

Nihilism and Politics: The Constrained Life Chances of African American Youth

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In July 2005, The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement released a fact sheet announcing that the increase in youth voting in 2004 touted by the media and politicians was largely driven by the increase in voting among Latino and African American youth.¹ For some the news was interpreted as evidence that forty years after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 the promise of a fully functioning democracy in the United States was closer than it ever had been. These individuals read this information as a clear indicator that the United States had reached a point in its history where all citizens regardless of race are engaged in debate, where they participate to ensure that their interests will be represented by the state, and where they believe that the simple act of voting is their responsibility and will have an impact.

Unfortunately, reality is never so simple. Other trends and policies in the United States pose a direct threat to the promise of a fully realized democracy and the future of black politics. For example, researchers note that the United States currently has the highest incarceration rate in the world. Our rate of incarceration is ten times higher than other Western democracies and there are currently over two million Americans in jail or prison. One of the consequences of our nation's incarceration policy is that "[o]ne of every 21 adult black men is incarcerated on any given day. For black men in their late twenties, the figure is one in eight. There are now far more incarcerated black men in this age group (161,600) than the total number of *all* incarcerated African Americans in 1954 (98,000)." Furthermore, nearly one-eighth of African American males in this country are disenfranchised because they are currently serving or have served time for a felony conviction.² Thus, while some might celebrate the increase in voting among black

¹ Mark Hugo Lopez. July 2005. "Electoral Engagement Among Minority Youth," fact sheet by The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_04_Minority_vote.pdf

² Marc Maurer and Ryan Scott King. 2004. "Schools and Prisons: Fifty Years After Brown v. Board of Education," Report for the The Sentencing Project, Washington, D.C., <http://sentencingproject.org/pdfs/brownvboard.pdf>

and Latino young people, we must also remember those who are disqualified from their right to cast a ballot. We might say it is the best of times and the worst of times for young African Americans and black politics today.

In her book, *The Tie that Binds*, Andrea Y. Simpson examines young people, identity, race and politics and discusses the changing and conflicting racial politics black youth face today. She writes that

[t]he hope that integration and time would usher in a new era of race relations has not been fulfilled, in part because the post-civil rights generation has experienced a different kind of racism but one just as damaging as the kind experienced by their parents. The problem is that this racism is more difficult to identify, provide evidence of, and even more painful to acknowledge.³

Building on the work of scholars such as Simpson and Cornel West, in this paper we explore the question of whether young African Americans face a different threat that is “more difficult to identify, provide evidence of, and [is] more painful to acknowledge.” And while the threat mentioned in the quote above is racism, we are interested in the threat posed by nihilism, especially since increasing numbers of prominent black leaders argue that it is nihilism, alienation and despair among African American young people that may endanger the promise of progress for this group. To that end, in this paper we explore the degree to which African American youth and young adults suffer from nihilistic attitudes and what impact such ideas and feelings have on their political behavior.

Nihilism

In *Race Matters*, Cornel West discusses the significance of nihilism in black communities, suggesting that nihilism must be a concept that researchers concerned with African

³ Andrea Y. Simpson. 1998. *The Tie That Binds: Identity and Political Attitudes in the Post-Civil Rights Generation*. New York: New York University Press, p. 151.

American youth make central to their analyses. He clarifies early in his discussion of the term that he is not utilizing the concept of nihilism associated with philosophers such as Nietzsche. For example, Nietzsche in his writing on nihilism is focused on the evolution or devaluation of society into a state where all values, all accepted eternal truths are revealed to be baseless, engendering the absence of meaning for human beings. While building on Nietzsche, West focuses on the evolution or devaluation of African American communities, especially as such trends impact young black people. West writes that the nihilism he is concerned with is “the lived experience of coping with a life of horrifying meaninglessness, hopelessness and (most important) lovelessness.”⁴ He argues that we must tread

into the murky waters of despair and dread that now flood the streets of black America. To talk about the depressing statistics of unemployment, infant mortality, incarceration, teenage pregnancy, and violent crime is one thing. But to face up to the monumental eclipse of hope, the unprecedented collapse of meaning, the incredible disregard for human (especially black) life and property in much of black America is something else....The liberal /conservative discussion conceals the most basic issue now facing black America: *the nihilistic threat to its very existence*....It is primarily a question of speaking to the profound sense of psychological depression, personal worthlessness, and social despair so widespread in black America.⁵

Cornel West was not the first to write about nihilism, despair and alienation in black communities. Others such as Richard Wright and Ralph Ellison, in both their fiction and non-fiction writing, explored how a life of social, economic and political alienation and marginalization manifested in the decisions and behaviors of black young people.⁶ Recently, however, much of the discussion of alienation, despair and what some call nihilism among young black people is coming from black elites who have turned their attention (and venom) away from

⁴ West, Cornel. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press, 14.

⁵ West, Cornel. 1993. *Race Matters*. Boston: Beacon Press, 12.

⁶ Nick De Genova. 1995. “Gansta Rap and Nihilism in Black America: Some Questions of Life and Death,” in *Social Text*, 43 (Autumn): 89-132; Richard Wright. 1941. *12 Million Black Voices*. New York: Thunder’s Mouth; Ralph Ellison. 1995. “What These Children are Like,” in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*. New York: Modern Library.

the possible structural causes of nihilism among black youth to the visible consequences of nihilism as evidenced in what they consider to be the self-defeating decisions and “immoral” behavior of this group. Bill Cosby and his continuous tirade against the black poor and black youth is undoubtedly the easiest and most recognized example of such discussion, but he is one among many. In books by John McWhorter, Stanley Crouch and Juan Williams, concerns like those articulated by Cosby about the culture and behaviors of black youth are raised repeatedly.

McWhorter, for example, points to the culture of “Victimology” that can be found among black Americans, even astonishingly he concludes among black youth who “have never remotely known the world that spawned Victimology.”⁷ McWhorter writes that

much more often in modern black American life, victimhood is simply called attention to where it barely exists if at all. Most importantly, all too often this is done not with a view toward forging solutions, but to foster and nurture an unfocused brand of resentment and sense of alienation from the mainstream⁸

He continues later arguing that, “[V]ictimology seduces young black people just like the crack trade seduces inner-city blacks, virtually irresistible in its offer of an easy road to self-esteem and some cheap thrills on the way.”⁹

Other authors take their shot at the perceived nihilism of black youth by targeting what is seen as “the” most destructive force in black youth culture—rap music. In his book *Enough*, Juan Williams describes the evolution of rap music, writing that

before long the gritty street reporting gave way to nihilistic glorifications of the ‘thug life.’ ... Along the same path to corruption, the early hip-hop tradition of young men bragging in their raps about being great, passionate lovers took a wrong turn down a path to degrading women as ‘whores’ and ‘bitches.’ Time after time, raising the stakes in rap to get attention from listeners and record companies meant descending to self-hating vulgarity (shout-outs to friends and foes alike meant calling them ‘nigger’ or ‘motherfucker.’)¹⁰

⁷John McWhorter. 2001. *Losing the Race: Self-Sabotage in Black America*. New York: Perennial, p.37.

