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## Community Resources and Black Social Action, F Street, A Case Study

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COMMUNITY RESOURCES AND BLACK SOCIAL ACTION:  
F STREET, A CASE STUDY

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the

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**Community Resources and Black Social Action:**

**F Street, a Case Study**

By

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This study examines the resources employed by the predominantly African American residents of Historic West Las Vegas, Nevada, to protest a street closure in their community. Previous studies of collective social action in the black community have stressed the involvement and resources of the black church. Instead, the residents of this community relied on cultural, social, and economic resources that did not depend heavily on the church. In this ethnographic case study, I combined participant observation, ethnographic interviews, prolonged engagement, photographs, and document analysis. I argue that the resources a community employs in social action can be analyzed using my community resources model (CRM). The CRM examines three factors: 1). the specific community; 2). the socio-historical context of the community; and 3). how the community identifies itself and how it is identified by the larger society. In doing so, I explain how this community was able to succeed in their protest action without a dependent reliance on the black church.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

As one of the few white males in the room, I fidgeted nervously in my seat checking my watch to see if it was time for the meeting to start. I thought about my car in the parking lot and wondered if it was okay. Before leaving the house, my wife cautioned me to be safe. After all, this was West Las Vegas—a predominantly African American community—with a “reputation” for being unsafe, especially for whites, or so I’ve heard. I would later discover that a lot of whites who had never been to West Las Vegas held this “stigmatized” (Borer 2010) view of the community.

The newspaper article said the meeting would begin at 6:00 p.m. Yet, as I anxiously awaited the start of the meeting, more and more people crowded into the conference room at the West Las Vegas Library. When I first arrived, there were only about ten people in the small room. But as the hour approached, scores of people continued to line up at the sign-in desk. They dropped a few coins in the donation bucket, or purchased homemade cookies—the proceeds of which went to help support the burgeoning cause. It appeared to me from their clothing that most of them had just gotten off work. Many wore service uniforms; they were trash collectors, utility and construction workers. Some were dressed in business suits or office attire. Others wore casual clothing that was clean but well-worn. Although many seemed to be in their late forties or fifties, about a third of the group was much older. The room eventually filled beyond capacity, with people standing in the back and along the aisles. The cacophony of friendships between neighbors, co-workers, and relatives grew louder, consistent with



Simmel's (1950 [1908]) concept of "intersecting social circles." I however sat quietly near the back—a stranger in a strange place—feeling very much out of place.

I came to that first meeting on February 23, 2009, mostly out of curiosity. The gathering was being held for the residents of West Las Vegas to express their concerns about the plans to close F Street, in their community, for the expansion of Interstate 15 (I-15). Having lived in Las Vegas for over thirty years, and having worked in West Las Vegas many times, I pondered: "What is the big deal? Why can't the residents just take another street?" The meeting was finally called to order at about 6:20 p.m. and we began with a benediction by one of the local pastors. This meeting, as in every subsequent meeting, began and ended with a prayer by one of the pastors in attendance. Segre (2006) noted that religious overtones, as practiced in these meetings, provide a mechanism for solidarity that produce and reaffirm group identity. After two meetings at the cramped library, we moved to the Abundant Life Church in West Las Vegas. The meetings always followed a perfunctory pattern: we began with a prayer, followed by pleas for fundraising, and updates on the lawsuit. The last portion of every meeting was open for discussion, which often resulted in boisterous exchanges between members lasting for hours. Community social action has the potential for evoking passionate emotions (Isaac 2008) and this one was no different.

At that first meeting, residents complained about the lack of funding for community projects at a time when the city was spending hundreds of millions of dollars on downtown redevelopment. They criticized Mayor Oscar Goodman's pet project of a mob museum in what was once the downtown post office. The elders of the group talked about the closure of other streets in their community in the 1950s and 1960s, for the

construction of I-15, which they protested in vain. They loudly accused those behind the current street closure of having racially motivated intentions. Those residents who lived closest to F Street grumbled that they never received any notice of the street closure, as required by law. They were critical of their elected officials—young black men who had grown up in their community—for having let this occur. They bemoaned the lack of opportunities for their children and the rundown business district on Jackson Street that once bustled with energy.

When that first meeting was over, I understood that the community's outrage was about more than just one street closure. It was about eighty years of alienation and discrimination by the city of Las Vegas and its wealthy property-developing allies. I could not help but wonder: "How could this loosely organized group, consisting mainly of African Americans, lacking financial or political support, do anything to reverse the proposed street closure?"

Although it appeared that the various black churches in the community rallied behind this cause, it seemed to me that the involvement of the black church alone would not be enough for the community to prevail against such entrenched and powerful adversaries. Because of what initially appeared to be the heavy involvement of the black church in this matter, I questioned whether church culture was always at the forefront of social action in the black community? I learned that although the church serves as an integral institution in this community, church culture is only one of the resources African Americans in West Las Vegas rely upon to motivate social action (c.f. Emerson and Smith 2000).

When the meeting was over, I was greeted by several elderly community members who were delighted to talk to me about their experiences in West Las Vegas and about their concerns over the street closure. One man who identified himself Marshall X (pseudonym) was a business owner in the community; he said his “slave name” was Robinson (pseudonym). Marshall X was always impeccably dressed in a three-piece suit. In subsequent meetings, he would often sit by me and I felt less like a stranger. When I got to my car in the parking lot, it was fine, as it would be in every subsequent visit to the community over the next two and a half years.

This ethnographic case study is about how the residents of this historically African American community of West Las Vegas, Nevada, came together to protest a street closure in their community. In their call for social action, the residents of this economically challenged area drew upon their available resources – cultural, social, and economic – shaped in large part by a protracted legacy of racism and discrimination, to triumph against the political structure and social resistance. I argue that the resources employed by this community differ significantly from previous sociological examples of African American protests in the U.S., in that the residents of West Las Vegas did not rely solely on the dominant presence of the black church or its religious leaders to affect change in their community. While some of the local church leaders were involved, it was neither the church nor its religious leaders that assumed an overtly demonstrative role in this collective protest. Instead, it was a community group led largely by black women who professed no particular affinity to the church. My findings suggest that we need to expand our perception of collective action in a black community beyond church culture.

So why weren't the social, economic, and cultural resources of the church at the forefront of this social action? Please, do not misunderstand; some church congregants and their respective leaders did actively participate in this social action. While the group was not particularly dominated by the church, they were still integrally connected. The point I am trying to make here is that, unlike other examples of African American collective community action, the F Street protest was not one where the residents relied solely, or largely, on the church. In the following chapters, I document the process whereby the community successfully reverses the decision to close off the street without a dominant reliance of the resources of the church. I uncover and analyze the resources the residents utilized to mobilize their community into a coalition for change, despite a prolonged history of racially motivated governmental actions designed to further alienate and isolate this community. The community, led by the coalition committee, relied upon grassroots community organizing, meeting and budget management, social skills, joining forces with outside organizations, and political and economic pressure, among other available resources. The residents also drew upon the lessons learned from previous social conflicts, particularly those headed up by the women in the community. Of note, I use the terms "black" and "African American" interchangeably as they are commonly found to express the same racial group in the United States (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Brunnsma 2006; Yancey 2003; Massey and Denton 1993).

*Mobilizing Community Resources: The Community Resource Model*

As a result of this study, I developed an analytical tool I call the "community resource model" (CRM), which is designed for assessing and evaluating the available

resources (economic, social, and cultural) that a community may or may not possess and the potential effectiveness of those resources in times of social action (McAdam, Tarrow and Tilly 2008; Tilly 1973). The model emphasizes three factors: 1) a specific community; 2) sociohistorical influences; and 3) collective identity. I provide a more detailed description of CRM in Chapter Three. I found the CRM to be a more complete analytic tool than resource mobilization theory, which tends to focus heavily on economic resources, or those methods that stress only cultural or social resources.

Resource mobilization theory is a theoretical perspective that emphasizes material resources and a rational approach to social action (Sommerville 1997). This theory stresses the critical role of funding, leadership, and organization (Kendall 2005). Material resources generally consist of financial resources (Smith and Riley 2009). In times of social action, a community may have at their disposal varying degrees of economic, cultural, and social resources needed to accomplish a purposeful goal. Initially, the F Street coalition lacked significant economic resources and a formal organization.<sup>1</sup> Thus, the community had to explore other sources of support –social and cultural resources – in order to mobilize and sustain this social action.

Social and cultural resources are not mutually exclusive. What may be perceived as a social resource might also be culturally derived (Stuber 2009). For example, informal social networking was common in black communities in the South since slavery as a means for communicating and organizing that would not draw the suspicion of their white power structure (Billingsley 1999; Butler 1991; Morris 1984). Likewise solidarity in a social cause may be derived from a common racial, ethnic, or gender identity (Taylor and Whittier 1992). They are resources that have been socially constructed in reaction to

structural conditions that have become ingrained in a culture and used in times of social action.

Social resources may be acquired through interaction with “a boss, other workers on the job, and professional associates in other organizations” (Stuber 2007:7). Social resources, which at times may overlap with cultural resources, are also enhanced through interaction with community leaders or through participation in various community organizations that augment certain “tangible skills that allow them to manage a budget, an itinerary, or other people” (Stuber 2007:6). In the case of the F Street coalition, social resources also included a tightly-knit social network of friends, neighbors, coworkers, and church members whom shared a common attachment to the community. This resource permitted the community to organize quickly via a grassroots effort and to augment their cause by soliciting support from outside of the community. This resource also provided the group with a committee that possessed important organizational skills and the ability to conduct meetings, create and administer an agenda, and manage a budget.

Economic resources, and to a lesser extent social resources, are fairly descriptive and easily defined. Defining cultural resources can be a bit more nebulous.

Anthropologists define cultural resources as “the collective evidence of the *past* activities and accomplishments of people” (my emphasis).<sup>2</sup> Williams (2002:91) describes cultural resources as “the symbolic tools that movements wield in their efforts at social change, be they formal ideologies or expressive symbolic actions.” For some, spirituality is an important cultural resource (Flanagan and Jupp 2007); but for others, cultural resources include a diverse set of “tools” a group may call upon to formulate a plan of action

(Swidler 1998). Cultural resources also refer to knowledge of the arts, cultural preferences or “tastes” (Gans 1974); cultural skills such as the ability to play a musical instrument; singing or dancing talents; educational degrees or professional certifications (Bourdieu 1984 [1979]). Cultural resources are not an innate resource; they are “accumulated through a lifelong process of socialization” (Kraaykamp and van Eijck 2010:210). These three resources form a potentially powerful set of tools when used for community social action.

I posit that the cultural resources of the black community are far more complex than church culture alone. According to Swidler (1986:277), “All real cultures contain diverse, often conflicting symbols, rituals, stories, and guides to action.” The focus on church culture has the potential to stigmatize the culture of African Americans, thus creating a caricature of “black culture” that reflects on the identity of their community and its residents (Zaidi 2010). In contrast to a reliance on church culture, the residents of West Las Vegas drew upon a diverse wealth of indigenous cultural, social, and economic resources: grassroots organizing, social networking, political activism, economic pressure, litigation, management skills, writing skills, and the formation of alliances with supporters from within and outside of their community.

The coalition committee consisted of an author, an attorney, an office manager, several community activists, a politician, a media consultant, an academic, a distinguished retired military man, and one full-time pastor. Instead of relying on financial support from the church, the members sought donations from the community. Members assisted the movement in many ways: by creating a web site; providing media support; soliciting donations of financial and professional support; managing the budget;

lobbying politicians; and recruiting and organizing community members. Despite some infighting, the membership exhibited a unified front; they exercised patience, persistence, and perseverance in the face of adversity from the power structure. This study examines whether these resources are unique to this community, or if they mirror examples of social action by African Americans in other communities that are generally overshadowed in the sociological literature in favor of church culture.

Prior sociological work on social action in African American communities placed a strong emphasis on church culture (Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Smith 1996; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Marable 1989; Annals 1985; Morris 1984). These important works do not fully represent the rich and diverse cultural characteristics of African Americans in their persistent struggle for acceptance, equality, and social justice. While providing valuable insight into the intersection of race and culture and its impact on social action, their approach does not explain how the community of West Las Vegas was able to successfully challenge a street closure in one of their neighborhoods without the dominant participation of the black church. The case of West Las Vegas, then, may be instructive for social activists, and may help paint a fuller picture of the ways that social action is coordinated in and outside of black communities.

When we think about the modern civil rights movement in the U.S., we are likely to envision images of the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr. and other prominent religious leaders participating in such events as the march from Selma to Montgomery. This prevailing impression of the role of religion in the pursuit of social equality for blacks in America may be due largely to the media (Nelson 2001), but is also reinforced in the sociological literature (Bretz 2010). By focusing so heavily on the role of the black



church in times of social action, sociologists have tended to ignore the other salient social and cultural aspects of African Americans.

The goal of my argument is not to underrate the importance of religion in the lives of many African Americans; certainly there is ample support for this thesis (Hunt and Hunt 2001; Billingsley 1999, 1992; Du Bois 1996 [1899], 1903; Butler 1993). Instead, I hope to unpack and analyze the cultural tool kit (Swidler 1986) and repertoire (Tilly 1992) the community residents of West Las Vegas relied upon, and have historically relied upon, in times of social struggle. I also explore some of the lesser-mentioned resources African Americans in general have brought to bear in times of social action that do not stress religiosity, but instead depend upon other means to achieve social justice.

If there is a singular point that I would like the reader to take away from this study it is my firm conviction, that, when faced with a social injustice, the resources of African Americans in general, and in particular in the largely African American community of West Las Vegas, are exceedingly more complex than has generally been recognized by sociology. Despite the emphasis in the literature on the importance of religion in the lives of African Americans (Gallup and Castelli 1989), there are many blacks in West Las Vegas, and throughout the U.S., for whom religion does not represent a significant aspect of their lives (Hunt and Hunt 2001) and correspondingly serves little or no purpose in their pursuit of social justice.

A secondary goal of this study is to evoke a critical discussion concerning the concept of “black culture.” While some contend that black culture is a legitimate sociological concept (Hannerz 1969; Blauner 1967), others argue that black culture is either non-existent (Frazier 1939); irrelevant because it is based on poverty (Berger 1967;

Myrdal 1944); or has been unfairly linked with the urban underclass (Alba and Nee 2003).

### *Racial Residential Segregation*

Following my first meeting of the study group, I concluded that their outrage extended far beyond the street closure. At the core of their collective anger was the undeniable feeling that the street closure was just another attempt by the city to segregate the residents of this community. Du Bois was the first sociologist to study the social conditions of the black community and the problems associated with prejudice and racism resulting in, among other evils, residential segregation. Du Bois (1996 [1899]:322) wrote:

In the Negro's mind, color prejudice in Philadelphia is that widespread feeling of dislike for his blood, which keeps him and his children out of decent employment from certain public conveniences and amusements from hiring houses in many sections, and in general, from being recognized as a man. Negroes regard this prejudice as the chief cause of their present unfortunate condition.

The above quote shows how Du Bois recognized that it was not only the overtly racist actions of whites in Philadelphia that kept blacks from social advancement and prevented blacks from moving out of the "ghetto;" he also was keenly aware that many whites were "quite unconscious of any such powerful and vindictive feeling" (1996

[1899]:322). Racial residential segregation is, as Lawrence Bobo (1989) refers to it, the “structural linchpin” of racial inequality in the U.S. Residential segregation continues to be one of the most persistent forces of racial inequality (Oliver and Shapiro 1995). And, as I observed in the F Street protest, it appears to exist without the conscious recognition or admission of racism by most whites (Bonilla-Silva 2010).

Historic West Las Vegas serves as an exemplar for the intellectual debate between Du Bois, who argued in favor of an equal opportunity for blacks to assimilate into the white mainstream culture, and Booker T. Washington (1969 [1907]) who supported a self-sustaining, segregated black community (see also Ture and Hamilton 1967). West Las Vegas’ residents are forced to ponder how they can achieve socioeconomic equality in a society that persists to deny them full assimilation – one that continues to alienate and isolate this residential community.

The ecological model is the view that a group’s behavior is influenced by their environment (Betancur 1996). For example, early immigrant groups lived very near to their places of work and in many cases produced ethnic enclaves, or urban ghetto (DuBois 1996 [1899]). At first glance, one could be tempted to use the ecological model to analyze the settlement of blacks in Las Vegas. The first homes and businesses to spring up in Las Vegas, were located near the railroad tracks in what is now downtown Las Vegas (Moehring 1989; Kaufman 1974). Many early black immigrants to Las Vegas worked downtown as maids and porters and lived nearby, just west of the railroad tracks (Herschwitzky 2011). As Southern Nevada grew, city and state officials conspired in an insidious fashion to build physical barriers that further segregated the residents of West Las Vegas. The community is locked in between highways I-15 and U. S. 93/95; and

there is a two-mile impenetrable barrier of industrial shops on Bonanza Road, between Martin Luther King Blvd. and Main Street, further limiting downtown access.

African Americans have been a presence in Las Vegas since its early days as a railroad stop in 1905. Yet, despite their steady migration and attempts to assimilate to the mainstream culture, they remain the object of systemic racism and discrimination that continues to keep them at the bottom of the socioeconomic hierarchy (see Gordon 1964). The ecological model implies that ethnic groups have a choice in where they reside. For blacks and other minorities who migrated to Las Vegas in the 1940s and 1950s, where they lived were not a matter of their choosing. They were the victims of Jim Crow laws, redlining policies by the banks, and other forms of systemic residential segregation (Moehring 1989).

As a result of these onerous policies, West Las Vegas came into existence. For decades residents battled the city for adequate infrastructure, schools, and housing; and in the process, they created an historic and proud community. With the F Street protests, the residents continue that struggle to assimilate into the mainstream culture and society of Southern Nevada, despite protracted attempts to segregate and estrange the community. This study sheds light on the community's struggle for equality by mustering their available resources, forged in the Deep South and refashioned to meet the challenges of their new environment in their desert homeland.

### *Welcome to West Las Vegas*

The historical context behind the migration of blacks to Las Vegas, primarily from the rural South, worked to frame their opposition to racial injustices. It is a history

forged in response to their somewhat unique structural conditions, both in their former communities and in their newly-found residence of Las Vegas. Drawing upon their indigenous social and cultural resources, hewn from a history of violence, discrimination, and poverty, the African American residents of West Las Vegas demonstrate in this study that the struggle continues. From their past experiences, they developed the “tools” (Swidler 1986) to resist, persevere, and prevail.

The first blacks came to Las Vegas as early as 1905; alongside with Mexicans and Chinese immigrants, they toiled as railroad crew employees (Moehring 1989; Kaufman 1974). By 1910, there were less than twenty blacks in Las Vegas and by 1925 there were only about fifty blacks living in the small desert town (Moehring 1989). Unlike the many blacks who migrated from the rural South to the established cities of the urban North in the early part of the twentieth century, the blacks who came to Las Vegas in that time period were coming to a dusty western city lacking adequate housing or infrastructure (Geran 2006; Kaufman 1974).

In the early 1930s there were about fifty-eight blacks living in Las Vegas and most of them resided downtown; along with whites, they were regular customers at the taverns and other businesses (Moehring 1989). Several black-owned businesses were located downtown, including restaurants and brothels (Kaufman 1974). It was not uncommon for blacks and whites to be seen socializing together in some of the downtown gambling halls and restaurants (Herschwitzsky 2011; Geran 2006). According to the 1940 census there were fewer than 200 blacks living in Las Vegas (Moehring 1989; Kaufman 1974). The relatively small percentage of blacks in Las Vegas at the time

was perhaps a major reason why their presence had not yet been perceived as a threat to whites (Blaylock 1967; Blumer 1958). But that was about to change.

During the 1930s, Southern Nevada saw a gradual influx of African Americans seeking employment on the project to build Hoover Dam in Boulder City, and in the nascent gambling industry (Moehring 1989). In the 1940s, Las Vegas experienced rapid growth as a result of the completion of Hoover Dam and the Basic Magnesium Plant in Henderson. For the first time, African Americans began to migrate to Las Vegas in large numbers and the threat they presented to the white population was becoming palpable (Geran 2006; Kaufman 1974). Many of these black residents came from the southern states of Missouri, Arkansas, and Mississippi (Hershwitzky 2011; Bracey 2008). They left the Deep South to escape violence and discrimination, only to experience the same injustices in Las Vegas (Geran 2006; Orleck 2005).

The steady increase in the African American population in Southern Nevada was met with an influx of southern white gamblers and white airmen at Nellis Air Force Base. These two groups of whites were unaccustomed to socializing with blacks (Bracey 2008; Kaufman 1974). This combination prompted casino owners to begin refusing service to blacks, fearing they would lose business (Hershwitzky 2011; Geran 2006; Kaufman 1974). African American entertainers could perform at the hotels, but were forced to leave once their shows were over, and they could only find lodging in West Las Vegas (Hershwitzky 2011; Geran 2006; Moehring 1989).

In 1943, Las Vegas Mayor Ernie Cragin refused to renew the business licenses of any black-owned businesses located downtown unless they agreed to relocate to West Las Vegas (Moehring 1989; Kaufman 1974). Segregation resulted in many blacks

opening their own businesses in West Las Vegas, causing a booming economy to flourish there in the 1940s and 1950s, with many stores, shops, and restaurants along Jackson Street (Bracey 2008; Geran 2006). In 1955, the Moulin Rouge opened in West Las Vegas as the first fully-integrated hotel casino in the United States. Entertainers like Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin were regular patrons (Bracey 2008; Geran 2006; Moehring 1989).

By comparison, the cities of the urban North offered blacks employment in the many bustling factories and industries that drew them there from the plantations of the South (Tolney 1997). The African Americans who migrated to Las Vegas in the 1930s came at a time when gambling halls, brothels, and saloons were still in their infancy (Geran 2006). Gambling was legalized in 1931, in Nevada, and many of the early casinos were really just converted taverns (Moehring 1989). What would someday become the gambling Mecca of the world was a city still many decades off into the future. While it is true that the blacks who migrated to the northern cities were often victimized by racism and discrimination, the violence and harsh Jim Crow laws of the Old South had softened for them to some extent (Woodward and McFeely 2001). Blacks who came to Las Vegas in the 1940s would soon discover that in addition to racial segregation, the Jim Crow laws of the Old South had followed them here (Orleck 2005). However, the indigenous social and cultural resources they brought with them, and those they created out of their adaption to their new structural conditions, would serve them well in their struggle for social justice in their present homeland.

Historic West Las Vegas (also known as the Westside), comprises a 3.5 square mile area within the City of Las Vegas. The community has some of the oldest streets,

homes, and businesses in Southern Nevada. Originally platted as home sites for miners in 1905, the area was developed by J. T. McWilliams and known as the McWilliams Townsite (Moehring 1989). By the 1930s, the area had become known as “the Westside” because it was situated west of the railroad tracks, which served as a dividing line separating blacks, Hispanics, and poor whites from the more prosperous whites living downtown (Kaufman 1974). The railroad tracks also acted as the western border for downtown Las Vegas (Hershwitzky 2011; Geran 2006). In those days, West Las Vegas had no infrastructure and only a few dirt roads (Moehring 2005; Kaufman 1974). Over the next two decades residents’ requests for infrastructure improvements were repeatedly denied by the City of Las Vegas, despite having to pay taxes that supported these improvements in other parts of the city (Hershwitzky 2011; Orleck 2005).

