

# The Threat of Visibility and State-Sanctioned Violence for Rural Black Lives Matter Youth Activists

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*Less than 24 hours after police murdered George Floyd, Black Lives Matter protesters organized in several cities to demand that their elected officials defund their police and redirect this funding to better healthcare, schools, public transportation, affordable housing, and food security. Eventually, these protesters came together in rural communities and towns to push for similar demands. Journalists documented these protests, highlighting both the similarities and differences in these places and protests. This article directly addresses the oversights and stereotypes that many of these articles promoted through a careful analysis of the experiences of two rural youth—a Black, Puerto Rican young woman and a Black, Dominican young man—as the Black Lives Matter protests unfolded in their predominantly white small town. In doing so, this study illustrates the threat of visibility that rural youth experience and how this threat shaped their decision to participate or not participate in the protests.*

The police executions of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor sparked national outcry and protests under the auspices of the Black Lives Matter movement. The movement represents an ideological and political intervention in a society where Black lives are under constant threat at the hands of state-sanctioned violence. The movement is also an affirmation of the humanity, contributions, and resiliency of Black people in the face of deadly injustice and oppression. Founded in 2013 by Patisse Cullors, Alicia Garza, and Opal Tometi in response to the acquittal of Trayvon Martin’s murderer, George Zimmerman, the Black Lives Matter movement built upon centuries of Black activism. The Black Lives Matter movement, like other movements before it, recognizes the central role that disabled, women, formerly incarcerated, queer, transgender, and undocumented individuals play in movements to create a more equitable, just, and safe world (Garza, 2017; Hillstrom, 2018; Jones, 2020; Ransby, 2018).

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Less than 24 hours after Floyd’s death, protesters organized in a half-dozen cities, demanding that their communities defund their police and redirect this funding to better healthcare, more teachers, public transportation, affordable housing, and food security. Within a few weeks, the protests spread across the United States to more than 2,000 communities that included large cities, such as New York, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia, and small towns, such as Bryan, Texas; Great Falls, Montana; and Montrose, Georgia. These individuals, who included people from every age, ethnicity, gender, and race, refused to be silent despite the threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, a reckless president, armed police, and white supremacist opposition (Burch et al., 2020).<sup>1</sup>

Journalists documented these events as they unfolded, first focusing on the protests in major metropolitan cities and eventually in small towns in the United States and cities around the globe. While rural communities might have welcomed this attention in the mainstream press, many of the articles about rural Black Lives Matter protests often promoted deficit narratives about rural America as well as long-standing and widely held stereotypes about race and racism in rural spaces. Several articles juxtaposed the Black

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<sup>1</sup> We have chosen to capitalize “Black” to highlight the shared experiences that most Black residents have had and continue to have with structural racism and white supremacy. We have chosen not to capitalize “white” because white individuals do not have this shared experience.

Lives Matter movement against the backdrop of a long history of white supremacy in rural towns (Carlton, 2020). Other articles about rural Black Lives Matter protests centered white rural activism and downplayed or completely ignored the role that Black activists played in organizing and sustaining this moment (Mohdin & Campbell, 2020).

White supremacy clearly exists in rural communities, but the fact that journalists often highlighted the history of rural white supremacy while downplaying its effects in urban spaces advanced the idea that white supremacy is a rural construct that does not exist in urban communities. Moreover, many journalists decided to center white activism in these predominantly white rural communities, which effectively erased Black rural activism and resistance, suggesting that people of color do not live in rural communities. Currently, about one in five rural residents across the United States is nonwhite (Parker et al., 2018). In some rural counties, particularly in the South, people of color have been and continue to be the majority of residents and activists (Ajilore & Willingham, 2019; Hale, 2016; Kelly, 2015).

Youth activists have played and continue to play a critical role in leading and sustaining global protests, including the Black Lives Matter movement that occurred this past spring and summer (Hale, 2016; Payne, 2007; Ransby, 2005). However, the accounts of rural Black Lives Matter protests often downplayed, ignored, and misrepresented youth leadership and participation. While some articles about urban protests centered youth activism as one of the main drivers of this moment, this oversight was particularly salient in the coverage about rural protests (Kamenetz et al., 2020). In the rare cases in which communities acknowledged the roles that rural youth played, the coverage, once again, misrepresented the activists' work. Much of the media coverage about rural protests focused on white allies and downplayed the role that rural BIPOC youth played (Carlton, 2020; Mohdin & Campbell, 2020; Putnam et al., 2020; Robertson, 2020; Simpson, 2020). This article directly addresses the oversights and stereotypes that many of these news reports promoted through a careful analysis of the experiences of two rural youth—a Black, Puerto Rican young woman and a Black, Dominican young man—as the Black Lives Matter protests unfolded in their predominantly white small town.