⁸ Ibid, p. 2.

⁹ Ibid, p. 39.

Stanley Crouch also sets his sites on black youth culture. Targeting rap music videos, he comments on the excessive violence, sexuality and dehumanization of such commercialized products.

[I]mages of black youth seen on MTV, BET, or VH1... are not far removed from those D. W. Griffith used in *Birth of a Nation*, where Reconstruction Negroes were depicted as bullying, hedonistic buffoons ever ready to bloody somebody. This is the new minstrelsy. The neo-Sambo is sturdily placed in our contemporary popular iconography. He can be seen, for instance, mugging or scowling in Trick Daddy's "I'm a Thug," where gold teeth, drop-down pants and tasteless jewelry abound. There is the fast-tailed hussy, rolling her rump at the camera or challenging some anonymous man to satisfy her in Missy's latest video. These videos are created primarily for the material enrichment of black entertainers, producers, and directors, not present-day whites, who would be run off the planet if they—like the creators of nineteenth-century minstrelsy—were responsible for the images, the ideas and the content.¹¹

Black writers like Williams, Crouch and McWhorter have given up on analyzing the structural conditions that might lead to seemingly nihilistic behavior among African American youth, preferring instead to engage in polemical exchanges absent any empirical evidence about the deficiencies of African American youth. Yet, other scholars are producing new research that sheds light on the environmental and structural challenges that face black youth. Recently, there has been a spate of articles and books that highlight the dire condition, in particular the devastating economic position of Black men in the United States.¹² For example, a March 20, 2006 *New York Times* article begins with the sentence "Black men in the United States face a far more dire situation than is portrayed by common employment and educational statistics, a flurry of new scholarly studies warn, and it has worsened in recent years even as an economic boom

¹⁰ Juan Williams. 2006. *Enough: The Phony Leaders, Dead-End Movements, and Culture of Failure That are Undermining Black America—and What We Can Do About It*. New York: Crown Publishers: 126-127.

¹¹ Stanley Crouch. 2004. *the artificial white man: essays on authenticity*. New York: Basic Books, p. 10.

¹² Ronald B. Mincy (ed.). 2006. *Black Males Left Behind*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute; Peter Edelman, Harry J. Holzer and Paul Offner. 2006. *Reconnecting Disadvantaged Young Men*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute; Jeremy Travis. 2005. *But They All Come Back: Facing the Challenges of Prisoner Reentry*. Washington, DC: The Urban Institute.

and a welfare overhaul brought gains to black women and other groups.”¹³ Later in the article the author writes that “the clients [from the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development] readily admit to their own bad choices but say they also fight a *pervasive sense of hopelessness* (author’s emphasis).”¹⁴

It is the stark reality of poverty, imprisonment, disease, violence and other life threatening conditions that West and the clients of the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development are referring to when they talk of an “eclipse of hope” in black communities. These conditions are also those of utmost concern to us. We want to understand how living what is undoubtedly a contradictory life of opportunity and difficulty impacts the attitudes and political behavior of black youth. What does it mean for black youth to exist in a society where many of the economic opportunities afforded one’s parents are no longer available, like high-paying, low-skill jobs? What does it mean for black youth to live in a hyper-consumer oriented society where many African American young people believe you are judged by what you can buy and what you own? What does it mean for black youth to live in a time when most black men expect to spend some time in jail? We will explore these questions in our paper.

Nihilism and Lived Experience

By now many are familiar with the statistics that under gird the claim of nihilism and despair among black youth. We know, for example, that while approximately 10 percent of non-Hispanic white children lived in poverty in 2001, the poverty rate for African American children

¹³ Although much of the current focus on the alienation and disengagement from the economy centers on the experiences of young black men, young black women face their own series of gendered challenges with regard to economic, educational and personal mobility.

¹⁴ Eckholm, Erik. March 20, 2006. “Plight Deepens for Black Men, Studies Warn,” *nytimes.com*.

was 30 percent.¹⁵ Similarly, data from the U.S. Department of Justice indicates that while 3 of 1,000 white Americans ages 18-19 are sentenced prisoners, 29 of 1,000 African Americans ages 18-19 are sentenced prisoners.¹⁶ African American males ages 14-24 in 2000 constituted 1 percent of the general population, however they comprised nearly 15 percent of all victims of homicide and over a quarter—27 percent—of convicted homicide offenders.¹⁷ And while African American youth comprise only 16 percent of the adolescent population in the U.S., they accounted for nearly 50 percent of adolescents arrested for murder, 42 percent of those arrested for violent crimes,¹⁸ and approximately 40 percent of young people in public and private juvenile detention facilities in 2001.¹⁹

African American youth also comprised 51 percent of all AIDS cases among young people ages 13-19 from 1981 to 2001, and 61 percent of new AIDS cases in the same age range in 2001, even though they represented only 16 percent of all young people ages 13-19.²⁰ Unfortunately, education and employment statistics do not provide a more optimistic picture. In 2000, nearly 30 percent of African American young people ages 18-24 had not completed high school compared to 18 percent of white youth.²¹ In August of 2003, 30 percent of African American youth ages 16-19 were unemployed compared to only 15 percent of white youth in the same age range.²² These broad statistics suggest an experience of lost opportunities, depleted

¹⁵ Proctor, Bernadette D. and Joseph Dalaker, U.S. Census Bureau, Current Population Reports, P60-219, *Poverty in the United States: 2001*, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC, 20002.

¹⁶ U.S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, *Prisoners in 2001*, Bulletin NCJ 195189 (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, July 2002), p. 12, Table 16.

¹⁷ Fox, James Alan and Marianne W. Zawitz, "Homicide Trends in the United States," available online at <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/homtrnd.htm>.

¹⁸ Sourcebook of Criminal Justice Statistics 2001, Table 4.10, p. 356-358.

¹⁹ Melissa Sickmund and Yi-chun Wan, "Census of Juveniles in Residential Placement Databook" [Online]. Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 2002.

²⁰ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, "HIV/AIDS Surveillance in Adolescents—L265 Slide Series (through 2001)."

²¹ U.S. Census Bureau, Report P20-536 (2000).

²² United States Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, News Release, USDL 04-07.

resources, and daily racist encounters with individuals and the state that make the possibility of nihilism all too real for far too many African American young people.