In December of 1949, the *Las Vegas Review - Journal* published two newspaper articles announcing the opening of a new subdivision called “Westside Park,” designed by noted African American architect Paul Revere Williams (Moehring 1989). The property changed hands several times and in 1954 the subdivision was recorded as Berkley Square, with 148 lots on 22 acres. Berkley Square was named after the distinguished African American civil rights attorney Thomas L. Berkley, who served as an adviser to the Kennedy and Johnson administrations (Mooney 2006).

As the name implies, “Historic” West Las Vegas contains numerous locales listed on the National Register of Historic Places.<sup>3</sup> The Berkley Square district, bounded by Byrnes Avenue, D Street, Leonard Avenue, and G Street in West Las Vegas, was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 2009. The Moulin Rouge, once located at 900 W. Bonanza Road and later demolished in 2010, was listed on the National Register



of Historic Places in 1992. The Westside School was built as the original “Branch No.1, Las Vegas Grammar School” in 1922. Though no longer used as a school, it was placed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1979.

In 1956, large parcels of property in West Las Vegas were condemned as part of the City Planning Department’s “slum clearance program,” recommending I-15 be routed through the Westside (Orleck 2005; Kaufman 1974). In 1968, seven streets were closed on the Westside. Ethel Pearson organized hundreds of her fellow West Las Vegas residents to protest the closures, but the streets remained closed (Geran 2006). According to Orleck (2005:48), West Las Vegas residents called I-15 the concrete curtain, “a bitter allusion to the ‘Iron Curtain,’ the infamous symbol of Communist domination in Eastern Europe.” The highway served as a deterrent that hindered the community from traveling into the downtown commercial districts, and as a barrier between more prosperous white residential communities. It was a harbinger of things to come.

In the first few months of 1960, with Jim Crow laws still being enforced by the hotels and casinos, local NAACP president, Dr. James B. McMillan, a dentist, with assistance from the national branch, intensified his campaign to end the discriminatory labor practices in the gaming industry.<sup>4</sup> McMillan had found a powerful ally in Hank Greenspun, publisher of the *Las Vegas Sun*, who published daily articles about the campaign. Despite threats on his life and to his family, McMillan issued a thirty-day deadline in February 1960 to end the practice of discrimination or a march of 300 demonstrators would take place on the Las Vegas Strip (Moehring 1989). On March 26, 1960, McMillan and Greenspun, along with national NAACP officials, local business leaders, law enforcement officers, county commissioners, Mayor Oran Gragson,

Governor Grant Sawyer, and members of the press met at the Moulin Rouge to negotiate the end of the color barrier in the Las Vegas hotels and casinos.<sup>5</sup> Shortly thereafter, Jim Crow laws in Las Vegas began to fade away and blacks were free for the first time to frequent most of the white-owned businesses. Some hotels, however, initially failed to change their racist policies until much later (Moehring 1989; Kaufman 1974). Despite these advances, other systemic and insidious forms of racism would continue to plague blacks in the community for decades to follow.

Since racial integration in the 1970s, West Las Vegas has experienced a steady economic decline that continues today, with nearly one in three African American families living below the poverty level.<sup>6</sup> Many of the once-thriving businesses have been replaced by a plethora of churches that dot the landscape, or empty buildings and vacant lots.<sup>7</sup> The Moulin Rouge was shuttered for decades – having fallen victim to numerous fires by homeless squatters – and was demolished in 2010. In many ways, the economic decline of West Las Vegas mirrors what has occurred to African Americans in other inner-city urban areas throughout the U.S. (Feagin 2010; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Wilson 1987, 1978). Today, the community is generally bordered by Interstate 15 (I-15) to the east, Carey Avenue to the north, Rancho Drive to the west, and U. S. 95 to the south.

For purposes of compiling census data, West Las Vegas is contained within Ward 5. The population of Ward 5 is approximately fifty-three percent African American,<sup>8</sup> though recently the area has seen an influx of Hispanics.<sup>9</sup> However, these statistics can be somewhat deceiving as many whites, including non-Hispanic whites, tend to reside in the neighborhoods that frame the outer sections of Ward 5 (see table 2). Table 2 represents

the demographic information for Ward 5, which includes West Las Vegas. Ward 5 contains census tracts 2.01, 3.01, 3.02, 34.25, and 35. Census tracts 3.01, 3.02, and 35 comprise much of the study area, particularly the intersection of F Street and McWilliams, which is located in tract 3.01. The population for census tract 3.01 is two percent white and fifty-three black; tract 3.02 is eight percent white and seventy-one percent black; and, tract 35 is six percent white and seventy-five percent black. However, portions of each of these three tracts extend beyond the traditional boundaries of West Las Vegas and include a larger white and Hispanic population than is actually present in the community. While the precise demographic information for the neighborhoods closest to the street closure is not available, my personal estimate would be closer to ninety percent African American, with a non-Hispanic white population of less than one percent.

*The Women of West Las Vegas: A Legacy of Social Action*

Ruby Duncan felt that she was on her way to eradicating poverty in her (West Las Vegas) community. Now she's well past the age when she can think of going back to organizing. But the key to her approach is as relevant today as it ever was. You have to feed the children. But you also have to build self-esteem among their mothers, women who have been despised for so long that they've begun to despise themselves. Duncan's great hope is that today's young women will carry on her challenge: to break down the barriers against decent jobs, healthcare, daycare, housing,

and education for poor women and their children, and to establish those goals as a birthright for all Americans. Orleck (2005:310)

The quote above encapsulates the noble spirit of the resistance and pride I witnessed by the women of the F Street coalition. On March 6, 1971, some thirty-eight years before the F Street protest march on the Las Vegas Strip, Ruby Duncan led a group of disgruntled African American women from West Las Vegas, frustrated by the state's attempts to reduce public assistance benefits, on a march down the Strip and into the opulent Caesars Palace casino.<sup>10</sup> The marchers included a collection of 1,500 men, women, and children. Their actions, captured by television cameras from around the nation, prompted the casino floor to shut down for over an hour. "Interspersed throughout the march were the mothers and children of the Westside—'long, long strips of people,' says Duncan. 'They were backed all the way downtown'" (Orleck 2005:156). The group was headed by West Las Vegas activists Ruby Duncan, Alversa Beals, and Mary Wesley, Ralph Abernathy, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, National Welfare Rights Organization chief George Wiley, California welfare rights activist Johnnie Tillmon, and actress Jane Fonda (Orleck 2005).

Frustrated by what they perceived as a "war on welfare," the women of West Las Vegas were protesting Nevada's decision to remove one in three welfare families from the rolls and drastically reduce benefits for another third (Orleck 2005). Their actions would eventually lead to major changes in the administration of welfare benefits in Nevada and throughout the U.S. These mostly single-mothers from West Las Vegas would go on to build one of the most successful antipoverty programs in the nation,

Operation Life.<sup>11</sup> Duncan assembled a loose coalition of radical priests and nuns, civil rights leaders, legal services lawyers, welfare mothers, and celebrities in this extraordinary act of civil disobedience (Orleck 2005).

The other story here is who these women were and what structural conditions led them to take their place in the history of civil rights in Las Vegas. Ruby Duncan, the group's leader, was a single-mother of seven, from Tallulah, Louisiana, who, in the early 1950s, fled the life of a cotton-picker as a teenager for the promise of a good-paying job as a hotel maid in Las Vegas. Duncan was like so many of the other black women she would come to know as friends and neighbors in West Las Vegas. They came from the southern states of Mississippi, Arkansas and all throughout the Deep South seeking a better life (Geran 2006). Due to the violence that was commonplace in the South, these women were raised in a culture that both feared and loathed the white men who dominated their lives. Their mothers trained them how to tactfully sidestep the sexual advances and physical and verbal abuse of their white overlords: "they modeled patterns of dignity and resistance that shaped these young girl's identities" (Orleck 2005:20). Though they possessed little in the way of formal education, these social skills and cultural values would serve them well in their new home in Las Vegas.

When Duncan and the many other black men and women from the South, who followed their dreams to the desert of Las Vegas, arrived, they were directed to the undeveloped section of Las Vegas, west of the railroad tracks, called the "Westside" (Hershwitzky 2011). They were shocked to see people living in tents and shacks; there were no paved roads, electricity, sewers, running water, or street-lighting (Geran 2006.). Jim Crow laws prevented blacks from patronizing most of the white-owned businesses

downtown. The only work they could find were low-paying jobs as maids and porters (Moehring 1989).

Many of these women, including Duncan and Wesley, were married at the time they came to Las Vegas. Their marriages soon deteriorated in part due to their husbands' inability to secure good-paying jobs that necessitated them moving around constantly in order to support their growing families (Orleck 2005). Still, for these young mothers, the working conditions and pay were a vast improvement over the plantation lives they had left behind (Geran 2006). Duncan and the other single-mothers soon discovered, however, that hotel work was seasonal. And when the tourist season ended, they were forced to go on welfare to feed their families (Orleck 2005). The financial assistance these women of West Las Vegas received, though meager, was barely enough to carry them over until the tourist season returned.

A backlash against welfare recipients gained popularity in the mid-1960s, spurred on by then candidate for governor of California, Ronald Reagan. In his 1966 bid for governor, Reagan announced: "From now on, the able-bodied will work for their keep;" and he promised to "send the welfare bums back to work" (Feagin 1975:5). Soon after these statements, his poll numbers surged (Orleck 2005); and he was elected to two terms of office from 1967 to 1975. The growing national sentiment that black mothers were to blame for poverty, drugs, juvenile delinquency and gang violence (Perlman 1964), were only bolstered by scholars such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965) and the earlier works of E. Franklin Frazier (1939). Politicians, especially in the South, used these works and the growing anti-welfare sentiment as fodder to attack black women as reckless and immoral. As Orleck (2005:83) notes:

Black welfare mothers were not citizens seeking their rights, legislators charged, but charlatans extorting state funds to which they were not entitled. What's more, they alleged, black women were having babies to increase their welfare checks...Russell Long, the influential U.S. Senator from Louisiana, described welfare mothers as 'brood mares'—an image plucked directly from the language of the slave masters.

This socially constructed image of black single mothers as irresponsible, “welfare queens” framed the perspective of the state legislators and welfare caseworkers in Nevada and elsewhere (Perlman 1964). Social workers encouraged both white and black single moms to give up their children in order to be socially responsible, and as a way to get them off the welfare rolls. But they failed to understand a black mothers' resistance to such a suggestion (Kunzel 1994). As Orleck (2005:84) notes: “Single black mothers who wanted to keep their babies were incomprehensible to white caseworkers raised in a culture where illegitimacy equaled shame. Such women seemed to them as unregenerate and unrepentant.” In Florida and elsewhere in the U.S., black single mothers withdrew from public assistance rather than give their children away (Kunzel 1994).

In reaction to the growing anti-welfare movement, the subsequent mistreatment from social workers, and the shadowy world of powerful men who controlled their fate, the women of West Las Vegas formed the Clark County Welfare Rights Organization (CCWRO). In 1969, Ruby Duncan would become the head of the CCWRO and later that

year she was elected to the National Welfare Rights Organization's National Coordinating Committee (Orleck 2005:104-119).

By 1970, Richard Nixon's administration attempted to balance the policies of the previous Johnson administration's "war on poverty," with the interests of his party—to drastically reduce federal public assistance (Kunzel 1994). State after state began the systematic process of cutting welfare benefits and eliminating recipients from their rolls. Nevada was no exception. Frustration had overcome their patience and the mothers of West Las Vegas, with assistance from outside the community, organized the protest march on the Las Vegas Strip in the spring of 1971. Their efforts resulted in federal intervention that saw thousands of recipients being put back on public assistance in Nevada (Orleck 2005:168-170).

Many of the women who participated in the F Street protests were the children, grandchildren, neighbors, nieces and nephews of the women of West Las Vegas, who fought so valiantly for welfare rights. Long after their struggle for welfare rights ended, they continued to be socially active in their community. They instilled in their families and the other children in the surrounding neighborhoods the same culture of contempt and mistrust for the politicians and government administrators that they once felt for their white overlords in the South. They taught the members of their community that despite lacking financial support or political backing, through unity and perseverance, they could break down the "walls" of injustice. They accomplished this task by building coalitions with an eclectic mix of participants, and without the dominant involvement of the black church or its religious leaders. The social and cultural resources they had acquired from



confronting years of systemic racism in the Old South were now being adapted to face the new challenges in their present environment.

### *The F Street Closure*

Neighbors Ora Bland and Estella Jimmerson were awakened one morning in July of 2008, by the sound of bulldozers and other construction equipment parked near the underpass to I-15 at the corner of F Street and McWilliams. In the weeks that followed, residents began to see more and more dirt being brought in and a “road closed” sign was put up at the intersection. Their initial curiosity turned to anxious concern as word began to spread throughout the community that the Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT) was planning on closing F and D streets permanently for the expansion of the interstate. The residents began calling city officials seeking answers, but their calls were not returned and the collective voice of the community grew louder.

On September 18, 2008, at the urging of Mayor Oscar Goodman, a community meeting was held at the Doolittle Community Center by City Councilman Ricki Barlow, and County Commissioner Lawrence Weekly—two African American men who had grown up in West Las Vegas. NDOT officials were also at the meeting. When asked several times if the streets would be permanently closed, the two politicians and the NDOT officials remained silent. By October of 2008, NDOT contractor Las Vegas Paving, with approval from the City of Las Vegas, had dumped hundreds of tons of dirt at the intersection of F Street and McWilliams and began the construction of a wall, signaling that F Street would be permanently closed for the expansion of I-15. However, NDOT did so without prior written notice to the residents as required by law.

Immediately, the local residents again began to voice their dissent over the proposed wall to city and state officials. Due to the massive outcry from the community, the city and NDOT agreed to back off of their plan to close D Street. But the closure of F Street and the construction of the wall there commenced on schedule. This project essentially closed off one of the few remaining main arterials between the community and downtown Las Vegas. The residents of West Las Vegas formed small neighborhood groups hoping to develop a plan to stop the project. On October 8, 2008, using the list from the Doolittle meeting, these neighborhood groups evolved into “The Coalition to Stop the F Street Closure.” The initial group, consisting of eleven members, all of whom either lived in West Las Vegas or had family ties to the community, continued to meet in each other’s homes regularly for several months.

Then on Monday, February 23, 2009, a formal community meeting was held at the West Las Vegas Library. This is when I became involved as a researcher *and* as an activist. I actively participated in the efforts of this protest group by attending biweekly meetings, rallies, city planning meetings, and a protest march on the Las Vegas Strip. As a result of our persistent efforts, in June of 2009, the Nevada State Legislature in conjunction with the city of Las Vegas agreed to set aside \$70 million dollars to fund a tunnel through the F Street wall, and to contribute to the economic redevelopment of the community.

For more than two years, I watched as this small band of outraged residents, with no financial backing or political support, forged coalitions of disparate individuals and groups within the community into a force for change. The coalition reached out beyond the community to find support from other more organized factions. Members participated

in grass-roots organizing to recruit their friends, neighbors, and coworkers. They made savvy use of the media to embarrass and shame local politicians into supporting their cause. The group found support from a prominent attorney who worked pro-bono and from a certain white, male academic who carried their message beyond the community. They found strength and inspiration from the elderly women of West Las Vegas who decades earlier had fought a battle over welfare rights. Though the church was involved in this protest, their role was not the dominant one. The church alone would never have been able to accomplish this feat without the host of social and cultural resources the community brought to bear in this social action.

### *Organization of the Study*

Up to this point, I have described how I became involved in the F Street movement and I provided a historical context for the topic of this study: the resources of social action in a black community. I discussed not only the history of African Americans in Las Vegas, but also the social injustices they faced and the actions they took to fight back. Social action in this black community draws upon a multitude of social and cultural resources, which at times may overlap, that extend well beyond the dominance of the black church. In the following chapters, I will situate my study within the sociological literature and discuss my research methods, and will then unpack and uncover the cultural “toolkit” (Swidler 1986) of the community action.

Chapter Two is a review of the literature that addresses the issue of church culture in black social action. I discuss the theoretical considerations of the case: race, culture, and to a lesser degree social action. I also engage in a critical discussion of the term

“black culture.” I discuss the difficulty social scientists have encountered in defining culture, and how I define and conceptualize the terms culture and race. It is the intersection of these two concepts (race and culture) that helps to inform my analyses of this study. I provide some examples of how church culture has played a dominant role in black social action. This approach tends to be heavily emphasized in the sociological literature, at the expense of other African American resources. Then I offer three multi-level examples of black social action that engage African American social and cultural capital which do not stress the dominant participation of the black church. This chapter includes a discussion of African American religiosity, black social action absent the dominant presence of the church, and residential segregation. Racial residential segregation was a critical issue behind the community’s efforts to combat the construction of the F Street wall.

In Chapter Three, I discuss my research methods and data collection techniques. I also take a reflexive view of my presence in the group – as a white middle-class male, academic, in my fifties – and how my presence may have affected my data collection, analyses, and results. Chapter Four provides a detailed account of my involvement with this protest group. I chronicle my participation in this social action, beginning with my first meeting in February of 2009, and culminating in the meetings to design the reopening of the street. I discuss the often-times contentious community meetings, the rallies, and the influence of the black religious leaders. I give an account of the protest march on the Las Vegas Strip and the mixed reaction I received from some of the members to my involvement in this cause. I also discuss how city officials attempted to co-opt the group’s message following the march.

Chapter Five is an analysis of the differentially-interpreted meanings of the F Street wall. I introduce comments made by both the African American residents of West Las Vegas who were opposed to the street closure, and those made by white outsiders in favor of the street closure. The comments come from several sources: online postings, conversations with informants, and editorials. The wall symbolizes a protracted history of oppression to one group and is seen as a necessary barrier between downtown and a perceived ghetto for another group.

In Chapter Six, I provide a descriptive account of the community that is often either ignored or described in less than ideal terms by residents from outside of West Las Vegas. I use Lofland's (1998) example of "parochial realms" to analyze the various places residents socialize and bond. I discuss the importance these "places" have for informal social networking – one method for residents used to obtain information about the protest. I discuss the cultural significance of place, collective memory, examine the verve of this proud community, and uncover why the residents have fought for so long to keep from becoming marginalized and segregated.

Chapter Seven is an analysis of my findings and a comparative examination between Horton's (1992) Black Organizational Autonomy Model and the organizational mechanisms of the F Street Coalition. I also provide a more detailed analysis of two major sociological works that focus considerable emphasis on the relationship between black social action and the church: Morris's (1984) *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* and Pattillo-McCoy's (1998) "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community."

My study concludes with a call for a broader sociological view of the relationship between the community resources of African Americans and social action beyond the involvement of the black church. This study suggests that the intersection of race and culture can positively affect social action, providing a bridge between social movement and cultural theory. I hope to show that the church's presence was not a dominant voice in the call for social action. The community members, assisted by outside support, drew upon a host of resources, shaped in part by their reaction to their historical structural conditions, to combat and rectify an egregious social injustice. I also discuss the limitations of my research and how I might have improved upon my methods and techniques. I conclude with a discussion how this study might further our theoretical understanding of community resources in black social action and the potential for future research on community-building and community activism.

## Notes

1. I use the terms “coalition” or “F Street coalition” to describe the formal organization responsible for the protest action in this case study. The initial group was called the “Coalition to Stop the Street Closure.” In January of 2009, they became “Stop the F Street Closure, LLC.”
2. New York State Museum, Office of Cultural Education.  
[www.nysm.gov/research/anthropology](http://www.nysm.gov/research/anthropology).
3. See the National Register Information System, National Register of Historic Places, National Park Service, U.S. Department of the Interior.
4. For a complete discussion of the campaign to end racial discrimination in the Las Vegas hotels and casinos, see Geran (2006:133-146).
5. See “Lifting of LV Racial Barrier Passes Test” Las Vegas Sun archives, March 26, 1960.
6. See Table 1.
7. West Las Vegas has 56 parcels of land that are dedicated as religious facilities. They comprise approximately 12 acres and make up about 15% of the total area.  
[http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/files/WLV\\_Religious\\_Facilities\\_NS.pdf](http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/files/WLV_Religious_Facilities_NS.pdf)
8. West Las Vegas is comprised of five U.S. Census tracts: 2.01, 3.01, 3.02, 34.25, and 35.01. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, the total percentage of African Americans living in these combined census tracts was approximately fifty-three percent. See table 2 for a complete racial demographic breakdown.
9. The Hispanic population increased in Ward 5, which includes West Las Vegas, by three-hundred percent between 1990 and 2000. Ward 5 Report, prepared by the City of Las Vegas, Planning and Development Department July 1, 2008.
10. For a detailed account of this event read *Storming Caesar’s Palace: How Black Mothers Fought Their Own War on Poverty* by Annalise Orleck (2005).
11. In 1971, Ruby Duncan and some of the other mother’s who participated in the welfare rights organization formed Operation Life, in the closed Cove Hotel. The group opened the community’s first medical clinic, library, swimming pool, and provided assistance to poor mothers in the way of food, clothing, housing, utilities and legal assistance. In 1977, Operation Life was the only Title 7 non-profit to receive federal funding in the country. Their efforts continued for nearly 25 years, until their funding was stopped in 1996, in large part to the welfare to work policies of the Clinton Administration (Orleck 2005). For a discussion of the welfare to work policy see Monnat and Bunyan (2008).

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This study shows how the intersection of race and culture can positively affect social action and provide a bridge between social movement and cultural theory. In this chapter, I review the relevant literature pertaining to race, culture, and social action. I also address two major sociological works that act as guiding frameworks for my study: *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, by Aldon Morris (1984); and, “Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community,” by Mary Pattillo-McCoy (1998). These two works focus on church culture as the dominant resource for social action in the black community. My objective in this study is to expand upon these two outstanding contributions to the literature by exploring *all* of the tools my study group employed in their struggle for social justice that did not rely heavily on the black church.

#### *Race*

Some people talk about race as if it were culture; others talk about race as if it were a biological identity. Race is a symbol of both stratification and population identity, because racial stratification and identity are both aspects of society and, in fact, are both the same. -Tukufu Zuberi, (2001:xix)



Race, racism, and racial discrimination were mentioned frequently by the coalition at meetings and other events. Members often expressed the opinion that the construction of the wall was racially motivated—a charge vehemently denied by city officials. Issues about race also emerged in my conversations with whites who were in favor of the wall. Comments posted on the *Las Vegas Review - Journal* newspaper's online forum were regularly filled with racially charged remarks. Perceptions of race and discrimination were at the forefront of discussions about the F Street wall. Race, therefore, is not a tangential issue but central to this study.

