, I was invited by a colleague and close friend to speak at an education class at Brown University. The class was working through Paolo Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed, and some were still struggling with the core concepts in the complex text. I had helped with some of the design of the course, and my colleague had helped me think through what I was learning from conversations with X. I told her that he was an exceptional example of putting Freire’s concepts into plain words.

I attended the class to talk about both Freire and X. It struck me that I was going to work with students at one of the most prestigious universities in the country by sharing the wisdom of a young man who did not make it through Baltimore City Community College. I was able to use X’s People Talk to help the students understand some of Freire’s complex theories. This is, in fact, the express purpose of People Talk: to translate complex ideas into everyday language. As one example, we juxtaposed the following words from Freire with X’s People Talk:

To be concrete: if at a given historical moment the basic aspiration of the people goes no further than a demand for salary increases, the leaders can commit two errors. They can limit their action to stimulating this one demand or they can overrule this popular aspiration and substitute something more far-reaching – but something which has not yet come to the forefront of the people’s attention…The solution lies in synthesis: the leaders must on the one hand identify with the people’s
demand for higher salaries, while on the other they must pose the meaning of that very demand as a problem...To achieve critical consciousness of the facts that it is necessary to be the “owner of one’s own labor,” that labor “constitutes part of the human person,” and that “a human being can neither be sold nor can he sell himself” is to go a step beyond the deception of palliative solutions. It is to engage in the authentic transformation of reality in order, by humanizing that reality, to humanize women and men. (Pedagogy of the Oppressed, pp 182-183)

Freire is explaining the concept of “cultural synthesis,” in which a revolutionary leader both acknowledges the demands of the people and challenges them to understand their demands as part of “something more far-reaching.”

Compare Freire’s words with these words from X, in which he reflects on his work with farmworkers who came to Baltimore from Florida to organize support for their struggle. In the end, X comes to the same conclusion Freire deems necessary:

They were sharing more information about what they organizing around. And for me it was a serious issue because it addressed more than just the farmworkers; it addressed people that’s starving in general. It’s like, I don’t know, it’s a whole culture thing. It’s bigger than the wages because, like, I don’t know – from the testimonies I’ve seen it’s like, honestly? We can organize around getting higher wages, but they really just wanna be treated like humans. You know? Not like they dogs.

We found four other selections from Freire’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed that X had translated into People Talk, however unwittingly, throughout my conversations with him. The question is, how did X come to be the people’s Freire?

One of the main arguments in Pedagogy of the Oppressed is that oppressed people need to go through the process of “achieving critical consciousness,” as noted in the Freire quote
above, to realize their full humanness and to overcome their oppressed conditions. One could argue this is the story of X’s life – that he went through a process of raising his consciousness with the help of the B.A.P. and realized his full humanness. But X would counter that argument. He says he already understood his full humanness prior to the political education he got through his work at the B.A.P.

He already knew he was a full citizen, in large part because his mother made sure he knew. He knew it in everyday language; he just didn’t use the term “full citizens.” In the words from X that open this portrait, he identifies some of the elements that make up a full citizen: being involved in struggle in solidarity with the community; self-reliance; recognition of one’s power; being educated about the world.

X received most of these critical elements from his own everyday experiences and from his family. He gives his mother the most credit for teaching him about being a full citizen, and part of this is reflected in her lessons to him about his independence and leadership:

My mother always used to say I’m not raising no followers. My whole family has this alpha leader thing where we always got to be leaders. When I see a follower, I just don’t like that type of person. I like people who can just be themselves. That’s how we are in the family.

Another key lesson from his mother was: “You have to earn everything that you get, no one is gonna hand anything to you. And anything given to you aint worth havin’, you know what I’m sayin’?” Her philosophy about earning what you get, combined with her talk of leadership and independence, are the roots of X’s ideas about self-reliance. The notion of self-reliance is also closely related to the power he describes in his song: “I use my power to make change at the top.” He clearly owns
his power in this line. As he said in the beginning, “So it’s like, once you recognize
that ourselves, that the full power of a full citizen, like, you know. I think people
should use that. And you know, I don’t know, take advantage of the power within
themselves.”

X defines full citizenship as the recognition of one’s power, and the recognition of
oneself as fully human. Defined in those terms, it is not the B.A.P. that helped him see
himself as a full citizen; that was already within him. But the B.A.P. did serve an important
function. In the following statement he explains how he went from his mother’s People Talk
to the B.A.P.’s Feature Talk:

My mother didn’t use words like ‘you’re a citizen.’ She used, you know, what
we call in the Algebra Project, you know ‘People Talk’. So she’s like, you are,
you know, a person, you’re a person just like they are a person. You’re not
nobody’s – my mother’s favorite word is ‘bitch.’ Cuz that’s like, in my family,
men are supposed to abhor that word, like that’s one thing you shouldn’t
never get called and you know you shouldn’t have a reason for anybody to
call you that. So my mother would always say you not somebody’s hoe or
somebody’s bitch. You not nobody’s, you know, errand boy. You know, you
not none of that.

You are a person just like they are. You shouldn’t let nobody treat you like
that. You should live like a person supposed to live. Not like a bitch should
live or somebody’s hoe should live. And when I got in the Algebra Project,
they were like, you know, they changed the word around and was like
‘Feature Talk’, like you’re a citizen, you’re not a minority, you’re not a lower
class citizen, you’re not a prisoner, you’re not this and that. You’re a
constitutional person. They taught me that.

X’s mom’s People Talk minced no words: “…you not somebody’s hoe or
somebody’s bitch. You not somebody’s…errand boy.” The message of being a fully human
citizen of the world is in there: “you not none of that. You are a person just like they are.” X didn’t achieve critical consciousness through the B.A.P.; he gained language. This is precisely the point he is making above. Prior to entering the B.A.P., he already knew he was a person who fully mattered. This was something his mother taught him. She taught him this through her own People Talk. The kernel was already there; the truth of it was already known. The People Talk of “you not somebody’s hoe,” was extended to the Feature Talk of being a “constitutional person.”

Though the statement, “you not somebody’s hoe” can feel jarring, failing to understand it as a statement of full humanness is like when math teachers confuse students’ lack of mathematical language fluency with the inability to think mathematically. X always understood himself as a person who mattered in the world – a person with power, and a person with the right and the responsibility to make demands on his own behalf and on behalf of others. His mother, family and experiences helped him define the basic elements of constitutional personhood: community, self-reliance, education, advocacy.

IV. Feature Talk

“When you get into the Feature Talk, you’re putting the math [language] into it.” – Faye Brown, former B.A.P. fundi

“The exact definition of features in pedagogy are the important parts of the experiment or important items of the experiment.” – Xzavier Cheatom

The sudden verbal outburst and confrontation felt simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar as I sat in the classroom led by co-teachers X, Jay, Wayne, Chamir and B. The young woman was up in a dude’s face, aggressively letting him know with no uncertainty that she was in the right and he was completely wrong. I
had witnessed many such confrontations years ago during my time as an organizer in the school. The pale blue walls and dull yellow metallic desks served as a remembered backdrop to this face-to-face drama, which was getting louder by the moment. But the similarities stopped at the surface. I wasn’t feeling anxiety or dread like before; this time I was fascinated.

The argument intensified to the point that security rushed into the room looking to break up a fight, and I was snapped back into reality. Jay quickly assured the guards that they weren’t needed and that the two students were arguing about a math concept. Reluctantly, and what seemed to be suspiciously, security left the classroom and the room returned to the normal level of chaos in which it functioned.

Societal claims of student apathy in “inner city” mathematics classroom lay dead in this space. I see X bring his group of four students back together to discuss the “debate” that just took place. He crouches down to their level as the students sit in a circle, discussing how the revelations of the debate affect the math on which they are working.

At the *Free Minds, Free People* planning retreat in Providence, RI in May 2010, X introduced himself as an algebra teacher. It was a bit puzzling to those who knew about X, but didn’t know him well. He had graduated from high school just a couple of years before, so how could he be an algebra teacher?

X, in fact, *was* an algebra teacher at the time. He was co-teaching a cohort of students using the National Algebra Project curriculum at the school he once attended. A National Science Foundation grant had provided the Algebra Project a chance to teach cohorts of students around the country – in California, Colorado, Michigan, Mississippi and Ohio – with a newly developed (and often developing) Algebra Project curriculum. Jay Gillen had proposed to Bob Moses that they use a similar, but slightly different, model in Baltimore.
Unlike other Algebra Project sites, the Baltimore Algebra Project had been youth-driven and led. In its development as a youth-led entity, the B.A.P. had produced a group of young people intensely dedicated to the organization, but lacking defined roles as they graduated from high school. They could no longer be tutors at the peer-to-peer high school tutoring sites, and there were only so many organizing and administrative positions they could create and fund. Jay understood the immense power and potential of employing these college-age youth to serve as teachers and mentors to the high school students. So he proposed a co-teaching model to Moses in which he would serve as the lead teacher and would hire several college-age B.A.P. members to teach with him.

X was a great candidate for one of these positions. He was quite good at math; he attended the school in which they would be working; he was well-respected in the organization; and he had always taken the math as seriously as the organizing. In fact, he was able to articulate the connections between the math work and the organizing work very effectively.

I’ve been advocating up and organizing in the Algebra Project for, like, the past years, and I notice I’ve been doing a outstanding job on my work in the Algebra Project as far as tutoring. I kinda find tutoring as organizing cuz it’s like our logo “no education, no life.” Our goal is to help people to get where they wanna be. If they wanna be full citizens of this country, part of being a full citizen is knowing math, knowing how it relates to life and how yourself can contribute to the larger society, and be part of it.

It’s like everybody are not organizers, or everybody may not have the movement in them, but one thing I do understand is that people do wanna be part of society and the positions a lotta people find themselves in is not part of society. Like people with records with federal charges, they’re not really considered full citizens. And minorities – illegal immigrants, well, not illegal immigrants, but migrant workers and
people that just don’t know. So, people that just don’t know how society works. So I
find tutoring, helping people be part of, I guess, the larger society… It’s being a
citizen that’s aware of what’s going on, it’s basically what I believe people should do
in order to be successful, getting through life, making changes, especially when they
see problems that affect them and people that they know.

It was X, after all, who became a key architect in the “pedacacy” workshops. He was
at the forefront of applying the math pedagogy to organizing principles. He understood the
classroom as a place to enact the ideals of full personhood developed from his family and
expanded at the B.A.P. He took his role as a classroom teacher very seriously. At times, it
was overwhelming:

When I’m teaching it’s like I’m in a minefield. I don’t want to step on a mine. And
the mines are their emotions. I don’t want to do anything that affects their emotions.
Or do anything that would take away their trust from me. Or anything that might
change how they feel about working with me…I don’t want to treat them like the
normal teachers that they usually seen growing up.

These feelings were constant for X in his role as a classroom teacher. Part of the
reason he felt the heavy burden of responsibility is that he believed they were doing
monumentally important things in the B.A.P. The following description of a B.A.P. Friday
leadership meeting reflects his sense of the weightiness of their work together:

It’s similar to a setting of a bunch of scholars getting together discussing and
debating on new knowledge, you know, whether or not we really want to put this in
the history books. A lot of times when I was in the Algebra Project I would describe
the Friday meetings as – I hope I'm correct when I say this – but it's the meetings
that Constantine used to force the Catholic church to have when he decided that he
was going to force them to put together the Bible. It was like sitting in the Algebra
Project was like sitting in the meetings for creating the team bible.
X understood the work of the B.A.P. as world-shaping. In another comparison, he said the Friday meetings felt like they were at the Constitutional Convention in the late 1780s when the U.S. Constitution was formed:

> Also it was like the American revolutionaries that, you know, Independence Day. Excuse my incorrectness if I'm saying things in the wrong way, like how all the Constitution was a get-together and come up with the wording for the Constitution, the Bill of Rights, the Amendments, or like the early laws of this country. That's what it was like, sitting on it. We even came up with our own student bill of rights that started from sitting in those meetings.

It remains to be seen whether they will have the same world impact as the architects of the U.S. Constitution, but that is what X felt like in those spaces. That’s what he imagined he was doing in his work with the B.A.P. And because he understood the relationships between math and organizing, he considered his work in the classroom to be no less important:

> And that’s what I try to do with this class that me and Jay and them are teaching. So, once you get exposed to these things, you start to understand what a full citizen’s, how a full citizen should be treated. And if and when you’re not considered as, when you’re not treated as a full citizen, you start to realize and learn how it feels like to start to learn how it – how somebody that’s not a full citizen should be treated. And you come to the conclusion that basically they should be treated the same way, like human beings.

These opportunities – peer-to-peer tutoring, Friday leadership meetings, presenting at and helping plan national conferences, teaching math to high school students – facilitated X’s transition from People Talk to Feature Talk. They took him from “you not somebody’s
“hoe” to “you are a constitutional person.” Of course, it isn’t just the opportunities themselves that matter; it’s the particulars that constituted the experiences – the one-on-one talks behind the scenes, the study of history and movements, the process of consensus decision-making, the group discussions in and out of meetings, the chances to speak with Bob Moses, the daily teaching planning meetings. The preparation for and reflection on these kinds of experiences gave X the language to express his fundamental understanding of what it means to be a citizen of the world:

It was truly a learning experience. I had fun. I learned how to socialize with people more. I've learned how to participate in a professional setting. I learned how to speak up when I felt I'm not heard. I've learned how to create a setting that will give other people a voice, like my words aren't the only ones that matter. I should empathize with other people and be considerate of what they have to say… I've learned how to speak publicly in those meetings. I just really learned a lot. I've taken community organizing classes in those meetings.

X recalls a conversation with Jay early on in his time with the B.A.P. that was pivotal in his involvement with the “advocacy” work of the organization – the explicitly political area of work:

I really got to talk to Jay, like Jay would normally stop by the site for like 15, 30 minutes. On that day, that's when me and Jay really got to talking. I don't know, he was just like – I'm trying to figure out how to explain it. It was like Wayne, like he was fighting for money for the schools, and he was like, "Well, I wish I didn't have to fight for this money." I don't know, he just explained everything to me that just made a lot more sense… It was like, "Well, you go to the school they got the most of math, so you should get the right kind of supply for the schools.” The schools should be better. Why should the schools where people don't need a lot of stuff always get it, but the people that really need it don't always get it? When I really got in a deep discussion with Jay that's what really got me into doing the advocacy. Once I had went to that event I had told people about the event and how cool it was.
X's experiences in the B.A.P. were made up of both of these kinds of moments –
times when he’s on stage and leading, and the behind-the-scenes times. He took advantage
of the B.A.P.’s explicit practice of holding meetings to grow and extend his understanding of
citizenship, beyond the fundamental kernels of humanness instilled by his upbringing. The
B.A.P. held meetings after each tutoring session. There were Friday leadership meetings,
advocacy meetings, meetings before and after each class with the cohort. In those meetings,
they got to practice what it feels like to be a full citizen who counts in the world. Their
interactions allowed them to practice what a more perfect union might be with fully
constitutional people.

Beyond the job of transitioning from People Talk, Feature Talk helps people apply
what they’ve learned. For X, one of the functions of the B.A.P. is that it serves as a parallel
institution where people can enact their full citizenship. They can participate democratically;
they can make a demand for their rights; there is community; and they generate knowledge
and revenue from that knowledge. People can bring their full selves to the B.A.P.
Explaining why he has stayed in the organization for years, X says:

There is not this much freedom in any other job. I’ve had a lot of other jobs
and they ask me to hurt people. In this job, you helping people. Like when I
worked at 7-11, we would throw away hot dogs and nachos and burritos. But
every day you had starving homeless people coming in. The manager said we
would get fired if we gave them the food. So we just threw it away every day.
B worked there and we did everything – security, cashier, stock boy,
accountant, and the manager didn’t pay us for all that. The Project offers a
service to people. We help people.

For X, having to throw away food when people around you are starving makes no
sense. He sees this as an act of intentionally hurting people, a way of dehumanizing “starving
homeless” people. On top of this, at 7-11 his labor is being exploited. He’s undervalued, overworked and underpaid. In the B.A.P., by contrast, he gets to be the kind of person he wants to be in the world. The B.A.P. helped him to recognize and resist mistreatment of himself, but also the mistreatment and undervaluation of others:

[The B.A.P.] taught me that other things that were projected to me that I couldn't do, I could do. It's just as easy as living, just do whatever I want to do or be whatever I want to be. Nothing's out of my reach, there's no ceilings. ... Algebra Project taught me that anybody can learn, nobody's dumb or born dumb.

X says that his mother helped him see himself as a person who is as important as anyone else. When she interacted with the police, or when she took him to see Baltimore baseball legend Cal Ripken, Jr., and would “have normal conversations with these” authority figures or celebrities, he learned that she believed in the equal status of all people. Having normal conversations with these people served to both elevate X and to bring the exalted down to a sort of normal status. These lessons did not, however, take the next step in supposing that we all share this fundamental kernel of being constitutional people. X’s mom was specific — you not somebody’s errand boy. X’s time in the B.A.P. helped him extend that notion to other people and communities, as well.

While many in the B.A.P. stayed within the B.A.P. world — that is, within the world of youth organizing or Baltimore-specific work or education justice work — a few members explored other spaces of justice work. X was able to connect with groups with socialist and communist agendas in Washington, D.C.

I've been working with PSL [Party for Socialism and Liberation], they’re based in Washington, D.C. You know, they organize around, you know, a lot of human rights issues, like, you know, rent, utilities, the right for jobs, labor rights, union rights, well, they help organize unions and they advocate for the ending of the occupations in the
Middle East. And I work with them and their campaign and organizing. They just started a track in Baltimore that I helped them set up.

X sees PSL as an opportunity to learn about socialism and communism and about labor rights work more generally, but was most inspired by his connection to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW) – a coalition founded through farmworker community organizing in the 1990s. His notions of citizenship and constitutional people expanded as he started to consider the stories of the Immokalee farmworkers:

One thing I learned about these people, this community, is that a lot of them... came here in the late 20th century to America as slaves. It's something crazy to hear about... A lot of them were promised work visas to come to this country. Came here in the back of pick-up trucks, all the way from like, El Salvador, through Mexico, to California, all the way to southern Florida. They came here on boats, like in the cargo containers. Several different ways they have gotten here. They were promised work visas to come here and harvest these crops and plant these crops, on these large industrial farms ran by some big businesses. And when they got here, they were told that they were now illegal immigrants in another country. If you don't work here, we'll report you, and you'll do jail time, and you'll probably never see your families again. Some of them were threatened with violence and murder. A lot of them were forced to live in the containers that they came in the country in. In the back of cargo trucks where they all slept there. They were forced to be there every night. They barely got paid. They were told that – a lot of them were still getting paid, but, because they couldn't leave the properties, they could never spend their money.

X’s analysis of the farmworkers’ situation is particularly important in light of his ideas about citizenship. For him, citizenship isn’t about what the U.S. government decides is citizenship. His definition has to do with how you be in the world. It’s about how you treat people and, as he puts it, “…they really just wanna be treated like humans.”
X started his relationship with the CIW when one of their national organizers was in Baltimore organizing to support their *Penny for a Pound* campaign, which has successfully pressured several fast food chains to increase wages for farmworkers picking tomatoes. He took a keen interest in their struggle at the time and pursued his interest to the point of visiting Immokalee, Florida to learn more about their struggle and to see how he could connect their struggle to the B.A.P.’s. What he found was a model of community that impressed him immensely.