And while there is much previous research to draw upon when investigating the emotional disposition and political attitudes of young African Americans, it has been new data secured through the Black Youth Project that suggests that we might need to take another look at the emotional lives, strategic behaviors and politics of young African Americans through the lens of nihilism.²³ For example, data gathered from three small focus groups with African American young adults, ages 18-21 in Chicago, suggest that substantial numbers of these young people believe there is little hope of progress during their lives and so their goal is one of survival. Specifically, they are engaged in a political strategy of survival that Cohen has called a “politics of invisibility.”²⁴ Some of the participants, especially those most vulnerably positioned, indicated that they are constantly engaged in a strategy of invisibility, making themselves invisible to authority figures like the police, teachers, and correction officers that they believe are out to “get them.”

Of course, one of the most troubling parts of this revelation, especially for political scientists, is that a strategy of invisibility is largely a politically disempowering strategy for if one is invisible to government authorities their needs and concerns are unlikely to be heard.

Furthermore, through a politics of invisibility young people lose any power to hold entities

²³ The Black Youth Project is a research initiative headed by Professor Cathy Cohen at the University of Chicago. This project will examine the attitudes, resources, and culture of African American youth ages 15 to 25, exploring how these factors and others influence their decision-making, norms, and behavior in critical domains such as sex, health, and politics. Arguably more than any other subgroup of Americans, African American youth reflect the challenges of inclusion and empowerment in the post-civil rights period. The first phase of the research focused on mounting a new national survey of young people ages 15-25 with an over-sample of African Americans. Phase two of the project will center on conducting in-depth interviews with African American respondents of the new national survey. The third phase of the project will explore the themes and narratives found in the most popular rap songs through the methodology of content analysis. The project is funded by the Ford Foundation, the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago and the Social Science Division at the University of Chicago.

²⁴ Cathy J. Cohen. 2005. “African American Youth: Broadening our Understanding of Politics, Civic Engagement and Activism,” <http://ya.ssrc.org/african/Cohen/> (Social Science Research Council Youth Activism Web Forum).

accountable. In a democracy based on visibility and voice, attempts to make one-self invisible have the unintended consequence of silencing discontent. It obscures their lived reality from the public, and in particular, those responsible for responding to such difficulties.

Correspondingly, data from the national survey of the Black Youth Project indicates that African American young people do, in fact, believe themselves to be under attack and thus suffer from greater political and social alienation and marginalization than other young people. For example, preliminary analysis of the data shows that African American young people are more likely to believe that they are not treated as equal citizens in this country, that immigrants are treated better than Blacks, that leaders care very little about people like them, and that the government is generally run by a few big interests looking out for themselves.

These same young people expressed attitudes of societal alienation and marginalization that should be noted. African American respondents were more likely to believe that it was more difficult for black youth to get ahead, that black youth receive a poorer education than other young people, that the police discriminate *much* more against black youth than white youth, that people judge them by what they can buy and what they own, that life is not fair and that people like them never get their fair share, and that racism would never be eliminated in their lifetime. One of the most troubling findings was the degree to which African American youth seem to have internalized some of the demonizing directed their way. For example, overwhelmingly African American respondents agreed with the statement that “young black people have the wrong morals about things like sex and work.”

We believe the data generated from the focus groups and the new national survey suggests that researchers concerned with black politics and the political futures of young African Americans must take seriously West’s assertion that nihilism exists among black youth. And

while pundits and our preliminary data analysis hint that the issue of nihilism is real, we still have serious questions regarding whether African American youth ages 15-25 are nihilistic in their beliefs about themselves, their communities and the society, and how such feelings might impact their political attitudes and actions. For example, it has repeatedly been empirically observed that African American youth tend to have higher self-esteem than other young people from other racial and ethnic categories.²⁵ Of course, researchers suggest that self-esteem is probably more related to interpersonal relations with one's family and community than to one's experience in the larger society. And when we think of the hopelessness and nihilism that West and others are writing about, we believe this concept to be rooted in one's subjective sense of possibilities and status in the broader society. Given that presumption, the areas of self-efficacy, political efficacy and alienation are probably much better indicators of the possible existence of nihilistic feelings among African American youth and in these areas the research indicates that African American youth and young adults trail their peers.²⁶

In the rest of this paper we turn our attention to empirically examining whether African American young people are more nihilistic in their attitudes than other young people and if such attitudes impact their political behavior. Realizing that we are limited by our measures in this dataset, we see this as an initial effort to empirically explore the relationship between nihilism and politics in the lives of young African Americans at the beginning of the twenty-first century. We hope this preliminary attempt will shed some light on how to further pursue the question of nihilism and politics among African American young people.

²⁵ Hughes, Michael, and David Demo. 1989. Self-Perceptions of Black Americans: Self-Esteem and Personal Efficacy. *The American Journal of Sociology* 95(1):132-59.

²⁶ *ibid*

Measuring Nihilism

The Survey Instrument

When we set out to measure the effects of nihilism in black youth, the primary obstacle was the construction of an instrument that could capture elusive concepts such as hope, meaning and love. In many ways, what we are trying to observe are the various underlying currents driving young black people's attitudes and behavior. Have African American youth read and internalized the desperate narratives of alienation, poverty and violence in ways that affect their social and political choices? To begin answering this question we use data from the Black Youth Project (BYP) survey.²⁷ The Black Youth Project Survey is a national, multi-racial sample of 1,590 young people who were asked their opinions and experiences in eleven distinct subject areas including demographics, self-esteem, personal efficacy and political behavior. For this analysis we use responses from the 635 African American respondents to assess the impact of nihilistic attitudes on political behavior.

As with any observed relationship, the key to our analysis is the fit between the attitudes we want to measure and the indicators of those attitudes available in the data. We acknowledge the difficulty in separating indicators of nihilism in the data from other attitudinal phenomena such as self-esteem. However, as noted earlier, Cornel West identifies three principle components of nihilism among African American youth— meaninglessness, hopelessness and lovelessness. With this in mind, we used a series of questions to construct scales of respondents'

²⁷ Cathy Cohen is the principal investigator of the Black Youth Project and the Black Youth Project Survey, also known as the Youth Culture Survey through NORC. 1,590 45-minute telephone surveys were conducted between July and November 2005. The primary sampling mode was a national random digit dial conducted by NORC. A secondary oversample of blacks and Hispanics was used to supplement low N from those groups in the primary sample. Participants in the oversample came from areas of the U.S. with at least 15% black or Hispanic populations. 92% of blacks and Hispanics in the U.S. live in such areas. There was also an oversample of respondents in the Chicago area. Researchers at the University of Chicago are conducting in-depth face-to-face interviews with respondents who participate in the telephone survey. The Chicago oversample provides a larger N of local respondents with which to conduct interviews. The response rate for the telephone surveys was 62%.

overall sense of nihilism as it appears along these three broad dimensions. These are the dimensions of nihilism among young African Americans which we explore in the next section as possible motivators of their political behavior. In this section, we test for the existence of nihilism among our African American respondents and in comparison to other groups of young people.