There is little disagreement among contemporary social scientists that race is a social construction (Yancey 2003; Bonilla-Silva 2001, 1997; Omi and Winant 1986), as opposed to the traditional view of race as biological (Zuberi 2001). As such, assigning racial identity is arbitrary (Blauner 2001; Omi and Winant 1986), yet context-dependent. Bonilla-Silva (2010:8-10) contends that social scientists use three approaches to the social construction of race: 1) race is socially constructed and therefore should not be used as a category of analysis; 2) while providing “lip service” to the social constructionist view, “proceeds to discuss ‘racial differences’ in academic achievement...as if they were truly racial,” (e. g., studies analyzing the relationship between race and crime, or race and educational attainment); and 3) race, like class and gender, is socially constructed but has a social reality (see Thomas and Thomas 1928).<sup>1</sup>

Brunsma (2006:5) says “race is not something one *is*, but rather an elaborate, lived experience and cultural ritual of what one *does*.” Race affects social interaction and societal perceptions of social status (Blauner 1989), racial knowledge (Collins 2000), and identity (Anderson 1999). I contend that race is socially constructed. Racial identity has a

deeply symbolic meaning; it influences our perceptions and actions. Racial identity plays an important role in social interactions, particularly between blacks and non-blacks (Waters 1990).

### *Statistics and Racial Identity*

My best estimate is that about two percent of the coalition members who regularly attended the meetings were white. Other than me, the only white males who regularly attended the meetings were committee members Dan Shaulis and Colin Jacobs. The coalition members who voiced the greatest opposition to the wall were African Americans; and they identified themselves as African American or black. They identified their protagonists as white racist elites who controlled the power structure and were bent on alienating this community.

Probably nothing has had a greater impact on shaping racial identity in the U.S. than the census (Zuberi 2001). Since racial categories are socially constructed they have historically been subjected to change (Yancey 2003; Rodriguez 2000). The measurement of race and ethnicity has never fully been without its problems or consequences (Alba 1990); it continues to present researchers with ethical and methodological concerns (Yancey 2003). The measurement of race and ethnicity is compounded by the tendency for social scientists to lump together groups for statistical purposes (Alba and Logan 1991). For these reasons, Zuberi (2001:144) encourages social scientists to be careful and reflexive in their use of racial data. Zuberi emphasizes that racial statistics, specifically how they are used in social science, are at the heart of *racial formation* (Omi and Winant 1986) and classification (Bonilla-Silva 2001).

The shift from descriptive to inferential statistics can be problematic for sociologists and for society (Stigler 1986). For example, if descriptive statistics report a disproportionate percentage of blacks living at or near the poverty level, inferential statistics might imply that the cultural values and behaviors associated with being black somehow causes poverty, (Glazer and Moynihan 1970), without examining the underlying social causes (Massey 1990; Massey and Denton 1993). Because this study involves the intersection of race and culture, I provide only descriptive data hoping to avoid the previously noted potential for reifying racial and ethnic stereotypes.

### *Constructing the Cultural Identity of a Community*

If we accept the premise that race is socially constructed then the next step is to posit that cultural identity is also ascribed to a racial group (Sharma 2010), both from those within and those outside of the racial group, based on their racial identity (Blumer 1959). Racial or ethnic identity and its ascribed cultural characteristics are potentially problematic for individuals interacting in society (Blauner 2001). But the dilemma of ascribing cultural characteristics to a racial or ethnic group is compounded when that identity is generalized to the culture of an entire community (Zaidi 2010). A negative cultural identity can stigmatize a community (Borer 2010), affecting governmental policies (Feagin and Sikes 1994; Wilson 1978), and reinforcing residential segregation (Emerson, Yancey and Chai 2001; Massey and Denton 1993).

Because the various racial and ethnic groups in the U. S. have experienced different levels of success at assimilating to the mainstream culture (Lieberson and Waters 1988), both within and between groups – what Alba and Nee (2003) refer to as

“segmented assimilation” – we recognize that not all minority group members share the same cultural models as other members of their group. As Alba and Nee state (2003:8): “The segmented assimilation concept risks essentializing central-city black culture in the image of the underclass, which the American mainstream views as the undeserving poor. This image overlooks the variety of cultural models found among urban African Americans and inflates the magnitude of the underclass population.” This negative image may also have deleterious consequences to the cultural identity and resources of an affected community (Oliver and Shapiro 1995).

Like diamonds formed from extreme geological conditions, community culture is often formed from a group’s reaction to their structural conditions. The African American experience in the U.S. is a distinctive one. Likewise, the historical experience of African Americans in West Las Vegas is also unique. Their cultural identity has the potential to be dissimilar from other black communities. Despite this potential, a negative stereotypical view of African American culture in West Las Vegas has permeated the consciousness of many whites.

Frequent comments posted in the newspaper’s online forum, in response to the street closure, were racially charged. References were made to West Las Vegas residents eating “chicken bones and watermelon,” or being criminals, drug addicts and welfare recipients. In subsequent conversations with whites who were in favor of the street closure, I learned that they had never visited West Las Vegas. Their view of the area as a “ghetto” rested solely on the fact that the community is predominantly black. In their collective minds, the “stigmatized” racial group (Goffman 1963), resided in a stigmatized

neighborhood (Borer 2010); and stereotypically negative assumptions were made regarding their culture.

Racial formation theory recognizes that, at the micro-interactional level, race is a matter of individuality and the formation of identities (Winant 2006). Racial formation stresses the theoretical and empirical possibility that the social construction of race has the ability to change how an individual defines their racial, ethnic, or cultural identity (Brunsma 2006). In contrast to those who expressed negative opinions of West Las Vegas, both current and former residents often voiced great pride in their cultural heritage and in the historical aspects of their community.

At one meeting, an African American utility worker and former resident of West Las Vegas told me he recently had a traffic dispute with a white woman who told him to go back to his house in the ghetto. He actually lives in an upscale neighborhood in the northwest valley. He said: “Why is it whites always assume that blacks must live in the ghetto, just because we are black?” F. James Davis (2006) finds racial and ethnic identity to have a highly variable status, which includes certain ascribed cultural attributes depending on one’s social status. In Latin America, mixed-race persons are assigned a social status that may vary from quite low to very high, depending more on education and wealth than on color or other racial traits (Davis 2006). Wilson (1978) makes a similar argument concerning the cultural values of middle-class blacks being more in line with that of whites than with their *underclass*, inner-city counterparts (c.f. Frazier 1939, 1957).

Cox (1948), however, argued that race was even more restrictive than *caste* in terms of placing a group within the socioeconomic hierarchy. This latter argument tends to explain the negative view of blacks in West Las Vegas, whom despite their educational

or social class status, are often relegated to the lowest rung of the socioeconomic hierarchy.

The residents of West Las Vegas comprise a mix of social and economic classes (see Tables 2 and 3). The community has some fine educational institutions, middle-class neighborhoods, churches, stores, restaurants, and community centers. While poverty is no stranger to the community, there are many residents who lead typical middle-class lives. I met numerous blacks who were raised in West Las Vegas but moved away after graduating from college for a variety of reasons. These same individuals remain connected to the community by attending church, visiting friends or relatives, or patronizing the stores and restaurants in West Las Vegas. They participated in the protest action because of the deep feelings of respect they held for the residents and the community. They identify as being from the community and take pride in their cultural heritage, and in having come from West Las Vegas.

### *Culture*

The term 'culture' has by now acquired a certain aura of ill-repute in social anthropological circles because of the multiplicity of its referents and the studied vagueness with which it has all too often been invoked. (Though why it should suffer more for these reasons than 'social structure' or 'personality' is something I do not entirely understand.) -Clifford Geertz, (1973:89)

A major focus of this study was to locate the resources this community brought to bear in times of social action. In Chapter Six, I give a detailed account of the community, and its “parochial realms” (see Lofland 1998). I devoted considerable energy trying to identify the “cumulative local culture” of this community (Suttles 1984). I spent many hours traveling about West Las Vegas, patronizing stores and restaurants, visiting libraries and schools, and talking to shopkeepers, residents, and other members of the community. I wanted to understand the street names; the artwork; the buildings and businesses; and what makes this historic community so resilient despite all the repeated attempts to marginalize it over the years.

My concept of culture, especially local culture, is one that captures all of the socio-historical aspects of a community. Such a conception of local culture, as Suttles (1984:283) explains: “makes it ...an integral element in an ecological approach which increasingly draws implicitly or explicitly on social as well as economic differences in explaining our urban society.” Local culture, he reminds us: “is not something that starts full blown but something that accumulates” (p. 284). Local culture gives a community its unique, perhaps quirky, identity formed over time (Smith and Riley 2009). Local culture gives life to its traditions, people, places, and spaces (Borer 2006a, 2006b; Gottdiener, Collins, and Dickens 1988).

I discovered that the residents and business owners – young and old – knew a great deal about the cultural contributions of prior and current residents of West Las Vegas. They spoke proudly of the musicians, athletes, professionals, authors, and artists who lived and worked in the community. They knew the significance of the historical figures pictured in the artwork seen throughout the area. Old-timers reminisced about the

current businesses and those that have passed into history. In the process, I discovered the local culture of this community. While some residents felt a strong commitment to the various religious institutions in the community, “church culture” (Pattillo-McCoy 1998), did not appear to be a dominant presence in their everyday lives. Neither was church culture the topic of conversation for most residents when discussing the important cultural aspects of their community. What I discovered was a more diverse and complex culture that was not characterized, influenced, or defined by religion.

### *Defining Culture*

Defining culture has proven to be an elusive effort within the social sciences (Eagleton 2000). Yet, despite its countless definitions (Kroeber and Kluckhohn 1952), the concept of culture is one of the most frequently discussed terms among sociologists (Edles 2002). One problem of defining culture is that those writing about it have attempted to make their definition fit a particular subject of interest (Hall, Neitz, and Battani 2003). As a result, the definitions of culture have varied to reflect a wide-range of topics (Hartman 1997).

The position one takes influences what elements of culture can and cannot be studied empirically. It affects our understanding of an individuals’ relationship to both their culture and the cultures of others (Smith and Riley 2009). For some, culture is treated as a dependent variable as determined by social structure (Parsons 1951). For others, individuals and groups have agency (Emirbayer and Mische 1998), with the ability to resist cultural determinants (Gamson 1998), and the creativity to construct culture (Borer 2006b; Schudson 1989; Simmel 1968 [1911-1918]).



## *Culture and Classical Social Theory*

Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. – Karl Marx (1994 [1852]:1)

Since sociology's inception in the nineteenth century, theorists have expressed a concern for the concept of culture. In the above quote from *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*, Marx proffers a dialectical view of culture that is not structural only or interpretive only. For Marx, social class shaped ideology and consciousness which were central to his theory of social upheaval (1994 [1852]). Marx felt social class dictated how people reacted to problems arising from class differences (see Williams 1982). The residents of West Las Vegas often expressed that they were an oppressed social class, struggling against powerful politicians and their wealthy, property-developing, allies. When attempts to resolve the matter through negotiation failed, the residents concluded that their only recourse was to organize a protest movement – an act of rebellion against the dominant structural forces that were attempting to control their fate. Some of the younger male members called for a more militant approach that included acts of civil disobedience. They recounted the violence of the 1960s civil rights movement and suggested this demonstrative method was the impetus behind social change for blacks.

Durkheim (1985 [1912]:15) viewed religion as a *cultural system* that served a social and communal function by binding a *community of believers* through a collective system of rituals and symbols. Weber too saw religion as a cultural determinant, but in a

view that differed from Durkheim. Weber (1958 [1904]) argued that the doctrine of predestination caused Protestants to develop a moral code that stressed hard work and self-denial (see Smith and Riley 2009:12-15). The cultural values of discipline and asceticism became associated with this group of early Protestants and, according to Weber, accounted for the rapid success of capitalism (Hall *et al.* 2003). This value-rational action, or “*Wertrational*,” was motivated by their cultural beliefs and objectives (Weber 1958 [1904]).

The structuralist perspective therefore argues that cultural values are determined by social structure and they help to promote solidarity in society. Some members of the F Street coalition were culled from their respective church congregations. During the open discussion portion of the meetings some members referred to their religious values as the impetus for their participation and solidarity in the protest action. The contingent of members in the F Street protest group, who often proclaimed publicly their devotion to Christian values, declared that “God was on our side,” and therefore we were “destined” to succeed. This same group credited their religious devotion for creating their values of hard-work and perseverance, and they saw these religious values as the keys to achieving social justice.

#### *Simmel on Culture*

Simmel (1968 [1911-1918]) was among the first in sociology to develop the concept of culture. For Simmel, culture had to be accessible to all members of a social group at the “lowest common level” (1950:37). Frisby (2002) contends that for Simmel, culture was the product of structure and forces that existed outside of the individual.

Others contend that Simmel shared a more dialectical view of culture than Durkheim, providing a stepping stone between the structuralists and the interactionists (Smith and Riley 2009; Emirbayer 2004; Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). Simmel (1968 [1918]:19) recognized the dialectic of life between the forms of social order and the struggle of creative individuals to “puncture the principle of form itself.” While on one hand Simmel identified the capacity for individuals to escape the cultural constraints of structure, he also recognized the overwhelming influences of modernity on culture (Smith and Riley 2009).

Faced with new forms of the same systemic racism they encountered in the South, the African Americans of West Las Vegas struggled against the existing power structure to maintain aspects of their cultural heritage and their individuality. The community battled social alienation but fought to nurture educators, politicians, musicians, athletes, and business professionals. Denied business opportunities downtown, they opened restaurants, taverns, barber shops and other businesses that catered that reflected their unique social and cultural identity.

Simmel was also among the first sociologists to address both the material and non-material aspects of culture (Levine 1971). He conveyed an inclusive notion of culture as both material and non-material (see Frisby 2002:57). Material culture refers to the tangible objects produced by groups – tools, food, photographs, etc. – an approach most favored by archaeologists and some anthropologists (Harris 1979). Non-material culture consists of ideas, beliefs, values, traditions, etc. (Griswold 1986). Most of the West Las Vegas residents I spoke to in this study interpreted the street closure as a symbolic gesture. For them, the F Street wall symbolized oppression; it was meant to

alienate their community from the larger, more prosperous downtown. Many whites from outside of the community interpreted the wall as either a minor logistical problem for commuters, or as a barrier to protect them from a ghetto. I discuss this issue in greater detail in Chapter Five.

### *Contemporary View of Culture*

The contemporary view of culture is that of a dynamic process – one created and transmitted through interaction. Culture is viewed as a dialectical; it is both structural and interactional (Becker 1982; Fine 1979; Goffman 1959 [1956]). Peterson and Anand (2004) assert that the production of cultural objects and the interpretation of cultural objects have opened an empirical chasm in sociology. Interpretive sociologists, however, and most cultural anthropologists are inclined to emphasize the importance of ideas and symbols over the actual production of material objects (Hall *et al.* 2003; Swidler 1986).

The term culture has its roots in the concept of cultivation; it conveys the notion of the “cultivation of the human mind and sensibility” (Griswold 1994:7). This approach views culture as a social construction (Berger and Luckman 1966). The social constructionist view of culture has long been a focus of investigation for scholars of urban studies. As Park and Burgess (1925:145) note that local culture or community culture “includes those sentiments...which are characteristic of a locality, which have either originated in the area or have become identified with it. For Borer (2006a:175) a place is only a place “if it has culture makers-human beings – to create it, use it, live with it, live through it, and consider it significant.” In a discussion of “public culture” Zukin (2004:11) argues that public culture is socially constructed on the micro-level: “It is

produced by the many social encounters that make up daily life in the streets, shops, and parks – the spaces in which we experience public life in cities.” Culture is how a discernable group comprehends their social environment and how they communicate their way of life (Borer 2006a:175). Culture is created by individuals and groups; it influences social structure through interaction, but it is also influenced by social structure (Smith and Riley 2009).

Symbols and their meanings are central to a culture (Geertz 1973:89). Thus we see that cultural anthropologists and symbolic interactionists of the Weberian interpretive strand share some commonalities in defining culture – with an emphasis on shared symbols, transmitted from one generation to the next, via a common language (Hall *et al.* 2003). The residents interpreted the F Street wall as a symbol of oppression and discrimination. Instead of calling on church leaders to help them combat this social injustice, the residents deployed the social and cultural resources they acquired through their social interactions with their powerful white overlords in the South and honed to adapt to their new environment in Southern Nevada. They spread their message throughout the community via an informal social network of neighbors, friends, relatives, church members, and shop-keepers. Lacking economic resources, the community relied on hard work, perseverance, and a unified belief that their cause was just.

### *Conceptualizing Culture*

I view culture as the complex process whereby members of a discernable group acquire their material and non material aspects that are characteristically unique to that group. Culture includes their language (Cerulo 1997), values or “moral order” (Anderson

1999; Wilson 1978), and beliefs (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). Culture also includes their food, customs, dress, music, art and literature (Geertz 1973). The intricate process entails the transmission of cultural values and traditions from one generation to the next (Zerubavel 1996). Culture also involves unique symbols that resonate with the members of a group (Schudson 1989), and which nurture a collective identity (Taylor and Whittier 1992).

Culture is shaped both by structural conditions on the macro-level – institutions, social class, roles, social status, etc. – and by social interaction via agency in our everyday lives on the micro-level. Culture-makers produce material and non-material objects of culture (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972 [1947]; Peterson 1994) that have the potential to evoke strong emotions and stoke long-held memories (Griswold (1986:5). Cultural objects are subjected to varied interpretations depending on the cultural group (Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991). With respect to the F Street wall, interpretations varied significantly depending on which side of the wall one resided. Thus signifying that place truly matters.

While the cultural history of West Las Vegas is not well-known outside of the community, the residents and those raised in the community are well-versed in its history as a result of the stories passed down from prior generations of African Americans. As one excited elder said to me, “this is our history – our culture. This is who we are, and this is why we fight so hard to preserve our neighborhoods.” While material and nonmaterial aspects of culture may be influenced by structural forces, those forces are not all-constraining. Individuals and groups possess agency to resist, create, and interpret cultural objects for themselves.

The term “cultural trauma” (Eyerman 2004) might best describe the experiences of those African Americans who migrated from the rural South to the fast-paced life of Las Vegas in the 1940s and 1950s.<sup>2</sup> Cultural trauma is “a collective memory of some overwhelmingly negative situation experienced by members of a particular social group that is understood as ineradicable and threatening to the very existence of society” (Smith and Riley 2009:244). They brought with them the socially constructed cultural resources that had allowed them to survive in a hostile environment. They believed their reception in Las Vegas would be different, better (Kaufman 1974). They fled the drudgery and poverty of plantation life for the economic opportunities of Las Vegas. What they found was a racist structure that, because of their race, immediately reduced them collectively to the lowest rung of the socioeconomic hierarchy. They forced them to live in the poorest of conditions, offered them only menial jobs, and despised their very presence. They struggled to adapt to their new “modern” environment despite the systemic racism they encountered in the process.

While those blacks who migrated to the northern cities were often victimized by the same forms of systemic racism and discrimination as those who came to Las Vegas, the violence and harsh Jim Crow laws of the Old South had softened for them to some extent (Woodward and McFeely 2001). Blacks who journeyed to Las Vegas in the 1940s and 1950s would soon discover that the Jim Crow laws of the Old South had followed them here (Orleck 2005). Residential segregation and other forms of discrimination were fairly common in the northern cities, but northern blacks were not banned from patronizing the business establishments (Woodward and McFeely 2001), as to the extent they were in Las Vegas (Geran 2006).

### *Social Action*

I chose the term “social action” as it allows for a broader understanding of a group’s attempts to resist or promote social change through various means, and avoids the academic debate over the use of the term “social movement” (Darnovsky, Epstein and Flacks 1995). In this context, a social action may include everything from a macro-level event like the modern civil rights movement, to the mid-level coalition I experienced in the F Street protests, and micro-level interactions that occur on an individual basis in the everyday lives of African Americans (Anderson 1999). Social change includes all of the events that have seen African Americans make a successful entrée into politics, the economy, the arts and sciences, academia, etc.; and having parlayed that success into furthering efforts for equality in all aspects of life.

Diani, Lindsay, and Purdue (2007:3) suggest that a social movement is distinct from a coalition based on the absence of identity feelings and mutual bonds between the actors: “A coalition consists of the set of actors who only interact in terms of exchanging practical resources for action aimed at specific goals (weak ties).” By contrast, they argue that social movements “include mutual solidarity and social bonds (strong ties) alongside resource circulation.” Isaac (2008) suggests that what may start as a small coalition can eventually morph into a movement. Simmel (2004 [1903]) noted that social movements often begin as a coalition of neighbors, friends, church members or coworkers that slowly expands into the larger community.

The social action that prompted the F Street protest began with small groups of outraged neighbors and grew into a force for social change. Because of our focused objective to reopen the street, the effort falls short of being characterized as a social



movement. However, some of the concepts outlined in the social movement literature can be applied to this study, such as resource mobilization theory (Oberschall 1973). This theory emphasizes a group's resources – organization, political opportunities, capital, labor, facilities, etc. – that can be utilized in an effort to mobilize their membership and promote social change (Jenkins 1983).

Critics have faulted resource mobilization theory for its emphasis on economic resources (Ryan 2006 and Gamson; Somerville 1997) and for failing to take into account the “cultural underpinnings of social action” (Pattillo-McCoy 1998:769). Cultural resources have been recognized as a formidable force in achieving social action (Williams and Kubal 1999; Morris 1984). One significant resource the F Street group possessed was the people themselves who, despite lots of infighting, stayed united in their objective to reopen the street. With little economic assistance or political clout, this community relied on indigenous cultural and social resources, shaped over decades of systemic racism, to prevail against an entrenched political machine and their property developing cronies.

### *Black Culture*

Bob, there is a culture here. A black culture that began even before slavery; it is a culture borne out of suffering and hardship. It is also a culture of hope and perseverance that believes we not only deserve better but that we will someday be treated as equals by a country that brought us here in chains. – Comment to me by Marshall X, April 6, 2009.

The quote above is from one of the elder members of the F Street coalition. It was the first time I had heard the term “black culture.” The term seemed to make perfect sense to me. Normal attendance at the meetings included about one-hundred blacks, four or five Hispanics, and four or five non-Hispanic whites. Being among a group consisting almost exclusively of African Americans caused me to realize that this was a culture that was unique and also foreign to me. The more I began to discuss this term with other sociologists the more concerned I became about its usage in this study. Is it a pejorative term; a term of social rhetoric like “ghetto culture” (Hannerz 1969) better to be avoided? Is there such a thing as “black culture” or does the term invite an essentialist argument, making the concept moot?

An essentialist position implies that one is attempting to characterize the behaviors, thoughts, motivations, values, and experiences of a group (e.g., gender, race, and class) as being fundamentally similar to *all* members of that particular group (Zaidi 2010). Because someone can make the argument that a concept like black culture is essentialist, does not make the concept irrelevant. Similar arguments have been posited concerning “women’s standpoint theory” (Smith 1990) and “black women’s standpoint” (Collins 1990). But the sociological literature based on these two concepts continues to thrive, despite charges of essentialism (c.f. Kennelly 2002).

The definitions cited in this study tend to emphasize the idea that culture is what distinguishes one group from another. They support the notion that no one group in society holds a monopoly on any particular cultural trait, value, or norm despite racially motivated proclamations to the contrary (Blee 2002; Wray and Nevvitz 1997). The literature addresses such sociological concepts as “Asian culture” (Nakasone 2008; Yu et

al. 2005), “Hispanic/Latino culture” (Rabasso and Rabasso 2005), “Italian culture” (Comunian and Gielen 1995), and “Dutch culture” (Essed and Trienekens 2008) among other cultural groups. But does the term *culture* only refer to a group’s language, food, music, dress, etc., or does the term also imply certain, norms, values, and/or behavioral characteristics too? And are those characteristics collectively accepted or can there be internal disagreement? With this in mind, I explore whether the concept of black culture is sociologically useful, inevitably essentialist, or something else?