Like, in Immokalee, they weren't just organizing; they were like, taking care of whole communities together.... In Immokalee, I learned how they took their wages and resources from the other countries to take care of each other. Like, I've learned about community gardens in Baltimore, but they normally would never work because something like that just hasn't been done in years. When I went to Immokalee, Florida, because of the culture and the environment and the struggles they've been through, they really understood the importance, and I learned how it could really work.

Not only did X extend his idea of citizenship to people who are explicitly considered non-citizens of this country, he was able to learn from their community something he wished he could see in his own immediate community: a sense of genuine solidarity in collective uplift.

The experience of seeing the Immokalee farmworkers as fellow humans in the struggle is an example of the B.A.P.’s expanding his world view, or as he put it:

It’s like, well, basically, [B.A.P.] showed me that I was a part of – they showed me that there’s a world community. So, knowing that there’s a world community, that means there’s issues in the world that need to be solved, and there’s a community we all should contribute to solving these issues so everybody can be happy. It’s like I can’t help solve problems in California, and people in California can’t help solve problems in Baltimore, simple as that. But we all need to be educated to do that, you know. And some of these problems aren’t local, so Algebra Project has opened my
eyes to that. And Algebra Project showed me that I don’t have to take what people give me. I can go out and get it myself, especially if I work hard and stay focused and be a constitutional person. Like, I don’t have to be what they say I should be.

Because X considers himself a part of a world community, he links his fate to the people in struggles like his own. When asked if he considers himself a full citizen, his response was complex, nuanced and almost circular:

Sadly, no. [laughs]. I mean, just due to the fact that, even if I’m aware of what’s going on, in order for me to be considered a full citizen, everybody in my situation would have to be considered a full citizen. You know, you need people that come from my perspective, that see things in my perspective, and people in my area’s perspective, you know, advocating for us. You know, actually considering us, supporting us, like the way they would any person – you know, like somebody they would consider a full citizen.

At the same time, he is clear that the greater society need not recognize his people’s fullness for them to be full:

But basically, we don’t need them. We don’t necessarily need to be considered full citizens by the government to live as constitutional people. You know what I mean by that? People that can work together and solve our problems on our own, and make sure everybody’s happy and accommodated for, and everyone has the resources in the community. We can get that on our own.

In X’s Feature Talk, all the values he learned from his family come through clearly – his conception of community, his self-reliance, the importance of education, and the critical lesson from his mother that he matters just as much as anyone else. Through the organizing process, B.A.P. helped him realize many of these values in practice. He believes that people need to understand and recognize their own power and legitimacy. This is partly
accomplished through the demand and struggle for recognition of their full citizenship. At the same time, it doesn’t really matter if they get recognized because through the struggle – through acting as constitutional people – they get to be constitutional people.

During his time at the B.A.P., which spanned about seven years, X was able to take his Physical Experience and his natural People Talk to make sense of that experience, and to then apply new lenses and frames to codify and apply his understanding of citizenship through Feature Talk. Through various public and private experiences, he acquired new language and a broader-based analysis for how he felt people should be treated and regarded in the world. The B.A.P. served as a place to practice being in community, to practice democracy, and to practice being a constitutional person. Finally, he used the B.A.P. to apply his sense of what a citizen is to people he might not otherwise have encountered and, in doing so, expanded his notion of constitutional people.

V. Symbolic Representation

*Symbolic Representation facilitates the communication and application of Feature Talk.* The key feature of Symbolic Representation is that it allows for ease of application across contexts. Having the complexity of a mathematical concept distilled into a simple representation allows that representation to be widely applied and easily communicated. In the pedagogy of X, I use the metaphor of Symbolic Representation to capture how he applies his notion of full citizenship and constitutional personhood to the way he chooses to be in the world. If a Symbolic Representation is understood as a way to send a mathematical idea into the world, imagine that this section captures the ways in which X sends his definition of a “constitutional people” into the world. Here, the focus is on how X lives his everyday life as
a Symbolic Representation of some very complex, nuanced definitions of citizenship, humanness and constitutional personhood.

Jay Gillen lives about a block away from Baltimore City College High School – known simply as “City” to Baltimore residents. Many B.A.P. members, including Chris Goodman and Chris Lawson, attended City. Jay’s place is less than a mile from the school Wayne and X attended. The vast majority of Jay’s neighbors are Black and it’s not unusual to see neighborhood kids playing basketball on Jay’s crooked backboard. They are free to play on one condition: they have to knock on the front door and ask.

The door is red and large, wooden, curved at the top to fit the arched doorway. Walking in, one immediately sees a large, beautiful stone fireplace dominating the wall that separates the living room from the dining room. Straight ahead, off the living room, is Jay’s office. In his office, the left wall is literally covered top to bottom, left to right, with built-in bookshelves. There is not a single empty spot for another book on these shelves – there are hundreds and hundreds of books. I’m sure Jay has read the majority of them. He is a voracious reader and a beautiful writer. Most of the young people call him “Mr. Jay,” as is custom in Baltimore. Younger folks don’t generally address older folks by their first names unless accompanied by a Mr. or Miss – Miss Diane is Jay’s partner. Some of us call him “Dr. Jay” – in a reverent and loving and somewhat ironic way. Jay would never refer to himself as Dr. anything, always preferring to be called “teacher” rather than “founder” or “director” of the B.A.P.

Jay is an intellectual and identifies with a long line of secular Jewish writers and thinkers who understand their Judaism with respect to ethics rather than religion. As much as reading and writing are in Jay’s blood, what he loves most (besides his family) are the young people in the B.A.P. They are at his house on countless occasions for meetings,
cookouts, dinners, one-to-one talks, and even to stay for a few days, weeks or months at a
time. Off the kitchen are two bedrooms. Jay converted this area into a separate living space
for his mother, with a full bathroom and a new door for privacy.

I am meeting X at Jay’s to catch up with him after the time he spent away from
Baltimore. Later we will have a dinner party here. Wayne and Mahogany and their kids will
be here, as well as X’s sister Nicole and her partner Greg and their daughter Zahra. Other
former and current members of the B.A.P. – Maurice, Maryland, Kat, Twan, and his younger
brother Daitwan – will round out the large dinner crew.

During my visit to Baltimore, I am staying in one of the two back rooms and
meeting with X in the other. There are more books in this room. Miss Diane, an artist, art
teacher and art teacher educator uses this room to store a lot of her art supplies and teaching
material. I move a pile of papers from the couch so X and I can sit side-by-side.

As we sit down to talk, my shoulders feel like they are bearing the weight of the
elephant in the room. In all the time we’ve spent together for this project – in hours upon
hours of formal interviews and informal conversations – X hasn’t talked to me about Zach
and I haven’t asked him about Zach. But if there is one thing that has dominated his psyche
in the last several years, it is witnessing the shooting death of his best friend. X watched
Zach get murdered over an argument about a cell phone at a bus stop just a block from
where we are sitting – following one of these get-togethers at Jay’s house.

X had grown up with violence – getting into fights, witnessing police brutality, the
aftermath of gang violence, and even visiting family members in the hospital who had been
shot. His family did not keep him sheltered, as his mother often used corporal punishment
and his cousins were part of the world of crime. X himself sold drugs for a short time. None
of this, however, would prepare him for the trauma of being just a few feet away from Zach as he refused to give up his phone to a man who obviously didn’t respect the sanctity of life.

Zach’s death shook the entire B.A.P. community. Wayne remembers screaming so loudly that he scared his children when he heard the news. Chris Goodman remembers it as one of the worst moments of his life. Jay reflected that the B.A.P. served as a kind of bubble for these young people where they could affect the world in ways they couldn’t always in the rest of their lives. He said Zach’s death burst that bubble in a lot of ways.

Nobody was affected as much as X, though. He was feeling so much at the time – anger, sadness, guilt, helplessness, fear. Afterward, he refused to ride the bus and he didn’t have a car, so that meant he went to work or to school only when he was able to find a ride. Jay set up grief counseling, but X needed so much more. His head was swimming as he talked to the counselor, the police investigators, to Zach’s family, to his own people. Wayne tried to coax him to go out and have some fun, but X mostly just wanted to stay home. He started drinking heavily and smoking cigarettes. It was almost as if he couldn’t breathe.

In one of the rare instances in which he was persuaded to go out, he met a young woman with whom he would start a close relationship. It couldn’t get too deep because she would be leaving soon to go to school in Arizona. A few months later, feeling stuck in Baltimore with the weight of his trauma, he pulled toward his new friend and pursued an opportunity to work with Immokalee organizers. X left Baltimore for Arizona.

I was still working with [CIW], and they had presented a [chance of] working with them full time in different states, and so, at the same time I had that to consider...they had been asking me to apply ... And at the same time I just knew I couldn't stay in Baltimore – I was going through too much. For some reason, I was just saving up money just to leave, like saving, saving, saving and I even took some of that money to pay for school and, you know, that didn't work out. And like, by I'm gonna say October, I took a trip out there to visit them as well as a friend, and I
actually liked it out there. So when I came back... I had decided I was going to move to Arizona.

In the months preceding his move, X had been saving money, sensing that he was drowning in the grief of Baltimore and would need to leave. He had opportunities to move to Boston and New York through his organizing ties, but wasn’t able to make the final decision to leave. The money he had saved in anticipation of a move made it possible for him to go to Arizona without a job or a place to live.

X credits the survival skills his mother taught him and the professional skills B.A.P. taught him for enabling him to make it those first few weeks in Arizona. He found that many of the things he learned from his mother and from the B.A.P. were put to immediate use. The wide application of the fundamental pillars of his upbringing – self-reliance, community, full humanness – along with the knowledge he gained in the B.A.P. became symbolically represented in his ability to transfer his learning to the Immokalee farmworkers’ struggle. But things were not easy. Though he had hoped to work with Immokalee in Arizona, they had decided to move on to Texas by the time he got out there. He eventually got a job at an airport car rental company through a temp agency.

His first paycheck came just in time, as his savings had dwindled after he realized he would need to purchase a car to get around in Phoenix. He had always traveled by bus in Baltimore, and didn’t realize the public transportation system would be so limited in Phoenix. His job was a 40-minute drive from where he lived. He needed reliable transportation to get to work without the safety nets of friends and family, Jay and the B.A.P. in his new home. What struck X more than the differences in how he was able to move around the world in Arizona, though, were the cultural differences:
I learned a lot out there, just like how people set up their rules, like the cultures. I learned how, I'm trying to figure out how to explain it, I learned how the culture really affects the laws in different parts of the country. Phoenix is mostly populated by Mexican Americans and Mexican immigrants and immigrants of different kinds, but mostly Mexican. And so a lot of laws there were set up to create a glass ceiling for Mexicans. They were the minority, so there was a lot of laws to keep them down.

X is talking about hierarchy and about power. It is a political analysis full of Feature Talk. He applies the lessons from his mother about mattering, translated through his experiences during his time at the B.A.P., to his context in Arizona. He observes racial profiling in Arizona that is at once both very familiar and foreign. He is much less often the target than he was in Baltimore, but sees just as clearly the impact on the Latinx community.

I really learned what modern-day racism looked like out there. You know, the struggle of a Black man, I see the struggles of a Black man every day, you know, in Baltimore. But they never go as far as to what they did in the 50s and 60s as what they did to a group of people that was starting to get more, who were dangerously close to getting as many rights as White people. You know, I really got to see that violence and intimidation out there on the migrant, the immigrant communities out there. That was ridiculous. I didn't even face it myself! You know, I'm half Black and Puerto Rican, so, you know they look up my name see Anthony Antonio Julio Cheatom in their database, you know, they think they got them an illegal immigrant. So I get pulled over real quick out there. So yeah, I really got to see that. I've seen ICE, or whatever you call it. I've seen them run into establishments looking for illegal immigrants and shutting down the place. Family-owned businesses end up getting shut down and losing money for weeks for a false tip that there were illegal immigrants there, you know. So you got like a Mexican or immigrant business owner who's missing out on so much wealth because somebody didn't collect enough evidence or somebody didn't like the fact that there was an immigrant making money in their neighborhood, and they wasn't.
Beyond his observations and analysis, X applies the idea of constitutional people in his day-to-day interactions. He suddenly and impulsively quit his job at the rental company after being hired fulltime and moving up to assistant manager. An interaction with a White fellow employee rubbed him the wrong way and he decided to quit rather than be treated in a way that felt demeaning.

Through a relationship he had made in Arizona, he got a job almost immediately at a recycling center. Again, with lessons from his mother and the B.A.P., he was not afraid to confront fellow employees or supervisors if he saw something he thought was wrong. In a strange way, these confrontations led to quick movement within the company through several positions, starting with sorting recycled materials and eventually ending with refurbishing and repairing computers.

I started off sorting trash, but at the same time I just wanted to make it clear from the start I did not want to go through what I went through at my last job with that one supervisor… They were asking me to do stuff that was really unsafe. This is a trash facility. There is dangerous, sharp, hard, high objects everywhere. You know, something could fall on me, I could trip and fall or something, I could hurt my back for the rest of my life. And I was telling them off the bricks like, "I'm sorry. I care too much about my safety to answer your request. If you would like to fire me, I can help you sit down with HR and talk this out, work something out." And because I spoke to ’em like that, I was real professional with it… so the supervisors couldn't get me for anything. So what they ended up doing was keep promoting me to move me from where I was! [laughter].

Even though he was dealing emotionally and psychologically with the tragedy of Zach’s death, as well as the daily struggle of making it in a new place with different cultural practices, his basic way of being in the world stayed intact. X understood how he and those around him were constitutional people and should be treated accordingly:
Like, if there was somebody I was working with, like a female and [the supervisor] was always sexually harassing them, I would tell him, "Dude, don't come over here in the area with the people I'm working with harassing them." People would just sit there and watch. They'd either join the sexual harassment or just not say anything at all. When they get reported to Human Resources, you know, the supervisor, the employees would act like they never saw anything. And I never said anything to Human Resources, but whenever incidents happened, I said something at the moment.

X intervened in those moments because that is how he moves in the world. He does not only stand up for himself, as he did with the dangerous working conditions, he will stand with someone else if they are being wronged. After a year and a half in Arizona, X felt he had made it in some respects. He had gone from having nowhere to live and no job to a comfortable apartment and earning a living wage. He had moved from walking up and down streets in downtown Phoenix filling out job applications at every establishment that had an opening to being promoted to what he called a “knowledge-based job” repairing computers.

In each of the positions he had, X would engage his supervisors about how his labor was being used. When he was working on sorting materials, he challenged them on job safety issues; by the time he was working in a safer and more cerebral position, he challenged the supervisors on the processes they had in place:

I got into it with one of the supervisors about efficiency. Like, this is very inefficient what we're doing… I did not go back and forth with the guy. I just played it cool and made the supervisor look dumb in front of everybody…and he got so mad, and went to the owner. Like, he skipped HR, he skipped managers, he went to the owner to get rid of me. And he comes, the owner comes to me. He's like, "we don't tolerate that here, Mr. Cheatom. We don't appreciate that, we don't accept anything of the sort."… So what happened was the supervisor had told him some like off line to try and get me fired. Like, I called him dumb, no he said I called
him a dumb ass or something like that. ... I said that doesn't make sense. I think it
would be a lot more efficient if you did this this way and I would prefer if we did it
this way and I did not have to put myself through such a predicament.
X was able to speak to the owner about efficiency and about how certain changes in
processes would net him more money. Rather than being fired, he earned a promotion.

Despite this relative success and the fact that he had left Baltimore at his lowest
point, he missed sharing his work with his friends and family. He recalled speaking on the
phone with a friend from Baltimore:

But I got real lonely without my friends and family, and I finally decided I would just
come back to Baltimore. After all I accomplished, all the hard work and struggle, I
was like, all the success, and no one to share it with! And, you know, talking to my
friends, I’m drinking a bottle of Dom P by myself, true story. I’m like, yo, on the
phone, like I’m by myself. I’m in the dark. I’m like, got a bottle with Dom P. I’m
talking to Sean. Like, yo Sean, I got the Dom P over here, you know what I’m sayin’?
I’m drunk! I was like, yo, I can't be doing this.

Drinking champagne out of the bottle like a hip-hop video in his own spot – the first he’d
ever had – was “living the dream,” but the pull from home was strong. Soon after, he
returned to Baltimore and moved back in with Wayne and Mahogany and their kids.
Mahogany laughed as she recalled how the decision was made: “X came back from Arizona
and I don’t even think he asked to move in either (laughs). He just moved in.”

X was fully integrated into family life with the Washington/Bosworths, and Wayne
was able to help him get a job working at the downtown hotel where he worked. For X, the
job was simply a job – something to help him contribute financially to the household and to
allow him to survive day-to-day. Unlike Wayne, he did not harbor thoughts of moving up in
the company to higher positions and higher wages. “If I’m still at [the hotel] in five years,
shoot me,” he told me.
X says that a typical work day starts with a few hours of “getting fresh for the day,” because he is into good health and hygiene. When he gets to work, he spends part of the day greeting guests, “trying to make them feel comfortable.” This is the most interesting part of the day for X. He is able to meet new people and learn about different kinds of businesses and organizations. Beyond his personal curiosity and enlivening an otherwise tedious day, interacting with top executives, athletes, movie producers and the like gives him more fodder for political analysis: “The first part of my day, I use that analyzing different social groups. That’s how I look at it.”

Once he is done interacting with guests, his job is to set up the meeting rooms for the various events the hotel hosts – weddings or conferences or regional business meetings. But for X, this is not as straightforward as it might seem: “I pretty much just set up the rooms. I usually get into some type of conflict with my manager or supervisor about their inefficient ideas to complete my labor.” Similar to his experiences in Arizona, he thinks he knows much better ways to use his labor than his supervisors do.

X’s stance on his employment and employer sometimes makes things complicated on multiple levels for Wayne. Wayne confides to me that fellow employees complain to him about X’s lack of effort, which puts Wayne in a difficult position. On the one hand, X is Wayne’s best friend – like a brother, so he will always have his back. On the other hand, there are times when he shares the frustration as he works to the point of exhaustion while X paces himself. At the same time, Wayne completely understands X’s position about not wanting to break his back for a corporate hotel that treats its employees quite poorly. Wayne provides this analysis of X’s position:

X also learned through advocacy in Algebra Project, fuck that shit. Man, fuck that. I’m going to do this, man. Forget that, we’re going to do that. That’s how you feel like at work because the attitude is, “Fuck them. Let me just do what I’m going to do
whatever. I can go somewhere else. I know how to look for other jobs, fuck it. If this is how they’re treating me, I’m going to do what I’m going to do.”

Wayne understands that X is in a better position to be defiant than he is. The job is just a job for X and he can find another job. He also connects this way of thinking to what they learned at the B.A.P. – that they aren’t supposed to take this kind of treatment, and refusing to be treated this way is completely legitimate. When Wayne brings up X’s work performance, it causes tension between them. Wayne decides his relationship with X outweighs the frustrations and social awkwardness with their annoyed co-workers.

For X, it’s a matter of understanding his relationship to his employers. Some of this understanding comes from the time he spent with PSL. He describes his relationship with his employers in both an economic and historical context:

We work in a propertarian society… Propertarian society is when... in humanity's recent history, we went from, I believe it's called a serf society, where people just work for the king, as far as western civilization, they worked and served under their king. Which eventually grew into slavery. I mean, there were slaves before, and there was communal labor before, a serf-like society. Recently, we moved into slavery, people being indebted to not only royalty, but indebted to merchants, I guess. I'm talking like 300, 400, 500 years ago. I don't know what you call those people – rich landowners. Once people got sick of that, that got shut down. They moved into slavery, where people were kidnapped and forced into doing labor for free instead of people just owing a debt to someone else.