While it was difficult to craft direct indicators for our primary concepts, we asked ourselves what it meant to lack meaning, hope, or love and developed indicators based on what we might expect to observe in a population suffering from a lack of those essential personal and societal characteristics. In some cases respondents were asked about their sense of hope or love directly. Other times questions were constructed to capture the effects, if any, of a lack of meaning or hope in respondents' lives.

For instance, respondents might have been asked what it means to be a young African American today. However, it is not likely that a question like this would illicit responses along a single positive-negative dimension that could be coded and compared across respondents. Such a question is better suited for our in-depth interviews with young African Americans. In this survey we explored issues of meaning and hope by measuring attitudes associated with perceptions of African Americans and their relationship to the political system. Each item in the nihilism scales is measured in terms of respondents' agreement or disagreement with a stated position along a standard Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree.²⁸ Items measuring related positions are combined and used to construct scales of our three dimensions: respondents' sense of social meaning, political hope and personal love.

²⁸ Survey items and response scales are included in the Appendix.

Constructing the Scales

For each of the three scales we developed we identified survey questions associated with the underlying nihilistic dimension under consideration and tested those questions to interrogate the reliability of the scale constructed. The first of these is meaninglessness. Again, it is difficult to gauge meaning in any direct way, but we chose indicators that we believed captured young black people's sense of how they are viewed by the society. To restate an earlier observation, while African American youth enjoy relatively high levels of self-esteem they may simultaneously suffer from an understanding or belief that their position in the broader society is secondary and inferior. It is possible that African American youth value themselves while believing that they are not valued by others, or that their lives do not mean very much in the grand scheme of things.

In looking to measure this sense of societal meaninglessness, we identified three survey items in which young people were asked to respond to statements about popular perceptions or representations of black youth. They are (1) *People judge me by what I can buy and what I own*; (2) *Rap videos portray Black women in bad and offensive ways*; and (3) *Rap videos portray Black men in bad and offensive ways*. The first item is a measure of how respondents believe they are valued in the society. The second and third are measures of how respondents believe black women and men are portrayed in perhaps the most widely distributed media representations of young African Americans, rap music and videos. We found that young black people who feel they are being judged by what they own are also likely to believe they are being negatively portrayed in rap music videos. The combination of these items as a scale serves as an overall measure of how black youth feel they are valued or undervalued in the society.

The choice of rap music videos as an area in which to gauge the presence or lack of meaning in the lives of African American youth has dual explanations. First, we know from observation, and it is confirmed by the data,²⁹ that rap music and videos are a substantial part of the everyday lives and socialization of young black people. The values and meanings relayed through that media have an influence on, or at the very least, are not being rejected by, black youth. And so we wish to know how these young people feel they are represented in the most popular portrayals of black youth culture, rap music videos.

The second reason to include rap music videos in assessing the perceived meaning of young black life is that in fact rap music and videos are a principle source of influence on the perception of black youth among people outside the black community and around the world. The images in rap music videos often are for many people around the world (and in the U.S.) a seemingly all-access glimpse into the lives and behaviors of young black people. Black respondents' attitudes toward these images are not only measures of how they perceive themselves in the media but of how they believe they are perceived by billions of others across the globe. And so, in order to gauge respondents' sense of the social meaning of young black life, we combine respondents' beliefs about how they are perceived with their beliefs about how they and others perceive a pre-eminent and defining element of their culture—rap music videos.

The second dimension we wanted to capture was hopelessness. Statistics like those presented earlier drive home the overwhelmingly bleak life chances facing many young African Americans. The goal for researchers on the Black Youth Project was to uncover whether or not black youth perceive their life chances to be diminished and whether that belief, if it exists, impacts their political behavior.

²⁹ Nearly twice as many blacks (80%) as whites (42%) between the ages of 15 and 25 report listening to rap music every day or several days a week. Black youth were four times as likely as whites to report watching rap music programming on television every day or several days a week (48% and 12%, respectively).

Again, it was necessary to develop proxy concepts to gauge respondents' sense of hope in various areas of their lives. In general, hopefulness was measured in terms of respondents' expressed expectations when presented with particular options. In this case, because we are exploring issues of hopelessness and political behavior, we used a pair of items on which respondents were asked to comment on their expectations of and relationship to the government. Specifically, young people were asked to respond to the statements (1) *The leaders in government care very little about people like me;* and (2) *The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends.* As with the scale of meaningfulness, we incorporated respondents' beliefs of how they are personally valued with a measure of their perception of broader phenomena. Together these items are used as a scale of young people's belief or sense of hope in the political system.

What we found was that young black people who believed government leaders were not concerned about their interests also tended to have a pessimistic view of government in general. It is important to distinguish the types of attitudes that might be reported on items in this scale. On the first item young people are expressing their belief that the government works specifically for people like them. A belief that government is unresponsive in that case is not necessarily synonymous with a belief that government is corrupt or ineffective in general. It could be that respondents are expressing something like the thought that "Leaders only care about certain kinds of people, but not about people like me." The second item in the scale gets at respondents' sense of how government is run in general. This is where we get a sense of how respondents feel about the relationship between the government and the populace generally. An item like this gives respondents an opportunity to express the belief that government is attentive to certain segments of the population, or alternatively that is run by "big interests" looking out for

themselves. It is the interplay between these closely related but distinct attitudes that we expect to have some impact on black youth's decision to invest the time and energy to participate in political processes.

Finally, West tells us that the most important dimension of nihilism as it appears among black youth is lovelessness. It is along this dimension that we gauge any feeling that young people may have that they are alone in the world and lack social and personal support. Indicators along this dimension get directly at the heart of respondents' feelings of being loved and supported by those around them. The items in the scale are (1) *I feel loved and wanted*; and (2) *I know people upon whom I can always rely*. Again, respondents who report being loved are also more likely to report having someone in their life on whom they can always rely.

Love as a dimension of nihilism is important for what it says about young people's feeling that they are connected to and invested in the lives of others. The feeling that one is loved is in many ways a measure of the social resources at one's disposal. Young people with greater social resources, more loving and supportive relationships, have a larger network on which to rely for advice and influence in personal, sexual and political decision-making. These networks are particularly important for an evaluation of the attitudes and behaviors that have produced the alarming statistics to which West and others point in their writing on the desperate state of black youth. In the final section we examine the effect of love and the other constructs on the decisions that young black people make when participating in or refraining from political activity.

The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for each of the three scales is presented in Table 1. The alphas are measures of the internal consistency of the scales. Higher alphas mean that responses to certain items in the scale consistently predict responses to others. For instance,

an alpha of 0.9 could indicate that respondents who answer ‘Yes’ to Question A almost always answer ‘Yes’ to Question B. An alpha of 0.2 would indicate that answers to Question A are not at all reliable predictors of responses to Question B. The conventional standard for scale reliability is 0.7. The alphas on the scales in our analysis range from 0.65 to 0.69. While none of the constructs is a perfectly consistent predictor of attitudes, by including both an analysis of the constructs and their effects on behavior we can begin to assess the fit of the frame of nihilism being used in media and literature to describe the plight of young African Americans. If it were impossible to construct even a minimally reliable scale of respondents’ expectations of government, this would suggest that the attitudes of black youth toward government are not driven by any single or particular force, i.e. nihilism. As it is, we found that the dimensions of meaning, hope and love as embodied in the scales we constructed were reasonably consistent lines along which to predict young people’s responses to particular survey items.