### **Black Lives Matter in Heaton, PA**

This study is part of a larger study that seeks to understand the perspectives that youth have about poverty, inequality, and opportunity in three Pennsylvania counties. While the Black Lives Matter movement was not a central focus of the initial study, the fact that these protests occurred in the three counties under examination pushed us

to consider the role that youth played and continue to play in public protest and dissent about police brutality, mass incarceration, and racial inequity.

The research presented in this article took place in Heaton, Pennsylvania, a small town of about 20,000 people, known throughout the region for its small family-owned farms, its location at the crossroads of major interstates, and its low real estate and business tax rates.<sup>2</sup> Heaton is located in the state's predominately white, strongly Christian, and solidly Republican center. The town consists of two ZIP codes, one that includes the town's borough and another that includes Heaton's many townships. The ZIP codes exemplify the town's distinct racial and class demographics (see Figure 1). In the town center, about 23% of children under the age of 18 live below the federal poverty line compared to about 16% in the town's outlying communities (Saha, 2019).

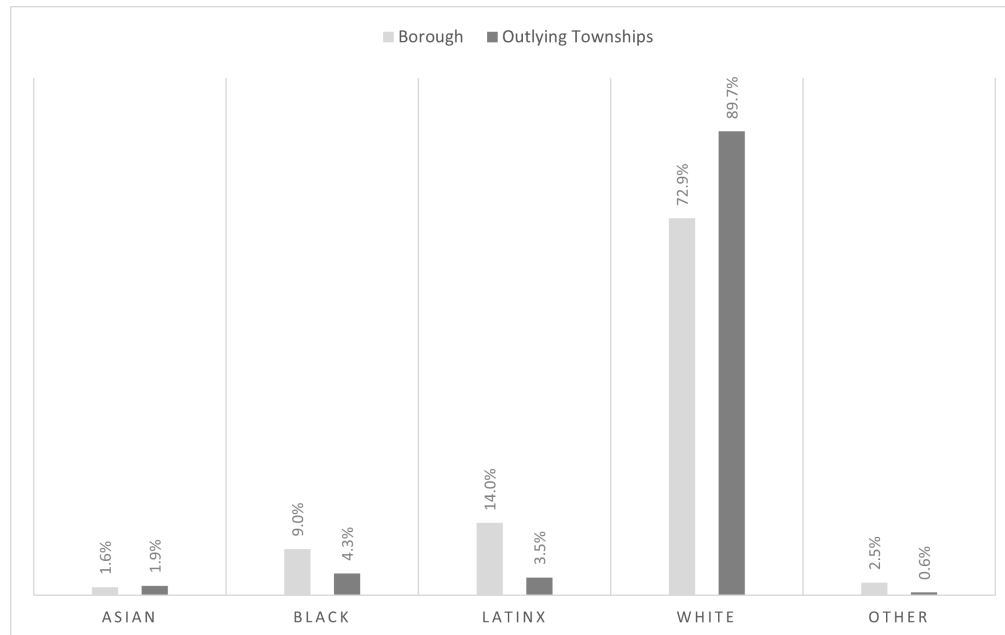
Like many of the Black Lives Matter protests that took place in the spring and summer of 2020, the protests in Heaton started when one individual and her mother stood on the town square to show their support for the Black Lives Matter protests. Within a week, the protests included more than a dozen individuals from a variety of backgrounds who shared a commitment to racial equity and justice and demanded an end to police brutality and state-sanctioned violence. Over time, the protests expanded to include hundreds of individuals, families, youth, and residents, who came together to show their support for the movement. Many of these individuals had never participated in a protest before, but for weeks they stood on the town square holding signs condemning police brutality, mass incarceration, and racial injustice. While the protests remained peaceful, local residents who opposed these measures organized corollary All Lives Matter protests. The All Lives Matter protesters stood on the same square and same street brandishing automatic weapons and taunting their neighbors who were waving their Black Lives Matter signs.