Once a lot of large societies and nations saw that that was inhumane, we moved on to a society where we trade our labor instead of being forced into labor. A propertarian system is basically you have a right to choose who your slave master is if they're willing to make a good trade for your labor and services. It's basically living in the mindset that you're still in slavery, but you get to choose your master. If your master is not completing his end of the bargain, you get to move on to another
master. Or if you're not completing your end of the bargain, your master can cease to have you as part of their labor force. That's propertarian society.

X sees his relationship with his employer as an investment in his future. He is trading his labor for the moment so that he can do something more meaningful in the future. He has no allegiance to the hotel; he simply sees it as a useful arrangement until the time comes when either party no longer finds the arrangement useful. With this in mind, he’s certainly not going to break his back for the company, even if it means annoying his co-workers.

Wages aren’t the only benefit of the job. When X is talking to the guests, these interesting people, he is trying to learn about the inner workings of sectors of society to which he is not privy:

I see myself as part of the lower class, so when I interact with the guests in the hotel, just to step in the space that I work in, you're spending at least $5,000 an hour. It's complicated. Basically, one of the things I learn is how people get from one place to another. All types of corporations rent the space. Evapco, which is a company that only sells filtration units, factories that produce smog and pollution, they build the fans and the filters that go on the machines and ventilation systems that keep down the pollution coming out of the factories. They only sell those. I try to figure out how a person becomes successful just selling those… I talk to people to see how that works. I try to figure out how you get people to buy into this idea. What is endorsed in this idea. Of course, for this particular company, they've got the government saying that all the factories have to lower their pollution, and if you've got a lobbyist, you got somebody saying, "You need to reduce your pollution, I'm going to give you a card for this company. You can pick whoever you want, but I know this company definitely does it, the government recommends it. You probably would get this problem solved a lot sooner if you pick these people."
Through these interactions, X learns about how a company could get to a place where they can reserve a hotel space for $5,000 an hour, how they take advantage of the political climate and the historical moment, how they use the government policies and lobbyists to stack the deck for themselves. It's not that he is taking notes to emulate the moves these companies make. He still has his bearings as a constitutional person, looking out for other constitutional people:

I've also learned that people don't openly say this, but I can tell from things I hear, in order to really excel in your socioeconomic status, you've really got to participate in some horrible things. I don't know how to explain it, you really have to turn your back on society. You really have to separate yourself. If you want to be a top executive, you just have to stop caring about people in general. You've got to be willing to lay off 100 people at a time; you've got to be willing to force people to work under horrid conditions. You've got to be the one to go out and say things will never change. It's been this way, and always will be this way, even though you know it doesn't have to be that way. You can't really socialize with people that don't see things that way. They just wouldn't allow you to be part of that society, if you wouldn't be able to make decisions like that, make decisions to exploit people.

X is able to learn the machinations of this sector of society, but does not aspire to those practices. In fact, he says, “I’m not a money-type person,” when I ask him if it bothers him that he is getting paid $11 or $12 an hour to set up a room that is rented for $5,000 an hour. He says he doesn’t care, but “it does make me upset that my co-workers are making that much money and people are paying that much just to be in the building for an hour, and my co-workers bend themselves backwards just for $11.25.” The irony is not lost on X, but he understands his relationship to his employers, so he doesn't bend himself backward for them.
X applies his concept of constitutional people to arenas beyond the political and economic. He makes a point of bringing his analysis to much of his everyday life more broadly:

I hang out with Mahogany to see what it's like in a woman's world. I like to check on a lady to see if they're getting treated equally as us men. See what is projected to women, I learn a lot from her, I know where she's coming from with a diverse background. To me, I can learn a lot more from her than the average female in the city. Like how does she see things, how does she see society. She plays a lot of roles, mother, wife, Black woman, White woman, upper class, lower class. She sees the world from a lot of different views.

He could say, *I like to spend time with Mahogany because she is my friend and I like her.* Instead he says, “I hang out with Mahogany to see what it’s like in a woman’s world.” Mahogany, who is a woman, lighter-skinned, and has White relatives, has a different social location from X’s. He thinks about what it means to be a woman in this world. It’s as is if he is wondering what it’s like to be a woman with respect to being a constitutional person. Women had to be amended into the constitution, after all.

He also turns his analytical gaze on the most vulnerable of our society – children. He learned from his mother at an early age that he mattered in the world, so it is not surprising that he sees children in a similar way. There is a certain level of respect that X affords children, a kind of recognition of personhood that is often absent with regard to children. “I can hang out with the kids, Wayne and Mahogany kids – Jaelyn, Toryn, Peighton – see how they see society from their eyes growing up, what are their views, what are the motives being projected on to them.” It is clear that he is constantly trying to understand people’s relationship to society and society’s relationship to people – even small people.

Back at Jay’s house, where I was struggling to ask about Zach and X was not bringing up Zach, he stumbles onto the subject of Zach. He is describing how, despite being
quite good in math, he struggled in his English classes throughout his time in school. “Even in 8th grade, I don't even remember my 8th grade English teacher or even what she looked like or what her classroom looked like. I don't remember any of it. It's that crazy.” He is puzzled about why he can’t remember his 8th grade English teacher. “I was describing my 8th grade English teacher, it's just a blur. Maybe she was sick all the time we always had a substitute, something.” I try to be helpful – “Do you remember what you would do instead…what you did in that class?” He responds, “I don’t remember. Maybe me and Zach would be hanging out – be writing songs. Shoot, we’d do a lot…” His voice trails off. “I can’t be talking about… He was one of my best friends.” X starts to sob uncontrollably. I put a hand on his heaving shoulder, but it offers little comfort. I get up and leave him in his grief – a grief that came out in that particular moment, but lives within him at all times.

Had someone asked me when X was 17 what he would be doing as an adult, I would have been sure it would have been some kind of community organizing. His political analysis is too acute and his philosophical mind is too broad to be constrained by a regular everyday job. Witnessing your best friend’s murder changes almost everything, though. For X, Zach’s murder, without question, changed his life trajectory. It didn’t, however, change his understanding of constitutional people. It did not undo his mom’s People Talk; it did not erase his Feature Talk. It did not alter how X be in the world, and it did not change the Pedagogy of X.
Chris Lawson: The Search for Belonging

I always kinda felt alone, but I wasn’t alone... I wasn’t alone, but it, I didn’t belong – if that can make sense. I’m a very personal person, so I could talk to anybody. I have no problem getting along with people, but, like I said, I didn’t have, like, a best friend kinda thing. It was like I didn’t have a belonging. Like I didn’t have a clique or, cuz I clicked well with everybody. So, I know the different cliques, but I was still able to, you know, communicate and, I guess, talk to them and engage with them. But still, I guess, in a way that also kept me at my distance. – Chris Lawson

It falls strangely on my ears to hear Chris admit that he has never had a sense of belonging. The same Chris who was a 10-year member of Youth Dreamers – an organization that dreamt of opening a youth-run after-school youth center and then did it. The same Chris who was an integral part of the Baltimore Algebra Project (B.A.P.) for 10 years. The same Chris who was a leader in Youth As Resources (YAR) – a youth philanthropy organization that gives money to youth-run organizations – for four years. After graduating from college, Chris now lives with his mother, her partner, and his brother. Despite his long commitment and dedication to these institutions – that are as much about relationship-building as they are about their missions – and despite being immediately surrounded by his family, Chris has never had “a belonging.”

My memories of Chris in the B.A.P. are of a person well-liked and well-respected, though more serious than his peers. He could grow impatient when they weren’t focused during times he thought needed sharp focus. Though he got along with everybody, he didn’t really have a crew in the same way that X, Wayne and Chris Goodman did. Still, to never have had a sense of belonging feels like a lonely path to walk.

In many ways, Chris is still on this path. More recently, he found a group of friends with whom he can be more at ease, but they don’t necessarily understand where he comes from, what he’s been through, or where he’s trying to go. Chris’s search for belonging is more layered than looking for companionship. His search necessarily includes his sense of
purpose in the world. Through his experiences in Youth Dreamers, B.A.P. and Youth As Resources he knows he needs to build collective power to realize his purpose. In looking for community, for power and for purpose, Chris may eventually find his belonging.

I. Looking for Community

They call him “Big Chris.” It isn’t one of those ironic nicknames like the guy named Tiny who is actually huge. No, Big Chris is big. Folks sometimes euphemize fat with “big-boned,” but in Chris’s case it’s no euphemism – he’s not fat, he’s just big-boned. He’s been big as long as I’ve known him. When he was 16 and we’d be walking the couple of blocks from the Stadium School, where he was a site leader for the B.A.P., to City High School on Baltimore’s East Side, he looked the part with his corn rows and grim face. No one was looking to mess with Chris. But this “part,” this way he looked, is one of those ironic twists, because Chris is the prototypical gentle giant. He’s quiet and unassuming – until he laughs.

When Chris laughs, the room fills up with sound – it’s often a sudden and unexpected jolt, yet rather endearing.

Even back then, he had started growing facial hair and I had never seen him without any. So I really wasn’t sure what to expect when I showed up at the drag show he invited me to that night – several years and seemingly a whole new world later. We were still in Baltimore, but not on the East Side. Baltimore’s East Side is defined by its rowhomes and stoops. Block after block, fifteen- to twenty-foot wide homes are connected wall-to-wall for an entire city block. These days, some of the streets have blocks in which every home is boarded-up and uninhabited. Entire blocks are completely dark; the street lights don’t work; there is no running water; there is no electricity. The insides of the homes have been stripped for scrap, right down to the last light filament.
But tonight we are in the happening part of Baltimore, where the locals hit the bars. There are a couple of gay bars, including the one where I am meeting Chris. There's a more upscale Black bar next to a lounge-like hipster bar. The valets are mostly 20-somethings – both Black and White. It’s one of the few areas in Baltimore where you find both Black and White people. Segregation is as alive here as in most medium-size cities I have encountered – Boston, Detroit, Philadelphia.

As I walk into Grand Central Club on a brisk February night, I am asked to show my ID. Chris had this job before becoming a bartender. He has invited me to the Grand Central Employees' Show. I’ve been here only once before, to visit Chris during one of his bartending shifts. As I enter, it looks very much like any number of pubs I’ve been in. The large bar dominates the room with some limited seating to my right. I notice the sign posted on the wall as patrons walk in: “Rules of the House – no sagging pants, no doo rags, no baseball caps.” I wonder to myself what Chris feels when he reads the sign, as it would prohibit the entry of people typically dressed like a lot of the people he came up with. These racialized rules of the house have me feeling uneasy.

The last time I was here, I went to the left, through a door up the stairs to a lounge area. The Loft, as it is called, has a large wraparound bar. Though bigger than the one downstairs, the bar doesn’t feel like the focal point of the room because the Loft has much more seating – big, comfortable chairs arranged around low coffee tables, and two pool tables.

This night, however, I am going to the right into the Disco. Chris meets me at the door. I am eager to find him, to let him know I’m here and to find out what the show will be about. When I see him, I barely recognize him. Somehow he looks absolutely natural in his long, black velvet dress, stuffed brazier, high heels and long wig. In those heels, he is even
taller, but for some reason he didn’t look as big. He is stunning, actually. He helps me find one of the unoccupied small round tables toward the back of the room. He gets me a Sprite and points out his aunt sitting several tables ahead, closer to the stage, as well as part of his cohort at Public Allies, where he is currently working through the AmeriCorps VISTA program. He excuses himself to get ready for his number. I notice Julie Reader walk in. Julie is the longtime executive director of Youth As Resources. Chris has support here from as far back as his infancy to his high school organizations to his current co-workers – a spectrum of support from family to mentors to peers.

I turn my attention to the stage, where three men are dancing in skirt and sweater cheerleader outfits that show off their well-defined muscles. They are not particularly in sync and the dancing is a bit stilted, but that does not stop the enthusiastic crowd from showing the performers a lot of love. After a few more fun and flawed performances, it’s time for Chris to take the stage.

Chris is flanked by two thin Black men in booty shorts – one topless and the other in a white tank top. The music starts immediately and Chris starts killing it. His natural rhythm and practiced dance moves carry him across the stage and then down into the crowd. I’m reminded of the first time I saw Chris dance at one of our Advocacy Through the Open Mic events in which the B.A.P. held a conference during the day and a dance party to follow. I was amazed at the time that someone so big could move so well. Later his mother would tell me that he once won a contest at a disco. She said proudly, “They played this one song and he got up and he was just dancing, dancing his pain away. Actually, he won a CD for the best dancer. He won a prize.” The audience is scrambling to give Chris tips as he dances in their midst. Back on stage, the number ends with his back-up dancers hugging him.

Chris didn’t
just steal the show – he was the show. I’m not sure I have ever seen him more alive and at home than he was at that moment.

People don’t often see Chris this way, at least not during the day. He is a serious man and he has been that way as long as people can remember. Kristina Berdan, the executive director of Youth Dreamers, recalls:

He was always the voice of reason and incredibly committed and very serious. For a seventh grader, I was always very struck by how serious he was, and so it was so nice when he would crack up because he’s got the biggest, best smile ever. But he didn’t just easily crack up.

As Chris puts it, he knows when to be serious and when to play. Julie Reader, from Youth As Resources, posits that this might be part of why Chris might not have found a belonging:

I definitely think the demand on your peers back in the day was evident. I think it’s still evident. I think that 90-something percent of the time that works for him and sometimes it doesn’t because I think he can be – I think once in a while he could be rigid in a peer group… He’s also very easy-going socially with his peers… I did always notice how where he could be rigid with his peers about work occasionally, he was very forgiving socially, and really just wanted to be included and was nice and kind socially and then took on a little bit of a dictatorial thing when it came to work, which was cool in a way. The flip side of that, he’s got high standards for himself and his peers. The other flip side is not every fifteen-year-old was ready to be a corporate executive like he was.

Chris was not overbearing or domineering with his peers. In fact, he was usually very quiet until he felt he needed to say something. Kristina remembers, “He was very quiet, incredibly thoughtful. He was quiet and you could tell he would never say anything unless he was really sure. He’d really think about things before he spoke, which I think he still is like that a little bit.” When it came to the work, he was more than willing to argue for the purpose of perfecting a plan. Chris explains that one of the things he learned from the B.A.P. was to dig into a plan to make sure all the bases were covered.
… being thorough, I was being argumentative, not for the sake of doing so, to challenge people or to, I guess – not argumentative, but probing. Like, making people think their ideas through because when people would give suggestions, I automatically go into a mode of “what are the outcomes?” and it’s just, and I don’t know how it actually works... It’s like in that split second, I already see that it’s gonna fail or it’s not gonna go over well, and then so, I’m just like, “How’s this gonna play out?”

These were typical and productive moments, though. Nothing that would scream I don’t have a belonging. Yet he explains:

Friends? I don’t know, just “friends” is just a weird word for me… just because, I don’t know, like I could see all the different cliques. So, when I hear the word friends, I think of cliques, and I was never a part of a clique, like a group of friends is a clique to me, and I don’t think I fall into it. I have relationships with certain people in different cliques, but I guess I had stronger relationships… there were only, like, probably a handful of people that I didn’t associate with at all just because I didn’t like their being – their character. But other than that, I was able to get along with everybody, pretty much well.

The fact that Chris feels so uneasy, even with the word “friends,” is telling. He associates friends with exclusivity, with not being a part of a community. His take is that he was sort of above all of that, but saying that he didn’t have a belonging seems a lonely existence.

Chris says that he has relatively low expectations of friendship:

I adapt pretty well to people like on the surface. Like, on the plain surface, I can connect with anyone. And then there’s a select few who are allowed to, I guess, disclose myself with more and still be able to keep those – like, I don’t ever make people feel unwanted, and so even with people that I’m more disclosed with, when I’m around other people who, on the surface, I’m still cool with, it’s all still a level playing field. So, I don’t treat others that I’m more disclosed to any different than the
others; they just know more about me. So, I don’t treat them differently, but they might treat me differently from each other, but that’s just on relationship-building. So, I think that’s also a reason why it’s hard for me to say that I have friends cuz I still have, I just keep it like a surface playing field, and I allow some people to get closer, but I still don’t expect them to disclose themselves to me. It would be a nice benefit for that to happen, but I don’t expect it, and so, I guess that’s why I don’t feel as though I have friends cuz I don’t ask for it. I guess you don’t get what you don’t ask for in some sense.

When a friend “discloses” her or himself to Chris, it’s a bonus, but not expected. He generally does not “disclose” himself to a lot of people. Julie sees both positive and negative sides of this approach:

I’m proud of everything Chris has done because he just is someone who perseveres very quietly. There’s not a whole lot of *look at me*. There’s not a whole lot of *help me*. He’s strong-willed. I wonder about the impact when he gets sideswiped. I wonder if he’s depressed sometimes because he’s had some sideswipes. He went off to college. He was going to study business. He didn’t like that. That didn’t work for him. He kept on going. I’m proud of him for all of that and with doing it with zero whining. There’s no whining involved. He just gets it done, but I do wonder when hard things happen, even if it’s not out of the ordinary hard things, and he says it’s okay. I wonder if I’m not suggesting it shouldn’t be okay, that he shouldn’t get up and dust himself off, but sometimes I look at his face and feel like, are you really okay?

On the one hand, Chris soldiers on in the face of adversity. As a Black man from Baltimore who graduated from the state’s flagship university, he is one of the exceptions, and that’s a testament to his determination. On the other hand, he shoulders it all alone, not wanting to burden others even if they could help him share the load. Chris’s mother wonders if he learned this way of being from her: “I guess he gets that *stay to himself* part
from me also because I do that.” Kristina shares her worry about Chris and his instinct to stay to himself:

I did worry about him sometimes because I thought sometimes he carried the weight of the world on his shoulders. Because I felt like he – and maybe it was because he just was so quiet a lot of times, you weren’t really sure what was going on in his head, but he just seemed to carry a lot of worry with him.

As Kristina explains, this can have real life consequences for Chris:

He had a really traumatizing event happen when he was in high school and it affected his grades a lot and he took that on himself, and I said, “Chris, you’ve got to go talk to your teachers. You’ve got to just communicate to them. You don’t have to tell them what happened, but you have to tell them that you need some space and you need some extensions and you need some help.” That’s where he always – I think he has a perfection issue. Rather than admit that this very traumatizing thing had happened and thrown him off his game, he was going to potentially fail…

Chris was struggling with all of this partly because he, his mother and brother were suddenly uprooted as a result of this event.

Now I had to take two buses to get to school, so now I had to wake up even earlier, which you know I’m not accustomed to. I had to start catching the bus that I’m not used to catching. I don’t know the time schedules, like I was getting to school late almost every day. And then, you know, still working with Algebra Project and doing Youth Dream and Youth As Resources and trying to make it back, you know, to where they were at, and getting home later, so it was just like… Yeah, it was a lot of adjusting to persevere.

Chris was determined to go to the University of Maryland at College Park (known as the University of Maryland, or just Maryland, around the rest of the country, and as College Park in Baltimore). Julie went with him to talk to an admissions officer about his family circumstances, which helped to provide context for his sudden drop in grades at a crucial
time in his high school career. Chris was admitted to Maryland and had the opportunity for a fresh start.

Though he left Baltimore behind in some ways, he never really let go of the burdens. Unlike his B.A.P. colleague, Chris Goodman, Chris did not find community with on-campus political groups.