One important project for those working to observe the attitudes and behaviors of black youth is to better understand and evaluate the underlying forces driving those attitudes and behavior. In that respect the Black Youth Project survey is a step in the right direction. Although black youth, and youth generally, have been the subject of previous studies of attitudes and behaviors, the Black Youth Project survey is the first comprehensive examination of young people’s experiences in and attitudes about diverse areas of their lives. Where other studies have been devoted exclusively to uncovering young people’s thoughts on sex or politics, Black Youth Project researchers developed a comprehensive survey to observe attitudes on sex, politics, education, health care, crime and punishment, gender and religion as related components of young people’s lives. The data from this survey will help us to understand how youth draw on

various kinds of experience to form opinions and make decisions across a wide range of subject areas.

Table 1. Scale Reliability Coefficients

| <i>Construct</i> | <i>Reliability Coefficient</i> |
|---|--------------------------------|
| Perceived of Meaning for Black Youth | 0.69 |
| I am judged by what I own | |
| Rap videos portray black women | |
| Rap videos portray black men badly | |
| Political Hope | 0.66 |
| Government doesn't care about me | |
| Leaders in government look out for | |
| Love | 0.65 |
| I feel loved | |
| I know people I can rely on | |

Nihilism and Demographics

Before we assess the impact of our constructs on the political behaviors of black youth, there remains the question of whether nihilistic attitudes are any more prevalent among black youth than among young people from other racial groups. While the concrete circumstances facing the present generation of young African Americans are disheartening, we cannot assume that these young people are internalizing the narratives of despair coming out of the academy, media and their lived experience.

With this in mind we measured the effect of various demographic characteristics on respondent's scores along each of our three dimensions of nihilism. As we expected, race did prove to be a significant influence on two of the three constructs. However, these racial differences do not necessarily conform to the Black-White or Black-Other difference dimension that underlies these analyses. In one case, variation in respondents' attitudes exists only when Hispanics are compared to all other respondents. In the end, we can only confirm that black

youth differ from other young people on one of our three dimensions of nihilism. In Table 2, the expressed attitudes of white, black and Hispanic respondents are compared by sex, age group and household income.³⁰ The first of the constructs we explore is social meaning. Because the meaning scale is used as a measure of respondent's feeling about the value of black youth, we can only compare responses among black respondents. Recall that the scale includes items about the portrayal of black women and men in rap videos and also about respondents' own sense of how they are judged. On this latter item white and Hispanic respondents reported feelings about their own experience, not about the experience of black youth. So the meaning scale as a measure of perception of society's value of young black life does not hold for these groups.

In exploring the relationship between demographics and sense of social meaning among black respondents, we found that sex significantly affected young black people's impression of how they are viewed by the world. The negative relationship between sex and social meaning for black youth in the first column of the table tells us that young black women score lower on the meaning scale than young black men. They are more likely to feel that they are being judged by the things that they can buy or that black people are portrayed negatively in rap music videos. Age and income prove not to be significant predictors of young black people's feelings of how they are perceived in the world.

In looking at the dimension of political hope, where we are able to compare young people from different racial groups, we find significant variation by both race and age. Relationships between demographic characteristics and respondents' sense of political hope are reported in the second column of Table 2. In the first row we find that a respondent's race has a significant

³⁰ Age groups used in analysis are 15 to 17, 18 to 21, and 22 to 25. Respondents' household incomes have also been collapsed into groups to allow us to compare groups of young people from various income ranges. These ranges are \$0-9,999; \$10k-19,999; \$20k-29,999; \$30k-49,999; \$50k-74,999; \$75k-99,999; \$100k and above. This analysis black, white and Hispanic respondents. Respondents from other racial groups have been dropped from the analysis due to low *N*.

impact on their sense that they matter to leaders in government. For the racial demographic, the main “Race” score is the measure of the statistical relationship between race and respondents’ scores when we compare all three racial groups. Since it is possible that the effect of race varies between the groups, we also compare each of the groups individually to the others. For instance, in the sub-group comparisons for race and political hope, we see that the White-Black and White-Hispanic comparisons both yield significant results. By this we know that both Blacks and Hispanics differ from Whites in their expectations of government. The negative coefficient reported in the table lets us know that as we move from white to black or from white to Hispanic youth, we can expect respondents of color to express less hope for government to respond to their needs than their white counterparts. Interestingly, there is no relationship between race and political hope when we compare black youth to Hispanics. Neither group is more or less likely than the other to believe that they are important to government officials or that leaders in government have their best interests at heart. What all of this tells us is that the overall relationship between race and political hope is actually a measure of the degree to which youth of color (Blacks and Hispanics) tend to differ from their white counterparts.

As we work our way down the results column for political hope, we come to the measures of racial impact for men and women. It was possible that race was a significant predictor of political hopefulness for one sex and not other. This proved not to be the case. The impact of race on respondents’ sense of hope in government is statistically identical for the two sexes.

Table 2. Relationship Between Demographics and Nihilism in Young People

| <i>Nihilism Constructs</i> | <i>Social Meaning</i> | <i>Political Hope</i> | <i>Love</i> | <i>N</i> |
|--------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---------------|----------|
| Independent Variables: | | | | |
| Race (all 3 races) | NA ¹ | -.31 (.06)*** | -.18 (.06)*** | |
| White-Black | NA | -.67 (.11)*** | -- | |
| White-Hispanic | NA | -.27 (.06)*** | -.19 (.07)*** | |
| Black-Hispanic | NA | -- | -.24 (.13)* | |
| Male | NA | -.32 (.09)*** | -- | |
| Female | NA | -.31 (.09)*** | -.21 (.09)** | |
| Sex | NA | -- | .19 (.09)** | |
| White | NA | -- | -- | |
| Black | -.48 (.14)*** | -- | -- | |
| Hispanic | NA | -- | -- | |
| Age Group | NA | -.47 (.06)*** | .11 (.06)* | |
| White | NA | -.50 (.10)*** | -- | |
| Black | -- | -.44 (.10)*** | -- | |
| Hispanic | NA | -.48 (.13)*** | .34 (.14)** | |
| Income | NA | -- | .10***(.03) | |
| White | NA | -- | -- | |
| Black | -- | -- | .08 (.05)* | |
| Hispanic | NA | -- | .25 (.07)*** | |
| N | | | | |

Note: Entries are ordered logit coefficients with standard errors in parenthesis. *N* for significant coefficients are reported in Table 2.1 in the Appendix.