In 1967, Robert Blauner published *Black Culture and Its Critics* in a rejoinder to an article by Bennett Berger (1967), who insisted that black culture could not be a “genuine” ethnic culture because it was based on poverty. Blauner was also a strong critic of E. Franklin Frazier (1957) and those who either completely dismissed the concept of black culture as non-existent (Myrdal 1944), or associated black culture as one based on a “culture of poverty” (Moynihan 1965; Lewis 1961). Instead, Blauner (2001:88) argues that the failure of social scientists to recognize black culture was due in large part because African Americans did not conform to the traditional form of ethnic culture as did their European immigrant counterparts:

The latter brought with them their own languages, religions, and memories of a national homeland, whereas Americans of African descent were originally a legal category in this country and not a nationality or even a sociological group. A long slow process of group formation and culture building began during slavery and was influenced not only by bondage

and lower-class status, but also by Africa, life in the South, Emancipation, northern migration, and, above all, the struggle to survive a racist society.

As Blauner suggests, by comparing the cultural assimilation (or lack thereof) of blacks to that of other early European ethnic groups, social scientists have ignored the structural conditions that prevented blacks from assimilating to mainstream American culture (Alba and Nee 2003). This comparison fails to recognize African American culture in the same context as other white ethnic groups who are recognized for their cultural pluralism (Glazer and Moynihan 1970).

Black culture has also been characterized in a manner closely associated with the “culture of poverty thesis” (Lewis 1961) – as a cultural characteristic of inner-city African Americans – albeit still coupled with their impoverished social status, or “ghetto” culture (Anderson 1999; Wilson 1987, 1978; Hannerz 1969). As Anderson notes: “For those living according to the rules of that culture, it becomes important to be tough, to act as though one is beyond the reach of lawful authority – to go for bad. In this scenario, anything associated with conventional white society is seen as square; the hip things are at odds with it” (1999:112). In another reference to inner-city social orientation, Wilson (1987:18) refers to “ghetto specific cultural characteristics:” crime, teen pregnancy, welfare dependence, joblessness, and drug abuse. These negative references to black street culture tend to reinforce pejorative stereotypes that influence social policy and public opinion (Massey and Denton 1993). Though perhaps not intended in Wilson’s case, these characterizations tend to conflate black culture with ghetto culture which I contend are not synonymous.

Some ethnographic studies have sought to dispel the notion that black street culture, or ghetto culture, is the result of blacks rejecting the basic values of American mainstream society. But instead, what separated inner-city blacks from other Americans “was not their lack of fealty to American ideals but their inability to accomplish them” (Massey and Denton 1993:171). In Elliot Liebow’s *Talley’s Corner*, he writes that “an attempt was made to see the man as he sees himself, to compare what he says with what he does, and to explain his behavior as a direct response to the conditions of lower-class negro life rather than as mute compliance with historical or cultural imperatives” (2003:208). In these examples, ghetto culture is again conflated with black culture and explained as a reaction to structural conditions over which African Americans have little control.

Hannerz (1969:13) echoes this notion of “ghetto culture” as an adaptive strategy to a hostile environment, rather than a determinate set of indigenous cultural characteristics: “It is generally recognized that much of what should concern us about ghetto life has its ultimate determinants in much larger structures, beyond the reach of ghetto dwellers.” Waquant (2004:46) insists that the cultural values of the boxers in his study differ from other ghetto youths: “they come from traditional working-class backgrounds and are attempting to maintain or recapture this precarious status by entering a profession that they perceive as a skilled manual trade, highly regarded by their immediate entourage.” These studies tend to portray inner city black men as victims of the larger social structure; at times excusing behavior that might otherwise be viewed as anti-social and counter to mainstream values (Anderson 1999).

Despite these accounts of impoverished inner-city blacks struggling to identify with mainstream cultural values, Duneier advises sociologists to approach such works with a degree of caution as these studies, while well-meaning, tend to cast urban blacks in a positive, almost innocent, manner that is not always supported by the evidence. Ethnographers he says: “have made an industry out of studying black men and making generalizations that would be regarded as unacceptable if they were made about white ethnic groups with as little evidence” (1992:139-140). Since studies of inner city blacks have the potential to mischaracterize or essentialize the inhabitants, sociologists have a duty to accurately portray the residents without respect to their personal agendas, even if to do so might reinforce certain negative stereotypes.

In an attempt to identify and define the concept of black culture, we see that many of the stereotypical cultural attributes associated with inner-city blacks are socially constructed by interpreting cultural values based on social pathologies (i.e., crime and drug use equate to a lack of morals; poverty and joblessness equate to laziness; unwed mothers and single-parent households equate to promiscuity and a lack of family values). We also see that some social scientists interpret these anti-social behaviors as a reaction to the adverse and hostile living conditions faced on an everyday basis by inner-city blacks, resulting from structural conditions like residential segregation and not truly indicative of their cultural values (Anderson 2011; 1999; DuBois 1996 [1899]; Liebow 1967).

It is critically important to recognize the impact that social structure has upon culture. There appears to be a clear nexus between social class and cultural capital (Stuber 2009), and cultural values (Hadley 2009), regardless of race. Though African

Americans do comprise a disproportionate percentage of the lower socioeconomic classes, it would be erroneous to conflate black culture with “ghetto culture.” And as Anderson notes, even among poor inner-city blacks, there are those who struggle to maintain “decent values” (1999:35-65).

In my experience with the F Street protest, I have met many hard-working African Americans whose cultural values mirror those of middle-class whites: family, education, hard work, honesty, faith in humanity, etc. They struggle to raise their children in a safe environment. They take pride in their homes and their neighborhoods. And they work hard to improve the conditions in their community despite the backdrop of crime, poverty, and systemic racism. I also encountered individuals in the community who reject these “mainstream” cultural values. Much like some of the men in Liebow’s *Tally’s Corner*, they hung out in groups of other men and women, getting drunk, doing drugs, starting fights, engaging in reckless sexual behavior, and committing petty crimes.

All “ethnic culture” terms must be handled with extreme care, as they are often as internally diverse (and therefore categorically misleading) as they are internally coherent. I think the best way to approach the concept of black culture is to point out in what sense it is internally coherent and in what sense it is not. To insist that one group – in this case a racial group – can have their cultural identity reduced to certain specific characteristics, like values or norms of behavior, would be to invite an essentialist argument. No one culture can lay claim to any specific cultural value or behavior. Within every racial or ethnic group, there are those who accept and those who reject definitive cultural values, traits, or characteristics (Zaidi 2010).

I argue that African Americans do possess a cultural identity, with certain material and non-material characteristics that can be described as black culture. Black culture provides a rich and complex set of resources that far exceed the singular characteristic of religiosity. I reject the notion that any characteristics associated with the term black culture applies universally to every African American. However, structural conditions faced by the African American residents of West Las Vegas may well have produced certain social and cultural resources: strong resistance to social injustice; informal social networking; grass roots organizing; and perseverance unique to the community's residents, which were brought to bear in times of social action.

#### *Community Social Action and the Black Church*

In the black Christian view, freedom is an explicitly collective endeavor signifying both spiritual deliverance into God's kingdom and worldly deliverance from the material realities of racial oppression. Using the call-and-response style, the preacher and the congregation, in musical and verbal cooperation, make the journey toward freedom as one body.  
-Pattillo-McCoy (1998:770)

As the above quote indicates, previous work on the subject of black social action tends to focus on specific cultural characteristics – most notably the emphasis on church culture (Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Lincoln and Mamiya 1990; Marable 1989; Annals 1985; Morris 1984). I contend that this approach fails to fully explore the rich and diverse cultural characteristics of African Americans in their historic struggle for acceptance,



equality, and social justice. These characteristics include a strong emphasis on education, networking, political action, economic boycotts, and legal action.

In *Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community*, Pattillo-McCoy (1998) looks at the cultural significance of the black church for everyday organizing activities within the black community. Pattillo-McCoy posits that social movement theory is just beginning to recognize the role of culture in assisting or confounding collective organizing. She asserts that culture “consists of rhetorical, interactional, and material tools that are organized into strategies of action,” within the African American community of Groveland, Illinois (p. 767).<sup>3</sup> Pattillo-McCoy uses social constructionism as an analytical approach to connect social movement and cultural theory. This approach is more concerned with how social action is constructed, rather than what problems or concepts are being constructed (Loseke 2003).

Pattillo-McCoy compiles data from more than three years of research, which consisted of field notes from thirty-one informal interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis. Her focus is on the black church with its Christian teachings and rituals “as they are utilized in social action” (1998:768). Pattillo-McCoy posits a relationship linking the cultural repertoire of prayer, song, and call-and-response interaction between the religious leaders and the congregation and community social action. They are important parts of the cultural “tool kit” (Swidler 1986) of Groveland's black residents, and these cultural practices invigorate their social activism. Pattillo-McCoy argues that black church culture constitutes the taken-for-granted practices that put civic efforts into action: “the traditional repertoire of the black church expresses in both language and affect the communal nature of activism, and God’s direct involvement in human affairs”

(p. 771). The focus is on how culture affects collective social action, in contrast to other theoretical analyses such as resource mobilization theory (Jenkins 1983) that, according to her, ignores the role of culture. Pattillo-McCoy concludes that the black church provides a cultural blueprint for civic life and social action in the neighborhood.

This relationship between black culture and social activism has been criticized for lacking an empirical basis (c.f., Barnes 2004). Another potential shortcoming of this study is that Pattillo-McCoy relies on the analysis of her ethnographic field notes, rather than actual transcripts of tape-recorded interviews, to illustrate culture's role in social action. She concedes that a greater level of confidence in her findings might have been derived by using discourse analysis from tape-recorded interviews (Gubrium and Holstein 1997; Dickens and Fontana 1994). Her assumption is that the black "church style" is part of a unique cultural tool kit that explains organizing among African Americans. She argues that other churches do not have the same cultural imprint on the community's social action, but fails to offer comparisons with any of these other churches, including non-Christian black churches. While I don't necessarily agree with this criticism, a comparison with other non-Christian black churches may have strengthened her case for validity.

Eliasoph and Lichterman (2003) criticize Pattillo-McCoy's social constructionist approach, arguing that it fails to appreciate what issues are being constructed. I disagree with this last criticism. Having also employed a social constructionist approach in my study, I observed, as Pattillo-McCoy emphasized, that racial injustice was often the motivating factor for social activism in the black community. Despite these criticisms, I commend Pattillo-McCoy for advancing the importance of culture in social action. My

goal is to build upon her thesis to include not just church culture, but other social and cultural resources an African American community has at their disposal in times of social action.

*The Black Church and the Modern Civil Rights Movement*

The black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. Churches provide the movement with an organized mass base; a leadership of clergymen largely economically independent of the larger white society and skilled in the area of managing people and resources; and institutionalized financial base through which protest was financed; and meeting places where the masses planned tactics and strategies and collectively committed themselves to the struggle.

- Aldon D. Morris, (1984:4)

This quote by Morris supports the importance conferred upon the black church for motivating and facilitating social action. Occasionally one of the elder members in the F Street protest group would proclaim that nothing changed during the civil rights movement until Dr. King got involved and they (the police) started “busting heads.” Thankfully, cooler heads prevailed and the violence surrounding the civil rights movement was never a factor in this social action. In *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement*, Morris (1984) uses elements of Weber’s theory of the charismatic leader, collective behavior theory, and resource mobilization theory to analyze the conception and growth of the modern civil rights movement. Morris insists that the movement

(which he contends began with a bus boycott in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, in 1953) represents a tradition of protest and confrontation dating back to the slave revolts. Like Pattillo-McCoy (1998), Morris saw the black church as an integral part of black social action: “Many black churches preached that oppression is sinful and that God sanctions protest aimed at eradicating social evils” (p. 4). The prominent role of the black church as the driving force behind the civil rights movement and of other instances of black protest actions serves as an overarching theme in this work.

Morris acknowledges the cultural attributes of the black church and its charismatic leaders for the success of the movement: “The black church supplied the civil rights movement with a collective enthusiasm generated through a rich culture consisting of songs, testimonies, oratory, and prayers that spoke directly to the needs of an oppressed group” (p. 4). For Morris, the black church functioned as the institutional center of the modern civil rights movement. According to his argument, the church provided: an organized mass base; the charismatic leadership of clergymen who were skilled in the management of people and resources; the church was economically independent of the larger white society with an institutionalized financial base to finance protest; and, the church provided convenient meeting places.

Morris credits the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) – a group he intimately connects to the NAACP and the black church – for being “the force that developed the infrastructure of the civil rights movement and that it functioned as the decentralized arm of the black church” (p. 77). Among the initial organizing members of the SCLC were such charismatic notables as Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., Reverend Ralph Abernathy, and the Reverend Fred Shuttlesworth. They became the “leaders and symbols

of the mass bus boycotts, controlled the resource-filled churches of the black masses....and came to understand the power harnessed in an organized group” (pp. 87-88). According to Morris, this tradition of protest has become part of the cultural repertoire for African Americans as it is “transmitted across generations by older relatives, black educational institutions, churches, and protest organizations” (p. x). Morris also credits W. E. B. DuBois, Booker T. Washington, and Muslim minister Malcolm X for the “black protest tradition” and for inspiring the leadership of the SCLC.

Opponents of the modern civil rights movement also appeared to recognize the influence of the black church and the sway its charismatic leaders held over its members. I am referring to the 1963, 16<sup>th</sup> Street Church bombing in Birmingham, Alabama, that left four young girls dead (Sikora 1991); and the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968. These horrific acts, are cemented into the public consciousness through the media (Bretz 2010; Nelson 2001), and may be partly responsible for much of the literature concerning black social action having been focused on the black church.

While devoting attention to the role of the black church, Morris ignores the massive structural changes occurring in the nation during this time that created the perfect opportunity for black social advancement. In the post-WW II United States, large numbers of blacks were moving to the big cities of the urban North and venturing west to California and Nevada. The children of the once docile African Americans of the rural South had evolved into the “New Negro;” they had become more militant in their demands for equality. Morris rejects the “New Negro” thesis and instead attributes this attitudinal change to the institutions: the black church and black colleges. According to Morris: “The idea that urbanization created a ‘New Negro’ eager to change his status in

American society is not borne out by the evidence, yet the 'New Negro' thesis has been advanced as an explanation for the emergence of the civil rights movement by a number of activists and some social scientists" (p. 105). He believes that the growing unrest among blacks was the result of changing attitudes of the institutional leaders rather than the demands of community members who made up those institutions.

Morris's argument contradicts remarks from Dr. King's 1956 speech: "The tension which we are witnessing in race relations in the South today is to be explained in part by the revolutionary change in the Negro's evaluation of himself... You cannot understand the bus protest in Montgomery without understanding that there is a New Negro in the South."<sup>4</sup> Finally, while acknowledging the efforts of social activists and other groups not affiliated with the black church, Morris tends to downplay their importance to the civil rights movement. But as I discuss below, there are numerous occasions where the black church has been only a minor player, or even nonexistent, in the history of African American social action.

### *African American Religiosity*

One tenant of my thesis is that religion is not always a central aspect of African American culture. Initially, I was somewhat taken by the religious overtones of the study group. We regularly met in a church, we began and ended each meeting with a prayer, and some members were recruited from their church congregations. As the study progressed, I noticed that religion was not the dominant resource I had earlier presumed it to be. This observation caused me to question the extent of religion in the lives of African Americans.

Hunt and Hunt (2001) explore whether a comparative study of African Americans and whites in a nationwide sample bears out the widespread assumption of a distinctive African American religiosity, when region and other factors are controlled. The study examined an aggregated set of surveys from the GSS between 1974 and 1994. Of the 18,995 respondents, eighty-six percent were white and fourteen percent were black. The dependent variables were: church attendance, subjective identification with one's religious affiliation, and membership in a church-based voluntary association. The independent variables were race and region.

The authors found that there was no race difference in church attendance between whites and blacks for either the rural South or the urban North. They found that African Americans do not have consistently higher church attendance than whites, when the type of church attendance is specified (i.e., weekly, monthly, infrequent). African Americans, they concluded, may have higher subjective religious identification and are more likely to be church-group members, but a comparable high level of religious involvement is not found when all four types of attendance are examined. The study also found that church attendance by African Americans is no different than whites in the rural South, higher than whites in the urban South, and that "African Americans evidence greater disengagement than whites from religious institutions in the urban North" (p. 615). The authors concluded that when it comes to race and religiosity, region may be more important than race as a factor in shaping church attendance.

I observed in my research that the members displayed varying degrees of religiosity. Religion appeared to be an important aspect in the lives of some members, while others expressed outright disdain and mistrust of the religious leaders in the

community. As one woman exclaimed at a meeting, “it seems to me the preachers are more worried about what is in the collection plate than they are about helping this community.” Others frequently scoffed at those members who voiced their devotion to Christianity. My best estimate was that approximately twenty-five percent of the coalition was recruited from their respective church congregations. I based this estimate on two main observations. Following a spate of invectives hurled towards some of the religious leaders by the members at two previous meetings, Trish Geran asked for all of the pastors, deacons, and ministers in attendance to stand. This group comprised about ten percent of the audience. Trish then asked for any of the members who were encouraged to come to the meetings by their religious leaders to stand. This group accounted for another ten to fifteen percent of the total membership in attendance at that meeting. Following that display, tensions between the members who previously voiced their displeasure towards the religious leaders and the members who professed their affinity to the church dissipated noticeably.

### *Black Social Action sans the Church*

A key argument in this study is that social action by African Americans is possible without the heavy involvement of the black church. Despite the prominence of the black church and its clergymen as the charismatic leaders of the modern civil rights movement, the historic role of the black church was not always associated with promoting social action. Billingsley (1999) points out that the role of the black church in matters of social justice is a relatively new one, having emerged at the onset of the modern civil rights movement: “Our concern was sustaining ourselves as we resisted the



evil influences of this world to survive and overcome it in order to go home to where we would have no more suffering” (1999:3). Prior to that time, the primary focus of the black church was not for social change, but to prepare its members for the spiritual afterlife.

This is not to minimize the importance of the black church as a social institution. Du Bois (1903) was among the first sociologists to study the black church’s role in the lives of the communities they served. He envisioned that the geographical dispersion of African Americans out of the Deep South would strengthen racial solidarity, maintain racial identity, and provide a mechanism for some individual blacks to assimilate into mainstream white culture, with the black church serving as the communal connection (Blau and Brown 2002). Du Bois (1996 [1899]:207) recognized the important role of the church in the betterment of African American community life in Philadelphia at the turn of the twentieth century: “The Negro churches were the birthplaces of Negro schools and of all agencies which seek to promote the intelligence of the masses; and even today no agency serves to disseminate news or information so quickly and effectively among Negroes as the church.” While the black church has served an important social function in the community, it was not a dominant force in promoting social action until the second half of the twentieth-century (Billingsley 1999; Baer and Singer 1992).

Butler (1991:80) too acknowledges the vital role the black church has played as a social institution in the black community: “The fundamental institution for self-help among Afro-Americans was the church. Beginning with slavery in America, the church traditionally has held center stage.” However, while not refuting the contributions of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) in the success of the modern civil

rights movement, Butler also acknowledges the efforts of the black power movement, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, the Black Panthers, and the NAACP (pp. 282-283). While acknowledging the role of the church as an important social institution in many African American communities, I hope to expand upon the concept of black social action to include an array of resources that have facilitated the pursuit of social change for African Americans. The following examples provide support for my argument that the black church is always at the forefront of social action. To do so is to mischaracterize and underestimate African American resources and perhaps reinforce a stereotypical caricature of African American community life.

#### *The NAACP*

As the F Street coalition grew, our membership received support from the local National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), among other organized groups. No other single organization in America has done more to promote equality for African Americans than has the NAACP. The organization was founded in 1909 and is the nation's oldest and largest civil rights organization.<sup>5</sup> The organization was founded by W.E.B. Du Bois along with a multi-racial and multi-religious group of social and political activists who "in contrast to the church, was organized specifically to fight for equal rights for black Americans" (Morris 1984:12). The NAACP has an unparalleled reputation of pursuing social justice for African Americans primarily through the legal system.

Under the leadership of Charles H. Houston and his student and protégé Thurgood Marshall (the first black justice on the U.S. Supreme Court), the organization sought

equal rights through a series of court battles. In 1944, in *Smith vs. Allwright*, Marshall successfully challenged “white primaries” which prevented blacks from voting in Texas and other Southern states.<sup>6</sup> In 1948, Marshall and other attorneys for the NAACP prevailed in the landmark ruling of *Shelley vs. Kraemer*, which ended the enforcement of racially restrictive covenants, a practice that barred blacks from purchasing homes in white neighborhoods (Massey and Denton 1993).

The most significant of these court battles culminated in the 1954 decision *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka Kansas*, ending segregation in public schools, which prompted the NAACP to declare: “The Brown decision inspired the marches and demonstrations of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and 60s. These wide-spread protests ultimately led to the enactment of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, the Voting rights Act of 1965, and the Fair Housing Act of 1968”.<sup>7</sup> Despite the public efforts of religious leaders like Fred Shuttlesworth Jr., and Martin Luther King Jr., it was the tireless efforts of the NAACP, who sought an alternative route to equal rights for African Americans that did not stress the involvement of the black church. This well-organized group of legal scholars, intellectuals, professionals, business executives, and social and political activists were a powerful force for social change for blacks in the U. S.

However, in the South, the church did serve as a meeting place for many of the local chapters of the NAACP, and many of the local NAACP leaders were ministers as a result of their prominence in the community (Meier 1963). Despite the involvement of the black church at the local level, the NAACP represents a different but complimentary cultural milieu that undermines the traditional concept of black social action as being directed by the black church. Yet, the legal victories of the NAACP would soon give way

to a new and disturbingly radical approach that often pitted African American leaders against one another—the Black Power Movement.

### *Black Nationalism and the Black Power Movement*

While a few of the younger members of the F Street coalition professed a more militant approach, akin to Black Nationalism, none was known to be a member of any militant group. An overwhelming majority of the group detested any discussion of violence. Black Nationalism, the predecessor to the black power movement, had its roots in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with such notables as Marcus Garvey, who encouraged his fellow blacks around the world to be proud of their race while at the same time he held out no hostility towards whites (Delaney 1996). But by the mid-1950s, when most black civil rights leaders were encouraging peaceful assimilation into the mainstream white culture, Malcom X was espousing that nonviolence was “the philosophy of the fool” (Taylor 2011). Malcom X rejected the notion of compromising with whites. Instead, he argued in favor of racial separatism (a view he later recanted following a pilgrimage to Mecca), and he called for blacks to become economically and socially independent of white society (Price 2009).