I was a part of the Black Business Association. That was when I was aspiring to do business – accounting and business. So, that was like the first two years. And I really didn’t get into any other groups… But I don’t know, I didn’t really feel any organization that, I guess, I resonated with. Like, I coulda did the Black Student Union, but I was just like, I really didn’t even go to see what it was about. I was already turned off by the Black Student Union, which was like, cuz I’m Black, I should be a part of it, so that’s why I didn’t join that. And then, there wasn’t really anything else that I knew of to join.

Instead, he turned to partying as a way to fill some of his non-school time and find community. Chris describes this time rather neutrally – that he turned into a “party boy,” and describes it as in line with his family’s predilection for having a good time.

And so like, even as they were growing up and they threw, you know, house parties, you know, people from down the street would come and party with us when we had cookouts … But I had some fun days, fun times. Good music, good food, good laughs, and I guess that’s always stuck with me.

Chris found a group of people with whom he could party on the weekends. He describes it similarly to what his family did growing up, “…just having a good time. Partying, drinking, music, pretty much it, and just having a good time with people. Dancing, pretty much.” Julie, however, wondered if the partying was a response to more underlying sadness:
I think that when he didn’t do as well in college as he wanted to, I think his drinking and partying were – and I wonder why he was drinking and partying that way because sometimes people just drink and party and that doesn’t concern me at all because they really just want to have fun and their grades aren’t as good, etc. But it seems something, there seems to be something more going on, particularly when he was at college, about his drinking and partying.

Though Chris probably would disagree with Julie’s take, he did relay a story about a time in college when he “freaked out” on everyone:

Like, there was this one instance when I was a junior where, it was just a, somebody, I don’t know if it was a fight between two people. It was just, like, a group of people, and I kinda just freaked out on everybody, and then I had, like, this breakdown of, like, “Why am I trying to put myself through college and trying to make a difference if this is how people act and feel and treat each other?”

This moment points to something Chris kept under the surface that bubbled up during a stressful time for him. It could have been an isolated incident and it may have had nothing to do with the drinking, but Julie’s question is still worth considering.

If drinking was a way to find community with his fellow college partyers, it didn’t go far enough for him to find a belonging. In fact, Chris recalls going to parties in D.C. (only about 10 miles from College Park) and his friends would know that he may not return with them.

I don’t know, it’s just like, I go out with different people...It’s just like, pretty much, I ride solo because I don’t wanna be in a position where I’m out partying and if I’m ready to go, I have to wait for somebody to leave. … even if I drive to D.C., they already know there’s a possibility that I’m not coming back with them. Like, I might go to another a club if I feel the need to go to another club… So, if I wound up going to another place and then I was just like, “Just hit me up when you leave,” and then do it that way.
Chris had good times partying and found people to have fun with, but there is still a sense that he saw himself on the periphery of these groups. He wasn’t excluded, but he was on the margins because of his own desire to be on his own or not to be too tied down. He got tired of the drama that came with his college friends, as well, and “freaked out on everybody.”

After so much academic and political heavy lifting in high school, the college partying was a nice break, but it was not sufficient to create genuine community for Chris.

Even as he turned into a party boy, Chris came home in the summers to continue work for the B.A.P. He stayed loyal to his organizations. He explains that his intention was to go into accounting in college so that he could continue the work he started in high school:

I always been good in math, and initially it was just like, well, if I become an accountant, I can do the finances for Youth Dreamers, and then we don’t have to pay a treasurer cuz I can do it. Then I was like, well, if I can be the treasurer for Youth Dreamers, I can also be the treasurer for Algebra Project, and we still wouldn’t have to pay nobody to do it, and I could get paid to do it. So pretty much, I was just looking for ways that I could still be involved with the things I love and make it work, you know, be happy doing the thing that I wanna do.

He stayed in close touch with Julie and often visited the headquarters of Youth As Resources. After his graduation from college, he spent a year as an AmeriCorps VISTA member, shadowing Kristina at the Youth Dreamers house.

This does not seem like the manner of someone who doesn’t have a belonging, yet I believe him when he says it. Julie and Kristina understand when I mention it to them. His non-belonging is at once surprising, given his firm place in the organizations, and expected. Kristina offered this possibility: “You’d think, what other kid has had so many groups they’ve been that connected to for so long, but maybe that was him seeking out a place to belong?”
Before working at Youth Dreamers after college, Chris tried to reintegrate himself into the B.A.P. He was hanging out with Wayne and Mahogany and all the people in their circle. But one day, a misunderstanding turned into an accusation and a fierce standoff, with Wayne and Mahogany on one side and Chris on the other. To categorize it more fairly, it was a fierce stance on Wayne and Mahogany’s side, and a passive, but unmoving, stance on Chris’s side. Wayne, always wanting to bring people together, says he wants to reconcile the relationship despite Mahogany’s reluctance, though he never made the overture. For Chris’s part, he isn’t sure he would accept any overtures made by Wayne unless they included taking blame for the split. The B.A.P. had newer, younger members with no real relationship to Chris and, with his old relationships in a state of disrepair, he was without the organization that for more than a decade had been a source of community.

Chris applied to be an AmeriCorps VISTA member and, coincidentally, Kristina had applied to hire a VISTA member for Youth Dreamers. Once Chris was accepted, he paired up with Kristina in a role they both hoped would eventually lead to his taking over as executive director for Youth Dreamers. They started this journey when Chris was in middle school, and after years of work, the Youth Dreamers managed to buy and renovate a house for the youth center they dreamed of as twelve-year-olds. In Chris’s new role, however, things didn’t work out as they hoped. He didn’t take to the work of doing programming at the youth center. Kristina remembers Chris meeting with his fellow VISTA cohort at the Dream House and seeing the difference between how comfortable he was with them compared to how awkward he was with the high school students. “[The VISTA cohort] would meet here frequently and I could see that those times, he really thrived because he was working in his peer group, you know what I mean, but he was a leader within his peer group.” Yet she had a hard time getting him out of the office at the Dream House and
engaging the youth. Chris was not finding community at the Youth Dreamers house. His search for a belonging continued.

At Grand Central, where he tends bar, Chris feels some ease – some room to breathe. His time at Central still consists of heavy drinking, though. As he put it, “my dream part-time job is to bartend cuz I like to drink. And so, why not make money doing something that you like to do?” Chris says his comfort at Central consists of several factors, including the fact that the job is not mentally taxing. Kristina said she was glad Chris took the job at the bar: “I have to be honest, like the fact that he started working in a bar, I was like, ‘This is good for him.’ He needs to have a job where he doesn’t take it home with him and he can have a little fun.” Similarly, Chris describes the toll of more intellectually demanding jobs:

I can go to Central and just hang out with them and not have to think. I think that’s the, thinking is the hardest job. And I think I’m being, I’m probably being, using that too conservatively, just the fact that, I mean, I know I don’t want to do physical labor. That’s not me. I don’t like it. But to do, like, you don’t have to think about that. Like, you know what the task is, you know what it takes to do it, you just do it, and you do it, and you do it, and you do it – you really don’t ask any questions because you know it’s just like if you’re walking from your house to the corner store. You don’t think of which way to walk there, you just walk. Your body just walks. You don’t have a thought process of, “I have to walk down these four stairs.” You know there’s four stairs already there, and you just walk down without thinking about it. So, I feel like with the work that I do and the work that I wanna do, it involves thinking. You have to think, you’re challenging yourself, your brain is a muscle, and it’s exhausting. I find myself exhausting myself.

At Central he does not experience the burden of being expected to know what to think or say or do. It is easier to find community if you can just be without having to think about the
right way to say or do things all the time. In addition to its intellectually simpler work, Central provides a break from what Chris calls “the search.”

I enjoy the scene, too. It just seems fun and, like, carefree. I don’t know, like, for me, even just going to a straight bar, and I like to dance too, so it’s like, I don’t know. At a straight bar, all people wanna do is grind and not dance and just like, it’s always a search for someone. I just want to relax and have fun and have casual conversation and not have to be under that radar kinda thing. And I think the gay bars and the gay scene allow me to do that, and I actually make many more connections at gay bars than I think I would ever do at a straight bar.

I question Chris’s analysis, but not his feelings. People at gay bars are just as likely to be on “the search” as people at other bars, but Chris doesn’t feel the pressure the same way. He does not identify as gay, so he feels he can be at ease at a gay bar. He also doesn’t identify as straight.

I don’t like labels, but I haven’t, uh, done anything with either sex, but I do find gay people to be more, to be easier to engage with and talk to. I don’t know, I just feel like there’s not as much drama or risk, I don’t know. I’m still figuring that out.

Chris can just be at Central in ways that he hadn’t been able to since he was a middle-schooler at the Stadium School with a familiar and beloved cohort of peers and teachers. He concedes that there have been times when he feels like he is his full self with other people, but not in a lasting or sustained way. The seriousness that marked his high school career was countered by the partying during college. Neither way of behaving produced a community that felt just right. Going back to his roots at B.A.P. and Youth Dreamers did not provide the companionship he sought. Grand Central was where he found companionship. However, even as Chris found a place of ease, a place to breathe and people he could just be
around, the pull of Youth Dreamers, B.A.P., YAR meant that the community he had found with his coworkers at Central was not sufficient to create a belonging.

II. Looking for Power

The Stadium School, started in 1994 by parents and teachers, served fourth to eighth grade students – including Chris – who lived in the old Memorial Stadium neighborhood in East Baltimore. It was not a charter school. It was part of the Baltimore City Public School System, but had autonomy in curricular and programming decisions. In the current education environment, it probably would have been a proposed charter, but it started during the pre-charter era. The basis of the school was that parents and teachers knew what was best for their students and that the school should be able to respond to the needs of the community rather than move along the rapid path to standardization that the rest of the city (and country) was on.

It is no coincidence that the Youth Dreamers and the Baltimore Algebra Project started at the Stadium School. One of the key curricular innovations at the Stadium School was the mini-courses it offered. These courses lasted a marking period and were taught by faculty and community members as electives. Chris remembers having Mosaic Art with Ms. Diane, Arts and Crafts with Ms. Tony, Gardening with Mr. Marcus, Tutoring with Mr. Mark, and Basketball with Mr. Bill. The mini-courses offered students chances to find new passions or develop existing ones. They fostered different kinds of relationships between students and faculty, as well as among students themselves, and provided opportunities to engage with the community.

One such mini-course was offered by Kristina Berdan. Ms. Kristina had taken a social action course from De Montfort University in England and decided to apply the processes
she learned in that course to her mini-course: *Community Action*. Kristina joked that there were only nine students who selected her mini-course because it “was up against basketball and karaoke and other more fun things.” Kristina started the social action process by finding out what was most pressing for the students. She describes the rest of the process: “It's a five-step process of identifying the problem, why is it a problem, how can we change it, acting on it, and then reflecting. It constantly circles itself around.”

At the time, one of the issues at the front of her students’ minds was violence in the community. There was a recent shooting in the neighborhood. The students didn’t feel safe and didn’t have a safe place to go after school. Having identified the issue, the students began a “how can we change it” discussion. They decided they wanted to open a youth center of their own that they would be paid to run. Likely influenced by the B.A.P.’s employment model, the students considered themselves more knowledgeable than adults about what young people need out of a youth-centered space, and believed their skills deserved compensation. Believing this was a project beyond their scope, Kristina tried to persuade them to take on other projects:

> I kept encouraging them to vote if they had a couple other ideas and they just kept voting. I mean, they just kept voting on this project, so I really was at this – it ended up being a turning point in my life because I was like, “Okay, I’m either going to – this is going to end up being a crazy adventure that’s going to take well over what they think it’s going to take, or I should really present another direction,” but I just couldn’t resist them.

Persuaded by their seriousness and determination, Kristina had them sign a pledge and then she organized her Stadium School course around how to open a youth center. What started as a mini-course turned into a master course and an organization called the Youth Dreamers. Over several years, the course included real-life lessons in architectural
design, budgeting, grant-writing, non-profit incorporation, zoning laws, oral history, public speaking, real estate and fundraising, fundraising, fundraising. Chris was one of the original nine Youth Dreamers. Kristina remembers him clearly:

He's such an interesting kid. He was very quiet, incredibly thoughtful. He was quiet and you could tell he would never say anything unless he was really sure. He'd really think about things before he spoke, which I think he still is like that a little bit. He was great, I mean he – with that group, they were super on board. They were so connected with each other. They were so dedicated to this. He tended to be the voice of reason, because there's a lot of crazy ideas, too.

The Youth Dreamers truly had a sense of themselves as people who mattered and had a purpose. They had a way of bringing people in and keeping them around to make sure they would be successful. As Chris puts it:

I guess it resonated with people. People, I guess, saw that we really meant what we said, that this was not a game, felt the need for something to be done, really cared, but they just loved us. Like they got something. We call it “the portal,” where we suck you in and never let you go.

Even the most reluctant would fall into their portal. Many residents on the street where the Youth Dreamers proposed to open their youth center were fiercely against it. At a zoning hearing, some of the residents said they didn’t want young people bringing drugs and violence to their neighborhood. In response to the neighborhood concerns, the students wrote a grant to conduct oral history interviews. They wanted to prove to the neighbors that they cared about the neighborhood. They knew that once they interacted with them, their fears about bringing drugs and violence would melt away. One such neighbor was Mrs. Stewart, an elderly woman who had lived in the neighborhood for decades. Kristina recalls Chris’s interviewing Mrs. Stewart:
He sat down with Mrs. Stewart across the street. I'll never forget it. He was very serious, asking her questions about what she loved about her community and why it was so important to her. Then he asked what she thought of us, and she said – it was a real turning point for us — she said, “I was really anxious about you and now I see that you young people just want to do good for other young people.” It was much more poignant than that, but they both cracked and hugged each other and it was lovely.

Imagine Chris, known as Big Chris, with corn rows and a very serious face, walking into Mrs. Stewart’s home. Imagine Mrs. Stewart, who already has ideas about who Chris is and what he represents. And then imagine Chris charming her and, in the end, both of them crying and hugging each other. Mrs. Stewart was sucked into their portal.

When I taught at City College High School, I could often tell when I had a Stadium School student in class. They were less likely to complain that I didn’t use a textbook, less resistant to the group work on which I insisted, more willing to write about their relationship to mathematics in a beginning of the year exercise, and more comfortable producing mathematics rather than only wanting (or not wanting) to consume mathematics. Stadium School is the institution where Chris found his footing. Kristina is quick to point out that the school was not perfect, but it was special.

I think there’s something, there’s a powerful thing about that school that is so important, especially now with what’s happening in education. Schools are now becoming places where kids don’t want to be, and we had a place where kids wanted to be and where kids had voice and really felt like they had some control over what happened there. I am in touch with so many young people and so many teachers from the formative years of the Stadium School. That place developed me as a teacher, developed me as a person and I think they’d all agree – even though you didn’t realize it then. Nobody went to that school and was like, “This is the best school in the world.” It wasn’t that dorky, hunky-dory thing. It was we just we went,
we liked being there and then when I reflect on it and I think about – think that a lot of young people were able to be successful because they had this foundation at a very special place. And we need to do a longitudinal study of kids who went there because it wasn’t just about the school; it really was about the community. Then the Algebra Project was born and then the Youth Dreamers was born and then we all connected to Youth As Resources because they were funding us, and then we became part of their family and then it just became this really beautiful connected web of organizations and I just think that’s a really cool thing about the city, too.

Chris was right in the center of the web that Kristina describes – at the intersection of the Youth Dreamers, the Baltimore Algebra Project and Youth As Resources. Chris remembers the students as the difference-makers. He refers to the young people he grew up with, in and through the Youth Dreamers and Baltimore Algebra Project, as go-getters:

The reason we became a family is because it started in one central place, the Stadium School. And, I mean, that’s the core… I just think that, so there’s a right time and a right place for everything, and I think the Stadium School was at a good place, that I was in the Stadium School at the right time, and it was a good place to be at the right time with my peers who aligned themselves on the same line… my peers, the generation of peers that I grew up with through middle school were – are – leaders. We’re go-getters and, I mean, you still have your outliers. But majority, and I’m talking about, not all of the students that were in middle school, but the ones that went to the Stadium School that got involved in the Algebra Project, we were the go-getters … Chelsea … Mildred… Chantel… Chris… And those, they were my core. That was my core.

I know all of these young people, as they were all part of the Baltimore Algebra Project when I was an organizer there. There is no disputing that they are go-getters, that they are special people. The Stadium School, however, played a role in fostering their commitment to justice and collective action. There seems to have been an important
confluence of these students and the structure that allowed them to thrive – not just academically, but to become leaders and changemakers.

To this day, Chris sees that cohort – Chelsea, Mildred, Chantel, Chris Goodman and himself – as the gold standard for how people should work together. As he puts it, “They were my core. That was my core.” He credits a lot of his leadership skills to their interactions.

So, you now, I know Chelsea’s weaknesses – she’s a loudmouth, she thinks she’s always right. They know me – I think I’m always right, but I only speak when I think that I’m right and I will have facts to back up my reasoning, why I think I’m right. Mildred – she’s goofy, you know, she likes to play, but she’s also effective and will tell you how it is if she doesn’t like it. Chris – calm and collected, but also, you know, genuine with his thoughts… Chantel, she’s bright, she has a very high vocabulary, she knows how to present herself well, she knows how to present an argument and, you know, make you think on your feet. And those, they were my core. That was my core. That’s how I became the person that I am because when, the reason why I don’t speak unless I have facts to back it up is because Chantel is well-spoken, and she will present, she presents herself well, so I have to come back at her the same way.

Chris honed his abilities both as a reaction to and in concert with the others’ abilities. He had to learn to counter Chelsea and emulate Chantel. He respected Mildred’s honesty and Goodman’s presence. One gets the impression that if he could have preserved that group of five, he might have found that belonging.

As they all headed to high school at City, however, friendships expanded. The tight-knit group was augmented with friends from other middle schools and other high schools, as well. The B.A.P. grew and went from only doing math tutoring to doing more explicitly political work. All five were important leaders in both the math and political work of the B.A.P. Mildred and Chantel were also both Youth Dreamers and part of Youth As
Resources. In these ways the cohort stayed together and connected, but the cocoon that was the Stadium School was left behind. The belonging that might have been stayed with the Stadium School.

What they carried forward, however, would stay with Chris long after he left. This included the knowledge, skills and mindset to make real change. His two closest friends from college – both members of the Black Business Association – pursued corporate jobs after college. His friend Norman went to ESPN and is based in Chicago, and his friend Rafael is in Virginia working for Exxon. Chris decided to return to Baltimore. He decided to return to Youth Dreamers and the B.A.P., even if only briefly. The year after his unsuccessful return to Youth Dreamers, he did another year as an AmeriCorps VISTA member – this time at the ACLU. He was working primarily on a school funding initiative. While his college friends are working to get ahead in their careers, Chris considers what he can do to make a difference in the world:

I think the only thing that I really need… I need a house. Once I have a house, the only thing I need is money for food, gas, electricity. I don’t think – it’s not all about the money, I guess. If I have enough to sustain and to live and, like, to live comfortably I don’t need to be – I mean, everybody wants to have money, but when you have the money, what then? What do you do once you have the money? For Chris, the money is not as important as what he is doing in the world. He says that he doesn’t need the money, and people who have money often end up giving it away. He says if someone has money, “they can give it to me and I’ll do the work.”

The fact that Chris kept returning to the B.A.P. and Youth Dreamers speaks to how much those organizations are in him. They are, in fact, fundamental to him. At least, what they stand for is:

…working with like-minded people to accomplish a goal. And that’s what all three organizations have had in the impact…I wanted to work there for a reason. So that’s
what all three have in common, and I think that’s…other people wanted to make a
difference the same way that I wanted to make a difference.