### **Methodology and Researcher Positionality**

From the spring of 2017 to the spring of 2020, I (Erika) visited the public high school regularly, spending about one day a month inside the school building to conduct classroom observations and interview high school youth. In addition, I worked closely with several community organizations and local residents to learn more about the ways in which poverty and inequality shape opportunities for Heaton youth and their families. I obtained permission to conduct this research from Heaton's superintendent of schools, with whom I met regularly as the research unfolded. I worked closely with the high school principal, who helped me recruit

<sup>2</sup> The name of the town and the names of individuals in this article are pseudonyms.

**Figure 1**  
*Racial Demographics, Heaton*



*Note.* Demographic data for Heaton were drawn from [Statistical Atlas](#) and [American Community Survey](#).

participants and on a regular basis shared his perspectives about the nature of poverty and inequality. I have spent about 150 hours inside the school and have conducted about 50 interviews with high school youth, high school teachers, and local residents. I recorded the interviews and transcribed them verbatim. The research team double blind coded the interviews shared in this article to identify themes that emerged from the data (Emerson et al., 1995; Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995). This article examines the divergent roles that Black youth played in Heaton’s Black Lives Matter movement and what their participation might help us learn about the factors that influenced the decisions that Heaton youth made about their engagement with these protests and the Black Lives Matter movement.

I (Erika) am a first-generation college student and white researcher whose immigrant mother and white father moved to a town outside Heaton when I was four years old. Even though I spent most of my childhood there I have always felt like an outsider because I was not born there. I attended Catholic and then public schools and, like many rural youth, contributed to the rural “brain drain” when I left to attend college outside Boston (Carr & Kefalas, 2010). For the past two decades, I have lived in urban communities—Boston, New York, and Philadelphia. Since my departure from the area, Heaton has changed significantly. Heaton is a larger, poorer, and more racially diverse community than when I lived there. Large franchises, such as Target, Starbucks, and

Chick-Fil-A, and sprawling warehouses, such as Amazon, Target, and Ulta, have replaced Heaton’s open farmlands and locally owned businesses. And yet, the fact that I grew up and maintained close connections in the area gave me unique access to conduct this work.

In the spring of 2020, I hired a team of seven undergraduate research assistants from Barnard College, Columbia University, and Princeton University. These students assisted me with the research design, data collection, and data analysis. The interviews in this article were blind coded by two of these research assistants and me, based on emergent themes from the data. Elizabeth Burton, who has served as a research assistant on this project since May 2020, came to the project with deep knowledge of and interests in the relationship that education inequality has to issues of race, region, and class. These interests are informed by her own upbringing and educational experiences as a Black student and child of educators in Augusta, Georgia. In this project, she has collaborated with me on a variety of tasks: secondary research, interview protocols, data collection, data analysis, and now this publication. The authors shared responsibilities for writing and editing the introduction, researcher positions, and conclusion; I wrote the description of Black Lives Matter in Heaton, the methodology section, and the analysis of Kia; Elizabeth wrote the analysis of Kyle. I revised the article based on the reviewers’ comments and feedback. In the sections that follow, the personal pronoun

*I* refers to Erika, who conducted Kia's interview, while the pronoun *we* refers to Erika and Elizabeth, who conducted Kyle's interview.

### **Different Trajectories and Experiences of Heaton's BIPOC Youth: Kia and Kyle**

At the time of her interview, Kia Houston was a 16-year-old young woman who identified as "racially mixed: I'm white, Black, and Puerto Rican." Kia said that her mixed-race identity is difficult to navigate in her community and school. In her interview, she shared that "people don't believe that I am Black, they don't see me as Black ... I get hated on because I'm a mixed kid, 'cause I'm not fully white, and I'm not fully Black. It's just hard." In school, she often hears student react to "how I talk, people are like, 'Oh, she's acting Black.' And sometimes when I'm around my friend, I hold myself as if I'm white or like I am all that and people get really upset about it."