In 1967, Kwame Ture (formerly Stokely Carmichael) and Charles V. Hamilton published *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation*. According to Ture, the white racist system colonized blacks in an effort to dehumanize them and destroy their culture (Blauner 1972). Ture described Black Power as “black people coming together to form a political force and either electing representatives or forcing their representatives to speak their needs” (*King Encyclopedia* 2006). For Ture and Hamilton, Black Power was an

ideological expression calling for the national liberation of blacks in America (Ogbar 2005). More importantly, as Bonilla-Silva (2001:26) states, their perspective “helped to move the discussion about race in academic and nonacademic circles from the realm of people’s attitudes to the realm of institutions and organizations.” Thus, Ture and Hamilton established the academic groundwork for the discussion of systemic racism in the U.S. and offered an alternative to the church’s influence.

The tactical approach of the black power advocates was a fundamental departure from the nonviolent civil rights movement of the 1960s; it threatened to divide blacks along two polar-opposite ideological viewpoints (McCartney 1992). Instead of calling upon whites to peacefully desegregate the social institutions of America through nonviolent protests by religious leaders like the Reverend Martin Luther King, Jr., Ture advocated for an approach that included cessation, violence, and the threat of violence (Minor 1971).

Black power can be viewed as an integrationist argument; one that calls for blacks to have the same rights as whites within the U. S. system (Blauner 1972, 1967). Ture and his followers abandoned the assimilationist argument advanced by the noted black sociologist E. Franklin Frazier (1939:680-681) in *The Negro in the United States*, who wrote:

Since the institutions, the social stratification, and the culture of the Negro minority are essentially the same as those of the larger community, it is not strange that the Negro minority belongs among the assimilationist rather than the pluralist, secessionist or militant minorities. It is seldom

that one finds Negroes who think of themselves as possessing a different culture from whites and that their peculiar culture should be preserved.

Ture vehemently rejected Frazier's above conception of black culture. The black power movement is credited for giving birth to the heretofore nonexistent notion of *black pride* – a self-awareness and respect for one's African cultural roots – that would culminate in a series of social and cultural advancements including the arts, business, sports, academia (Blauner 1972), and most significantly politics (Morris 1984). Civil rights militants, inspired by Ture, encouraged African Americans to rebuff white standards of beauty with the expression that “black is beautiful” (Feagin 2010). They replaced the word “Negro” with “black,” and embraced their proud black cultural heritage (Blauner 2001). These changes were soon followed by demands for black studies programs in colleges and high schools (Blauner 1972; Cruse 1967).

Key among these post-civil rights advancements is those made in the political realm (Blauner 2001; 1972). In 1965, there was only seventy-eight elected officials in the South (Ploski and Kaiser 1971); but by 1982, there were 5,160 black elected officials nationally, and the South accounted for sixty-one percent of that total.<sup>8</sup> Presently, there are hundreds of African American political officeholders in the U.S. at the local, state, and national levels, including the highest office-holder in the nation – President Barak Obama.<sup>9</sup> Of the ten largest cities in the country, six have elected black mayors; and in 2002, fifty-seven percent of black mayors served in cities that did not have a black majority population.<sup>10</sup>

### *The Black Organizational Autonomy Model*

In 1967, the Theresa Hoover United Methodist Church, in Little Rock, Arkansas, founded an outreach program called the Black Community Developers (BCD). Hayward Derrick Horton spent two years (1987-1989) studying the success of the BCD, from which he developed the Black Organizational Autonomy model (BOA). What started as a small community program consisting of a food and clothing pantry and a homeless shelter has since grown into one of the most valued black organizations in the state. The model is characteristic of the black community's tradition of self-help, borne out of a legacy of systemic racism (Butler 1991). It reflects, though perhaps not intentionally, Ture and Hamilton's (1967) call for black economic autonomy as the key to advancement in American society.

According to Horton (1992:8-9), the success of the BOA model lays in three factors: 1) the empowerment of indigenous groups to plan and act independently of external factors, which derives from economic autonomy; 2) the support of the black church; and 3) the group should consist primarily of those with a grassroots orientation to community problem-solving. This last factor purposely excludes the more prominent, elite members of the black community, which most often are the clergy. For Horton, economic autonomy does not signify separatism; instead, it encourages outside support and assistance that only comes when the group demonstrates they are capable of sustaining themselves financially.

While the BOA model maintains strong ties to the black church, the organization emphasizes social inclusiveness: "the BOA model involves acceptance and cooperation among black leaders of significantly different political philosophies and social policy

orientations” (p. 7). This heterogeneous component of the BOA reflects the historical leadership struggles of the black community (Du Bois 1996 [1899]; Childs 1989); but also the need for representation from all social classes in the community (Stoecker 2009; Butler 1991). The model provides a guideline for community organizations seeking to improve the living conditions of their community; it serves as a strategy for community activists who are working to promote social change. The BOA model acts as a framework for my analysis because it bears some similarities to my community resource model. Both models provide mechanisms for community social action. However, the BOA does not fully comport to my community resource model because the former relies heavily on the black church for its organizational structure and financial support. The CRM recognizes the minimal resources provided by the church in the F Street protest, but it also exposes a much broader repertoire of cultural and social resources that extend well beyond those provided by the black church. A more detailed discussion of the two models can be found in Chapter Seven.

### *The Olympic Projects for Human Rights*

In my study, I discovered that the protest action began with the efforts of a few individuals who inspired and mobilized the residents into a force for social change. Now, I introduce examples of social action on the micro-level, which do not involve the participation of the black church. On October 16, 1968, Americans Tommy Smith and John Carlos—two African American Olympic athletes—stood on the podium in Mexico City to receive their gold and bronze medals respectively in the 200 meter race. Smith and Carlos accepted their medals shoeless, but wore black socks to represent



impoverished blacks in America. Smith wore a black scarf around his neck to symbolize black pride; and Carlos had his tracksuit jacket unzipped to demonstrate solidarity with blue collar workers in the U.S. Carlos also wore a necklace of beads which he said “were for those individuals that were lynched, or killed and that no one said a prayer for, that were hung and tarred. It was for those thrown off the side of the boats in the middle-passage” (see Churchill 1983). As *The Star Spangled Banner* played, Smith and Carlos raised their black-gloved fists in the traditional “black power” salute.

They were booed as they left the podium, prompting Smith to later say: “If I win, I am American, not a black American. But if I did something bad, then they would say I am a Negro. We are black and we are proud of being black. Black America will understand what we did tonight” (BBC 1968). Today this iconic image remains as a symbol of black defiance in the face of an overtly racist structure.

All three athletes wore Olympic Projects for Human Rights (OPHR) badges after Peter Norman, the silver medalist in the same race and a vocal critic of Australia’s *White Australia Policy*, who was sympathetic to their cause. The *White Australia Policy* was a series of historical policies that sought to restrict non-white immigration to Australia between 1901 and 1973 (Lewis, Balderstone and Bowan 2006). American sociologist Harry Edwards, the founder of the OPHR, had urged black athletes to boycott the games. Reportedly, the actions of Smith and Carlos were inspired by Edwards’ call for social action (Hartmann 2003).

On an international stage, witnessed by millions around the world, these two athletes exposed the racial hypocrisy that existed in the U.S. in 1968. Smith and Carlos were expelled from the games and immediately sent home to the U.S. where they were

welcomed as heroes by many African Americans. But they were also the recipients of death threats to themselves and their families (Hartmann 2003). Nonetheless, in 2005, San Jose State University honored Smith and Carlos, their former students, with a twenty-two foot tall statue of their historic protest (Slot 2005). And, in 2008, both athletes received the *Arthur Ashe Courage Award* at the 2008 *ESPY Awards* in acknowledgement of their courage and perseverance (Wojciechowski 2008). Their defiant actions on that day in 1968 demonstrated to black Americans that through courage and sacrifice, justice would ultimately prevail.

I compare the actions of Smith and Carlos to those of Ora Bland, Estelle Jimmerson, Trish Geran, and Shondra Summers-Armstrong, who began the F Street protest without an initial groundswell of community support. But like Smith and Carolos, they believed in their cause and they believed in time that justice would prevail. Without the brave actions of this core group of women, I am convinced the protest action would have never materialized. In my study, I found the church to be only a minor player in the larger fight for justice in their community. As in my study, these cases also exhibit the vast wealth of resources available to African Americans that do not rely heavily on the black church. These examples demonstrate that the literature tends to ignore the plethora of resources African Americans have in their cultural tool kit. The literature also fails to recognize the efforts and contributions to their struggle for equality that does not involve the organizational or financial support of the church. As you will see, the involvement of the church alone would not have been sufficient to overcome the powerful social structure opposing the wishes of the community.

### *Conclusion*

Race is a socially constructed concept albeit with real meaning in our everyday lives. Social actors readily identify as members of one racial group or another. Even many of those who are biracial or multiracial tend to identify with one racial or ethnic group over other alternative choices (Waters 1990). Likewise, cultural identity is structurally *and* socially constructed. The cultural content of a racial group is often taken-for-granted in society, despite examples to the contrary. It would be erroneous to ascribe specific cultural characteristics to any one group, particularly nonmaterial attributes carrying a pejorative connotation. The concept of black culture runs the risk of essentializing African Americans, especially when it is conflated with ghetto culture (Hannerz 1967).

Despite these caveats we see clear indications that certain cultural groups tend to rely on the unique resources they have at their disposal in times of social action. Those resources may be social, economic, or cultural, or a combination of all three. Social and cultural resources are not mutually exclusive and at times contain elements of each other. A social resource may be culturally derived and a cultural resource may be socially derived, depending on structural forces, agency, and reaction to social conditions. The study group employed a host of resources that were forged from a legacy of systemic racism in the rural South. They then adapted and modified those resources in reaction to the power structure they encountered in Las Vegas.

Both of the above examples from the literature stress the significant role of the black church to motivate and facilitate social action in black communities. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) uses the analytical techniques of social constructionism to examine how

church culture is utilized as an approach to collective social action in the black community. Her innovative study exposes the shortcomings of resource mobilization theory by expanding social movement and culture theory to include church culture as a strategy of social action. My goal in this study is to employ a similar social constructionist approach, but to expand upon Pattillo-McCoy's work by moving the focus beyond the cultural repertoire of the black church.

In Chapter 3 (Methods), I describe my use of the socially constructed concepts of race and culture to examine the tools the residents of West Las Vegas used to mobilize their community for social action. My main sensitizing concepts relate to community resources: *economic*, *social*, and *cultural*. Within each of these categories, I created subcategories depending on the information derived from the data. Unlike Pattillo-McCoy, however, I am also concerned about the motivation behind the community's social action and the differentially interpreted meanings of the F Street wall. From a review of the literature and interactions with members of the coalition and those opposed to reopening the street, I observed some emerging thematic categories to explain and analyze the different interpretations of the wall: *race*, *social class*, *utility*, and *community-wellness*. My purpose for creating these two sets of categories was not to develop a hypothesis, but to try to understand the resources the community employed for motivating social action. I also wanted to understand the impetus behind the differential interpretations of the wall.

Despite the many references in the social science literature focusing attention on the role of the black church in social action, there are an equal number of instances to support the thesis that the black church is only one player in the larger "game" of black

social activism. There are numerous occasions on all three sociological levels suggesting that religion plays little or no role in African Americans' struggle for social justice. These two statements bolster my thesis that the residents of West Las Vegas were able to mobilize their neighbors into social action, with only moderate assistance from the religious leaders in their community.

This chapter also reveals elements of black culture that are often overlooked or ignored. The public perception of African Americans has a tendency to be that of musicians, dancers, and athletes. But we should also recognize them for their contributions to law, literature, art, and academia. The African American cultural repertoire is rich, diverse, and complex. When faced with obstacles to equality, African Americans have shown they have more than just religiosity in their cultural toolkit. Like the residents of West Las Vegas, blacks throughout this country continue to combat the challenge of residential segregation. In this study, we see systemic efforts on behalf of the power structure to alienate and isolate the community of West Las Vegas. These efforts continue to cause economic hardships to the residents and reinforce pejorative stereotypes. When society comprehends this protracted history of oppression and segregation, we may begin to understand the motivation behind the outrage the residents feel for the closure of F Street.

## Notes

1. This position is consistent with the *Thomas Theorem*: “If men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences” (Thomas and Thomas 1928).
2. Eyerman uses the term “cultural trauma” to frame the formation of African American identity in the West, during slavery. The concept underlies the experience of slaves who came from different countries and cultures being lumped into a single racial category – black – a category that did not exist prior to this time (Eyerman 2004). See also “racial formation” (Omi and Winant 1994).
3. Groveland, Illinois is a pseudonym used by Pattillo-McCoy in this study. (see Pattillo-McCoy 1998:767).
4. Martin Luther King, Jr. address delivered at the 2<sup>nd</sup> anniversary of the NAACP Legal Defense and Educational Fund, May 17, 1956, MLK:BU.
5. For more information about the NAACP visit their website at: [www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org).
6. See 321 U.S. 649, decision by the U.S. Supreme Court in *Smith vs. Allwright*.
7. This is a direct quote from the website of the NAACP: [www.naacp.org](http://www.naacp.org).
8. The *National Roster of Black Elected Officials, Vol. 12* (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1982): pp. vii-viii.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODS

On February 23, 2009, I began an ethnographic case study, informed by the interpretive paradigm, which exercises the Chicago School's multi-method approach. This approach stresses that groups should be studied in their natural environment; using observation, participation, and interviews among other methods (Denzin 1978; Blumer 1969). "It lodges its problems in this natural world, conducts its studies in it, and derives its interpretation from such naturalistic studies" (Blumer 1969:47). A goal of this study is to develop an in-depth understanding of a population of African Americans in the community of West Las Vegas, Nevada (see Duneier).<sup>1</sup> I combined participant observation, ethnographic interviews, prolonged engagement, photographs, and document analysis to study the resources the residents employed in their efforts to protest a street closure in their community.

My methods are jointly influenced by the tenets of critical ethnography (Thomas 1993) and participatory action research (Stoecker 1999). There is, however, a difference between the methods of conducting a critical ethnography and the writing of a critical ethnography (see Kincheloe and McLaren 2000:279-304). The interpretive paradigm informs the methodology for conducting a critical ethnography (Thomas 1993), while critical theory informs the writing of a critical ethnography (Soyini 2005). Critical ethnography seeks to "use knowledge for social change" (Thomas 1993:4). According to Thomas, critical ethnography is "conventional ethnography with a political purpose"

(1993:4). Unlike conventional ethnographers who tend to speak for their subjects, critical ethnographers “speak *to* an audience *on behalf* of their subjects as a means of empowering them by giving authority to the subjects’ voice” (Thomas 1993:4). In critical ethnography, the researcher cannot be a detached observer. They are active, critically self-reflexive participants who challenge the power structure in an attempt to ameliorate a social injustice (Soyini 2005).

Participatory action research has two basic characteristics: “increasing participation in the research process and social change” (Stoecker and Bonacich 1992). My approach has always been to present myself as a sociologist, sympathetic to the issues affecting the residents. I felt I could provide a public forum for their problems in the hope of reopening the street and shining a light on the larger social problems affecting this community. I worked closely with the members to develop my study methods and to include them at every juncture of my analysis. This approach provided a way for the members to be active participants in the study as opposed to being research subjects. By joining forces with academic research, this protest group, as with any protest group, expands the potential audience for their message to be heard (Stoecker 1999).

During the course of my involvement with this group, I have presented papers at conferences (McKee and Monnat 2011; McKee 2010), spoken at public forums, informed my intro students, and written articles in the local newspaper (McKee 2011). I continue to speak out about the inequities suffered by the residents of this community long after the conclusion of this study.<sup>2</sup> Most recently, I visited the offices of Ward One City Councilman Bob Coffin to review documents he asserts will refute the resident’s claims that they were not lawfully notified. I was not convinced by his findings.



### *Research Question(s)*

Formulating the research question is the most critical element of any research design: “a research project is built on the foundation of research questions” (Blaikie 2000:58). According to this approach, the research question guides the methods of data collection and analysis. As Mason (2002:27) writes: “You will start to make strategic choices about which methods and sources are the most appropriate for answering your research questions. It is useful to engage directly with questions about how and why particular methods and sources might yield data which will help you to answer your questions.” Some qualitative researchers, however, minimize the importance of the research question: “a widely held principle of social research—that decisions about research methods and approach are subservient to the research questions that guide them—is questionable as a representation of social research practice” (Bryman 2007:18). Such is the dilemma of a qualitative researcher: Should we always know exactly what our research question is before determining our research design? Or is it acceptable to start with a general curiosity and let the research question reveal itself over time?

One benefit I realized by conducting an ethnographic study, with a grounded theory approach (Charmaz 2002), was that over time I found myself refining and reassessing my original research question. I discovered that one rather vaguely constructed research question – followed by data collection, analysis, more data collection, more analysis – led me to several new, well-defined, questions. As you may recall from Chapter One, my curiosity in this study was peaked when reading an article in the newspaper about the community meeting being held on February 23, 2009. At that time, I had no idea I would be embarking on a nearly three-year project that would

eventually become my doctoral dissertation. Upon reading the article about the street closure, I asked myself “What is the big deal? Can’t they just take another street?” But after attending that first meeting, my “sociological imagination” became aroused (Mills 1959:5). I realized my original research question was grossly inadequate.

As my interest in this project moved from my original curiosity, so too did my research question evolve into a series of questions. By the end of that first meeting, I understood that the object of the community’s outrage far exceeded one street closure. It was then that the focus of my research shifted to how the community hoped to prevail against such an entrenched political force. I also found myself wanting to help them in their struggle against the power structure that caused the street closure. Gradually my research questions became clear: “What resources would the community bring to bear in this protest?” After doing some preliminary review of the literature on social action in African American communities, I then wondered: “Why wasn’t church culture the most powerful tool the community had in their repertoire?”

I also became keenly aware of the polarizing symbolism of the wall and the community, depending largely on race and on which side of the wall one resided. This data led me to question why the wall would have differentially-interpreted meanings. This observation prompted me to conclude that place and identities really do matter when it comes to opinions about the wall and the community of West Las Vegas. From this progression the focus of my sociological lens became clearer. I was better able to determine my unit of analysis and decide upon the research methods that would best answer these questions.

### *Grounded Theory*

My research objective in this study was to determine which resources the community would rely upon in order to prevail in their goal of reopening the street. Initially, it appeared to me that church culture and the church's organizational and economic resources were going to be the dominant resources in their repertoire. After a few meetings at the cramped library, we switched to a church. Each meeting began and ended with a prayer by one of the local religious leaders. During times of quarreling and verbal disagreements, it was normally the religious leaders who calmed the participants and kept us on point. Nearly a third of the membership had been recruited from church congregations. And, it was not unusual for members to begin their comments with a reference to their Christian religious beliefs.

By employing a grounded theoretical approach to my data collection methods (Charmaz 2002; Glaser and Strauss 1967), I discovered that what I originally believed to be the overwhelming presence and influence of the black church was in reality not a great resource for the community's protest group. It was, as Adler and Adler (1994:378) describe, my "click experience." This is the moment when a researcher suddenly becomes aware of a unique observation that illuminates and clarifies the data analysis. Once I got to know the inner-circle (the coalition committee) and many of the general membership, I soon realized what an eclectic bunch this was. There were retirees, government workers, office personnel, business owners, entertainers, teachers, writers, community activists, the unemployed, and single-moms. During repeated subsequent interaction, I discovered that a many of the inner-circle, as well as the general membership, professed an outright disdain for some of the religious leaders. Though the

church leaders outwardly professed their support for the protest action, they contributed next to nothing financially. Many of them did not even live in the community, and only a few of them actually participated in the protest march on the Strip.

As the study progressed, I became deeply impressed with the role women played in this protest. I am convinced that without their participation, this coalition would have fizzled out in the early stages. It was long-time neighbors Ora Bland and Estella Jimmerson that first contacted their fellow residents about the proposed wall when they saw the bulldozers and dirt blocking the intersection. They were also the lead plaintiffs in the subsequent lawsuit against NDOT and the City of Las Vegas.<sup>3</sup> Mrs. Jimmerson gave Trish Geran the first donation consisting of one-hundred dollars. Geran and Shondra Armstrong were instrumental in forming the neighborhood meetings that eventually morphed into the coalition. Katherine Duncan, the daughter of Ruby Duncan, was an outspoken public critic of the street closing and a constant presence at the meetings, as were a number of other women.<sup>4</sup>

### *Unit of Analysis*

To answer my questions regarding the resources the community would call upon, my unit(s) of analysis are community resources: cultural, social, and economic. My primary concern was with cultural resources, but not all resources in community social action are cultural (Oberschall 1973). As a result of this study, I developed an analytical tool I call the “community resource model” (CRM), which is designed to assess and evaluate the available resources (economic, social, and cultural) that a community may or

may not possess and the potential effectiveness of those resources in times of social action.

The model emphasizes three factors: 1) a specific community; 2) sociohistorical influences; and 3) collective identity. Community specificity implies, as this study suggests, that individual communities possess varying degrees of social, cultural, and economic resources. It is important to specify the spatial and demographic particulars of the community to which the model will be applied. Because a community's resources are affected by change over time, the model is aptly suited for case studies, particularly *instrumental* case studies, where the case itself is of secondary importance and "facilitates our understanding of something else" (Stake 1995:437). The model is only applicable to a specific community, at a specific point in time. In this study, the community is largely working-class African American, with a predominance of females in leadership roles. Merely because the members of a specific community share a common identity, does not mean generalizations can be made to similar members in another community. That is why it is important to understand the history of the study community.

Sociohistorical influence is used to assess the structural conditions that may have shaped the available resources of the community. In the present study, the residents are mostly descendents of rural southern blacks who migrated to Las Vegas in the late 1940s. As previously noted, the most active participants in the protest coalition were women. These women, like many of the men represented a diverse class. There were business professionals, office workers, utility employees, single mothers, teachers, retirees, and the unemployed. For decades they have been the object of overt discrimination in

employment, politics, and housing that have seriously eroded their economic resources but have also shaped their cultural and social resources upon arrival in Southern Nevada. Those same resources were further tested, adapted and reshaped in response to their structural conditions here.

Collective identity refers to how the community members identify themselves (race/ethnicity, social class, and gender), how they identify with their community; and also, how “outsiders” perceive the community and its residents (Zaidi 2010; Taylor and Whittier 1992). In the present study, the residents identify as black or African American and express considerable pride in their community. Even those participants who no longer reside in West Las Vegas feel a strong connection to the community, as they continue to visit friends and relatives, patronize the stores and restaurants and attend church there. Conversely, those whites who expressed their opposition to the street reopening also view the community as predominantly black. But they have a very negative impression of the community and the residents based upon race. The significance of this last factor is the potential to access resources that extend beyond the community which may include political support and assistance from organized groups and sympathetic volunteers.

To demonstrate how the model is applied I offer a comparison of the F Street closure with an incident that occurred in the nearby community of Summerlin. In April of 2007, the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) changed the flight pattern for some airlines leaving Las Vegas. The change resulted in some flights going over Summerlin, a relatively new but well-to-do section in the far western section of town. The residents of Summerlin are mostly white, middle- and upper-class, and politically well-connected.