When he tried to go back he couldn’t find the right place, but the pull is real. Understanding
what the organizations are about gives insight into what pulls Chris back and offers clues to
the second component of his search for belonging – power.

Powerful. Powerful? I don’t know if powerful is the word, but I would say
“influential.” And that only comes with being a part of the Algebra Project. How I
see things, how I envision things, how I have a keen eye for details, how I like
everything to work out nice, how I like things to be structured neatly and to
perfection. I think all those, plus my performance, says a lot about me and what the
organization wants and needs, and so when people see that, they take heed to my
advice, and they ask for my thoughts… But just knowing that, I guess, there’s
enough respect for how I view things and what I think. I wouldn’t say it makes me
powerful, but influencing. You think of the definition of “power,” and you know,
some would say, the ability to have influence over others’ decisions.

Though Chris is reluctant to use the word power, it is what he means, and it is what
the young people were after. Explaining why it was important that the Youth Dreamer
house and the B.A.P. were youth-run, he says, “because I was a youth and I wanted to run
things.” For him, this notion of ownership and self-determination is human nature and
something young people, especially, desire.

Well, you have to think of the purpose of the organization. What is the purpose of
the organization? Who does it serve? And I think this organization serves youth, but
in the context of what it serves, it gives, it’s for youth leadership and development,
and if, I think what youth lack is a sense of ownership of things. Like, they don’t
have, they don’t own anything, so especially in Baltimore, which is kinda classified as,
you know, with a lotta at-risk youth, like, why do we have so many things
vandalized? It’s cuz it’s vandalized by people who don’t have ownership over
anything. They want to vandalize something to say that they did that. You see, you
know, people tag things, spray paint things, it’s not graffiti, it’s not art graffiti, it’s a sign of tagging to say, “I did this, I can come back and look at it and say, I remember when I did that.” So, why not put a positive spin on that and say, all right, I built this youth center. When I come past, ride past here, I helped make that happen. I invested my time and energy into this, and I can see something out of it. I learned something out of this. I think you reap more benefits when the youth have ownership over something.

Though Chris was being somewhat flippant when he said, “because I was a youth and I wanted to run things,” he is clear that those most affected by an issue must be at the center of any problem-solving. In a short conversation about homelessness, he said he wasn’t sure what it would take to work on that issue because he didn’t have experience with it firsthand, and that homeless people should be helping to set policy and create solutions. They have expertise others don’t.

It has to start within, for people who – people who are agents within that community have someone they know that has been homeless and affected them in some kind of way. They have knowledge, inside knowledge, of how to – of how the system should work. This idea – that those directly affected by a problem should lead its solution – is a central tenet of community organizing.

If Chris thinks a change needs to be made, he believes he should be part of the solution. Through his work at Youth Dreamers and B.A.P., he saw that solutions often coming through collective action. He started as a Youth Dreamer in 2001 and they finally opened the doors to the Dream House in 2010. As they swept people up in their portal over the nine years it took to make the dream come true, they created a community of people also dedicated to their dream. In persuading people to invest their time or money or resources or expertise, they had to show their own earnestness, commitment, abilities; and it had to be
something worth a nine-year struggle. The project had to mean something to the world, not just to them, for it to be sustained over time by people whose positions in society varied from a middle-schooler in East Baltimore to State Senator Barbara Mikulski. As Chris said about effectively producing change, “No, it’s not about one person. It has to be the collective as a whole; the collective has to want to do it.” When the collective makes change, that’s power.

The pictures of the grand opening, now adorning the walls of the Dream House, reveal the genuine joy of the day. Chris’s full and authentic smile is on display. The serious, reserved professional has taken a back seat on this day of true celebration. The pictures are reminiscent of images of a proud parent on the day of birth, only the labor in this case took nine years. It is no surprise that this kind of work could get into Chris. It’s no surprise that he isn’t parlaying his University of Maryland degree into a corporate position – even if Julie contends he was ready to be in the corporate world at age 14. For Chris, their Youth Dreamer story is about coming together, sticking together, and making something a reality that no one thought possible:

We can organize. We’re more than just students. We’re activists. We’re our own reason for, you know, living and being here. And I think with Youth Dreamers, just the story alone of saying that, “This is what I wanna do and I wanna see it happen.” And, you know, following through on that and going through the trials that, you know, having people tell you that you’re not gonna succeed at this and just having that will to keep pushing on and to prove them wrong, that we can build a youth center. Why is it needed, why is it needed, and why is it needed, and know why you should be in favor for it.

Chris’s experience of collective action as a Youth Dreamer was buttressed by his high school experience with the Baltimore Algebra Project. In many ways, the Youth
Dreamer work was very personal for him. He and a small group of his middle school classmates had a dream, and they worked this passion for years to make it happen. While the Youth Dreamers acted as a collective and for the collective good of the neighborhood, the B.A.P.’s political work had a broader scope. The B.A.P. saw its work as citywide, then broadened to statewide, and eventually nationwide. For the Dream House, Chris conducted oral history interviews with the neighbors to facilitate better relationships between adults and youth. The group had to think about the ideal place in the neighborhood for the youth center, research the zoning laws, and apply for a zoning change. He had to think carefully about his neighborhood and his project within it.

The work in the B.A.P. started very personally, as well. The peer-to-peer math tutoring was done on a one-on-one level. Chris was particularly devoted to his site at the Stadium School – always wanting it to be the best site. However, as he grew in his role with the B.A.P. leadership, he had to think about all the sites and the organization as a whole. By the time Chris was a sophomore the organization was thick into the politics of Baltimore’s and the state’s education system. The B.A.P. negotiated a contract with the Baltimore school system to provide math tutoring services, but the school system reneged on their verbal agreement. The students found out that the reason the school system could no longer pay for their services was that they were in a budget deficit – which also happened to be illegal. Further, the students discovered that there was a court ruling that said the Baltimore schools were owed $800 million by the state because of the mandate to provide an adequate education as guaranteed by the state constitution. The B.A.P. took to public protest to bring light to these issues. Chris, reflecting on this time, says:

Then we started educating, educating people about the issue behind the door, which enraged other people because more people were affected by the issue behind the door. So then, it’s like, “Well, if we’re all enraged about this issue, let’s make some
noise and knock on the door and bring it to light.” And it just kinda spiraled from there.  
For Chris, educating people about “the issue behind the door” was important because they were able to bring it to light. He wonders if the public would have even known about the deficit if the B.A.P. hadn’t been agitating. 
   
I guess the first question is, like, will we ever have the knowledge to know that the city was bankrupt? Like, I, maybe we would, I don’t even, honestly, I don’t even think we woulda heard it in the news. But I think we made noise about it, which brought light to the issue for the media to start talking about it. 
   
There is real power in that. Chris saw himself and his colleagues as people who made change, who had a profound impact on real issues at a city and state level. He and his compatriots quickly went from where is our contract money? to where is the money for all of the Baltimore students? and moved their demands from the school system to the state government. 
With the Youth Dreamers, Chris learned what it takes to delve deeply into an issue of great importance to a specific community. In his B.A.P. organizing, he learned about how a singular issue is tied to larger systems. As Jay Gillen, founder of the B.A.P., puts it, “It was at that point that the students set up an Advocacy Committee… that started this now 15-year-old path of trying to figure out how to organize to actually change systems.” 

These formative experiences with Youth Dreamers and the Baltimore Algebra Project developed Chris’s self-identify as a change agent. “I just feel like I have the will and capacity to make a difference, and I think that’s what drives me.” 

This powerful identity is evident on two levels: one, as a person who wants to see change happen for his neighborhood and for his people; and two, as a person who thinks he has the requisite skills, experience and disposition to make the change happen. His work in
these relational groups helps him know that this kind of change-making doesn’t happen alone – he needs others to be on the path with him:

And just talking with other people my age and seeing that it’s not all about just running the streets and, you know, just having a good time. Like, you’re actually doing something constructive with your time, your energy, and you’re looking forward to a better future. I think Algebra Project – doing all the campaigns that we have worked on and just interacting with the leaders of the city and being respected as someone who cares about this city and that has a stake in this city and has a voice, to be recognized for that, it’s very beneficial to know that we do have power.

Many of Chris’s foundational experiences happened at the Stadium School with Youth Dreamers, and coming out of that school, with the Baltimore Algebra Project. As his mom notes, “I think those projects made him…who he was, who he is.” These experiences also modeled for him what an extremely cohesive cohort could look like with his “core” of Chantel, Chelsea, Chris Goodman and Mildred. He learned that collective action could bring change at the community, city and state levels. His identity as a change agent was solidified through these experiences with his core and the rest of the young people at Youth Dreamers, B.A.P. and Youth As Resources. For Chris, finding a belonging must include this element of making change in the world. That is to say, it isn’t sufficient to feel companionship if not accompanied by an opportunity to exert power.

III. Looking for Place

While the youth organizations helped Chris develop a sense of purpose as a change agent, he is still on a path to finding a place to put that purpose. He needs this place before he attains that elusive belonging. As he said, he has the “will and capacity to make a difference,” but the question that remains is how and where he will make it.
Chris imagined that he would be doing change work with the Baltimore Algebra Project or Youth Dreamers. It did not work out with either organization, partly because these are youth-run organizations and he no longer considers himself a youth.

But then you start to get older and you’re like, “Yeah, I’m not a youth anymore.” But we still wanna stay true to the mission of being youth-run because that’s the only way youth will take ownership of it and want to do something with it.

More crucially, however, he figured out that he didn’t want to work directly with young people. He liked working with young people when he was young, but he thinks what he really enjoys is working with a peer group. He doesn’t consider young people his peer group anymore, so it’s not quite the right fit. Kristina recalls:

He really did see this difference between working with his colleagues and being this leader, which I thought was a little weird because he was just out of college and he was going to work with juniors and seniors in high school. So, I’m like you’re not that much older than they are. I mean it’s almost like your peer group, but I think he saw himself [differently].

Chris made the same observation.

I always thought of myself as wanting to work with youth. That’s not the case. I thought that was the case, but that was only the case because I was a youth. I think after, you know, looking deeper, it’s the fact that I was working with people, my own peers, so people my age or my caliber of experience with the same passion.

After trying unsuccessfully to have Chris engage the young people at the Dream House, Kristina wondered if a better model would have been for her to plan the programming with the youth and for him to run the business side of the organization. In retrospect, it is not surprising that working directly with youth didn’t pan out. Chris didn’t always like working with youth even when he was a youth – at least not when it was time to be serious and they were unfocused. What Chris brought to the table as a young person –
seriousness, organization, logic, order, argumentation – were all extremely valuable in a peer setting, but less desirable as an adult when the goal is to develop youth leadership. It turned out that working directly with youth was not his place.

Chris has always possessed these attributes. Walking into his mother’s house, there is no doubt where he got his sense of order and organization. On my way to her home I get the directions wrong and end up on a block on which all the houses are boarded up and there are no cars parked anywhere in the vicinity. I recheck the address and realize I’m a couple of blocks off. Chris’s mom’s rowhome is situated in East Baltimore on a well-populated street with lots of cars parked in front of the houses. The houses on her street are well kept, but there is no way to prepare for how pristine her house is on the inside. It might be the cleanest house I have ever been in. The dark wood furniture matches the immaculate dark wood floors. Big-backed leather couches with decorative throws greet me as I enter the long, narrow house. The immense entertainment center matches the coffee table. It’s not the furniture that’s striking, though; it’s just how neat, orderly and clean everything is. It’s not hard to understand why Chris presents himself as neat, clean and orderly in his appearance.

The youth organizations did not create Chris’s sense of order, but they gave him a productive place to apply his sensibilities. It is not just about presentation and looks for him, though; there is also a sense of organization and order and logic in how he thinks.

There’s my organization skills as far as being able to be in class, people will come to me and ask, do I have notes for class? Sometimes I do, and sometimes I didn’t take notes, and if I had notes for it, my notes for it are ordered. It was follow-through. So, organization and appearance, the appearance of my backpack made it so that people felt like they could ask me or something.
Chris extended this sense of order and documentation to his work in the organizations. The high school tutors at the Stadium School site had folders for their middle school “clients.” Chris decided to create a binder system for them instead.

I would do anything to make sure my site is the best, like, “Yeah, we gonna have the best site, but we gonna have all the information down pat. When you come into our site, you will know how things are.” And I took that and I ran with that for the whole organization, like when I suggested that we get, remember when we started to get binders for people? Like, why do we have folders when we need binders now? He would try to ensure that his site was the best site, but would then encourage the other sites to pick up the practices they had put into place at the Stadium School. He was a champion and chief author of the B.A.P. Handbook, which laid out the rules and regulations for the tutors. One might think a youth-run organization would eschew a document that set the rules, but the Handbook was embraced. These kinds of contributions were the norm for Chris.

When the B.A.P. started diving deeply into political actions – marches, rallies, sit-ins, teach-ins, die-ins, walk-outs, student strikes, hungers strikes and the like – the planning for these events started taking over the leadership meetings.

…then it was like, “Okay, we have other stuff that we need to talk about too, so let’s make committees and people can serve on committees who feel really strongly about working on advocacy.” And then we had sites, then we had handbook, then we had pedagogy and communication...

From Chris’s perspective, the “advocacy” work was just one part of the project’s interest. He was just as concerned with the pedagogy committee or the site reports or the handbook committee. He was concerned for the organization as a whole, not just the exciting and dramatic parts. In response to the Advocacy Committee’s taking over the meetings, Chris
argued for a separate Advocacy Committee that didn’t have tutoring responsibilities. Some of the young people wanted a separate Advocacy Committee so they could work on fun and dramatic events, but Chris wanted it separate to make sure all of the other work got done, too. He was a key voice in making the decision to hold Advocacy meetings outside of the Leadership meetings, and report back to Leadership meetings.

Julie Reader recalls a similar restructuring move Chris helped make at Youth As Resources:

He chaired project support… We used to have a combination committee – project support [and] grant making were combined. ...The whole board does grant-making, but the grant-making was just the committee that actually is the least responsible. They just look at materials and the messaging and then outreach us to do it… There was a decision to make it two different committees, and I think he led that project support committee and strengthened it. I think it was he who led the charge to split those committees, support the projects – that we needed a whole committee just to focus on grantee support after the grants. I think he basically gave vision and direction to that committee that we benefit from today.

This restructuring that Chris helped implement is still practiced at Youth As Resources ten years later. Similarly, the B.A.P. still has a handbook and a separate Advocacy Committee.

Chris and I were once at the B.A.P. office after he had graduated from college and was no longer part of the organization. I had asked him to meet me there while I finished observing a meeting. Chris came in and sat on the periphery of the meeting. He just sat back and listened – he didn’t try to interject and no one asked him to weigh in. The young people were trying to decide on a set of actions that would apply pressure to stop the construction
of a new juvenile detention center in Baltimore. Invest in education and youth jobs, they would argue, not on youth jails. Part of the action would include a march and rally and it would culminate in civil disobedience at the proposed site of the youth jail. After a lot of back and forth about how they might make it all work, Chris chimed in, seemingly out of nowhere. He clearly and convincingly made a logistical suggestion about the route of the march, the placement of the rally, and how to end at the site of the civil disobedience. The suggestion all but ended the discussion; it had made perfect sense to everyone in the room.

This is what Chris brought to the work – a quiet and serious attention to detail that was clearly articulated and well thought-out. Kristina remembered, “He was always the voice of reason.” This order and organization was a welcome addition to the creativity and fearlessness others brought. He offered sensibilities learned and groomed at home, and put them into practice at his organizations.

I don’t wanna say I learned organizing from the Algebra Project cuz I always been a organized person with work, school work and work, but, I guess, finding, knowing that I had a knack for it, I found out through that, or that that’s kinda like something that is a part of me, I guess a skill. And another thing, that I can be, like, I feel like the Algebra Project made me into the administrator that I am cuz it’s the first job of managing people and what it takes to have that responsibility.

Chris’s penchant for organization didn’t start with the Baltimore Algebra Project or Youth Dreamers or Youth As Resources, but these experiences helped nurture it, hone it, and put it to use.

This is not to say that Chris is a cold logistician. Though he is quiet and serious, when he laughs, it fills up the room. As Kristina says, “He has the biggest, best smile ever.”

For Kristina, one of his best attributes is his generosity of heart:

He had to interact with a lot of different age groups throughout this process [of opening the Dream House] and he had a generosity of heart that made people – you
could almost – it was almost palpable. If he reached out to talk to you about something, he’s passionate about something, he wasn’t always asking of someone but he was asking what he could do for someone.

Julie similarly remembers him in Youth As Resources:

I think he’s very caring. I think he really cares a lot…I think he just was always kind. I think he was, or probably still is, he totally treats everybody the same. He doesn’t do that stuff that some people do to fit in. He treats everybody the same, which I think is caring in itself.

Even as Kristina and Julie remembered him as generous and kind, the words that initially came to mind were “meticulous” and “administrative.” I think Chris would be happy to be described in these terms. He combined a quiet and caring demeanor with a logical and orderly mindset. He had earned his voice as an important part of decision-making at the B.A.P., at Youth Dreamers and at Youth As Resources. His skills, combined with his disposition, were both valuable and valued.

One of the most important aspects of having a role, of contributing substantively to an organization, cause or community, is the reciprocated feeling of being valued. That is, Chris added to his organization and, in return, felt valued. When he recounted the story about being asked for his notes in high school, he said it was important to him because he felt like he mattered: “It felt good to be needed or wanted or to be valued. I mean, that’s the reason – that I mattered.”

Chris cares about how others see him; it’s important to him. He makes a point of dressing in a particular way – a dressed-up way. His new friends have nicknamed him “Sunday’s Best” because he’s “always dressed to the nines,” they say. He believes he is taken more seriously when he dresses well.

You have to set the expectation for yourself – how you want others to perceive you. For me, I want to be treated with respect, and to know that, even though I’m not working for an organization, even though I’m not doing anything with my day, like,
when I go out, it doesn’t mean that nothing’s gonna happen. I should be ready for anything at any given moment. And that’s how I want, that’s how I dress… When people see you, see you in the way you want to be represented, then you’re doing, you’re being representative of the person that you want to be and you’re gonna be treated such like.

Chris wants to be treated with respect and sees how he dresses as directly related to how he is treated. Being treated with respect, feeling valued, these are elements that are very important to him in finding a place. He thinks people are more apt to engage him in conversation or ask him questions if he looks the part. It’s a way for him to share what he knows, and if he’s asked something he doesn’t know, it serves as an impetus to go learn about it.

It’s nice because they’re more inclined to ask my opinion on something. They are more inclined to talk and engage in a conversation, and a meaningful conversation, where they might get something out of it. And then, and even if I don’t have the answers, I don’t have a problem saying that I don’t know. But then I will probably want to know, and then I will look for a answer or a solution myself, which will make me better, that much better.

Chris clearly puts a lot of thought into how he presents himself and the meaning that is attached to that act. He sees himself as worthy of respect and wants his interactions to honor that. As he leaves the familiar world of youth work and the organizations in which he came up, he knows he will have to earn his voice, a sense of being valued, and the respect he garnered while making his mark as a Dreamer and organizer and youth philanthropist.