When he was interviewed, Kyle was an 18-year-old Black, Dominican young man who struggled academically in his junior and senior year due to housing insecurity and state-sanctioned violence, which we describe in detail later in the article. In his interview, Kyle referred to "We Dominicans out here," and while he explicitly distinguished his experience from African Americans, he identified as Black. He also described how his racial identity as a Black teenager shaped his teachers' perception that he was a "failing student." Kyle said that being a "failing student" was difficult, but being "being Black" made "it worse, because ... I'm a kid who wears a hoodie with headphones all day." Kyle felt that his teachers did not support him in the same way that they would have if he were white. To graduate, he said, "I've had to give of myself. I've had to emotionally drain myself, and give in to myself, just to be able to make sure I have a good relationship with my teachers." The racism in the public schools made it difficult, if not impossible, for Kia and Kyle to thrive (Love, 2019; Nieto, 2010).

Kia and Kyle grew up in Heaton's town center, "the borough" as locals call it, which is home to most of the community's Black and Latinx residents. As a child, Kia recalled that her Puerto Rican mother, who was on her own raising her two young children, struggled financially. Even from a young age, Kia said, her mother has always been open with her two daughters about her financial challenges. Kia remembered asking her mother for new toys or clothes as a child. Her mother would often tell her that they did not "have enough money for that right now." Even though her mother was working multiple jobs, her family still had to rely on food stamps and other welfare programs to provide essential supports to her family. She understood that her mother was trying as best as she could, and she understood

that the "system wasn't built for me." Kia learned at home, not at school, about the ways that the U.S. economy often left women of color like her mother behind in low-wage jobs with little promise of advancement (Branch & Hanley, 2014; Crocker, 2019; McLafferty & Preston, 2019).

When Kia's mother married her Black stepfather, her family purchased a single-family home in one of Heaton's predominately white communities in one of the surrounding townships. Kia recognized that this move meant that her family had achieved a level of financial security that they did not have in the past. When I asked her how she felt about the move, she said, "I think we're doing pretty good. We used to live in a townhouse, but now we live in a single-family home." When I asked about the differences between her childhood home in Heaton's borough and her new home in a predominately white community, she said that her childhood home was in a community with homes that felt like they "were smooshed together." There was not much space between the houses, "so it was kind of hard to not hear noises from the other houses. Sometimes the neighbors would be very loud, and sometimes the people in the neighborhood were very rude and stuff." Her new neighborhood is quiet, and "most of my neighbors are old." When I pushed her to say more about the similarities and differences between these two communities, she said that the community in the center of town where she spent most of her early childhood is much more diverse, racially and ethnically, than the community outside of town where she currently lives. She described her new community as a "more Republican place" with sprawling yards, picket fences, and mostly white residents.

Even though they both consider themselves lower-middle-class youth, Kyle's family never achieved the level of financial security that Kia's family enjoyed. Kyle's mother has a chronic, life-threatening illness, which according to Kyle, means that she is not "physically capable of manual labor" in Heaton's warehouses and other industries where she would most likely find employment. As a result, she relies on disability benefits to support her family. His father had difficulty finding secure and steady employment because, as Kyle said in his interview, "he doesn't really speak English, and he's Black, I guess." The intersection of xenophobia and racism in the local labor market barred his father from most jobs (Golash-Boza, 2018). However, for a brief time, Kyle's father had a job in a local warehouse as a forklift driver during which Kyle recalled, "we were getting some big bucks." That ended, and eventually, his father was incarcerated for three years. According to Kyle, "he got caught, and a lot of these different things were pinned on him that weren't necessarily true, but he got it anyways. So, he's going to be in there for maybe a year or more? Something like that. He just got his sentence, he was waiting in there three years without a sentence,

which is kind of crazy.” Kyle’s life intersected with twin pillars of American society: inadequate welfare and mass incarceration (Goffman, 2014; Golash-Boza, 2018; Hinton, 2015; Shedd, 2015).

When we asked Kyle to describe Heaton, he said,

It’s one of them pit stop cities I would say. It’s a little bit bigger than a pit stop city. We’re right on [a major interstate], so if you come here, and you kind of like what you see, I guess. It’s a place where you can settle down in, and feel safe and feel all right, generally. We do have spurts of violence and this and that, but nothing to major that’s crazy.