When the residents complained about the change in flight patterns, Mayor Oscar Goodman and the Las Vegas City Council unanimously approved spending \$400,000 to hire a law firm to challenge the change in court.<sup>5</sup>

Many of the city's other residents loudly objected to the expense and the court battle eventually proved fruitless. For years, the residents of North Las Vegas have complained in vain about the jet noise from Nellis Air Force base while city officials took no action. The incident demonstrates the resources the community of Summerlin was able to employ in times of social action that were not available to other Southern Nevada communities who lacked the social, economic, and cultural resources of Summerlin.

### *Sensitizing Concepts*

In Chapter Two, I defined my use of the term culture as the way of life of a people which includes their material and non-material objects. I established that all cultural groups have their traditions, values, music, food, language, arts, rituals, etc., with no one group having a monopoly on morality or virtue. A group's cultural resources are those that are created by, or representative of, the cultural group. In times of social action, a group will select from their cultural repertoire and utilize the most effective means available to resolve the turmoil. I am aware that ascribing certain cultural attributes like values or social class to a particular group can invite a charge of essentialism (e.g., black culture, ghetto culture).

In this study, I assessed the resources – cultural, social, and economic – that individuals and the collective group possessed. Then, I determined which of these resources were used to prevail in their struggle to reopen the street. While church culture

may have initially seemed to be the dominant resource, I eventually concluded that it was only one of many resources the group possessed and employed in this protest action.

And, it was far from being the central cultural resource of this community.

As my data collection progressed, I observed some general thematic categories beginning to emerge from my interactions with members of the protest group and from those opposed to reopening the street. To better understand the potential motivations behind these two different groups, I developed four sensitizing concepts (Blumer 1954): *race*, *social class*, *utility*, and *community-wellness*. Since my research is grounded in data collected through ethnographic fieldwork, I anticipated the categories might be altered or expanded depending on the direction the data collection and analysis took me (Charmaz 2002). Within each category I created subcategories depending on the information derived from the data. For example, the category of *race* includes subcategories such as racial bias, racial stereotypes, or racial group identity. *Social class* incorporates comments related to income or educational differentials. *Utility* includes categories for ease of traffic congestion, and traffic safety. A final subcategory – *community wellness* – was added to capture comments concerning safety, crime, and drug use.

My purpose for creating these categories was not to develop a hypothesis, but to try to understand the motivations behind the differential interpretations of the wall and of the community. I concluded that the wall's symbolic significance depended mostly upon two factors: 1) which side of the wall one was located; and 2) race. For the African American residents of West Las Vegas, the wall represented eighty years of oppression and alienation. For many of the white residents living on the other side of the wall, it



represented a much-needed physical barrier separating downtown Las Vegas and its tourists, from their perception of a blighted, crime-infested area.

### *The Site*

Since ethnography involves the study of people in their natural settings (Angrosino 2007), the innate site for this study was primarily the community known as Historic West Las Vegas. As previously noted, West Las Vegas comprises a 3.5 square mile area within the city of Las Vegas. The largely African American community is generally bordered by Rancho Drive to the West, Interstate 15 to the East, Bonanza Road to the South, and Carey Avenue to the North. While the study was principally situated in West Las Vegas, my observations and participation extended to other locations in Southern Nevada. This fluid venue was constituted by, among other things, public meetings and a protest march along the Las Vegas Strip.

Historic West Las Vegas is comprised largely of single-family, female-headed households, the majority of whom can be found among the lower socioeconomic classes (see Table 1).<sup>6</sup> Approximately seventy-three percent of the residents have attained a high school degree or less, with only six percent earning at least a bachelor's degree (see Table 3). The mean per capita income for the residents of West Las Vegas is approximately \$13,370 (see Table 2).<sup>7</sup> Despite these seemingly unfavorable characteristics, the coalition members defied this description. Many of the members belonged to two-parent, working-class families, who owned their own homes. This was particularly true of the committee members who were mostly college educated, middle-class, and married. While

approximately forty-six percent of the community is male, the membership was about sixty percent female.<sup>8</sup>

### *Data Collection and Analysis*

I first became involved in this project in February 2009 and the data collection for purposes of this study ceased in November 2011. If culture is the way of life of a people (Borer 2006a; Geertz 1973), and ethnography is “written representation of a culture (or selected aspects of a culture)” (Van Maanen 1988:1), then what better method for a study of community culture than ethnography? This project is an ethnographic case study (Stake 1995), involving temporal (2009-2011); physical (West Las Vegas); and social (African American community) environs. According to Stake (1995:xi) a case study is: “the study of the particularity and complexity of a single case, coming to understand its activities within important circumstances.” The “case” in this study is the community protest of a street closure and the resources they utilized. I chose to use the actual name of the community: West Las Vegas. By doing so, I followed Borer’s (2010:99) example that encourages realism, getting the story right and avoiding mystique, and to aid the community in their struggle to overcome the racist policies of the past.

I also chose to use the actual names of many of the participants, particularly board members, and other public figures such as politicians and employees of NDOT. I point out the instances when a pseudonym is used in lieu of the participant’s real name. Ethics review boards and researchers strongly encourage confidentiality in order to protect the identity of research subjects (Lofland *et al.* 2006). Some researchers suggest that anonymity faces serious challenges due to the nature of ethnographic research (Van den

Hoonard 2003). However, the comments expressed by the participants in my study were voiced at public events and the participants made no attempt to hide their actual identity. As such, I felt no ethical duty to conceal their names.

I used a multiple-methods approach to collect data, commonly referred to as “triangulation” (Denzin 1978), to lessen the chance of misinterpretation (Altheide and Johnson 1994). Although triangulation implies that only three methods were used in this study, I use ethnographic interviews, participant observation, prolonged engagement, and document analysis as my principle sources of data collection. In addition to these research tools, I also relied upon archival records and photographs to answer my research questions, support my thesis, and strengthen my case for validity. Archival records and “life history” interviews (Denzin 1978) were used mainly to provide an historical context. Archival records consisted of prior written works concerning West Las Vegas (e.g., Moehring 1989; Kaufman 1974), newspaper articles, and photographs. The life history interviews were conducted by other researchers with two elderly female residents whom had migrated to Las Vegas from the Deep South in the 1940s. They had participated in the welfare rights event captured in *Storming Caesar’s Palace* (Orleck 2005) and provided invaluable insight into the historic development of West Las Vegas (Geran 2006).

I analyzed the data by completing more than 1000 hours of participant observation, involving meetings of the coalition to reopen the street, rallies, visits to various locales in the community, and the protest march along the Las Vegas Strip. The study is not interview-laden, and relies more on comments expressed at public meetings

by the participants or by those opposed to the wall. The data also derives from my direct observations and participation.

Although I use the term “interview” in this study, the term does not actually describe my method of data collection. I did not have a predetermined set of questions in mind when engaging in conversations with participants or other informants. I conducted a total of twenty-seven conversational-style, or “unstructured” interviews, with seven subjects conducted multiple times over the course of the study. Nine people were interviewed once, and I engaged in numerous other conversations with people on both sides of this issue. The ethnographic interview design allows for a more open and relaxed environment between the researcher and subject (Spradley 1979). According to Spradley (1979:31) an ethnographic interview resembles “a series of friendly conversations into which the researcher slowly introduces new elements to assist informants to respond as informants.” Interviews were conducted at various public meetings, and other gatherings of the protest group and with those individuals in favor of closing the street. Often times I was not the one who initiated the conversation, but was simply a spectator or onlooker who was privy to certain comments made publicly or in private. Some of the comments were made directly to me, but most of the time they were made in public at meetings.

Being a participant observer allowed me convenient access to those opposed to the street closure, whom I met at public meetings, rallies, and a protest march. I faced a greater challenge in gaining access to those in favor of the wall, since my preliminary data analysis indicated that this group exhibited a tendency to limit their comments to online postings. To address this concern, I engaged in conversations with residents who border West Las Vegas through convenience sampling and eventually snowball sampling

(Babbie 1998). As articles concerning the wall appeared in the newspaper, there was an online forum that allowed readers to express their opinions concerning the wall. In the online forum, I invited residents to contact me if they wanted to discuss their opinions about the wall. From this sample, I conducted three conversations over the telephone, four by canvassing the surrounding North Las Vegas neighborhoods, two by canvassing the adjacent downtown neighborhoods, and one via email response. The documents consist of newspaper articles in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, letters to the editor, flyers, meeting agendas, and online postings from the newspaper's web page.

### *Validity*

Guba and Lincoln (1994) argue that qualitative research requires four distinct criteria for evaluating the validity of its methods: 1) internal validity: the extent to which results correctly fit the phenomenon; 2) external validity: the extent to which results can be generalized to other settings; 3) reliability: the degree to which findings can be replicated by other researchers; and 4) objectivity: the degree to which results are free from bias. Others have suggested, and I concur, that these criteria are incompatible with ethnography because ethnography has the potential for varied interpretations of the "truth" (see Chambers 2000:861-864). Kinchloe and McLaren (2000:299) state that claims of truth in critical ethnography "are always discursively situated and implicated in relations of power." Carspecken (1999) posits that critical ethnographers are capable of expressing normative evaluative claims when they can see and experience them in the same way through prolonged engagement in the culture of their participants.

The validation process in this study is triangulation (Denzin 1978): participant observation; prolonged engagement; and using the research participants in the process of data collection and analysis. A participant's observations are always subjected to the researcher's biases and interpretations (Chambers 2000; Denzin 2000). But my active participation in this protest action provided me with a higher level of access to the data that I otherwise would not have had. Prolonged engagement (over 1000 hours) reduced the potential for error and misinterpretation, as did using the participants in the process of data collection and analysis. As Fine notes, "we are interested in the problems faced by people in your condition, what you do and how you think" (1993:275). Fontana (2000) recognizes this method for recasting the researcher and the subject as active agents in the process by suspending agency. I do not speak *for* my research participants; I do speak *about* their concerns through the lens of my own observations and experiences.

Fieldwork is an interpretive process (Agar 1986) and is therefore open to subjective interpretations. Fieldwork and its resulting "tales," especially those involving case study ethnography, does not easily avail itself to replication (see Van Maanen 1988:91-96). Because of this, I regularly met with people from the community who had leadership roles in the protest action to discuss my observations and conclusions. This method was an opportunity for me to evaluate my data through the lens of those who "were there." It also proved to be an invaluable method for follow-up conversations and as leads for other ethnographic interviews. I took extensive field notes at meetings and summarized my observational notes immediately afterwards. Whenever possible, I tried to record on paper direct quotes from conversations or comments made during meetings or in my interactions with informants in various settings (Lofland *et al.* 2006). I

organized my notes and other data in chronological files. Other records (newspaper articles, lawsuit records, etc.) were kept separately from my field notes.

I am not overly concerned whether this ethnography will produce or advance general theory. Nor am I convinced that a good ethnography can. This ethnography has the potential to expand upon the theoretical concepts of social movement theory and culture posited by Pattillo-McCoy (1998). This ethnography will be relevant—my methods are sound and my data is accurate (see Hammersley 1992:67-77). Much of the data in this study consists of field notes that were registered as the data unfolded before me, in real time. Some postmodernists have argued that field notes are akin to fiction because they are “filtered” through the lens of the researcher attempting to prove or disprove a preconceived hypothesis (c.f. Lofland *et al.* 2006). I disagree with this argument. I worked diligently to accurately record data irrespective of any concerns about a hypothesis, mainly because I had not formulated one. Through the inductive process, I eventually reached some general conclusions concerning the resources of this community.

I was concerned that the racial differences between me and my informants might pose a problem of “reactivity” (see Lofland *et al.* 2006:91) and affect the accuracy of my data. During my many conversations with informants, I wondered if they were holding back on their true feelings concerning blacks or whites. I remember only one conversation with a young black man who angrily denounced whites as oppressors. But he also spared few harsh words for black politicians and religious leaders. I recall several conversations with whites who did not hesitate to denigrate African Americans in my

presence; a phenomenon not unlike that experienced by other researchers (Blee 2002; Simi and Futtrell 2010).

### *Gaining Entry*

Aside from the physical boundaries that I have already delineated, there are certain social (Bourdieu 1984 [1979], and racial (Lamont 1999) boundaries that distinguish Historic West Las Vegas from other sections of Southern Nevada. Breaching social (Lamont 1992) and cultural (Peterson and Kern 1996) boundaries can be a relatively simple task compared to navigating the border between racial boundaries (Liebow 1967; Duneier 1999, 1992). As a white male I anticipated obstacles in gaining access to informants in settings of perceived racial differences (Dunbar, Rodriguez and Parker 2002). Harrington (2003) suggests that many important ethnographic studies were nearly derailed because of the resistance of participants.

I was one of the few white males in the room at that first meeting, which was filled to overflowing capacity mostly with African American residents of West Las Vegas. When we were asked to stand up and identify ourselves, I introduced myself as a researcher from UNLV and expressed sympathy for their cause, to which I received applause. I invited anyone who wanted to discuss the matter with me to talk to me after the meeting. Initially, I was approached by a handful of elderly residents who were more interested in telling me their life stories than discussing the street closure. Later that evening, I approached the main speaker, Trish Geran, who was also the chairwoman of the Coalition to Reopen F Street. She immediately offered to provide me with any assistance I needed. Through Trish, I gained access to the committee's inner-circle. From



there I gained greater access to the general membership, some of whom at first seemed reluctant to speak to this white, middle-aged, academic who did not live in the community. But many eventually relented and provided me with relevant data.

Prolonged engagement in the community and among its residents allowed me to make contacts, which “snowballed” into other contacts. Eventually I was introduced to shop owners, school and community center administrators, past community organizers, and other notables in the community that formed the basis for Chapter Six, *The Parochial Realm*. I have come to develop some associations and friendships among the residents of the community. And although my research is completed, I intend to continue to work in whatever way I can to improve the well-being of this community and its residents.

#### *Ethical Considerations and Political Implications*

This project poses some serious political implications, but ethnography is not without its political motivations (Thomas 1993). The cost to reconstruct the wall into a tunnel is estimated to be between \$20 million and \$70 million dollars (Packer 2010). This comes at a time when many in the public and private sector are unemployed or are facing layoffs and the state budget is facing a potential \$3 billion dollar deficit.<sup>9</sup> However, the long range potential for the community could be positive if the momentum achieved by our efforts results in more financial investment in the community. I recognize that as a representative of the university, I have an obligation to obey the laws of our community and conduct research in an ethical and professional manner. With the exceptions as previously noted, the names of all informants will be held in confidence, known only to me. I summarized my conversations and then permitted the informants to review the

summary for accuracy. Those names that do appear in this study are public figures whose comments concerning the street closure have been well documented in the media.

Whenever an ethnographer is studying an economically depressed community there will be opportunities to observe or engage in behavior that is morally or ethically questionable (Liebow 1967; Anderson 1999; Duneier 1999, 1992; Hannerz 1969; Becker 1967, 1963). During my many visits to the community, I had numerous occasions to talk to residents from all walks of life. There were times when I was privy to information regarding drug use, prostitution, or petty crimes. On these occasions, I never participated in any criminal activity. Nor did I volunteer any information to the police, as I did not feel that my life or the life or well-being of anyone I came into contact with was threatened. For the most part, these instances involved men and women hanging out on street corners drinking beer or discussing smoking marijuana. I never saw anyone publicly smoking marijuana, but on several occasions I was invited to join them in the back of a store, to which I declined. Though acts of prostitution were less visible, some of the men hanging out in front of Mario's Market would point out different women they knew as prostitutes.

### *Interactions*

Despite my best efforts to fit in, it was apparent to me that I would never be fully accepted by all of the members because of my race. I was never so conscious of being white as when I was in West Las Vegas, participating in this protest. There were several times when I would have great discussions with members on an individual basis, only to be snubbed by them when they were in a group of other blacks. At the luncheon, after the

protest march on the Strip, I was seated at a table with a black man and his two adult sons. Before our food was served, one of the sons looked over at me and asked in a sarcastic tone “what are YOU doing here,” as if to question suspiciously my involvement in the march. Given the history of race relations in Las Vegas, I wasn’t too shocked by his attitude. I explained my role as a researcher, and my sympathy for the cause. But despite my best efforts to engage in table talk with the trio, I was ignored.

Just as Simmel (1950 [1908]) observed that the nature of the interaction between individuals was shaped by the form of the group - a *dyad* vs. a *triad* - I observed changes in the way some members interacted with me and with other individuals, and how their behavior changed when interacting within the larger group. As one of the few white participants in the movement, I often found myself conversing one-on-one with African Americans at meetings and events. During those conversations, I found them to be friendly and forthcoming. However, when I would see some of these same people in a group of other African Americans, I would on occasion be greeted with indifference or suspicion.

Brandon Greene was one of the more passionate members of the committee, yet at times he seemed sullen and angry in private. Brandon’s mother was a teacher and he was raised in West Las Vegas. Twice in 2009, I had rather lengthy conversations with Brandon. I found him to be very passionate about his racial identity and his connection to the community. I thought perhaps we had connected in a small way and that I had won his trust. But there were many times after those conversations, when I would see Brandon at a meeting or other event and he would ignore me to the point of appearing annoyed or openly hostile to me.

As I said in Chapter One, not all the players in the game were on the committee. During my research, I observed various “gift exchanges” (Simmel 1950 [1908]), where individuals would exchange their emotional outrage or status in the community for cognition, or to build support for their particular interests in the movement. Some of the elder residents discussed the hardships they endured during the civil rights movement, in an effort that I interpreted as a way to gain recognition or status in the group. Some members mentioned their desire to profit financially from redevelopment and repeatedly urged the group to use the street closure as leverage to force the city to contribute redevelopment funds to the area. It seemed to me that while all of the membership agreed on the need to reopen the street, some individuals, and a few small groups, formed coalitions within the movement to promote their own self-interests.

### *Reflexivity*

I was eleven years old in the summer of 1963, when I participated in a protest march with my social-activist mother, Mary McKee. She was supporting the garbage workers’ complaints about wages and working conditions in Cleveland, Ohio.<sup>10</sup> In those days the garbage workers were almost exclusively black men and the city was racially segregated. Blacks lived on the east side and whites on the west side of the city. Growing up, I had only limited interactions with blacks until I joined the U.S. Navy in 1971.

We marched downtown from our church, St. Ignatius, located about one-hundred blocks west of downtown. The blacks marched west from a church on the east side of Cleveland. The two groups convened in front of City Hall. There were lots of speeches and chanting and the whole affair lasted about two hours. After the rally was over, we

could not find the woman who was supposed to give us a ride home. My mother did not drive and we had no money for the bus, so we walked the ninety-five city blocks back to our house. It was late evening when we finally got home. My father, who had been drinking, slapped my mom knocking her down and called her a “nigger lover.” That incident of domestic violence did not stop my mother from participating in other acts of political activism that included civil rights, gender equality, and the Viet Nam War. She remains my inspiration for being socially active in community affairs, even when I am not a member of that community, as this study indicates.

Even after more than two years and countless visits, I remain a “professional stranger” (Agar 1980) in the community of West Las Vegas. I respect and acknowledge that I have an obligation to fairly and accurately describe my observations, but I am also keenly aware that I do not live in this community. I am a white male who lives the life of a middle-class academic. I am married, retired from a corporate position with a nice pension. My wife earns a good living and we reside in a 2,700 square foot, five-bedroom home, with a swimming pool. I do not reside in West Las Vegas, nor am I typical of most of the residents who do live in that community. Despite these differences, I possess certain skills and resources that I feel can be of use to their community.

When the legislature agreed to fund the street reopening, committees were established to oversee the project design. I was asked by members of the F Street Coalition Committee to head one such subcommittee. I politely declined because I felt that as a non-resident, I should not be in a position to make decisions about a community in which I did not reside. There were also times during this study that I would see or hear things I disagreed with, because I felt they were incongruent to my personal values.

During these moments, I held my tongue and reminded myself that I was not there to place value judgments or to try and influence the data (Rosenau 1992). I was there to observe, listen, collect data, analyze the data, and report my findings and conclusions.

As a white male, I am always concerned about the reaction I will get when discussing this project. After presenting a paper on this study last year at a conference, a young woman approached me and said she thought I would be black, based on the title of the paper presentation: “The Genesis of an African American Social Movement” (McKee 2010). One day, after leaving Dr. Shannon Monnat’s class on racial and ethnic relations, I asked her this question: “You and I are both white, but we ‘do race.’ Do people ever give you a bad time about that?” She told me not to be too concerned about how people react as long as my theory and methods were solid. I hope I have passed that test and that I have continued my mom’s fight for justice and equality.

## Notes

1. My approach was most influenced by Mitchell Duneier's 1999 ethnography *Sidewalk*. Duneier introduces the concept of "diagnostic ethnography:" an approach that applies the principles of sociology to the circumstances of which the researcher is immersed.
2. In 2010, I was awarded the *Norman K. Denzin Qualitative Research Award*, for my work on this project
3. *Bland et al. v. City Of Las Vegas et al.* United States District Court. District of Nevada (Las Vegas). Civil Docket for Case #:2:09-cv-00061-LGD-LRL.
4. Ruby Duncan is the organizer of the Nevada women's welfare rights protest group highlighted in *Storming Caesar's Palace* (Orleck 2005).
5. "City Keeps 'Right Turn' Fight Alive." David McGrath Schwartz. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, April 19, 2007. See also "At City Hall, New Excuses to Spend." Erin Neff. *Las Vegas-Review Journal*. April 24, 2007.
6. Census tract 3.02 comprises the majority of the area encompassing Historic West Las Vegas. Table 1 represents Ward 5 which includes West Las Vegas, but also the surrounding neighborhoods on the edge of West Las Vegas that are predominantly white, Hispanic, or Asian.
7. Census tract data for Tables 1, 2, and 3, were derived from data compiled by the 2005-2009 American Community Survey.
8. According to the 2005-2009 American Community Survey, the total population of census tract 3.02 is 4,742. There are 2,158 males and 2,584 females.
9. This figure has been contested by various analysts who estimate the budget deficit might be as low as \$1.4 billion dollars and as high as \$6.4 billion (see "The \$3 Billion Dollar Deficit Myth" by Victor Joecks, *Las Vegas – Review Journal*, September 13, 2010).
10. The terms "garbage worker" or "garbage man" were commonly used at that time and are not meant to be derogatory.

## CHAPTER 4

### THE MEETINGS, THE MARCH, AND THE MESSAGE

#### *The Meetings*

“They want to wall you off and forget you exist.” – Comment at meeting, February 23, 2009

I attended my first meeting of the “Stop the F Street Closure” on February 23, 2009, at the West Las Vegas Library. The original group of fourteen neighbors and friends had been meeting informally, in people’s homes, since October 8, 2008. The first public meeting was held on January 2, 2009, at the West Las Vegas Library, and reportedly only a handful of people attended. After several unsuccessful attempts, the group was finally able to secure the conference room at the library through committee member Gene Collins, a former state assemblyman, former president of the local chapter of the NAACP, and president of the National Action Network’s (NAN) Las Vegas branch.<sup>1</sup> Individuals like Collins and status groups often carry cultural currency in a community that can be used to support social causes (Hall *et al.* 2003).

In late January, word began to spread rapidly throughout the community, from neighbor to neighbor, through church congregations, and from a newspaper commentary in the *Las Vegas Review-Journal*.<sup>2</sup> Communal interaction is an important aspect of in many communities, and especially in African American communities; it has been known to promote community well-being, identity, and place attachment (Kusenbach 2006).