One of the first times Chris learned this lesson was at his work-study program at the Career Center his freshman year at Maryland. Chris, who by that time had helped create fundamental organizational documents, helped restructure organizations, helped raise tens of thousands of dollars, been interviewed by print and TV media, run a tutoring site, been
elected Treasurer by his peers in an organization with an annual budget of over $300,000, and on and on, was forced to just be a freshman-level office helper:

I didn’t feel as though, I felt kinda, I don’t know if “belittled” is the right word, but I didn’t feel as valued because it was such a different atmosphere. Like, coming from all these youth-run organizations, then going to a organization where it’s pretty adult employed, like employees, and they’re running the show. And then I was just like, “I have a lot to offer, gimme the chance” or “I wanna be involved here and just let me do it.” But I guess there’s hesitancy in letting someone younger do things. It kinda got on my nerves a little, but then I was like, “Well you just wanna pay me to sit down, I’ll do it.” I mean, it’s work-study.

Chris knew they weren’t taking full advantage of his capabilities, knowledge and skills. They didn’t understand the value he brought, and consequently, he didn’t feel valued. He knew what he had to offer, but didn’t feel he was in a position to bring that to the table.

It wasn’t the only time in college that he questioned his value – not as it related to his having value, but in his ability to bring that value to bear. When Chris “freaked out” in college he said he started to “question his value”:

I had this breakdown of, like, “Why am I trying to put myself through college and trying to make a difference if this is how people act and feel and treat each other?” Like, what impact could I have if this is what the majority of society does? And so, I started to question my value and what I could do.

Feeling valuable and valued are clearly important considerations for Chris as he tries to find his place. Much of this boils down to a sense of mattering. He is confident in his skills, experience and knowledge, and in the fact that he matters.

I always feel like I matter. Sometimes I feel like I’m the most important thing. It’s just the point of making others see it. And I am a quiet type and I don’t necessarily voice that I matter, not until you get to, like, really know and spend time with me to understand. Once you know me, of course you already know I matter…
For Chris, it’s about making sure other people recognize that he matters. When he reflects on all that he learned coming up in the youth organizations, he says that he wasn’t in the organizations for the purpose of gaining that set of expertise, but he has it and it should be put to use:

All the skills that went into that, as far as researching and marketing and fundraising and grant writing and all those skills, I didn’t expect to gain those skills just because I wanted to open up a youth center. I wanted to open up a youth center because I wanted somewhere to go, so that these are the things that I gained by working on that, working with that organization. And it wasn’t like I was planning on learning those skills. I didn’t even know what those skills were. So I been just having those experiences and knowing that I can use those experiences for another organization …or to another cause.

As Chris continues his search for a belonging, he is looking for a place where he can feel valued and valuable. He has come to the conclusion that this place is not working with youth, but finding a peer group with whom he can share his passions and his commitment to make change. That place will need to embrace his sense of order and logic and take advantage of the myriad skills he has nurtured for more than half of his life. If he is allowed to contribute and show what he has to offer, he can feel comfortable and right and respected. Searching for belonging, for Chris, includes looking for community, looking for the ability to make change with others, and looking for a place where his abilities and experiences can fit, can be valued, and he can thrive.
IV. Community, Power and Place: A Map to a Belonging

Chris Lawson is searching for a belonging, but he’s not a lost soul adrift with no direction. People often come out of college not knowing what they want to do or if they can do what they want to do. Other people come out of college and set themselves on a path that is convenient or expected, or that unexpectedly presents itself. That’s not the story for Chris. He does not lack clarity in his purpose or confidence in his skill set. He is not following his college friends’ footsteps by taking a corporate job anywhere in the country, nor is he falling back on the B.A.P. or Youth Dreamers. Chris is searching for his own path to a belonging. He is clear on the components of the belonging – community, power and place. The question is whether he can find them all together.

Chris, himself, has that question. He did find a group of friends around whom he can be himself and it feels good:

…it feels good… it’s a separate network, I still wanna have my professional network. This is more so of a social network, but I wanna have that. I want one that contains both… they’re not involved in my professional world, even though they know I have this other part or side of me, and if they ask about it, I’ll tell ’em, but it’s not a part of them. So, I need something that have both entwined.

“It feels good,” he says. The good feeling is qualified, though. For it to be right, he needs “both entwined.” The both in this case are community and power. He calls it a “professional network,” but his professional aspirations are to “make a difference.” On the community side of things, Chris realizes that he needs to be with people around whom he can just breathe. He gets that feeling when he doesn’t have to think about what to do or what to say, and can just be. That’s what he gets with this “social network” he formed at Grand Central. When the management at Central changed, Chris and his co-worker friends left their employment at the bar. They remained close, however. They often go to other bars together,
or to new restaurants, or do brunch at one of their houses or meet up in D.C. Chris laments not having his own place to host his friends, but knows that living with his mother is the prudent choice as he saves money for graduate school. Though having this group of friends “feels good,” he is still searching for a belonging that feels right.

Part of the reason Chris is still searching is that his friends know that he has “this other part” of him, but “it’s not part of them.” This other part of him is the part developed when he was a twelve-year-old starting a nonprofit so that he and his friends could have a safe place to be after school. The other part of him was defined when he learned to make a demand on himself, on his peers, and on society with the B.A.P. This part of him knows that things in the world need changing and that he has the “will and capacity” to help make those changes. He understands that these are a part of him, and the comforts of companionship and the potential comforts of the corporate world are not enough to pull him away from himself.

Effecting change has become fundamental to Chris from his experiences at Youth Dreamers, B.A.P. and Youth As Resources. He sees himself making change at a policy-level position, but says he will retain the value of youth-driven work. Even in a policy context, Chris says, “I feel like any program that serves the youth should have a youth component in their decision-making process.” He sees himself as an actor in the world with a responsibility to that world, saying, “I do kinda feel a responsibility to make a difference.”

The fact that Chris moved away from the idea of working directly with youth, with his sights set instead on a policy position, reflects his firm grasp of his own skills, expertise and predispositions. When he can use his best attributes to contribute to an organization, he feels he is valuable and, in turn, feels valued. He understands that he needs a place to put his
disposition and abilities to use (“will and capacity”) so he can make a difference, so he can thrive. He says:

I just feel, like, all the stuff that I’ve done up to now, if I don’t do anything with the knowledge I have, like, what was the point of knowing those things? … I did it because I care. I mean, and I still care, so, you know, why not continue to work on those issues and do something with it? My involvement with those organizations working on those issues, working on those projects have led to other people benefitting from it…. So, people benefit from the things that I worked on. That’s why I matter.

He knows he has made an impact on people’s lives before and wants to continue. He has a handle on how he wants to do that work. He just needs a place to do it.

Chris is not adrift. He has a map. He is on the path. It is not clear if he will ever find his belonging. It is not obvious that there is a place where the breathing is easy and the people want to create change and he can put his best qualities to use. His mother is worried he will settle into the life of a bartender and not put all his education, knowledge and skills to use:

Chris was bartending. It wasn't something he went to school for. He made a little bit of money and that was good… I talked to him about that. I was concerned because when he was doing that and making money he wasn't focused on trying to go back to school and do what he wanted to do with him graduating college, which was African American Studies. I was a little concerned about that…

On the other hand, Kristina worries he will succumb to the expectations of others:

Sometimes you get this feeling like he’s a little uncomfortable because he’s trying to live up to what he thinks people have in terms of expectations and I just want … I wish for him to find his space where his skills are being utilized but that he is feeling like, “This is the right space for me and this is who I want to be around and this is
what I want to be doing,” and it’s not “I didn’t pick it because it was what I thought other people wanted me to be doing.”

In the end, both women want the same thing:

[Kristina] I mean as super corny as it sounds, I really just want him to be happy.

[Chris’s mother] It's his life, he's going to be the one to lead it. He is the one that will have to be happy or not happy. I want him to be happy, and if that is what makes him happy, that's fine with me.

For Chris’s part, he is looking for that sweet spot where his social and professional circles are “both entwined.” Chris will likely be happiest if he can find community, power and place - that is, if he can find his belonging.
Commitment, Responsibility, Change: The Demands of Actors on Society

These are four ordinarily extraordinary young men. I set out to explore the role that life histories and their experiences in the Baltimore Algebra Project (BAP) played in both their ability and willingness to make demands on society. How do they understand their role as actors on society? The portraits of Comrade, Wayne, X and Chris address these questions for each of the protagonists. This chapter explores what we might learn by looking across them – to see where they intersect and how they diverge.

With his family’s strong racial identity, Comrade developed his political analysis in tandem with his musical skills at the BAP, all with a dream of creating and performing the “soundtrack to the revolution.” Wayne’s mother instilled in him the importance of family, which he embraced and broadened at the BAP, and exercises daily in his role as a partner and father. X learned from his mother that he mattered just as much as anyone else – a sensibility he applied to his students and to new communities he encountered through the BAP and beyond. Chris’s meticulous and logical ways of being mirror his mother’s, and were so utilized and valued at the Youth Dreamers, the BAP, and Youth as Resources that he is committed to putting them to use in the service of social change.

In many ways, these narratives are unique and it is important that they can stand alone, but there are also things to learn from these stories as a collection. Comrade may be an artist and Chris may be an administrator, but their cases point to some synthesis in experience. Across the four portraits three ideas emerged that relate to life histories, the Baltimore Algebra Project, and becoming actors in society:

i. First, the young men’s experiences prior to the BAP provided lessons that primed them to be able to make demands on society.
ii. Second, the Baltimore Algebra Project—a site defined by *freedom* and *power*—provided a space in which these young men leveraged their individual strengths toward collective social change.

iii. Finally, there are both constraints to and successes in the efforts of these four young men to be actors in, and on, society.

I. **Readying to Make a Demand: Early Lessons in Protection and Community**

In my third year of graduate study, I took a research methodology course on portraiture in which the culminating project was to design, research and write a portrait. I chose X as the focus of that portrait so many years ago, with the aim of understanding whether his participation in the Baltimore Algebra Project had “shaped” him, and if so, in what ways had it shaped him? During the course of that project, I came to learn about X’s very clear understanding of every person as a full human being—a “constitutional person”—deserving of all the rights afforded human beings.

Because I knew X in and through the Baltimore Algebra Project, I assumed that the BAP was responsible for planting the seed of this strong conception of a constitutional person. But portraiture encourages the researcher to make room for surprise, and learning about X taught me that I had put too much emphasis on the role of the Baltimore Algebra Project in developing his notion of a constitutional person. To be sure, he learned the term “constitutional person” at the BAP, but the seed of that idea came from his mother and his life experiences prior to his time with the Project. This came through clearly when I inquired about his individual life history, an inquiry often lacking in research on youth organizing, which tends to focus heavily on the young people’s experiences *in* the organizations or their “outcomes” once they leave the organizations.
This insight from X pushed me to broaden my inquiry when I started this larger research project. X reminded me that he was a full human being prior to the BAP. This might seem obvious. However, historically, institutions such as schools and churches – particularly for racially and religiously minoritized populations – have seen their role as “civilizing the savages” (Foner, 1997; Ward, 2004). That is, they often think their work is to transform less-than-human young people into more fully developed human beings. These days, schools and youth development programs would not say civilizing the savages, but they would certainly say preparing youth to be productive members of society. To my eyes and ears, that is a more “politically correct” way of saying essentially the same thing.

Because these organizations and programs start with the assumption of young people as less than fully human, it makes sense that the majority of research on youth organizing looks to understand the impact of those organizations both on communities and individuals (Braxton, 2016; Shaw, 2011). But this work overlooks the importance of examining, first, the life histories of the individual young people in the organizations. In failing to be curious about who these people were before they joined the organizations, we fail to identify and to appreciate the lessons, values and dispositions they carried with them into the work, and the ways in which those experiences shape their engagement in the work.

Bob Moses’s three-tier demand, which I introduced at the start of this work – demand on yourself, demand on your peers and demand on society – is concerned with the relationships among individuals, communities and greater society. It does not focus on the previous individual experiences of these people who come to make a demand on society, on the values and dispositions they develop that may prime them for the ability to make demands at any level. But it is bolstered by the recognition that the everyday life experiences
and home lessons of young Black people, in particular, may ready them in important ways to undertake the work of these tiers of demand.

The young men in this study pointed to critical lessons they learned at home and in their experiences prior to joining any organizations that facilitated and supported the ways in which they received their experiences at the Baltimore Algebra Project. By examining their life histories, I have been able to tease out some of the dispositions that prepared these young people as they encountered opportunities to make a demand on society. Thus, I have been able to avoid the mistake that many youth development programs (and the research attached to them) make when they assume that these dispositions are learned in their organizations. In addition, I am providing insight into some of the ways young people can be ready to enter Moses’s three-tier demand.

I start this cross-case chapter by sharing these lessons learned in the young men’s lives before the BAP as a way of offering an argument about the kinds of values, dispositions and lessons that might prime young people generally to be able to fully engage the opportunity to make demands. Specifically, these pre-BAP lessons include the responsibility to protect and the responsibility to community. Taken together, these lessons readied these young men to make demands on society by helping them to recognize two things that are fundamental to their ability to make change: first, that they mattered enough to deserve to make a demand on society; and second, that there was an urgent need to make a demand on society. These lessons are particular to the undertaking of surviving in and thriving in poverty, and are lessons that are arguably particular to the Black experience of poverty – an idea I expand on below.
Responsibility to Protect

All mothers have the instinct to protect their children. This instinct is more acute in the case of raising Black boys in a city that swallows up its young. As Wayne’s mom said, “these streets is mean.” All the mothers in this study felt a responsibility to protect their kids, but also to teach them to protect those around them. In their stories, the participants seemed to not only feel their mother’s protection, but to absorb that as a value that they, too, must enact. Though each mother had her own take on how best to protect her son, each understood it as her number one priority.

Mrs. Goodman, Comrade’s mom, took the approach of gathering up all of Comrade’s friends and keeping them close.

They always came here, my door was always open, and it still is always open [laughs]. It’s always open. And it’s good because I know where they are and they are like my children, too. And if it’s some place they need to be to calm down or whatever, just talk things out – then it’s fine.

She was able to do this because she was at home when the kids got home from school. While physical safety was the primary concern, Mrs. Goodman also hoped to offer another kind of safety, to ensure that any of the boys would feel they could come to her if they needed “…some place they need to be to calm down or whatever, just talk things out…”

Comrade embraced this ethos of protection, first by looking out for his brother Asa. Just as Mrs. Goodman looked out for her boys, Comrade looks out for Asa – not just in terms of physical protection, but in a form of protection that allows Asa to perceive Comrade as a role model to trust and to emulate. Asa looks up to Comrade so much that he followed him into the music business. Asa told me that if Comrade had been serious about college, he would be “trying to do that college thing.” Comrade kept Asa close as he learned from his mother. His mom provided protection by bringing Comrade, Asa and their friends
closer to her and by being a rock they could count on. Comrade learned this lesson and carried it forward to his time in the BAP, where he said his role was to be a “fearless soldier.” In other words, a protector. To this day, Comrade’s childhood friends go in and out of Mrs. Goodman’s house as if it were their own.

Wayne’s mother’s approach was both very similar to and very different from Mrs. Goodman’s. Like Comrade’s mom, Mrs. Washington sought to create a cocoon of safety. However, Wayne’s mom defined that place of safety much more narrowly. Wayne’s mother felt best when her four kids were all home safely in the basement. She taught them to have each other. As Wayne said, “It’s been really just my household against the world, you know? I’ve always been taught that.”

For Wayne, this lesson in protection came through strongly. Wayne’s emphasis on protection might partially stem from the helplessness he felt in his inability to protect his brother from being terrorized by a young man with a shotgun when they were kids. He wanted to protect his brother so much and he continues to carry that feeling with him.

Similarly, one of the most important aspects of Wayne’s friendship with Marquis was the way in which they protected each other. They made sure to travel places together to defend each other against those who might want to harm them on the streets. Marquis was the first person for whom Wayne expanded his definition of family beyond his immediate household. Where Wayne’s mother taught that they must protect the family, he applied that lesson to Marquis. The fact that he was not there to back up Marquis when he was attacked still bothers Wayne to this day, more than a decade later.

Chris’s mom tried to protect him by keeping to themselves. Though this story was not prominently featured in Chris’s portrait, there was a time when Chris’s mom, who was a daycare worker, left her job at one daycare to move to another with an older age range so
she could continue to bring Chris to her daycare before and after school so she could keep him close. Chris’s mother said that he had to grow up kind of fast because she was a single parent. She worried for him when he was out walking or waiting at the bus stop. It was one of the reasons she was happy that he kept to himself and did not go out too much as a kid.

This theme of safety is clearly reflected in Chris’s commitment to opening the Youth Dreamer house. The initial idea was sparked by the young people wanting a safe place to be after school. Chris took the notion of protection and applied it directly to his community.

Mrs. Williams’s notion of protection was different for X from Comrade’s, Wayne’s or Chris’s mothers’ approaches. While they tried their best to shelter their kids from the dangers of the streets and the police, X’s mother’s strategy was, instead, to protect him by equipping him with what he needed to survive those interactions. X’s mother used lessons in self-reliance and independence as preparation for survival. When X and his sisters were put into foster care, the option of a cocoon was not realistic. They had seen the harshness of the world up close and personal. Teaching her kids to hold themselves up was essential because she was in a struggle of her own with alcoholism. In addition to self-reliance and independence, X’s mom tried to teach her children a kind of psychological protection by telling them they were just as good and important and fully human as anyone else out there. She explicitly taught them to think of themselves as equal to any and all others, even police, celebrities or politicians. Unable to cocoon her children in the way Comrade’s and Wayne’s moms sought to do, X’s mom made sure they grew wings, so they could fly on their own if necessary. And she made sure they knew they deserved those wings.

X was also physically protected by his cousins. His mom’s protection and his cousins’ protection inspired him to think of himself as a protector, as well. He was
particularly protective of people like his close friend Fernandes – people who march to the beat of their own drummer. X described how he came to understand his role as a protector:

Growing up I used to have people defend me, then I grew into like a defender role, watching the people that watched over me like my older sister, or my uncle who was with my cousins. They would always protect me and as I got older I decided to start protecting them, the other kids.

In the act of protecting these young men and in the lessons they imparted about the importance of protecting others, their families were teaching Comrade, Wayne, X and Chris that they mattered. They were teaching them that what happens to them matters, and what happens to those around them matters. These experiences are particularly important in the context of poverty and of Black people in poverty. White children living in wealthy suburbs, for example, will not likely require or receive these fundamental lessons in what it means to protect oneself and one’s own, to learn that they are worthy and deserving of such careful, intentional protection. In teaching protection, their mothers taught them they were worth protecting – that their lives are valuable.

This lesson is critical to being able to make demands. If one is to make a demand on society, if one is to take a step into history (Gillen, 2015; Moses 2001), she must feel that she herself has something to offer society and history. This sense of self for these young men started with their families. It started with their people showing them they are worth protecting and they better protect those around them. When the system does not look out for you, an understanding emerges that you need to rely on your community.
Responsibility to Community

As the young men’s families were helping them to see that they mattered, they also came to learn that they were not the only ones who mattered. Each young man developed a feeling of responsibility to community. Sometimes they learned this through explicit teaching from their families and other times through their experiences outside the family.

Comrade and X had explicit teaching and examples of being responsible to the community from their families. In Comrade’s case, the example of his mother’s opening her door to the neighborhood kids was a lesson in community responsibility. As a young boy, it was just fun to always have his mom around and to be able to have his friends around. As he grew older, though, he started to understand his mother as a “matriarch.” Comrade explicitly compares himself to his mother, and now a small part of that is her exemplifying community responsibility.