He continued saying that Heaton is “real chill, real laid back.... So, it’s not a hustle and bustle area. It’s a small area where I have walked from one end of it to the other in two hours.” The description that Kyle offered does not seem to reflect the experiences he has had with police brutality and state-sanctioned violence, but rather seems to reflect the ideas of what Heaton can be and often is for white residents who have chosen to live and stay in the area.

Moments later in the interview, Kyle hinted at the anonymity and segregation that exist in this “small, small town.” Kyle asserted that the town promotes the idea that everyone knows everyone, but that in his experience, Heaton is a place where “not everybody knows everybody.” Kyle said that Heaton is an increasingly diverse community, but it remains a deeply segregated place where white residents hold political and social power. In his interview, he said, “we do have a lot of Hispanics and ethnics, too, but primarily I would see power in positions of, either in the bank or in town ... the local law places in here. A lot of those people are Caucasian. So, I’m not sure what that’s about.” Kyle works and lives in the area near these white-owned law firms. When he walks in the area, he “sees a lot of business people ... primarily Caucasian, which is fine,” but he often finds himself asking, “where do they [these white lawyers] live?” Kyle explained that he never sees white residents in the area where he lives in Heaton, and due to unwritten but clearly enforced racial codes and inadequate public transportation in the area, he has never been to one of the many predominately white communities in Heaton where Kia now lives. Like many rural communities and schools, Heaton is and always has been a deeply segregated community with regard to race (Lichter et al., 2018a, 2018b).

Throughout his childhood and young adulthood, Kyle lived in public housing and homeless shelters with his family—his mother, his father or stepfather, and siblings. In the rare moment when his family found housing on the private market, Kyle recalled that his landlord called

the police because his family had “too much trash on the sidewalks.” When the police showed up, they “busted in [to the apartment]. And that was a whole scene, so they busted in, they broke in. They took my dad, left the house a mess. And then we were cleaning it up for a couple of days. And then I think word got around to the landlord and the people around us.” Eventually the landlord evicted Kyle’s family and used “the excuse of trash being misplaced to evict us when obviously it was, I don’t want these like, you know, cop-attracting people around.”

While the exact details of Kyle’s father’s situation are not entirely clear, Kyle told us that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement officials deported Kyle’s father to the Dominican Republic, leaving his mother to fend on her own in a town with limited economic opportunities for women of color with children (Golash-Boza, 2018; Schueths, 2019). The effects of his father’s deportation affected Kyle at home and in school (Dreby, 2012). Kyle missed several weeks of school as he tried to support his family following his father’s incarceration. By the time his home situation and mental health improved toward the end of high school, Kyle struggled to reintegrate into the social and academic life at his school and often relied on white adults whom he met through Focus, a local Christian organization that runs afterschool programs from Black and Latinx in the borough.

Kyle participated in Focus programs in high school and now has a full-time position working there as a youth leader with middle school youth who attend Focus’s afterschool programs. Kyle described his position as “more than a job. It’s more of an opportunity.” He explained that Focus seemed like a refuge for him as a young kid, and now he feels fortunate to have a position working with “awesome people” providing other BIPOC youth with afterschool activities that he received from this organization when he was younger. He works three afternoons a week but said that he “usually goes [to Focus] like every day, just to chill out. Because it’s more than a job.” Kyle noted that the staff at Focus, most of whom are white, have been a constant source of support when he needed it. He said, “Focus is a really good outlet for the people, the staff there, they’re the people, yo, they have helped me.” The staff at Focus gave Kyle a job when he needed one to help his family, and after high school, he moved in with one of the staff members and works part-time for him. At the time of the interview, Kyle was completely dependent on the all-white staff at Focus for his housing and employment.

### **Kia and Kyle’s Response to Heaton’s Black Lives Matter Protests**

When I asked Kia if racism existed in her school and community, she immediately responded with a brief, sharp, “Yes.” I then asked her to describe what racism looked or

felt like in her community. She paused for a moment, as if to reflect about what she wanted to say, and then took a breath and said, “people crossing the street, people not wanting to go in somewhere [like a restaurant or store] because there is a Black person in there.” She paused again, looked at me, and said, “These things sound like they are from the ‘60s, but it still happens, and it’s awful.” She continued, explaining that the racism in the community feels more overt than the racism that occurs in school, at least in her classrooms. In school, she said, racism happens in a “more low-key way, like everyone won’t talk to everyone.” Black youth talk to Black youth; white youth talk to white youth. Students self-segregate in the school classrooms, corridors, and cafeterias according to their racial identity (Tatum, 2003). Kia, as a mixed-race student, often feels isolated and alone as she tries to navigate the multiple spaces where she could belong but does not always feel welcomed.