This has been a staple claim of community sociologists since the 1890s (Mandell 2010; Bernard 1951).

On February 23, 2009, the small conference room was overflowing with residents and their supporters. Feeling a little out of place, I sat near the back just in case I decided to make an early departure. The meeting was called to order by the committee chair, Trish Geran. The first agenda item was an invocation by the Reverend S. S. Rogers (Appendix 1). We bowed our heads and the minister led the group in prayer. He prayed that God would help the residents overcome this “injustice” and “right the wrong that had been brought upon the community.” This meeting, as in every subsequent meeting, began and ended with a prayer by one of the pastors in attendance. Segre (2006) noted that religious overtones provide a mechanism for solidarity that construct and reaffirm group identity (see also Durkheim 1965 [1912]).

We were then introduced to the committee members of the Coalition to Stop the F Street Closure, LLC. The individual members of the committee were a mixture of occupations, races, ages, and genders. I found the committee make-up interesting considering this is a predominantly African American community, with a reputation for being economically depressed. Since the committee is a limited liability company, the names of the members are a matter of public record and no attempt was made to conceal their identity. Trish Geran, age 40, is a non-resident. She was raised in West Las Vegas and her mother continues to live there. Barbara Crockett is a 60-year-old black woman who served as the community outreach assistant; Colin Jacobs, a white male media consultant designed the F Street logo and along with Brandon Greene co-created the group’s web page; Shondra Summers-Armstrong, a black women served as vice-chair

and worked as an administrator for a government agency; Harvey Munford, a black man, retired school teacher and District 6 Assemblyman served as political advisor; S.S. Rogers, a black man and Pastor of Greater Mount Sinai Church served as director of outreach services to congregations; Samuel Wright, a black man and retired engineer; Karl Armstrong, a black man and attorney served as legal advisor; Earleen Ventura, a 71-year-old black woman and lifetime resident; Bandon Greene, a black man in his early twenties was director of communications; Dahn Shaulis, a white male and a political activist who earned a Ph.D. in sociology at UNLV and was a criminal justice instructor for the College of Southern Nevada, conducted research on the environmental impact of the project; Arby Hambrick, a black man, retired military who served in WW II, Korea, and Viet Nam, often served as a respected spokesperson at governmental hearings; Beatrice Turner, a black woman and community activist; and Patty Jacobs a white woman and the financial assistant.

In every community there is a core group of influential actors who construct alliances and create action groups (Cornwell, Curry and Schwirian 2003). Religious leaders tend to be the most prominent members of an African American community (Billingsley 1999), but in this instance only one minister served on the committee. At first glance, this committee may seem to represent a rather eclectic bunch. Barbara Crockett was the only other non-resident, having been raised in West Las Vegas. She now lives in nearby North Las Vegas. Norton Long (1958) offers a perspective for studying community action, the *ecology of games model*, which might explain this assemblage. This perspective emphasizes the roles and interests of local actors when addressing community concerns; they are “reference points for the structure of local games” (see

Cornwell *et al.* 2003:121). The committee was a core group of community-minded citizens. Each member of the committee possessed certain cultural and social resources that suited the coalition's overall objective of preventing the street closure. Aside from their issue-focused objective, each member had other separate concerns that coexisted and intermingled with the goals and interests of the community at large. I would also soon discover that not all the "players" in the "game" were on the committee. Some of the committee members could be described as "moral entrepreneurs" (Becker 1963), as they attempted to generate public support for social reform. Other players were clearly not moral crusaders. They had ulterior motives that had nothing to do with reopening the street.

The meetings followed a perfunctory pattern: we began with a prayer, followed by presentations for fundraising, updates on the lawsuit, and pleas for spreading the word. The committee asked members to email friends at the web address <http://www.westlv.blogspot.com>, and to sign an online petition to be submitted to city and state legislators. We were asked to donate whatever we could to help finance the protest and to seek the support of other organizations that might be sympathetic to this issue. These types of indigenous resources are vital to a "dominated" community, especially in the early stages of development (Morris 1984). They help provide a sense of stability, leadership, and sources of funding that do not rely heavily on the black church for resources (Butler 1991).

The big news at every meeting was the upcoming protest march on the Las Vegas Strip, scheduled for April 18, 2009. Several members wanted to stage "mini protests" prior to and after the march. Many of the older residents recalled the welfare rights march

on Caesars Palace (Orleck 2005). Some suggested sit-ins at city hall, while a few of the members urged a more militant approach that included the potential for violence. The last portion of every meeting was reserved for open discussion, which often resulted in boisterous exchanges lasting for hours. Isaac (2008) noted that social movements have the potential for evoking passionate emotions (see also Jasper 1997), and this portion of the meetings were often quite emotional.

When the shouting was over and the meeting finally adjourned, those same individuals who previously engaged in heated arguments were seen outside sharing a laugh, a handshake, or a hug. The management of emotional energy has been recognized as a critical component of culture and society and central to community cohesion (Elias 1982 [1939]). These were, after all, neighbors in a marginalized community who recognized the need for unity. By reconciling their differences, residents maintained solidarity and focus.

After two meetings at the cramped library, we moved to the Abundant Life Church in West Las Vegas. I observed small coalitions forming between a few individuals. Attendees often criticized those who were not in attendance and accused certain community leaders of conspiring with the city. One particular accusation was lodged against Frank Hawkins, a former NFL player who parlayed his football fame into successful business enterprises. Hawkins, who grew up in West Las Vegas, was the head of the Nevada Chapter of the NAACP. He previously served a term as a Las Vegas City Councilman – the first elected black official in the city’s history. In 1995, Hawkins lost in his reelection bid when the Nevada Commission on Ethics found that Hawkins had breached ethics laws by profiting from a golf tournament where participants included

individuals who did business with the city.<sup>3</sup> He currently heads up the Community Development Programs Center, a non-profit group that builds affordable houses through federal Housing and Urban Development grants in low-income, inner city neighborhoods in West Las Vegas.<sup>4</sup>

One week prior to the March 23, 2009 meeting, and unbeknownst to the committee, Hawkins had met privately with Mayor Oscar Goodman regarding the street closure. Hawkins failed to notify the committee about the meeting, nor did he include them in the meeting. Some of the committee members accused Hawkins of attempting to coddle favor with the mayor, and influential property developers, by using his influence in the African American community to quell the uproar over the street closure. This accusation prompted Gene Collins, to say “If you are doing right and Satan doesn’t cause you problems, you are walking with Satan.” Hawkins arrived shortly after that outburst and was informed of the accusations by persons seated closest to him. After prompting by his allies, Hawkins stood up and defiantly defended his actions. He stated that he neither knew, nor did he believe, he needed the committee’s approval to meet with the mayor. While his supporters stood by him, many in attendance heckled and denounced his presence. But he refused to be intimidated and stayed for the duration of the meeting. These types of in-group squabbles have the potential to disrupt and distract the group from their stated goals (Granovetter 1978).

Some members accused property developers of attempting to wear down residents, by forcing them to sell their property for pennies on the dollar. It was well known that the mayor had been touting a six-billion dollar plan to redevelop the downtown area, just blocks from West Las Vegas, which included a proposed

professional sports venue<sup>5</sup>. Some attendees voiced their concerns about the lack of young people at the meetings and the failure of some church leaders to promote the movement. One woman shouted “Some pastors in this community only care about what’s in the collection plate.” Another cried out “there are 535 churches in West Las Vegas and there are less than 20 ministers here.” The actual count was much lower.

This outburst prompted the committee’s attorney, Matthew Callister, a white man, to reply “this is exactly what the white man wants you to do,” referring to the infighting and fragmentation. This lack of trust among members threatened to tear apart the fragile unity of the group. Simmel (1950 [1908]) observed that trust was an essential element in group life (see Eyerman 2006). In a discussion of Simmel’s concept of cohesion, White and Harary concluded: “A group is cohesive to the extent that it is resistant to being pulled apart by removal of its members” (2001:305). Callister’s plea for calm helped to temporarily restore order, but rumblings continued to be heard among the crowd.

At the next meeting, all of the pastors, ministers, and their respective congregants in attendance were asked by Trish to stand up and be recognized. They comprised about one-fifth of the regular attendees. Pattillo-McCoy (1998:768) notes: “Black church culture constitutes a common language that motivates social action.” And, while the church’s role was not a dominant one in this social action, there were times when its influence was felt. It was normally one of the pastors, ministers, or their congregants who would invoke their Christian beliefs in an effort to encourage the group in their cause. When this would happen, some of the other members would roll their eyes or smirk, as if to interpret their pleas as grandstanding. Though members would publicly and privately express a deep distrust for many of the religious leaders in the community, it was often

the pastors and ministers who were able to restore order. One common method was to remind everyone that we were in a church, sometimes to the amusement of the membership. But the religious leaders also urged the membership to be strong and persevere; demonstrating the militant culture of the church that successfully served the civil rights struggle (Morris 1984). The vocal animosity directed towards the religious leaders seemed to subside noticeably after that meeting. However, privately, some of the committee members continued to express negative comments to me regarding the religious leaders and their congregants.

As the movement progressed, we were joined by members of the Clark County Democratic Black Caucus; the Service Employees International Union (SEIU); the Association of Community Reforms Now (ACORN); Si Se Puede, a Hispanic community advocacy group; and the ACLU, who agreed to monitor the upcoming protest march on the Las Vegas Strip. This source of outside support ran counter to traditional accounts of African American community protests (Butler 1991), as seen in the 1960s. Ture and Hamilton (1967), for example, rejected calls for coalitions that were dependent on whites or other outside groups. But over the years, residents of this community found success in matters of welfare rights, employment discrimination, and the abolishment of Jim Crow laws by joining forces with whites and other groups from outside of the community. By rejecting the isolationist concept, the social culture of the community allowed it to recruit a broader network of resources in prior instances of social action.

During the discussion period, some of the older members reminisced about the 1960s civil rights movement and urged stronger forms of protest that had the potential for conflict. Marshall X shouted “the only way to get their attention is to cause a

confrontation with the city and the police, even if it means getting our heads busted.”

Another elderly man joined in saying “Martin Luther King was a great man, but they didn’t understand the problem until they started busting heads and people got killed.”

This notion of rejecting non-violence was consistent with the earlier position of Ture and Hamilton (1967:52): “Black people should and must fight back. Nothing more quickly repels someone bent on destroying you than the unequivocal message: ‘O.K. fool, make your move, and run the same risk I run—of dying.’” Ture and Hamilton were influenced by the earlier Black Nationalist Movement, particularly the efforts of Malcom X, whom despite unwarranted accusations that he encouraged violence actually defended his right to self-protection: “It doesn't mean that I advocate violence, but at the same time, I am not against using violence in self-defense. I don’t call it violence when it’s self-defense, I call it intelligence” (Price 2009; Taylor 2011). Fortunately the majority of our group was not in agreement with these sentiments; although, several members inquired about posting bail in the event there were arrests at the protest march. The coalition members stressed that violence, or the threat of violence, would only reinforce the stereotypical cultural depiction of blacks, particularly black men, as violent and anti-social (see Anderson 1999).

In response to those who spoke of violence, one member shouted back “you bring back the 1960s and they will bring back the dogs.” Trish reminded the membership that we had a duty to set the tone for a peaceful march and that those who had a different idea should just stay home. The majority of the group was strongly in favor of participating in a dignified act of protest that would encourage support from the community. The organized structure of the civil rights movement systematically nurtured a culture of



nonviolence (Morris 1984); a culture many of the older members of the group still professed. Blauner (2001) argues that the violent outbursts of the 1960s race riots had the effect of polarizing Americans whom otherwise might have been sympathetic to the cause of racial injustice. It is however important to note that much of the violence in the 1960s race riots were directed at property, what Massey and Denton (1996) call “commodity riots.” Some of the older coalition members recalled the massive destruction that occurred in West Las Vegas during the race riots of the late 1960s. They have continued to mourn the loss of businesses that never came back to the neighborhood. Blauner (1972) contends that such acts of violence, as depicted by the media, gave the misguided impression that blacks and their leadership were instigating mass contempt for the law.

Following the race riots of 1967, President Johnson appointed a national commission of elected official and public figures to investigate the root causes of such massive destruction. The commission concluded that the riots stemmed from historically persistent and systemic racial discrimination in employment, education, welfare. Underlying all of these social and economic disadvantages in the report was residential segregation (Massey and Denton 1996).

On April 3, 2009, Trish Geran, sent a letter to Steve Wynn, CEO and Chairman of Wynn Resorts, advising him of the intended march (Appendix 2). The letter outlined the reasons for the march and the lack of response from the city and state. Wynn is considered to be one of the wealthiest and most politically powerful men in Nevada. He has built many of the largest, most opulent resorts in Southern Nevada. A copy of the letter was sent to other powerful actors: Mayor Oscar Goodman; the city council; Sheriff

Doug Gillespie; CEOs of the most prominent hotels on the strip; and the executive officers of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), who were planning their conference in Las Vegas for the same week as the march.

As evidenced by the Birmingham bus boycott (1955-1956) and similar acts, African American community protests have found success by challenging the local economic and political structure (Dawkins 1994). This cultural resource of threatening to disrupt the local economy is borne out of the community's ancestral connection to the racial injustices they fought against in the rural south; and reminiscent of the same group that "stormed Caesars Palace" in March of 1971 (see Orleck 2005). While none of the addressees ever responded to the letter, the protest march, however, seemed to have gotten their attention.

### *The Protest March*

Protest marches have long been a valuable resource in the cultural repertoire of African American communities as a method for getting their message across to a wider public audience (Beder 1991; Morris 1984). It was a typically warm spring Saturday morning on April 18, 2009, when I along with approximately one-hundred people assembled at the Second Baptist Church located at F Street and Madison Avenue, in West Las Vegas. We were told in advance to wear red shirts as a show of unity. The color red was chosen to represent the blood that had been shed by African Americans in prior acts of civil disobedience and to draw attention to the group. We were given signs saying "Down but not Out - Reopen F Street," and "No Access - No Progress," and we rehearsed our chants. The most significant being "The Westside fought the battle of F Street, F

Street, F Street. The Westside fought the battle of F Street and the wall came tumbling down,” sung to the tune of “Joshua fought the battle of Jericho.” The significance of the biblical reference was not lost on me. It reaffirmed my observation that while the group was not particularly dominated by the church, they were still integrally connected. At approximately 9:00 a.m. we boarded a commercial bus and headed for the Las Vegas Strip. The bus had a banner displayed on the side that read “Down, Down, Down.” Several smaller groups followed in their cars or in church vans. While outwardly it might have appeared that the group was receiving considerable support from the church, in reality only a few of the local religious leaders actually participated in the march.

As we made our way down Las Vegas Boulevard, I tried to engage one of the few young black male members in a conversation about the significance of this day. He ignored my questions. Instead, he spent his time on the bus talking “trash” to a young lady. In language better-suited to “ghetto culture,” he complained about all of the phony ministers, and joked about the numbers associated with the names of Baptist churches in West Las Vegas (e.g., First Baptist, Second Baptist, etc.). During the bus ride, one of the elder committee members came to the front of the bus where we were seated to thank us for our participation. Instantly the young man changed his behavior and language. He sounded more like the young graduate student he was. This example of “code-switching” is part of the cultural repertoire of younger African Americans who find themselves immersed in two worlds – that of the street and that of the “decent” people in the community (Anderson 1999). In order for him to win favor with the established members of his community, he must conform to a certain image that is considered respectable to this group. But he is also torn by his desire to be popular with his peers.

We unloaded near the intersection of Flamingo Road and Las Vegas Boulevard and assembled into two lines. Before marching, we held hands for a prayer. The minister asked God to bless our actions this day and to keep us safe. These religious rituals, though not uniformly shared by the group, may have been intended to produce moral ties and to solidify our collective social goals (Isaac 2008; Durkheim 1965 [1912]). We started by marching north on Las Vegas Boulevard, stopping periodically in front of various hotels to rally. At each stopping point we chanted slogans like “Mayor Goodman tear down this wall” and “Who are we? Voters! What do we want? The wall down! When do we want it? Now!” Along the way we handed out informational placards explaining the purpose of the march (Appendix 3). While some tourists tried to ignore us, others appeared sympathetic and would stop to ask us about the protest march. One visiting tourist, after reading the placard said “It appears that they built a prison to lock up the residents and keep them away from the downtown area. That’s disgraceful. They need to remove the wall.”<sup>6</sup> At one point two young white men, appearing to be intoxicated, joined us and carried signs. A short time later, one of the black women in our group said “oh hell no,” as she grabbed the signs from the men.

While rallying in front of a boutique shopping center near the Venetian, we were angrily greeted by the proprietor of *Sephora*, a pricey skincare and fragrance shop. The manager shouted at us that we could not congregate there, despite the fact we had a permit and were not blocking the entrance to her business. Two young men in our group engaged her in an argument, to which her employee responded by “flipping us off.” Several other members urged the young men to stop arguing with the shopkeepers. We

peacefully moved on. By failing to be engaged in a prolonged confrontation, the group again demonstrated their commitment to nonviolence as part of their cultural repertoire.

Members of the Las Vegas Metropolitan Police Department (LVMPD) provided a police presence at the march, paid for by the coalition. The police, on horseback and on foot, did an excellent job assisting us with street crossings and ensuring a peaceful march. At the meeting on April 6, 2009, Deputy Chief, Gary Schofield, himself a Hispanic man who was raised in West Las Vegas and was familiar with many of the residents, spoke to the group about the march. He brought with him two police officers – a black man and a white man – who also told the group the police would provide protection and assured us of a peaceful march. Many of the elder female residents chided Officer Schofield about his childhood antics growing up in the community. He seemed to take pleasure in the friendly ribbing and reminisced about all of the great free meals he enjoyed as a kid growing up on the Westside. This seemingly cordial relationship between the police and the residents of West Las Vegas ran counter to past experiences in many other African American communities. This is especially true during the civil rights movement of the 1960s, where the police were responsible for instigating much of the violence against blacks (Feagin 2000; Massey and Denton 1996). This genial relationship with the police might also suggest that the community was attempting to cultivate a fragile culture of cooperation with law enforcement to improve the overall conditions of the community in terms of crime prevention and police response.

Near the end of the march, we had to cross a large pedestrian bridge. There I was with one hundred mostly black men and women carrying signs and shouting protests on one side of the bridge. On the other side were dumbfounded tourists, unsure of our intent.

For a moment I reflected on those courageous people, who on March 7, 1965, participated in the voter's rights march from Selma to Montgomery, Alabama. How brave they were to know that they would almost certainly experience the wrath of state troopers. Yet, undeterred, they faced down their oppressors, only to be beaten with night sticks and trampled by horses. Men, women, and children were tear-gassed, clubbed, and attacked by police dogs because they demanded the right to vote. It is because of their courage that some forty-four years later we could participate in this peaceful march, *with* the cooperation and assistance of the police.

There are far too many examples in the civil rights struggle for blacks in America to recall here. Suffice it to say, the police have a well-deserved reputation for unprovoked violence against blacks, particularly young black males (Blauner 1989). Despite their experiences with police brutality in the South, community leaders of West Las Vegas have attempted over the years to nurture a fragile culture of cooperation with the police that has on numerous occasions prevented or minimized confrontation (Orleck 2005). There were, however, some notable clashes with the police that resulted in violence on the Westside. In August 1943, there were several violent confrontations between black soldiers and police (Moehring 1995). In January 1944, a riot ensued outside of the Harlem Club and one black soldier was killed when the police moved in. As a result of these two incidents, Las Vegas was temporarily off-limits for black soldiers (Moehring 1995). In October 1969, following weeks of violent outbreaks at area high schools, a full-fledged riot broke out on the Westside that sent twenty-three people to the hospital and necessitated a response of 200 police officers. Rioting and looting continued for days before the NAACP and local church officials were able to assist the police in restoring

order. Perhaps, as a result of these earlier classes with the police in West Las Vegas, the community was seeking a more peaceful solution to conflicts with the police, with the Rodney King riots in 1992 being one noted exception.<sup>7</sup> The fact that Deputy Chief Schofield was raised in the community provided a unique social resource that facilitated cooperation between the residents and the police.

The march concluded at noon near the Las Vegas Convention Center, some three miles from where we began. The National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) was holding their annual convention there. The committee treated the group treated us to lunch at the café inside the Greek Isles Hotel and Casino. In the process, we garnered the attention of several national news organizations, including CNN and HBO, in addition to the local news media outlets. We were exhausted, our voices raspy from hours of chanting. But we were exhilarated at the same time, having been a part of history and a force for change. Now we would wait and see if our march had the desired effect.

### *Awakening the Political Giants*

A month before the march, on March 15, 2009, Brandon Greene published a scathing open letter to state Senator Steven Horsford (Appendix 4). Senator Horsford was born in West Las Vegas and was the first African American majority leader of the state senate. The letter included a photo of Senator Horsford with tape over his mouth and the words “Silence is Deafening” to symbolize his lack of support for the protest action. Greene writes: “The same man who as recently as February was presented with the Ghandi (sic), King, Ikeda Award for individuals who distinguish themselves through outstanding contributions to their community, has been absent from the very cause where

his contribution is needed the most.” While the letter had no immediate effect in eliciting support from Senator Horsford, the protest march appeared to have. I can only surmise that the owners of the Strip hotels and casinos began to put pressure on state and local politicians, following the march.

Shortly after the march, Senator Horsford asked to meet with Greene and some of the committee members to discuss the F Street closure. On May 8, 2009, Senator Horsford introduced Assembly Bill 304 (AB 304). The Bill called for allocating redevelopment funds up to \$70 million to reopen F Street, and for the economic redevelopment of the surrounding neighborhoods. Community members rallied around the bill and petitioned their state and local representatives to support it. But in order for the bill to pass, we knew it would require wider support. Efforts were then made to encourage groups who had previously been quiet on the issue to summon their respective memberships. This strategy of working with diverse factions to promote a common goal is referred to as “coalition politics” (Buck 2007). One such group was the Las Vegas Muslims. In the past, the coalition had not received substantial support from the Muslim community despite earlier attempts to include them in the coalition. Coalition politics has been called the “most likely route for racial change” (Bonilla-Silva 2001:197). In an email message, Hossein Mokhtar, urged his fellow Las Vegas Muslims to contact their state representatives and show support for the Bill (Appendix 5).

At our meeting on May 18, 2009, we were joined for the first time by County Commissioner Lawrence Weekly and City Councilman Ricki Barlow, two African Americans who were from West Las Vegas. While the members were openly hostile to both men, the group reserved their greatest measure of hostility for Weekly, the City



Councilman who represented West Las Vegas in 2006 when the NDOT plans for I-15 were submitted to the full council. Although the plans clearly spelled out that NDOT intended to permanently close F Street, Weekly denied reading that in the plans. He previously said that had he understood the plans called for the street closure in West Las Vegas, he most certainly would have held meetings with the residents.<sup>8</sup> Some residents accused Weekly of selling them out in order to gain favor with the mayor. Some eight months after the city council approved the NDOT plans, in March of 2007, the governor appointed Weekly to the County Commission.<sup>9</sup> While Barlow began to regularly attend the meetings after that confrontation, Weekly never returned.