In addition to showing him responsibility to community in how they embraced his immediate friends, Comrade’s family helped him come to understand Black people as community. Comrade has a strong racial identity through his parents’ efforts. At a young age, he was taught about Black historical figures that the school curriculum was likely to leave out. They gave him a poster of the historical figures and would quiz him on each of them. These early teachings stayed with him through his time at the BAP and they continue to influence his music career. It is a central part of his identity and he feels a responsibility to the Black community.

X also saw examples and received explicit lessons on the importance of a responsibility to community. His grandmother and grandfather each serve as examples in this value. X talked about how his grandfather would feed the kids at his arcade. His grandmother would open her door to anyone in the neighborhood when they lived in New
York. When his grandmother moved to Baltimore, she participated in a community garden. He also recalls his mother often sending him with a plate of food to an elderly neighbor. For X, the idea of taking care of each other runs down a family line:

When my grandfather got older and he started making money and his own businesses ... he used to run the arcade called Fat Albert’s in New York City... He would serve pork and beans out there for the kids at the school. It was kind of like him giving back...He used to do it too, my grandmother used to do it when she came and my mother used to do it in the neighborhood. Me and my sister grew up and we started it. Now I do it with my friends and family.

In addition to these examples in X’s life, his mother was explicit about this value. She told him he had a responsibility to take care of those around him – both those immediately around him, like his sisters, and those in his community – his neighbors.

Wayne’s mother felt safest when her children were together in her house. She sees herself as different from a lot of other Baltimore women because of her extensive travel. This meant that Wayne got his sense of responsibility to community from outside of his family – sort of. His mother preached family over everything, and Wayne embraced that mantra, except that he vastly expanded his definition of family. One of his first important experiences of this expansion was in his relationship with Marquis. Wayne came to understand Marquis as family and applied his mother’s teaching about family to Marquis. In this way, Wayne was primed to expand his definition of family as he encountered more and more people who reciprocated his caring. Wayne’s sense of responsibility to community is so strong that it often puts strains on his marriage.

Like Wayne’s mother, Chris’s mother felt that it was best to keep to herself. Chris names the Stadium School as a key factor in his developing a sense of responsibility to community. Chris credits a camping trip they all took as 6th graders as a community-building
activity as the foundation for the community that he felt at Stadium School. Chris took this value and made it his passion throughout his youth. His work to build a youth community center was about his neighborhood and his school and his classmates. Chris stayed committed to the Youth Dreamers from 6th grade until after college. He had a fierce loyalty to his community, as he demonstrated though his continued work with Youth Dreamers, Baltimore Algebra Project and Youth as Resources, even after he officially left those organizations.

The life experiences of these young men prepared them to make demands on society. Their families sought to protect them and instill in them a responsibility to protect those around them. These lessons were important in helping them to recognize that they mattered in the world. I posit that feeling that you matter, feeling that you are of consequence to the world, is a prerequisite for demanding that society recognize your full humanness. In other words, one must recognize her own humanity before she demands that of others. The families and life experiences helped fortify this notion for the young men in this project.

In addition, the experiences of poverty, and specifically of Black people in poverty, were primers for being able to make a demand society. The conditions and experiences of poverty helped these young men recognize the need to make a demand on society. As they experienced hunger or violence or poor living conditions, they developed an understanding that these conditions were not right. In X’s portrait, the young people of privilege at Brown University had trouble understanding Freire, but it made perfect sense to X. He and Wayne and Comrade and Chris experienced the oppression Freire discusses in Pedagogy of the Oppressed. In tandem with seeing the need for making a demand on society, these young men
had the necessary experience of counting on community to survive. They could not count on institutions and governments to protect their welfare (thus the need to make a demand), so they needed to count on community. This lesson on leaning on and being responsible to community was another piece of the foundation for making a demand on society.

The life experiences of these young men gave them lessons in the responsibility to protect and responsibility to community. These lessons primed the young men to make a demand on society by helping them recognize that they mattered, that there was a need to make a demand, and that they needed to band with community to make a demand. As they moved to their BAP experiences they were able to engage in opportunities to make a demand on society in light of these lessons.

II. Being and Becoming: The Baltimore Algebra Project: A Site of Freedom and Power

Having established that the young men were fully human coming into the BAP – recognizing that they matter and that there is a need to make a demand on society to recognize their full humanness – we can more accurately understand the role the BAP played in their making demands on society and as actors in society.

I do not mean to minimize the meaningful impact the BAP had on the participants. The Baltimore Algebra Project played a significant role in each of these four men’s lives. Comrade said, “most of my education is from the Algebra Project.” Wayne measures the BAP’s impact by how the knowledge he gained could affect his children:

I love the Algebra Project. I would not be where I’m at, I would not have the friends I’ve had, I would not have the knowledge, or be able to protect my babies from society if I didn’t have the knowledge that I have from going through the Algebra Project.
The BAP taught X that he was a “constitutional person”:

And when I got in the Algebra Project, they were like, you know, they changed the word around and was like “Feature Talk,” like you’re a citizen, you’re not a minority, you’re not a lower class citizen, you’re not a prisoner, you’re not this and that. You’re a constitutional person. They taught me that. Chris says that the “the Algebra Project made me into the administrator that I am.”

As is evident from their own words, the BAP was a major force in their lives, how they see themselves and others, and how they decided to live their lives. This influence is enough; we do not have to ascribe to the BAP all of who they are and have become. Instead, the BAP can be analyzed by understanding what the organization did with who they already are, and the ways in which it transformed them.

I began this study with a keen interest in what the BAP provided each of the participants. The literature says that youth organizing helps develop social critique, civic participation, research and public speaking skills, commitments to social justice, experiences in democratic participation and leadership development for young people (Delgado & Staples, 2008; Deschenes, McLaughlin, & Newman, 2008; Ginwright, 2003; Ginwright, Noguera, & Cammarota, 2006; Hosang, 2003; Warren & Mapp, 2011). Wayne, whom Jay Gillen calls a “genius,” shed important light on this question:

I think people at where we were at took all the same things from the Algebra Project. Personally, I do think that we all took the same thing regardless if they said it out loud, I think we all took the same thing. I just think that people cling onto what they needed the most out of the job for themselves. Wayne is saying that they all got the same things out of the BAP, but they pulled most strongly toward what each of them, as individuals, needed at the time. They all gained skills; they all built relationships; they all developed political analyses; they all became leaders; but their stories reflect the skills, interests and needs most salient to them at the time.
The Project’s stance was not “you will learn these skills” or “you will learn this content” or “you will build important relationships.” Yet the young people did all of these things. This happened because of the freedom within the Project for members to fully be themselves. Members can bring who they are to the space and practice it with other young people and supportive adults. Further, in this space of freedom, they had the power to transform their natural proclivities in both personal and political ways.

A Site of Freedom

The young men all found the BAP to be a place where their natural selves were recognized and nurtured. A prime example of this is how Chris’s penchant for organization found a home at the BAP. Chris convinced his peers that they needed governing documents, and headed the Handbook Committee. His logistical clarity was extremely valuable as they planned events. His overarching view of the entire organization was helpful to the health of the organization. While Wayne was saying, “I just completely did not care about budget problems or anything... I just enjoyed being part of the Algebra Project,” Chris – by contrast – was worried about the budget and performances at the tutoring sites. Chris got to be himself. He got to hone, apply and own his identity and his skills as an organized, logistical expert.

Wayne was not stressed about the budget, nor could he care less about whether the “client” binders were up-to-date. He latched onto the relational aspect of the Project. In childhood, Wayne was taught that it’s family over everything. This value of relationship was not suppressed at the BAP. The safety and shelter he experienced as a young man while at home with his family is how he felt with the BAP. Wayne and X started in the BAP together, and X is truly part of Wayne’s family now. Wayne’s value of family was honored at the BAP,
and his skills as a person who creates, nurtures and sustains family were developed and expanded.

X, the philosopher teacher, came into the Project with ideas of the basic common kernel of human being (see De Lissovoy [2010] for more on the common “ontological kernel” of human being). His mother taught him that he was as important as the police or a celebrity. At the BAP, X got to be a part of a democratic structure where people did matter. In a world full of hierarchies, he practiced distributed leadership. As he said in his rap, “Join me cuz I ain’t pickin’ cotton.” At the BAP, X asked people to join him in rejecting the chains and claiming his full humanness.

Comrade, too, was a poet coming into the BAP. He went from private poems in his notebook to public performances with the Militant Advocates. As his partner Bani says, Comrade is a very quiet person with an incredibly loud voice inside of him. The BAP allowed him to be both quiet and loud as he did the quiet work of one-on-one organizing and the loud work of activism. Comrade was a key organizer in the *Advocacy Through the Open Mic* events, which combined organizing with spoken word and rap performances. The Project afforded him the freedom to help create such an event, which showcased both his reserved and expressive sides.

I am defining freedom here as the opportunity to be one’s full self and to have that self not only recognized but actively nurtured, valued and developed. The BAP provided a site for each young man to flex his own natural and learned-at-home talents, values and skills. It was a place where they were free to be themselves.

*A Site of Power*

The BAP was a site of freedom largely because the young people were building the organization. If there was something they wanted or needed, they built it. *We think we need
more structure, so let’s make a handbook. We want to educate, perform, and have a party, so let’s organize an Advocacy Through the Open Mic. In other words, the young people had power. They could make decisions and they could act on those decisions. This mechanism had a transformational effect (see Warren & Mapp [2011] for more on building power and relationships as a transformational process). Through their ability to act – through their power – these young men transformed what they brought to the Project and who they were, in both personal and political ways.

Chris came into the BAP and contributed his ways of being to the collective. What he got in return, though, was a “new” identity as a person who could and should have responsibility. He now sees himself as someone capable of managing people. Chris went from being an organized person to being an organizer. His action was personally transformational. He now sees his new self as a political actor. As he put it, the BAP “made me into the administrator I am.” But he did not take those administrative skills and join a Fortune 500 company. As Chris says, he would rather use his skills for another organization or another cause:

And it wasn’t like I was planning on learning those skills. I didn’t even know what those skills were. So I been just having those experiences and knowing that I can use those experiences for another organization …or another cause.

The BAP was a place where Chris got to be and a place where he got to become.

Similarly, Wayne came to the BAP having been taught that his family was the most important thing. Wayne used his BAP experience to evolve his own conception of family. He talks about how when he was coming up he would keep to himself, but learned at the BAP to bring other people up with him. He is extremely proud that his daughter is at the top of the class, but isn’t just reveling in her own success; she’s pulling people up with her:
She’s leading. She’s not just being at the top and breathing all this fresh air like I’m on top of the mountain. She’s actually being up there. She’s pulling people whoever is sitting next to her she’s helping. I’m like that’s nice because I wasn’t doing that. I was sitting there quiet. I already feel like what I have learned is already being pushed on them at a young age.

When Wayne was in the streets, it was imperative that he pushed people down; at the BAP, he learned to do the opposite. This was transformational for Wayne. He came to see himself as an architect of family. As he builds this family, he is teaching them about what it means to be a leader and to be in community together.

While X’s mom gave him the foundation for the idea of a common kernel of human being – that every person is equally human – he really matured this idea through his experiences at the BAP. The translation from “People Talk” to “Feature Talk” allowed him to translate the concept of equal humanness into talk of “constitutional people,” and then apply the concept of constitutional people across communities and contexts. X was transformed from someone who wasn’t going to be treated as less than human to someone who stood in solidarity with immigrant farmworkers, insisting on their right to be treated as fully human. These are not inherently different stances, but he was able to transfer the idea of himself as a constitutional person to the idea of us all as constitutional people.

The big voice inside of Comrade may have lain dormant without the BAP – there’s really no way to tell. But it is clear to me that the big voice was influenced profoundly by the BAP. Comrade went from the shy, quiet kid to the young man most often on the megaphone. For a few years, Comrade was the face and the voice of the BAP. This transformation was not simply from shy to outgoing, not simply a personal transformation. It was also explicitly political, as he went from personal love poems in his notebook to the public desire to be the voice of the “soundtrack to the revolution.”
Lessons from Peers in Being and Becoming

It is important to understand how all this happened for the young men in the BAP. There was not a great deal of direct instruction in the Project. Instead, the young people were engaged in being and becoming through their everyday work with each other. Understanding the peer teaching and learning that took place in the Project is critical to understanding the genuine youth power facilitated in and by the space.

The participants engaged in peer-to-peer teaching and learning. Not only were they teaching each other math as peer-to-peer math tutors, they also learned about leadership, organizing, music and argumentation, to mention just a few areas of peer-to-peer curriculum that surfaced in the narratives.

The young men were constantly in meetings. They participated in meetings, they facilitated meetings, they planned meetings – and most of those meetings included other young people. These were authentic opportunities for leadership development. All of these young men were site leaders at one point, which meant they ran staff meetings at the tutoring sites and had to attend leadership meetings. In the meetings, they were teaching each other how to facilitate, how to come to consensus, how to delegate tasks, how to optimize participation. The moments when Jay or I would make suggestions, but the leadership would go in a different direction, were very instructive for newer members. These moments taught them about whose ideas were valued and who had power.

When Wayne and X went to their first leadership meeting, it was an eye-opening experience. Wayne thought it might be a good place to check out girls, but instead fell in love with the scene of young people leading the space and being very serious about the work
that was taking place. X recalls feeling as if they were at the Constitutional Convention, deciding the fate of the country.

So much of their learning was done by doing. X and Comrade, along with several other BAP members, put together the pedacacy [pedagogy + advocacy] workshop for the *Free Minds, Free People Conference* in Houston in 2009. In their effort to prepare that workshop on organizing, they were teaching each other about organizing. In turn, they taught a room full of people from all over the country about organizing. Their peer-to-peer math model became a general peer-to-peer model. They inspired youth groups all over Baltimore to adopt a peer-to-peer teaching model (indyreader.org/node129).

In addition to learning about big ideas like leadership and organizing, there were small moments of learning from their peers. Wayne teaching Comrade “how to rap” is one such moment. Comrade, who had been writing poetry in his notebook, did not know how to construct the rhymes so that they followed the beat properly. Wayne, a naturally gifted dancer and musician, taught Comrade how to match his rhymes to the beats. It was not an extensive lesson or difficult for Comrade, but it was a moment when Wayne taught Comrade something small that had an incredibly significant impact on Comrade’s life. In X’s ode to Zach he mentioned Zach’s teaching him things like how to get to places around the city, fitness tips, and how to get extra money in a pinch. Chris is quite explicit about some of the things he learned from his “core.” Chris thinks Chelsea is impulsive, so he learned to think things through in order to respond to her. He learned the importance of being articulate and persuasive from Chantel. Chris credits all the debate and consensus building in their meetings for his ability to be probing during discussions. When Chris was looking to add two minors to his African American Studies degree, he selected Leadership Studies and
Rhetoric, partly because he had already earned credits which applied to those credentials, but also because he thought they would be easy given his leadership and rhetoric experience.

This everyday learning is particularly important in the lives of people for whom schools have failed to provide a compelling, relevant education. The Project didn’t take the place of a school – with adults delivering predetermined information to young people. Instead, the BAP created the conditions under which the young people could nurture each other’s natural talents, could offer each other a relevant education, could use the collective struggle as their curriculum, and could drive their own teaching and learning – both literally, in their peer-to-peer model, and more generally in the leadership they had over every aspect of the work. While it may seem obvious that all people learn from peers and family, it is not the case that all people apply that learning to the process of personal, community and institutional transformation (Warren & Mapp, 2011). The BAP serves as a site of freedom and power – allowing these young men to be themselves and more. They became new selves and these new selves understood their identities as political actors. These young men were primed to make a demand on society when they came into the BAP, and the freedom and power they felt in the BAP allowed them to make a demand on society.

III. Actors on Society: Successes and Constraints in Making a Demand

In the first section of this chapter, I addressed the notion that the young people in this project were primed to make a demand on society through the lessons from their families and life experiences prior to coming to the BAP. In the second section, I examined the ways in which the Baltimore Algebra Project nurtured their talents and dispositions to make a demand on society. In this third section, I explore the question of whether the young men continue to be actors on society in their lives after the Baltimore Algebra Project.
I started this project with the knowledge that the four young men had made demands on society as teenagers. I witnessed it. I was curious about how and whether they saw themselves as actors on society now, in their adult lives. I wondered if, after being so active in political work in their high school years, they would feel as if they were “stepping into history,” as Bob Moses says, taking up their place in the arc of social change over time. In other words, would they still see themselves as people in a long line of freedom fighters who had some responsibility for acting on the world? I also looked for barriers and challenges they faced or created in acting on society. While it was easy to recognize the ways in which they were actors on society when they were part of the BAP, I examined the more subtle, everyday ways they were actors on society now that they had left.

Responsibility to Society

All four young men felt as though they had some responsibility to society. For Comrade and X this may have been a feeling that was initiated from their parents. Though Comrade’s mother says that they were not particularly politically active, they did make certain Comrade had a strong and positive racial identity. When Comrade talks about his responsibility to society, it is explicitly with respect to the Black community. After talking about his responsibility as a Black man, Comrade relates what he feels responsible to do to his role in the BAP:

The responsibility I think I have is to – I think my responsibility is to be someone who pushes. Someone who pushes things to the next level. I guess to be like, a fearless, a fearless soldier. I feel like that’s kind of my responsibility, in a sense. I mean, I think that’s what it feels like to me, because that was kind of like my role in the Algebra Project. So, I feel like I can do that in different ways, in different aspects.
Comrade clearly expresses his sense of responsibility to “push things to the next level” and be a “fearless soldier.” Ultimately, he would like to be doing this with his music, but for now he has a vague sense of the “different ways” and “aspects” in which he can fulfill that sense of responsibility.

Like Comrade, X learned from his family about responsibility to society. His grandmother and mother were community-oriented and took care of folks who needed it. X’s sense of responsibility to society echoes his family’s sentiments. He believes society should take care of people’s basic needs – safety, food, health and education. In return, X thinks he should contribute the same to society: “I owe society what society owes me.” He believes that society owes him recognition of his full humanness and of his status as a constitutional person. And he believes that, in return, he owes that same recognition to all others in the shared society.

Chris’s and Wayne’s families kept to themselves, and their sense of responsibility to society was developed more in the BAP. Chris, like Comrade, relates his responsibility to society to his time in the BAP, Youth Dreamers and Youth As Resources. Chris feels he gained his skills and disposition from these organizations committed to social change and, therefore, he has a responsibility to “make a difference.” Chris decided to major in African American Studies because he anticipated coming back to Baltimore to work in and with the African American community.

Finally, Wayne sees his responsibility to society as being a role model of sorts. Wayne wants to be seen as a person who paved his own road. He does not want people to follow his road, necessarily, but to know that a road can be paved with the right support in place:
I want to be known as someone going against the odds... My role is to show that you can be knowledgeable on both sides and choose to make a pavement of road that will benefit you in the outcome... My role is to show that you do not need to be completely political. You don’t need to be completely the gangsta. You don’t need to fall into a trap just to get what you want or to have your dream come true.

Repeating the refrain of “my role,” it’s clear that Wayne recognizes that he has a role to play, and a responsibility to society.

**Challenges and Barriers**

The narratives make clear that each of these young men feels a sense of responsibility, but the question of whether they are able to carry this out in action remains. As the narratives illustrate, certain challenges and barriers impeded their ability to be actors on society. The first challenge is that there aren’t many places to funnel these young men after they age out of a youth organization. There are very few places to put these talented and experienced leaders where they can continue this work. Second, there are life circumstances that act as barriers, making participation in explicit work more difficult.