Kia said that the racism in the community and school collided when she joined the high school cheerleading team. She is the only non-white student on the team. She said that when the team poses for their team photograph, she knows that she stands out as someone who looks different, someone whom her peers do not always embrace as a full-fledged member of the team. During Friday night football games, she notices that families in the stands are eager to cheer for the team when they come out on the field but then look away when they see her, a mixed-race young woman on the team. When she looks out to the spectators sitting on the football stand bleachers, she “sees a lot [of] people focusing on the other girls” rather than her. They often look away when they see Kia’s caramel skin.

Outside of school, Kia works two jobs in the community—one job as a waitress at a locally owned Italian restaurant and another job at a locally owned hoagie (sub) shop. At work, she often hears local residents express homophobic and racist views as well as their unwavering support of Donald Trump. In her community, she often sees Confederate flags waving in her neighbors’ yards. In her school, she routinely sees them on her classmates’ trucks, t-shirts, and belt buckles (Rogers, 2017; Rogers et al., 2019; Southern Poverty Law Center, 2016). Kia shared that this constant exposure to white supremacy in its myriad forms makes it hard for her to go to school and work. She feels that her peers often refuse to acknowledge racial inequities, particularly in Heaton, which, according to her, many of her white peers and co-workers regard as a small, perfect place. Kia told me, “I’ve talked to my friends about it, they understand. I’ve had to get rid of some friends though because they don’t understand the problems in America.”

Even though she acknowledges the challenges that she has faced as a mixed-race young woman in her majority-white, rural community, Kia also believes that her mixed-race identity, and perhaps her gender, makes it easier for her

to survive in white spaces throughout the community. She has come to this belief because she has witnessed the virulent racism that Black men, specifically her Black stepfather, have endured in Heaton. In her interview, she recalled a time when her stepfather took her to get ice cream at a local farm stand near their home. The cashier told her stepfather how much he owed and asked him to put the money for the two ice creams that he had just purchased on the counter. Her stepfather realized that the women did not want to touch his Black hand. When I asked Kia if she had ever experienced something like this, she said she has experienced racism in Heaton, “but it wouldn’t be that bad.” At the very end of her interview, I asked her if there was anything that she wanted to share that I had not asked her, and she paused and quietly said, “The cops are scary.” When I asked her to explain her statement further, Kia recalled a time when the police pulled her stepfather over for speeding near their home. As the police approached the car, Kia recalled that her stepfather told her, “He told me to put my hands on the dash, and not make eye contact. It was terrifying.” Kia thought that the police pulled her father over because he was a Black man driving in the almost exclusively white outlying areas of Heaton. When police brutally murdered George Floyd, she thought, “that could have been my [step]dad.”

A few days after George Floyd’s murder, Kia and her peers brainstormed what they might do to show their support for the Black Lives Matter movement. After about a week of discussions, they decided to make flyers about the Black Lives Matter protests that residents had organized in Heaton’s town square. Kia and her peers distributed the flyers on Snapchat, Instagram, and Facebook to encourage others to participate in the protests. They also solicited local businesses to post these flyers in their windows. Many of the businesses they visited agreed. Kia and her mother discussed the events over dinner and decided to make t-shirts to show their support. The t-shirts had raised fists with the words Black Lives Matter on them. Kia donated the proceeds from sales of these shirts to the Black Lives Matter organization. When we asked Kia what motivated her to engage, she said, without hesitation, “I’ve been treated differently because of the color of my skin a lot, and I don’t want to be treated like that anymore.” Moreover, she remembered when the police pulled her stepfather over, how terrified they both were, how her stepdad could have been George Floyd. She understood the risks she was taking by marching and standing on the square, but she refused to be silent. It was her time to act, with her mother and friends by her side.