¹ Because the meaning scale combines respondent's opinion of how they are perceived personally and of how black youth are portrayed in general, it is a measure of overall meaning for black youth only.

* $p \leq .10$ on a 2-tailed test

** $p \leq .05$ on a 2-tailed test

*** $p \leq .01$ on a 2-tailed test

The other demographic predictor of political hope for young people is age. The negative relationship between the two indicates that older respondents are less hopeful than younger ones. Specifically, 22-25 year-olds report significantly lower expectations of government than 15-17 year-olds. The results broken down by racial group let us know that the effects are not concentrated among respondents of any one race. Young adults in all three races are less hopeful than their teenage counterparts.

We also found a relationship between young people's race and their sense that they are loved. Unlike in our measure of political hope however, black youth do not trail whites in feelings of being loved and supported. When the overall effect of race is broken down and compared across pairs of races, the effect is concentrated entirely among Hispanic respondents. Young Hispanics are less likely than either Whites or Blacks to feel that they are loved or have someone on whom they can rely. The effect of race also varies by sex. Differences in respondents' scores on the love construct held only for young women. Young men's perception that they are loved does not appear to be significantly impacted by race. When we combine the differential results of race and sex, we would expect young Hispanic women to feel less strongly that they are loved than Whites or Blacks. However, we would not expect young Hispanic men to lack a sense of love and support relative to other racial groups.

Both sex and age appear to have a positive impact on young people's overall feelings of being loved. This is to say that women and older respondents appear more likely to believe that they are loved than men and younger respondents. However, when we tried to observe the effects of sex in each of the racial groups individually, it did not appear to operate in any significant way for any individual racial group. It is likely that minor and insignificant variation by sex in each of the three racial groups is contributing to an overall finding that sex affects

respondents' sense of love in some significant way. In the case of age, we were able to pinpoint its effects among Hispanic respondents. It seems that differences in feelings of being loved between older and younger Hispanic respondents are driving the results for sex in the general population. In fact, age, like sex, does not appear to be substantially related to black or white youth's feelings that they are loved.

Finally, household income plays a role in how strongly young people feel loved and supported. Overall, respondents from higher income households are more likely to believe that they are loved and can rely on those around them. This result holds for black and Hispanic respondents, but not for Whites. For black youth, there is modest evidence that those from more affluent homes will enjoy a greater sense of love. As with age, the relationship between income and one's feeling that they are loved seems to be concentrated primarily among Hispanic respondents.

To summarize, we find that young black people are as likely as whites and more likely than Hispanics to have the sense that they are loved and supported by those around them. However, it appears that the perception of black youth that they are loved is more closely related to their economic resources than it is for Whites. There is also significant evidence that young Blacks are suffering from a sense of political hopelessness. The question we are left with is, Does young black people's sense of nihilism influence their political behaviors in any significant way? We tackle this question in the next section.

Nihilism and Political Participation

The final step in our analysis was to assess the relationship between the various dimensions of nihilism and political participation. We used four questions from the “political activity” section of the Black Youth Project survey to measure participation. Respectively, the questions asked whether, in the past twelve months, respondents had (1) voted in a national or local election (2) signed a paper or e-mail petition (3) engaged in boycotting or (4) written or sent an e-mail/written a blog about a political issue.³¹ A basic description of each of the items is provided in Table 3 below.

Table 3. Political Participation Item Descriptions

| Political Participation Item | Response Categories | Percent Yes | # of cases |
|--|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|
| (1) Voted | 0=no 1=yes | 45.1 | N= 414* |
| (2) Signed Petition (on paper or via e-mail) | 0=no 1=yes | 16.2 | N=633 |
| (3) Boycott | 0=no 1=yes | 25.1 | N=634 |
| (4) Sent e-mail/ written blog | 0=no 1=yes | 15.4 | N=635 |

* Approximately 221 African-American respondents were under 18 and thus ineligible to vote

The four items enumerated thus far will be the dependent variables in our analysis. These items represent a range of types of political behavior. The first item, voting, is one of the most visible and traditional indicators of participation. In addition, among the sample of African-American youth surveyed, voting was one of the most common forms of political activity. The second item, signing a petition, was less widespread among respondents. Yet, we believe that petition signing is an important indicator of participation because it reflects the somewhat less

³¹ With respect to item number (3), respondents were told that boycotting was “buying a certain product or service because you like the social or political values of the company that produces or sells the product.” With respect to item number (4), respondents were told that a blog was “a public web site updated frequently where users post informal journals of their thoughts, comments, and philosophies.”

conventional efforts of black youth to change and improve the political system. It is also an indicator that has previously been incorporated into major studies of political participation in America.³² The third item, boycotting, is one kind of political behavior that has generally been overlooked by political scientists.³³ Yet, in a culture frequently labeled “consumerist,” where many people believe that “money talks,” it is increasingly important to consider the ways in which political values impact the decisions that young people make about where and what to purchase. Finally, our fourth indicator inquires about whether black youth have written an e-mail or blog about a political issue. This is another new but ever more pertinent lens through which to measure political behavior. As e-mail communications and the internet become a staple in the lives of many (though by far not all) young black people, it is essential that we adapt our measurements of political participation to include political activities that occur via these new technological venues.

Since the primary goal of this part of our research is to identify the impact of nihilism on political participation, it was necessary that we control for relevant individual characteristics that conceivably influence both nihilism and political outcomes among black youth. As such, before incorporating nihilism into the analysis, we constructed a base model to examine the relationship between each of the four dependent variables and a number of critical demographic factors such as: education, income, sex, and parent’s voting behavior. Each of these variables were included in the base model for substantive theoretical reasons. Education was considered because decades of political science research confirm that this is often one of the most influential determinants of

³² Rosenstone, Steven J. and John Mark Hansen, *Mobilization, Participation, and Democracy in America*. 1993. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.

³³ Keeter, S., Zukin, C., Andolina M., and Jenkins K. 2002. *The Civic and Political Health of the Nation: A Generational Portrait*. College Park, Md.: The Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement.

political behavior.³⁴ Sex was integrated into the base model because a number of studies of political participation have unearthed differences between the political orientations of men and women.³⁵ In particular, scholars have found that African-American women vote at higher rates than black men.³⁶ Parent's voting behavior was a part of the model because a substantial body of research has established the influence of parent's civic and political activity on the political behavior and socialization of youth.³⁷ Finally, household income was included as a measure of socioeconomic status, a concept that permeates the political science literature, particularly with regards to types and levels of political participation.³⁸

In Tables 4 and 5 (below) we show the results of the base model. This model reflects the relationships between the demographic and political participation variables enumerated thus far. Table 4 contains actual logit coefficients while Table 5 contains probabilities computed based on the estimated logit coefficients from Table 4.