The challenge of limited opportunities for continued organizing work is a serious one. These are stories of just four young men in the BAP. According to Jay Gillen, the BAP employed more than 100 tutors a year at its peak. Not all of these people took to the leadership and committed so strongly to the math and organizing work, but many more than these four did. The organization tried to accommodate this need the best it could by creating more senior positions that paid a little more. Unfortunately, there was only so much money to go around and only so many positions they could create. Additionally, the Handbook now states that people over 24 years of age cannot be employed by the BAP (Jay has been paid by the school district or by grants or not at all since this rule went into effect). This means that
even the creation of new positions has an end date. When this realization is applied to the hundreds of youth organizing groups across the country, it feels as though there is a massive waste of talent when there is no place for them coming out of the organizations.

Not only do all four participants feel a sense of responsibility, they feel they have the disposition and ability to act on society. Just as we saw in Chris’s narrative, there needs to be a place to put that “capacity and will to make a difference.” Wayne says he would love to be doing explicit political work, “if it gave me what I got now, which is the hours of paid leave, the sick hours, the health care, the dental care.” When Comrade took the school-sponsored Civil Rights tour, he learned that young people were largely responsible for the Civil Rights Movement. As long as youth organizing is thought of as afterschool programming and not movement-making work, like Comrade learned about, society will have people as analytically incisive as X stacking chairs at a hotel.

Having few places to send the young men after the BAP is only one of the challenges to acting on society. There are life circumstances that also affect the ways in which the young men could continue to be actors. These life circumstances seem to be even more significant when coupled with the impact of poverty. There are few personal safety nets, minimal support systems, and little margin for mistakes.

Wayne needs a steady, reliable income with benefits to support his three kids. He can’t afford the risky prospect of a grant-funded position or part-time work (like Jay has managed for many years). Wayne knows that he and his fellow housemen at the hotel are not treated as well as other hotel staff (except maybe housekeeping), but he has to mostly grin and bear it. Despite his critical analysis of the situation, including the fact that the majority of housemen are Black, his experience in advocacy and knowledge of protest tactics, he cannot afford to lose his income for his family. His financial burden becomes a strain on his
relationship even more than is typical because of his commitment to a broad definition of family.

These financial constraints are felt most acutely in Wayne’s case because of his children, but all of the young men felt economic uncertainty that adversely affected their activism. As a young adult, Comrade spent one winter shoveling snow and other times delivering newspapers. Though Chris found companionship and release at Grand Central bar, it turned into full-time work after he had completed his two-year AmeriCorps stint. His mother worries that he will not get back on track to do something related to his hard-earned college degree in African American Studies.

The fact that they came out of poverty meant they did not have a safety net for failed job experiments or volunteering until something materializes – a strategy used by people of privilege who have financial safety nets. These young men had to eat. Beyond the actual material need, lack of financial resources affect other areas, as well. As X struggled along with the rest of them to make ends meet, he was also dealing with severe trauma. The trauma was left unattended and still lives within him. He holds the effects of the trauma down, just under the surface, but admits he misses Zach every day. Wayne, too, acknowledges that he still has a “few screws loose” from the childhood trauma inflicted by a shotgun-wielding teenager who terrorized him and his brother. Without personal resources and no institutional support systems for mental health, the economic problems are compounded.

In fact, the BAP did find places for X and Wayne after they finished high school. Both were teaching math with Jay and two other BAP members. This was not full-time work, but it paid better than tutoring and was a significant increase from their previous pay. However, Wayne’s daughter took precedence and X could not cope with Baltimore
anymore. Even when the effort is made to find a place for them to be, life circumstances get in the way. X’s sudden departure from Baltimore as a consequence of the trauma of Zach’s death ended his time with the BAP. I believe firmly that X’s trauma has been a significant barrier to his ability to be an actor on society.

Another effect of poverty is that there is very little room for mistakes. Comrade made the mistake of counting on an organizing job that never came through, and the result was shoveling snow and delivering newspapers. Wayne got into a physical altercation with a fellow BAP member that led to his eventual departure. When Wayne’s street instincts got the better of him, he ended up leaving the Project and has not managed to find social justice-oriented work since. Young people make mistakes – that is how they learn – but for these young people, the mistakes have significant consequences, including negatively affecting their ability to act on society.

*Actors on Society*

Still, these narratives reveal that despite daunting challenges and barriers, these young men are able to be actors on society, even if it is through their everyday actions rather than civil disobedience or teaching mathematics.

For Comrade, his acting on society is quite clear. His music is the way he sees his ability to affect society. As he says, he’d like to be the “soundtrack to the revolution.” Yet there are also more everyday ways he acts on society. The way he treats and supports his partner is an example for men around him, especially his younger brother. His brother Asa admits that he is in the music industry strictly because of Comrade. How Comrade be in the world influences those around him.
Wayne is unapologetic about his distance from political work, though he desires to be engaged in it. He plans to climb the ladder at his hotel, trying to reach a higher status and more pay, in contrast to X who cannot fathom being there in a few years. Yet Wayne puts what he learned at the BAP to use in his parenting. He brags about his kids being leaders and feels they are ahead of his pace because they already know things that he didn’t discover until he was 16. He dreams of extending his parenting to other people’s children, wishing he could open a daycare committed to raising children as activist leaders ready to make a demand on society.

X has the same apolitical job that Wayne does. Unlike Wayne, who tries to make the best of the situation so he can move up into a different place, X speaks up when he sees something unfair. Whether something unfair is happening to him or to his fellow employees, he will say something. When X was being treated unfairly, he left his job at a car rental company in Arizona, rather than continuing to be mistreated. He stood by the side of a co-worker who was being sexually harassed, even serving as a witness in the HR inquiry. His understanding of the common kernel of human being gets acted on through his everyday actions.

Chris’s action is in his search for a job that will allow him to explicitly act on society. Chris is able to stay with his mother, as he does not have kids or a partner, while he finds the right opportunity to do justice work. Coming out of college he chose to apply to low-pay programs so that he could work at Youth Dreamers and the ACLU. He wants to go into policy positions in education or social work while carrying the value of youth-driven work with him: “I feel like any program that serves the youth should have a youth component in their decision-making process.” Chris is explicitly searching for a place to put to good use his skills, as well as his social and political commitments.
All of these young men face challenges and barriers, whether external or through their decisions, to being actors on society. These barriers are compounded by poverty. Despite these challenges, they carry a strong sense of responsibility to society, though the circumstances of life do not allow them to do the kind of explicit, active political work they did in their high school years. In their everyday actions and interactions – how they be in the world, even in their mundane workplaces, each does his best to express his commitment to uplifting the oppressed.

Still, one cannot help but feel troubled by the fact that, at the moment, Comrade scraps together enough cash from odd jobs to keep his musical dream afloat; X and Wayne stack chairs at a hotel; and Chris was last employed as a bartender – despite his college degree. Those committed to education for liberation believe that the purpose of education is to produce constitutional people who are both ready and able to make demands on society. By that definition, these young men are exceptionally educated. They have the requisite skills, knowledge, dispositions, and commitment to liberation. They are organizers, teachers, philosophers, poets, mathematicians, artists, problem-solvers, fathers, partners and leaders. But they do not possess the material privileges that allow them to experiment with employment, to make mistakes, or to choose an activist lifestyle without regard for economic realities. In the absence of certain privileges, each young man is trying to find a way to live as a constitutional person, a full human being committed to the full humanness of other beings. Each is working hard to find spaces and people with whom they can experience the freedom and power of their BAP days.
Afterword

In 1857, in a speech titled, *If There Is No Struggle, There Is No Progress*, Frederick Douglass said that “power concedes nothing without a demand.” We need demand in society. Our society moves toward justice when those most oppressed make a demand to be recognized as fully human. Douglass made well-documented demands on himself (to say nothing of those he made on his peers and greater society). Harriet Tubman made demands on her peers to enter troubled waters. The working poor made demands for better working conditions. The suffragettes demanded full participation in democracy. The introduction of this project documented some of the demands of those in the Black Freedom Movement in the 1960s. Soon after, the Chican@, Women’s, Native, and Gay Rights movements followed, demanding to be recognized.

Michelle Alexander makes a compelling argument in *The New Jim Crow* that every time the Black community demands and makes movement toward full human status, the forces of White supremacy lash back in new and more insidious ways. She argues that mass incarceration has rendered non-citizens of large swaths of the Black population – unable to vote and largely incapable of participating in the legitimate economy. A close family member of mine was convicted of a felony at age 17, and more than 20 years later still cannot get a full-time job or vote in her state of residence. In 1963, Bob Moses, in reference to literacy tests for voter registration, made the argument to a federal judge that the country could not on the one hand provide an inferior education to Black people and on the other hand use that inferior education as a basis for denying them the right to vote. Testifying before the Democratic National Convention Platform Committee in 2016, he made the same argument with regard to mass incarceration – that the country cannot institute policies that incarcerate mass numbers of people, and then use that incarceration as a basis to deny them the right to
vote. Yet, this is the latest incarnation of the original Jim Crow, and a modern site of a renewed voting rights struggle.

The need for the demand to recognize the full humanity of Black people is not going away any time soon. #BlackLivesMatter is based on this premise. If Moses is right, and I believe he is, what we need is for people to make a demand on themselves and a demand on their peers, so we can continue to make a demand on greater society.

In the portraits of these young men, we got to see Chris and Wayne make demands on themselves when Chris overcame family tragedy to push through to College Park and when Wayne got himself off the streets and into the B.A.P. We saw Comrade and X make demands on their peers when Comrade organized his peers to engage in civil disobedience and when X designed and presented his “pedacacy” workshops. We saw them make demands on Baltimore’s mayor, the state school board, and Maryland’s legislature and governor, to name just a few. Collectively, they were making the demand to be recognized as what X might call “constitutional people.” In their stories, witness the transformational power of wading into troubled waters.

It seems to me it was necessary for these young men to be extraordinary in order to be seen as ordinary – even if that recognition is only within.

As I have tried to emphasize, the civil rights movement of the 1960s was less about challenges and protests against white power than feeling our way toward our own power and possibilities – really a series of challenges by ourselves, and our communities, to ourselves. Moses and Cobb, 2001, p. 125

*Being Extraordinary*

Having spent two intense years with these four young men as an organizer, several more at a distance, and two more in the role of researcher, there is no doubt in my mind that
they are extraordinary. My hope is that I’ve brought enough of them to these pages for you to feel their extraordinariness. There’s just something about them.

To better pinpoint that something, I return to Bob Moses and the notion of “stepping into history.” The thing that makes them special, the thing that makes them extraordinary is their sense of themselves as people who matter. They came to understand their mattering in many ways – politically, relationally, intellectually, historically. One steps into history in the current moment, but with an eye on the past and with some vision for the future, knowing that they are an integral part of all three.

These young men were able to step into history because they made a demand on themselves, a demand on their peers and a demand society. If we are to value this, as I argue we must, then we need to create opportunities for young people to be extraordinary, to step into history. We need to learn more about (and make public) the ways in which the B.A.P. successfully fosters a space in which young Black people are free – free to be and free to work together to figure out how best to leverage their individual and collective power. Not to then apply these lessons to schools – which, as I have already argued, is futile – but instead to help educators, activists, funders and others to recognize, support, create and sustain critically powerful parallel institutions like the B.A.P.

However, while we certainly need to learn more from and about the B.A.P., we also need to learn more from and about the individual young people who are the B.A.P., in order to create opportunities for young people to experience the freedom and power required to make demands. I began this project with the wrong assumption that these young men were extraordinary in large part because of their exposure to and participation in the B.A.P. Instead, I learned that they arrived at the shared space of the Project with dispositions,
talents, skills, values and perspectives – learned in their homes and on the block – that mattered to how they shaped and were shaped by the work of the Project.

Further, considering the lives of these four individual participants post-B.A.P. created the opportunity to learn that one of the potential shortcomings of such organizations is that once young folks leave, there is no clear place to continue to channel their political participation. Once activated through organizations like the B.A.P., we need to be prepared to extend their opportunities to continue to be extraordinary.

Black liberation cannot be an after-school project.

*Being Ordinary*

I’ve just made an argument for creating opportunities for young people to be extraordinary. Wayne, however, would argue that the goal should be for young people to think of themselves as ordinary. That’s his goal:

I always feel like everyone’s extraordinary, and they don’t see how ordinary they are. They don’t see the everyday how compared, how they can compare themselves to everyone else on that everyday… Everyone has the talent to, everyone had the talent to learn, and to learn goes a long way. From birth, you can do whatever you want, you know? Everyone has that talent to learn, so I would never say someone’s not extraordinary. Everyone is extraordinary, great.

But what people don’t see sometimes is how ordinary they are to the next man, how typical they is to the next man... But what they forget is they come out of someone else, you know, they still a daughter or a son to a parent, they still can make kids, they still can teach, they still can learn, they still can progress, everyone can change, everyone can build. Everyone’s extraordinary, but they always forget that ordinary part. So, that’s how I see it.
Wayne uses “people talk” to describe what researcher and scholar Noah De Lissovoy (2010) calls the “common kernel of human being.” That’s really what it means to be ordinary to the next man. Ultimately that is the goal of any freedom project – to be ordinary to the next person.

Recently I was listening to a TrueHoop podcast and the Black participants were lamenting President Obama’s last week in office. They said President Obama had to be a truly extraordinary person to be the first elected Black president. To which @BigWos responded, we will truly have made it when a Black George Bush is president, or when we can just have a mediocre Black man as president. Then we’ll have made it. As ridiculous as it might be to consider a Black George Bush, @BigWos’s point is salient here. As Yasiin Bey said, “it’s distressin’ there’s never no in-between/we either niggas or kings, we either bitches or Queens.”

The lesson that Comrade tried to teach me back when he was 16 is that if I consider these young men extraordinary, I also need to recognize that the “next person” is also extraordinary. These young people realize that among their young Black peers, it’s ordinary to be extraordinary.

Yes, there is clearly something special about these four young men. Though, to be real, I felt the same way about Brandon and Charnel and Michele and Maryland and Greg and Twan… and … and... and...I could go on and on, but let me not forget who I started with…and Zach.

Ordinarily extraordinary Zach.
Appendix

Interview 1: Life history

Opening Script:
Thank you very much for taking the time to talk to me. It is a real privilege for me to be able to do this. I just want to be on record that you are giving your full consent for this and so I’m going to ask you to sign this consent form? [Present form for signing]
Is it okay if I audio record our conversation? It will help me get your words just right. Even though the digital recorder is on, I just want this to feel like a conversation. A conversation where you will do most of the talking, but still a conversation. If there is anything you don’t want to answer or talk about, just tell me. And if you ever feel like stopping, that’s fine too.

1. I want to start by asking where do you come from?
   a. What’s your story?
   b. Who are your people?
   c. What was it like coming up?
2. Do you have siblings?
   a. What was it like for you guys?
3. Is there a story that would help me understand your mom?
   a. Dad?
   b. Your relationship between you and your mom?
   c. Between your mom and your siblings?
   d. Between your mom and dad?
4. Describe a typical day in your household coming up.
5. What was school like for you?
   a. Elementary?
   b. Middle?
   c. High?
6. What did you do after you graduated high school?
7. Where does Dr. Jay fit your story?
8. What role did music play in how you came up?
9. Can you remember a time when you felt extraordinary?
10. Can you remember a time when you felt ordinary
11. Can you remember the best day of your life?
12. What about the worst day?
13. Can you remember a time when you felt powerful?
14. Can you remember a time when you felt powerless?
Appendix

Interview 2: Baltimore Algebra Project and high school years

Opening script:
Thanks for talking with me again. Last time we spent a couple of hours talking through your whole life story. This time I want to focus on that middle part with the Algebra Project. Again, if there are any questions you would rather not answer just let me know. And if you want to stop at any time, we can do that, too. I’m going to record again, if that’s okay?

1. I want to start by asking how you first heard of and got into the Algebra Project?
   a. Were there any adults influential in your first getting involved?
   b. Were there young people influential in your first getting involved?
2. What did your family think about it when you first got started being tutored?
   a. How about when you first started tutoring?
3. What did your friends outside of BAP think about your involvement?
4. Did you consider yourself a good math student before you joined?
   a. How did BAP change your view of yourself as a math student or didn’t it?
5. Can you talk about the difference between the tutoring and the advocacy work?
   a. How would you say they are the same or similar?
   b. How are they different?
   c. Why is math important?
6. I would like to know your evolution through the BAP. Did you have different phases?
7. Dr. Jay used to talk about sort of providing a ladder through the BAP. Do you know what I’m talking about?
   a. Did this model what you’ve done in BAP?
8. Can you explain the Bob Moses 3-tier demand?
   a. What are ways that you think you made a demand on your peers?
9. What was a typical day like when you were in high school with the BAP?
10. What would you say are the most important things that you gained from BAP (if any)?
11. What are some of the most important things you learned as part of your BAP experience?
12. What are some of the most important things that you have gained or learned that have nothing to do with the BAP?
13. In what ways did BAP make your life difficult or a pain?
14. What are your worst memories of the BAP?
15. What are other organizations or activities were you involved with at this time?
16. How would your life be different without the BAP?
17. People in the BAP talk about the BAP family a lot – how do you see that aspect?
Appendix

Interview 3: Current life and work and reflections on past interviews

Opening script:
The past two times that we sat down to talk we focused on your overall life story and then more specifically on the role of BAP in that story. This time I want to learn more about your current life and how you think that your life story and the BAP have influenced the life you live now and the life you see you making for yourself. Again, I’m going to audio record if that’s okay?

1. I want to start by asking you to walk me through a typical day for you right now.
2. What do you think is the most important part of what you do on a daily basis?
3. Are you still active in organizing work?
   a. Would you like to be? OR
   b. What has sustained you?
4. Where do you see yourself in 5 years?
   a. In 10 years?
5. In your first interview you mentioned ______________, can you explain how that is still true or how that has changed for you today?
6. How do you think your family has influenced the work you do today?
7. In our second interview you said you learned ______________ from your experience in the BAP – does that lesson still apply to your life today?
8. How do you think the BAP has influenced the work you do today?
9. Are there people that you knew in the BAP that you still keep up with?
10. Bob Moses talks about making a demand on society – do you think that most people do this?
    a. Do you?
    b. Did you before?
    c. Rallies and civil disobedience are obvious ways to make a demand on society, are there different ways?
Appendix

Stakeholder Interview Protocol

Opening Script:
I really appreciate you taking the time to talk to me about participant. As you know, I have been meeting with participant to try to get to understand how he got to be who he is in the world today. Part of figuring that out is talking to the people most important in his life. He has identified you as one of those people. So my goal in talking with you is to get to know participant from a little different perspective.

I just want make sure I have your full consent for this and so I’m going to ask you to sign this consent form? [Present form for signing]

Is it okay if I audio record our conversation? It will help me get your words just right. Even though the digital recorder is on, I just want this to feel like a conversation. A conversation where you will do most of the talking, but still a conversation. If there is anything you don’t want to answer or talk about, just tell me. And if you ever feel like stopping, that’s fine too.

1. How long have you known participant?

2. If you had to pick some words that best describe participant what would they be?
   a. Why?

3. Is there something that you are most proud about participant?
   a. Can you give me a specific example of when he did that?

4. What irks you most about participant?
   a. Can you give me a specific example of when he did that?

5. What are some things that you think he needs work on or that are challenges for him?
   a. Is there a specific example or story that would help me see that?

6. Can you think of a quintessential story, a story that would sum him up perfectly, that you can share?

7. How do you view his involvement in the BAP?

8. In what way was BAP bad for him or had a negative consequence for him?

9. What do you think is participant’s most important contribution to your life?

10. What do you think is your most important contribution to his life?
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