In his interview, Kyle shared his own experiences with racism and classism. Kyle spoke at length about his experience being racially profiled while walking down Heaton’s Main Street near its square. Like any teenaged boy, Kyle often wears sweatpants, hoodies, and headphones. These clothes might not elicit any response if Kyle were

white, but he knows that his Blackness, in sweatpants, hoodies, and headphones, created fear and anxiety among Heaton's white residents who work in the law firms and local banks in the borough and then retreat to their majority-white communities in Heaton's outlying districts after work. In his interview, he explained that he notices that white residents often look scared or fearful when he approaches them on the street. He said this experience happens frequently on Main Street; Heaton's main commercial corridors are one of the rare places where interracial mixing and mingling happens in the community. Moreover, he can recognize the strategies that he has implemented to react to their fear. Kyle "activates acting mode," which was his articulation of code switching and adhering to respectability politics (Higginbotham, 1993).

For Kyle, code switching is a means of survival (Harris, 2019). He made conscious efforts to appear friendly by smiling, waving, and behaving in ways that he knows actively contradict racist perceptions about Black men's aggression and violence (Hackman, 2016). When we directly asked him if he thought white residents who feared him were racist, he dismissed us, arguing that he does not believe that they are "racist," but rather that these individuals possess an "unfair stigma" against BIPOC youth like him. These experiences not only influenced his physical behavior and mannerisms, but they have forced him to confront his own internalization of racism, specifically toward other Black men. He found himself crossing the street to avoid other Black men, which he said seemed "ironic" since he was acting in the exact same way as the white people with whom he was frustrated. Kyle said, "somehow, some way, that [unfair stigma] had been programmed into [him]," citing white friends or the media as possible causes for his own internalized fear and anti-Blackness (Donnella, 2018).

This internalized fear and anti-Blackness spilled over into other aspects of Kyle's life. In his interview he explained that his mother often relied on him to translate for her because she did not feel confident speaking English, particularly with authority figures such as the police, lawyers, and judges. After she was evicted, she had to testify against her landlord in court. In his interview, Kyle remembered his mother pleaded with him to translate her words from Spanish to English verbatim. She felt that Kyle often downplayed racism in his own community, and she wanted him to "make sure you tell them they are being racist right now because that's discrimination that's what they are doing." Kyle said that he often told his mom, "I don't think that's what it is, like, whatever." And then, she would urge him, perhaps stronger than the first time, "you tell them exactly what I tell you." She wanted her son to translate her words verbatim, but he refused, often telling her, "chill, chill, chill." Ultimately, Kyle refused to translate his mother's words verbatim in court. Later in the interview,

Kyle said that he refuses to label "prejudice and bias" that his mother described as racism because he feels "like it's not always a race thing ... you can't jump on that right away until you know for sure." Unlike Kia, he is much less willing to label these moments or behaviors as racist even though his mother pleaded with him to represent her words accurately in court and name what she experienced as racism.

Kyle lives a few blocks away from the square and learned about the protests from peers from high school and work. A few days after the Black Lives Matter protests started, Kyle walked to the square to observe the Black Lives Matter protests in his hometown. When we showed him an image of Heaton's Black Lives Matter protests and asked for his reaction to the image, Kyle expressed his support for the movement saying,

I see that frustration coming to life, or at least becoming real to me that people are becoming increasingly frustrated because people aren't opening the door and letting us in and letting us have some of that food and some of that equality people talk about, and some of that love for all type situations.

He continued, looking at the image, and said,

when I look at this picture, and what I see here ... are initial reactions to injustice. Right? People cope and deal with pain in a lot of different ways, but, you know, what I see here are people dealing with that, and searching for that, are dealing with that anger and dealing with that pain and that hurt, by standing out, being outright, going outside and being direct, getting other people to go outside too. And holding up signs and speaking to sacrifice their health, their safety, their life, their time, their money. To say, "Yo, this is not right. This is still not right. Why is this still not right? Fix this. We need to fix this."

In this moment, Kyle recognized why individuals might have chosen to stand on the square in Heaton to protest police brutality and racial injustice.