³⁴ Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995 *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press; Wolfinger, Raymond E. and Steven J. Rosenstone. 1980. *Who Votes*, New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press.

³⁵ Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Nancy Burns, Sidney Verba, and Jesse Donahue. 1995. "Gender and Citizen Participation: Is There a Different Voice?" *American Journal of Political Science*: 267-93.

Schlozman, Kay Lehman, Nancy Burns, and Sidney Verba. 1994. "Gender and the Pathways to Participation: The Role of Resources," *Journal of Politics* 56(4): 963-90.

³⁶ Prestage, Jewel. 1991. "In Quest of African-American Political Woman." *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 515: 88-103.

³⁷ Alex-Assensoh, Yvette. 1998. *Neighborhoods, Family and Political Behavior in Urban America*. New York: Gerald Publishing; Andolina, Molly W., Krista Jenkins, Cliff Zukin, and Scott Keeter. 2003. "Habits from the Home, Lessons from School: Influences of Youth Civic Engagement" *PS: Political Science & Politics* 36(2):275–280; Youniss, J., S. Bales, V. Christmas-Best, M. Diversi, M. McLaughlin, and R. Silbereisen. 2002. "Youth Civic Engagement in the Twenty-first Century." *Journal of Research on Adolescence* 12:121–148.

³⁸ Verba, Sidney, Kay Lehman Schlozman, and Henry E. Brady. 1995. *Voice and Equality: Civic Voluntarism in American Politics*, Cambridge, Mass: Harvard Univ. Press.

Table 4. Determinants of Political Participation (Base Model)

| <i>Dependent Variables:</i> | <i>Voted</i> | <i>Signed Petition</i> | <i>Boycott</i> | <i>E-mail/Blog</i> |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|----------------|--------------------|
| <i>Independent Variables:</i> | | | | |
| Education | .069 (.06) | .051 (.06) | .114* (.06) | -.019 (.06) |
| Income | .022 (.06) | .198 *** (.06) | .090 (.06) | .110* (.07) |
| Sex | .825*** (.25) | .251 (.25) | -.070 (.24) | -.175 (.26) |
| Parents Vote | -.012 (.01) | .006 (.01) | -.081 (.10) | -.081 (.11) |
| N | 283 | 406 | 407 | 407 |

Note: Entries are logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses

*p≤.10, two-tailed test

**p≤.05, two-tailed test

***p≤.01, two-tailed test

**Table 5. Determinants of Political Participation
(Base Model with Probabilities)***

| <i>Dependent Variables:</i> | <i>Voted</i> | <i>Signed Petition</i> | <i>Boycott</i> | <i>E-mail/Blog</i> |
|-------------------------------|----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---|------------------------------------|
| <i>Independent Variables:</i> | | | | |
| Education | X | X | .17 <i>7th grade to Advanced degree</i> | X |
| | | | .07 <i>7th grade to twelfth grade</i> | |
| | | | .09 <i>Twelfth grade to Advanced degree</i> | |
| Income | X | .20 <i>0-10k to100k</i> | X | .10 <i>0-10k to 100k</i> |
| | | .14 <i>\$20-30k to100k+</i> | | .07 <i>\$20-30k to100k+</i> |
| Sex | .20 <i>Male to female</i> | X | X | X |
| Parents Vote | X | X | X | X |
| N | 283 | 406 | 407 | 407 |

* Cells contain probabilities derived from logit estimates using Clarify and Stata Statistical Software. Each entry represents the percentage change in probability as one moves between specified values of the independent variable (in italics). Insignificant logit coefficients were not assigned probability values.

The results from the tables above indicate that there are four significant relationships among this set of variables. First, as expected, young African-American women vote substantially more than their male counterparts. In fact, as the relevant cell in Table 5 reflects, even after controlling for education, income, and parent's vote, young black women are approximately twenty percent more likely than young black men to have voted in the past year.

The second statistically significant relationship is that black youth from households with higher incomes are more likely to have signed a petition. The probabilities computed indicate that youth from households in the highest income bracket (above \$100k) are twenty percent more likely to have signed a petition than youth from households in the lowest income bracket (\$0-10k). Even when the income gap is decreased by comparing youth from households in the mean income bracket (\$20-30k) to those from households in the highest income bracket (above \$100k), youth from the highest bracket are still fourteen percent more likely to have signed a petition than those from the mean category.

The third significant relationship indicates that black youth with higher levels of education are more likely to have participated in a boycott. The probability entry shows that youth at the highest education level (advanced degrees) are approximately seventeen percent more likely to have boycotted than youth with only the lowest level of formal education (seventh grade). Even youth at the mean education level (twelfth grade) are seven percent more likely to have boycotted than those at the lowest education level. Lastly, youth at the highest level of education are nine percent more likely to have boycotted a product than youth at the mean educational level.

The fourth and final significant relationship in the base model is that black youth from households with higher incomes are more likely to have sent an e-mail or written a blog about a

political issue. The probabilities computed confirm that youth from households in the highest income bracket are approximately ten percent more likely to have written a politically oriented e-mail/blog than youth from households in the lowest income bracket and seven percent more likely to have done so than youth from households in the mean income category.

The results from the base model indicate that there are several forms of political participation that are substantially influenced by basic demographic factors. Yet, the basic model also reflects the reality that much of the political participation of black youth is not an effect of such demographics. In this paper we concentrate on the possible relevance of nihilism as a framework through which to orient the political behavior of black youth. Although our tests of the various dimensions of nihilism have not unearthed an overwhelmingly strong relationship between black youth and nihilism, it is nevertheless useful to conduct a preliminary investigation into how nihilism, as we have operationalized it, may influence the political participation of black youth. As such, we developed a nihilism model to assess the degree to which the scaled dimensions of nihilism impact political participation when controlling for the basic demographic variables. Tables 6 and 7 below show the results of the nihilism model.

Table 6. Determinants of Political Participation (Nihilism Model)

| <i>Dependent Variables:</i> | <i>Voted</i> | <i>Signed Petition</i> | <i>Boycott</i> | <i>E-mail/Blog</i> |
|-------------------------------|------------------|------------------------|-----------------|--------------------|
| <i>Independent Variables:</i> | | | | |
| Education | .062 (.06) | .057 (.06) | .129** (.06) | -.028 (.07) |
| Income | .016 (.07) | .198 ** (.06) | .103* (.06) | .126* (.07) |
| Sex | .821*** (.26) | .261 (.26) | -.070 (.24) | -.150 (.26) |
| Parents Vote | -.011 (.01) | .006 (.01) | -.086 (.10) | -.069 (.10) |
| Meaning | .470** (.18) | -.061 (.18) | .121 (.17) | -.249 (.19) |
| Hope | -.201 (.18) | .125 (.18) | .321* (.18) | .013 (.19) |
| Love | -.048 (.22) | .159 (.22) | -.251 (.22) | -.164 (.24) |
| N | 277 | 398 | 399 | 399 |