But after he made this remark, he turned and said, "And some people, you know, don't go out in the streets, some people make music, some people donate, some people pray, some people silently have conversations with other people ... some people ask questions." Kyle is one of the people who did not "go out in the streets." When the Black Lives Matter protests took place on the square, unlike Kia, he stood on the sidelines and observed the activity from a distance. He could have walked over and joined the white

Christians who stood on the town square in solidarity with Black residents, but he did not. He could have joined his Black friends from high school whom he saw standing on the square, but he did not. He saw them from a distance. In his interview, Kyle acknowledged that it was “eye opening” to witness this moment in his hometown, but he said, “it was a situation where I didn’t feel like I was taking part of it. But more observing this part of history, this part of the world that was going on right in front of me.”

### **The Threat of Visibility and State-Sanctioned Violence**

The experiences that these youth shared with us reveal the possibilities and limitations of protest and the Black Lives Matter movement in rural America. The experiences that Kia and her peers had reveal the critical, and often overlooked, role that Black youth played in creating, mobilizing, and sustaining the Black Lives Matter protests in their rural communities. Kia participated because she recognizes the myriad ways that racism manifests itself in Heaton and the effects that this racism has on her and her family. Kia has witnessed customers in her workplace talk openly about their support for a white supremacist president, students in her school dismiss the racist foundation that the Confederate flag rests on, and police in her community target her family on the basis of their race. These events, coupled with her family and peers’ support, pushed her to act, to make t-shirts, to distribute flyers, to persuade local businesses, and to stand in solidarity with others on the town square holding signs to assert that Black Lives Matter.

When looking closely at the identities and roles of activists, it becomes clear that gender plays a significant role in youth engagement with Black Lives Matter protests. For generations, Black women have led the way in writing radical literature, organizing mutual aid, and leading global protests to end white supremacy. Black women created, organized, and sustained these protests even when they did not necessarily center Black women, including Breonna Taylor and Toyin Salau, who were murdered in 2020 (Cooper, 2018; Kendall, 2020; Moraga & Anzaldúa, 2015; Ransby, 2005; Ruiz & DuBois, 2007; Traister, 2019). Kia and her mother built on the legacy of the work of millions of Black women. They risked their lives and employment security to march in a small predominantly white town where many people opposed the message that Black Lives Matter.

Even though Kyle has experienced the racism that the Black Lives Matter movement seeks to dismantle, Kyle never participated in the Black Lives Matter protests. Instead, he stood on the sidelines watching others, including Kia and her mother, standing in the square. Kia and Kyle have vastly different personal life histories and lived experiences that influenced their decisions about whether to participate in or

to watch the activism that took place over the past eight months in Heaton. The *threat of visibility*, which we define as the threat that rural youth face due to the fact that most people in the community know the names and families of the individuals who protested on the square, might generate a different level of risk for the youth who participate in rural Black Lives Matter protests than their urban counterparts. Kia is not standing and marching with tens of thousands of activists like the youth of color in Philadelphia. She is standing on a square with several hundred people spread out across several blocks. People in this rural town can see her as they drive by the town square, standing with her Black Lives Matter sign next to her mom and her friends. They also probably know her and her family. Kia recognizes the risks that she took when she stood on the square with her mother and her peers. She knows that her employers, or a customer who had expressed opposition to the Black Lives Matter movement, might have seen her protesting on the square. Kia could have lost her job or faced retaliation from a customer for participating in these events. But as she said in her interview, she also knows from her own experiences that her stepfather could have been George Floyd. She decided to participate because the threat of state-sanctioned violence, particularly against her stepfather, outweighed the threat of visibility in her hometown.

We interpret Kyle’s reluctance to name acts and experiences as racist as also stemming, at least in part, from the threat of visibility and state-sanctioned violence that he has experienced and witnessed. As an adolescent, Kyle watched police put his father in handcuffs and remove him from his home. He knew that they deported him to the Dominican Republic. State-sanctioned violence is not an abstract idea for him. Kyle remained with his mother for several more years, but ultimately, he moved in with the white staff who ran the Focus programs that he attended in high school and now support with a part-time job. Most of the people who stood on the square know Kyle; he knows them. But the threat of visibility in his rural hometown coupled with the threat of state-sanctioned violence against him, as a Black boy, prevented him from participating in Heaton’s Black Lives Matter protests. Even though he recognized the many reasons why his peers and supervisors stood on the square last summer, he stood on the sidelines, taking the moment in, as a way to protect himself from the state-sanctioned violence that the protesters on Heaton’s town square aimed to end on his behalf.



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