Note: Entries are logit estimates with standard errors in parentheses

* $p \leq .10$, two-tailed test

** $p \leq .05$, two-tailed test

*** $p \leq .01$, two-tailed test

**Table 7. Determinants of Political Participation
(Nihilism Model with probabilities)**

| <i>Dependent Variables:</i> | <i>Voted</i> | <i>Signed Petition</i> | <i>Boycott</i> | <i>E-mail/Blog</i> |
|-------------------------------|-----------------------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|--------------------|
| <i>Independent Variables:</i> | | | | |
| Education | X | X | X | X |
| Income | X | X | X | X |
| Sex | X | X | X | X |
| Parents Vote | X | X | X | X |
| Meaning | .39 <i>Min to Max meaning</i> | X | X | X |
| | .18 <i>Min to Mean meaning</i> | | | |
| Hope | X | X | .17 <i>Min to Max Hope</i> | X |
| | | | .06 <i>Min to Mean Hope</i> | |
| Love | X | X | X | X |
| N | 277 | 398 | 399 | 399 |

* Cells contain probabilities derived from logit estimates using Clarify and Stata Statistical Software. Each entry represents the percentage change in probability as one moves between specified values of the independent variable (in italics). Insignificant coefficients were not assigned probability values. In addition, the coefficients that were significant and thus assigned probabilities in the base model are not re-assigned probabilities in the nihilism model.

Table 6 contains actual logit coefficients while Table 7 contains probabilities computed based on the estimated logit coefficients from Table 6. We can see from Table 6 that most of the significant relationships found mirror those discovered in the base model. However, the nihilism scales did prove significant in two cases. With respect to the voting patterns of black youth, a move from the minimum level to the maximum level of the meaning scale increases the likelihood of voting by thirty-nine percent. A less drastic move from the minimum to the mean level of the scale increases the likelihood of voting by eighteen percent. As noted previously, a low score on the meaning scale translates into feelings among black youth that people judge them by what they can buy, and that black women and black men are portrayed offensively in rap music videos. These measures tap into young black people's understandings of the way they are viewed and represented in society. Hence, black youth that score low on the meaning scale have very strong attitudes about the negative representations and devaluations of young black people in popular society. These young people will be less likely to vote.

The results also indicate that youth who had the maximum score on the hope scale are seventeen percent more likely to boycott than those with the lowest scores. The distance between those with a mean score and those with the lowest score is six percent. Substantively, this means that black youth who believe that the government cares and that government leaders are not unduly influenced by private interests are more likely to boycott than those who express negative judgments of government. One possible explanation of this phenomenon is that those who believe that the government is sensitive to the public interest may more easily be inclined to suppose that big business is similarly receptive. Again, without more analysis and additional data gathering through in-depth interviews with respondents we will not know the motivations for the findings discovered.

Conclusion

Ultimately, the relationships between our nihilism scales and the politics of black youth remain puzzling. We cannot explain the reasons why youth who had high levels of hope in government were not also more likely to vote, which is the result that would have been more in line with our expectations. Similarly, our analysis to date cannot furnish us with an account of why youth scoring high on the meaning scale were not also more likely to engage in other relevant political activities. All in all, the data demonstrates what we believe may be important relationships between certain aspects of nihilism and particular political activities but only in a few areas of analysis.

Are black youth suffering a different kind of racism as Simpson so aptly describes it? If one looks at the statistics it seems that the answer is yes. Those youth most vulnerable in black communities face great difficulties securing a quality education, finding a job that pays a living wage, feeling secure in the safety and prosperity of their neighborhood and believing that the state will work for their interests. Given this picture, it is easy to see how authors, scholars, journalists and pundits have turned to nihilism as an explanation for the attitudes and actions of black youth that they find problematic. Our preliminary analysis, however, suggests that nihilism, at least as it has been described by West and others, may not be the driving force behind the decision-making of black youth. Far from being exclusively nihilistic, black youth demonstrate indicators both of resilience and despair. In terms of their feelings about the government and the existence of racism in their lives, they seem to be realistically pessimistic about the possibility of radical improvement in the conditions they face. On the other hand, the black youth we surveyed have high levels of self-esteem, feel loved, and believe that they have

the ability to improve their lives. It is the contradictory positioning of black youth, living in a racist society that continues to perpetuate the myth of being color-blind, that demands the attention of researchers. While the conditions are ripe for nihilism, the psyches of African American young people do not seem to have been penetrated by nihilism. Our future analysis will focus on the contradictory messages and experiences in the lives, attitudes and politics of black youth.

APPENDIX

Scale Items and Response Categories

Social Meaning

People judge me by what I can buy and what I own.

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Strongly agree | 1 |
| Agree..... | 2 |
| Disagree | 3 |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 4 |

Rap videos portray Black women in bad and offensive ways.

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Strongly agree | 1 |
| Agree..... | 2 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 3 |
| Disagree | 4 |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 5 |

Rap videos portray Black men in bad and offensive ways.

| | |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Strongly agree | 1 |
| Agree..... | 2 |
| Neither agree nor disagree | 3 |
| Disagree | 4 |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 5 |

Political Hope

The leaders in government care very little about people like me.

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Strongly agree | 1 |
| Agree..... | 2 |
| Disagree | 3 |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 4 |

The government is pretty much run by a few big interests looking out for themselves and their friends.

| | |
|----------------------|---|
| Strongly agree | 1 |
| Agree..... | 2 |

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Disagree | 3 |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 4 |

Love

I feel loved and wanted.

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Strongly agree | 4 |
| Agree..... | 3 |
| Disagree | 2 |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 1 |

I know people upon whom I can always rely.

| | |
|------------------------|---|
| Strongly agree | 4 |
| Agree..... | 3 |
| Disagree | 2 |
| Strongly Disagree..... | 1 |

Table 2.1 N for Significant Coefficients Reported in Table 2

| <i>Nihilism Constructs</i> | <i>Social Meaning</i> | <i>Political Hope</i> | <i>Love</i> |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|-------------|
| <i>Independent Variables:</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>N</i> | <i>N</i> |
| Race (all 3 races) | NA ¹ | 1505 | 1516 |
| White-Black | NA | 1195 | -- |
| White-Hispanic | NA | 873 | 881 |
| Black-Hispanic | NA | -- | 949 |
| Male | NA | 709 | -- |
| Female | NA | 796 | 805 |
| Sex | NA | -- | 1516 |
| White | -- | -- | -- |
| Black | 635 | -- | -- |
| Hispanic | -- | -- | -- |
| Age Group | NA | 1578 | 1516 |
| White | NA | 563 | -- |
| Black | -- | 632 | -- |
| Hispanic | NA | 310 | 314 |
| Income | NA | -- | 1003 |
| White | NA | -- | -- |
| Black | -- | -- | 408 |
| Hispanic | NA | -- | 197 |