On June 1, 2009, the Nevada State legislators voted to override the governor's veto and passed AB 304. The project is estimated to cost between \$20 million and \$70 million dollars and is to be jointly funded by the city of Las Vegas and the state of Nevada. The construction portion of the project is currently scheduled to begin in the fall of 2012. No single action by the community or its supporters was responsible for this vote. It was the collective effort of the residents who exhibited a culture of perseverance, cooperation, and commitment that ultimately prevailed.

#### *Co-opting the Message*

On May 22, 2010, the city of Las Vegas and NDOT launched an aggressive outreach campaign they called the "F Street Connection," in an effort to keep West Las Vegas residents informed of the progress of the F Street reopening.<sup>10</sup> Up until the protest march, city officials and NDOT had been relatively nonresponsive; at times, they even appeared hostile to the coalition. At one city council meeting, Mayor Oscar Goodman

scolded the group for insinuating that he was a racist. While insisting that such racially divisive politics may have been part of the past, Goodman angrily reminded the residents that he was one of the few white attorneys in the 1970s who would represent African Americans charged with crimes. The mayor's attempt to deflect these charges of racism may be seen as an example what of Bonilla-Silva (2010) calls "minimization". This concept suggests that racism is a thing of the past. But for the F Street group, racism was something very much a part of their contemporary everyday lives.

Despite the mayor's protestations, the membership remained suspicious of him and other members of the city council. Coalition members openly suggested that he was the motivating force behind the street closure. Being wary of the actions of politicians, particularly white politicians was nothing new or unique for the residents of West Las Vegas. African Americans have maintained a culture of mistrust for white politicians that extend back as far as slavery in the U.S. (Bonilla-Silva 2010; Feagin 2000). The original NDOT plans in 2004 did not call for F Street to be closed. But after a meeting between NDOT and city officials in 2006, the city council made the decision to close both streets.<sup>11</sup> A secondary reason for filing the lawsuit against NDOT and the city was to determine the names of the individuals responsible for the street closure.

At a public town hall meeting held at the Culinary Training Academy to announce the "F Street Connection" campaign, city spokesman David Riggelman advised attendees that a series of meetings would be held to discuss the progress of the project and to assemble focus groups to help plan the various phases of the project. Coincidentally, Senator Horsford is also the CEO of the Culinary Training Academy. The first community meeting was held on May 24, 2010. The meeting was facilitated by two well

known and respected African American women: Hannah Brown, a former West Las Vegas resident and the first black female airline executive, and Dr. Lisa Morris Hibbler, the Deputy Neighborhood Services Director for the City of Las Vegas.<sup>12</sup> Jenica Finnerty, of NDOT, invited residents to participate in the design process to “generate ideas on how the project should be put together.”<sup>13</sup> It was at this meeting that we learned of the city’s web page entitled “F Street Connection,” complete with a street sign showing the intersections of F Street and McWilliams, and another sign below those with the name of Andrew Rube Foster, an athlete from the community.<sup>14</sup>

The city also announced a Facebook page of the same name.<sup>15</sup> A Spanish and English handout which stated that the “Projects Goals/Benefits” were: “Meet stakeholder/public expectations, Improve quality of life, Provide pedestrian and bicycle access, Support economic development, and Beautify neighborhood (Appendix 6).” Monthly planning meetings were held at the Doolittle Community Center over the next six months, for residents to develop the design of the street reopening and to discuss other improvements to the surrounding neighborhoods. In addition to representatives from NDOT, and David Rigglemen, the design meetings were regularly attended by Senator Horsford and City Councilman Ricki Barlow. These two politicians would often deliver the opening remarks with numerous references to their long-standing commitment to, and association with, the community. The senator would also bring his wife and children to the meetings as well.

Often, perhaps as a way to endear himself to a somewhat suspicious group, Senator Horsford recounted his efforts before the state legislature during the contentious sessions that culminated in the passage of AB 304. On May 29, 2009, Governor Jim

Gibbons vetoed AB 304, dashing the hopes of its supporters. Senator Horsford went back to the legislature and argued passionately for the Bill's passage: "The F Street closure physically isolates West Las Vegas, cutting residents off from places of employment and entertainment." He added that the closure reminds residents of the days when West Las Vegas was isolated through segregation.<sup>16</sup> The F Street wall had become the physical embodiment of the social boundaries that exists between blacks and whites in Las Vegas. The symbolic meaning of boundaries has been the subject of more recent sociological interest (Lamont and Molnár 2002), and is the topic of the next chapter.

### *Conclusion*

From February 2009 to November 2011, I was involved with a protest group that sought to reopen a street in the largely African American community of West Las Vegas. I attended regular meetings, observing and recording the process of social action as it unfolded. On April 18, 2009, I took part in a protest march on the Las Vegas Strip along with one-hundred residents of West Las Vegas. The march startled tourists, angered hotel and casino owners, and embarrassed city and state politicians. One purpose of the march was to draw attention to the lack of response by public officials to our repeated efforts to reopen F Street. The march was an important resource the community pulled from their cultural tool kit in order to draw attention to their plight. The black church played a small role in the group's strategy of action. But the success of the protest can be attributed to the other cultural and social resources of the community that did not rely heavily on the resources of the black church.

My findings suggest that we need to expand our perception of collective action in a black community beyond church culture. Instead, they utilized their indigenous cultural and social resources that included networking, grassroots organizing, neighboring, economic and political pressure. They formed alliances with groups from outside of the community, but shared a mutual distrust for politicians. They sought out and received the cooperation of police, due in large part to their communal association with a former resident who had risen to the rank of Deputy Chief. The coalition was headed by a committee that defied convention and included a mix of professionals, activists, educators, the elderly, and only one religious leader. They displayed a united front and a strong sense of community identity that challenged the power structure. The community's culture of resistance to social injustice and discrimination was forged in reaction to slavery and the Jim Crow laws of the old South. The residents adapted these communal resources to face the repeated challenges they encountered in their new home in Las Vegas. Whether the fight was for welfare rights, civil rights, or the reopening of a street, the community has historically banded together in a culture of unity and common identity that did not depend primarily on the black church for support.

Although city officials continue their attempts to co-opt the message, the members persist in directing the process of the street reopening. Recently a design meeting was scheduled to discuss the community-approved proposals for reopening the street. We learned of the meeting from Trish who now has a complete data base of email addresses and phone numbers at her disposal. About thirty members of the coalition came to the meeting to show our support for the project. At the design meeting, the architectural firm displayed a series of potential artwork that will line the tunnel

connecting F Street with downtown. Several residents loudly complained when informed that the architectural firm will be designing the artwork. The residents demanded to have input from the community that includes employing local artists to be involved. In the end, city officials and NDOT agreed to schedule more design meetings and to find a way to accommodate the community's wishes. I found this event to be indicative of the impact this community group has to mobilize the community and to shape the course of their destiny.

Finally, I would be remiss if I did not discuss the critical role women played in the overall success of this protest group. As I said previously, had it not been for the women in this community, particularly at the outset, I strongly believe that this social action would have never materialized. In conducting socio-historical research, I found that women were at the forefront of many other previous protest actions in the community. I also learned that these women and the women on the coalition committee did not have any strong religious affiliations. In fact, several of them expressed outright disdain for the lack of support they received from the religious leaders in the community. I concluded that their lack of connection to the black church may be due to the patriarchal nature of the church that tends to discourage gender equality (Simien 2006), and promotes traditional gender roles that are incongruent with women in leadership positions (Robnett and Bany 2012).

I had a few conversations with some of the older women in the community who had participated in prior incidents of social action in West Las Vegas about the apparent lack of men, aside from religious leaders, being involved in these activities. One woman in particular, Martha (pseudonym), felt that the reason women are often at the forefront of

these kinds of activities may well be a carryover from the culture of the Old South. Martha is a 73 year-old African American woman who has been actively involved in her community of West Las Vegas for over 50 years. Martha recently returned to Las Vegas after a five year absence because, as she described, “things were getting too hot here and I was beginning to get some threats against me that I took seriously.” She likes to joke that she has been arrested or thrown out of more meetings than anyone she knows. She said that in the Old South, black women could usually voice their disapproval about their mistreatment by whites without the threat of violence. However, it was not uncommon for black men to be beaten or even murdered for engaging in the same behavior. Martha confided in me that her father had been murdered by the Ku Klux Klan on Christmas Eve, in Mississippi, when she was only three years old, because he got in a disagreement with a group of white men over his small trucking business. Her father’s death is the reason her remaining family eventually came to Las Vegas.

Another woman, Alice (pseudonym), felt that historically black women have had to assume the leadership role in the household and as a result, they were more likely to organize their fellow female neighbors in times of a crisis in their community. Alice said:

Many of the women I’ve known over the years have gone for long periods without a man in the home. When a woman has to raise her children that way she learns to accept that she must be the one to stand up for her family. As women and neighbors, we tried to look out for each other’s kids and we understood, especially in the 1970s, that alone we don’t have

much power, but collectively we can make people listen to us by coming together.

The comments by Martha and Alice were repeated by several other older women in the community. They compared their efforts as similar to those of other African American women and didn't see their behavior as anything unusual or unique. They also mentioned that they tried to instill these same qualities in their children and grandchildren.

African American women in the U. S. have a distinguished, albeit relatively unheralded, history of social activism in the U.S., most notably during the civil rights movement of 1954-1968 (King-Farris and Ladd 2008). But even before the civil rights movement, African American women were present in the Women's Suffrage movement that fought for a woman's right to vote (Brown, Gordon and Collier-Thomas 1997). African American women continued that fight for another fifty years before they were able to vote in all fifty states. During the civil rights movement, African American women participated in acts of civil disobedience that saw them be arrested, beaten by police, and attacked with fire hoses, and police dogs. These courageous women fought for equal access to public buildings, movie theaters, education, employment, and housing.

The predominant presence of women in West Las Vegas to be involved in social activism appears to be a cultural tradition that has been passed down from one generation of women to the next. Many of the women involved in the F Street coalition are the daughters, granddaughters, or other relatives of the social activist women who preceded them. It was quite often the case that the names of these elder stateswomen would be



invoked at the meetings as a way to motivate and inspire the membership. They certainly made an impression on me.

## Notes

1. The Reverend Al Sharpton and a group of human rights activists founded The National Action Network in 1991 (NAN). According to their mission statement “NAN fights to empower people by providing extensive voter education, services aiding the poor, supporting economically small community businesses, confronting racism and violation of civil and human rights.”  
<http://www.nationalactionnetworklv.org/mission.htm>.
2. “Keep F Street Open.” Geoff Schumacher. *Las Vegas Review Journal*, January 2, 2009..
3. See “Ethics commission finds that Frank Hawkins violated ethics rules.” Opinion 94-05, April 10, 1995.
4. See “Hawkins’ group okay to rebuild development.” Tanya Flanagan. *Las Vegas Review Journal*, April 18, 1998.
5. “2012: The Year of Downtown.” *Las Vegas Review Journal* (Promotional Feature) pp. 1- 16. October 12, 2011.
6. “Activists hit strip to highlight F St. saga.” Lés Pierres Streater. *Las Vegas Sentinel Voice*. April 23, 2009.
7. <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/05/19/us/after-the-riots-mob-violence-continues-in-las-vegas.html>
8. “Street closure spurs march.” Francis McCabe. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. January 8, 2009.
9. Ibid.
10. “City to keep West Las Vegas updated on progress of F Street.” Adrienne Packer. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 22, 2010.
11. “F Street: Taking on the Road to Nowhere.” Sam Skolnik. *Las Vegas Sun*. May 14, 2009.
12. For a slide presentation of the meeting see  
[http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/files/F-Street\\_TownHall.pdf](http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/files/F-Street_TownHall.pdf).
13. “City to keep West Las Vegas updated on progress of F Street.” Adrienne Packer. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, May 22, 2010..
14. See [www.lasvegasnevada.gov/fstreet](http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/fstreet).

15. See [www.facebook.com/FStreetLasVegas](http://www.facebook.com/FStreetLasVegas).
16. “Bill to reopen street revived by legislators.” Ed Vogel, *Las Vegas Review Journal*, June 2, 2009.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE SYMBOLIC MEANINGS OF BOUNDARIES

The F Street wall is approximately forty feet in height. It is constructed of cement and rebar. The wall is painted in a combination of tan and light brown hues. The top portion is decorated with two very long intertwined elongated black and tan serpentine waves. There are numerous smaller versions of the waves on the bottom half of the wall. The wall is cold to the touch, even in summer, and it has the feel of permanency. It is too tall to scale, too wide to negotiate, too solid to break through. Despite denials by city officials, the wall *is* a border between one African American community and the burgeoning redevelopment of downtown Las Vegas.

Margarethe Kusenbach (2009:408) identified the concept of “bordering” which refers to “accounts and actions aimed at erecting boundaries between one’s own community and geographically, culturally, and/or structurally distant others.” The physical boundaries that separate communities are normally associated with social boundaries, including the “stigma” (Goffman 1963) attached to one’s location within a particular community. In Southern Nevada there exists a “status differentiation,” based on ethnic/racial differences (Weber 1978 [1922]), associated with living in West Las Vegas. For the residents of West Las Vegas, outsiders have come to associate this community with poverty, drug abuse, gangs, and high crime rates. This profane association has been used as justification for isolating this community from the rest of Las Vegas, particularly from the downtown area where tourists are likely to visit.

In my conversations with those whites in favor of the wall, I discovered that most of them had never been to the Westside, nor were they familiar with its history. However, they were always quick to mention that the community was “mostly black.” They talked about the community’s supposedly high crime rate, despite lacking concrete support for this perception.<sup>1</sup> When I asked them where they lived, many of them were in disbelief when I pointed out that the rates of violent crime in West Las Vegas were lower than those in their neighborhoods. They were quick to point out a recent shooting they heard about on the local television news program, but ignore the fact that there were three similar homicides within a mile of each other on the Las Vegas Strip that same week.<sup>2</sup> The public narrative and collective memories of this group seem to have been constructed from selected bits of information and not based on any systematic empirical evidence (Bates 2011; Borer 2010).

For the many African American residents of West Las Vegas, the F Street wall represents eighty years of exclusion, oppression, and racial discrimination at the hands of powerful city officials and their wealthy, property-developing allies. But for many whites who do not live in West Las Vegas, the F Street Wall is seen as a necessary barrier, keeping tourists and others from entering this economically-challenged, predominantly African American community. During my involvement with this study, I encountered polarized opinions about the community of West Las Vegas and the symbolic meanings of the wall. In this section of the study I analyze the socially constructed meanings of the F Street wall. The meaning of objects, and how they are interpreted, determine our actions towards those objects and towards those who may differ with our interpretation.

### *The Interpretation of Physical Objects*

The first premise of symbolic interactionism is that “human beings act toward things on the basis of the meaning that the things have for them” (Blumer 1969:2). As human actors, we live our lives in a physical environment. Yet, how we experience our corporal surroundings depends in large part on how we interpret the physical objects that make up our world (Blumer 1969; Mead 1934). The meaning of “things,” such as a tangible object, and our subsequent reaction to that object, depends on our interpretation of the object in question (Mead 1934).

Social constructionists refer to this process as the *subjectivist approach*: “Social construction perspectives on social problems begin with the belief that people create meaning because meaning is not inherent in objects” (Loseke 2003:25). According to Mead (1934:80), “Meaning is a content of an object which is dependent upon the relation of an organism or group of organisms to it.” Blumer (1969:12) posits that objects have no intrinsic meaning “except as their meaning is sustained through indications and definitions that people make of the objects.” It is only when human actors ascribe meaning to an object that it becomes a public symbol.

For the residents of West Las Vegas, the F Street wall is a symbol of racism and exclusion.

The wall is a symbol of exclusion. Why else would you put a wall up, except to keep us in and the tourists out? When the dam was built, and workers started coming downtown, black businesses were forced to move to the Westside. Police officer Moody (the first African American police

officer on the Las Vegas Police force) said they wanted two white police officers with shotguns stationed at the D Street underpass to keep blacks from going downtown. – Interview with Trish Geran, March 15, 2009.

For those opposed to reopening the street, the wall is seen as a necessary barrier that separates downtown from a ghetto:

Get over it. You are not that important, that millions upon millions of taxpayer dollars should be spent so you can get to ‘ghetto alley’ a bit easier. – Online posting, Las Vegas Review-Journal, May 28, 2009.

These comments suggest that the wall’s meaning was deeply subjective and heavily influenced by how residents felt about the community and the residents of West Las Vegas. I observed that opinions varied depending upon race, social class, and on which sides of the wall residents were situated.

The second premise of symbolic interactionism is that “the meaning of such things is derived from, or arises out of, the social interaction that one has with one’s fellows” (Blumer 1969:2). Las Vegas, like any modern society, is stratified by race and social class. A different status is placed on people according to their racial and social class membership. Other than at work, there is very little socialization between the African American residents of West Las Vegas and those residing outside of the community (Hershwitzky 2011; Orleck 2005; Moehring 1989). The longtime residents of West Las Vegas have for years experienced the repeated efforts of city officials to

marginalize them as a group. They have fomented a culture of mistrust and resentment concerning any action by the city with regard to their community.<sup>3</sup>

Their group membership as residents of West Las Vegas affects not only their access to resources and power, but also their cultural identity and self-image (Geran 2006; Moehring 1989). As Berger and Luckmann (1966:19) point out: “Everyday life presents itself as a reality interpreted by men and subjectively meaningful to them as a coherent world.” Through my discussions with the residents of West Las Vegas, a common theme reoccurs: they see themselves and their community as victims of racism and oppression. This is their reality; it is the world they live in everyday.

Many of the whites I spoke with had a very different perception of West Las Vegas, despite admitting they had never been to the community. All they knew, or seemingly cared to know, was that the community was largely African American. Similar comments appeared in the online forum:

If you poeple (sic) on the westside are worried about your welfare checks being late because of the closer (sic) don't, the U.S. mail will find you. If your (sic) worried about the person wanting to buy crack from you can't find your house, or will have to walk a little further, don't worry they will find you. If your (sic) worried your parole officer won't find you, don't worry they will find you, grow up people it's called progress, and growth.

- Online posting Las Vegas Review-Journal, May 28, 2009.



Anybody I knew who grew up on the Westside never thought it was bad. That perception comes from outside the neighborhood. They are repeating the same things that Mayor Goodman and others like him feel. The reason the Westside has become blighted is because of them. When they wouldn't allow us on the strip, we took care of ourselves. Prior to integration, we had everybody living there. You had teachers living next to preachers, next to doctors. Integration took a lot of business off the Westside and sucked the economic life out of the community. We went from slavery that produced fragmentation, to a community, then to integration that again caused fragmentation, to eventually a loss of identity. – Interview with Brandon Greene March 15, 2009.

These comments reflect a dichotomy of *racialization* (Samuels 2009; Lee 1993; Omi and Winant 1986)—the social understanding of racial differences—depending on whether an African American lives in the middle- or upper-class neighborhoods of Las Vegas, or in West Las Vegas (Hershwitzky 2011; Geran 2006).

### *A Stigmatized Community*

My interaction with white residents of Las Vegas suggest to me that black men and women living in middle-class or upper-class neighborhoods in Las Vegas are considered to be “hard-working,” “respectful,” and “just like us.” But black males living in West Las Vegas, regardless of social class or work ethic, are often seen by whites as lazy, disrespectful, violent drug-addicted criminals, and/or absentee fathers. I did not

include a representative sample of Asians or Hispanics in my conversations with those individuals living outside of West Las Vegas. However, one morning I did speak to two Hispanic men and two Hispanic women, at separate times, at the Family Dollar Store, located on the outer edge of West Las Vegas, near the corner of Rancho Drive and Washington. None of them lived on the Westside, although they lived in neighborhoods just outside of the community. They shared similar concerns with whites about the crime in West Las Vegas, but they reserved their harshest opinions for black females. In particular, the women I spoke to felt that black women were “lazy and promiscuous” and “had only themselves to blame” for their impoverished conditions. Likewise, many of the white subjects I interviewed perceived females living in West Las Vegas as single-mothers and welfare recipients:

All those women on the Westside do is sit around on their big fat asses, getting high and collecting welfare for every baby they pop out. They don't even know who the kid's father is. Why should they work, when we have to pay taxes to support those crackheads? – Interview with M, August 2, 2010.

Do you know the difference between a nigger and a black man? A nigger is someone who expects something for nothing. A black man is someone who works for what he wants. – Interview with J, August 2, 2010.

These comments support the perception of West Las Vegas as a “stigmatized” neighborhood (Borer 2010; Goffman 1963). Both of the white informants quoted above admitted they had never been to West Las Vegas and only knew about its “reputation” from the news.

This “profane” representation (Durkheim 1985 [1912]) appears to extend to the community at large, even though few of the Las Vegans, and even fewer whites, whom I spoke with acknowledged having ever visited West Las Vegas. I determined this from conversations I have had with whites in my travels throughout Southern Nevada in the past two and a half years. From cab drivers to patients in doctor’s waiting rooms to my neighbors; from hair stylists to passengers on the plane, and even former coworkers at social events; when told about my study, they all expressed similar concerns about the community and its residents. This same negative representation was being used by some to justify the F Street wall in order to further isolate West Las Vegans from the greater Las Vegas community; and perhaps as some suspect, to keep tourists from entering the West Las Vegas community.<sup>4</sup> The characterization of West Las Vegas as a stigmatized community persists, despite having many nice residential neighborhoods, schools, businesses, and more churches per capita than the greater Las Vegas area (Geran 2006).

### *A Marginalized Community*

Blumer’s (1969:2) third premise of symbolic interactionism is “these meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretive process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.” The meaning of things, whether tangible objects like a wall, or the intangible concept of community, is subject to interpretation and

reinterpretation (Gieryn 2000). In Erving Goffman's seminal work *Asylums*, he discusses the impact of a "total institution" on a marginalized social group. Goffman (1961:4) describes the characteristics of a total institution as "their encompassing or total character is symbolized by *the barrier to social intercourse with the outside* (my emphasis) and to departure that is often built right into the physical plant, such as locked doors, *high walls* (my emphasis), barbed wire, cliffs, water, forests, or moors." I am not suggesting that West Las Vegas is a total institution in the manner that Goffman intended, but similarities do exist concerning the socially constructed perceptions of the marginalized residents by many of those residing outside of the community. Residential integration severely limits opportunities to interact with diverse groups; it creates physical and social barriers to social intercourse that shape perception:

Cement the 'residents' in with a wall on all sides that is too tall for them to scale, escape from, throw watermelons over or chuck chicken bones over. If they 'be' complaining, drop enough cement to completely cover them, thus creating a nice dome-like existence for them. You could drop welfare checks through a small hole in the dome. Or not. Food? Grow their own! – Online posting Las Vegas Review-Journal, May 28, 2009.

The Westside is not full of people who are murdering each other and selling dope. The Westside has produced people like me; I have two degrees and I am on my way to graduate school. My sister went to Harvard and UCLA Medical School. The Westside has produced authors,

playwrights, and every occupation under the sun. This is a neighborhood that was cast aside while Las Vegas built up everywhere else. Then they put out to the media that it is the neighborhood that is lost and decrepit, never holding the city accountable. – Interview with Brandon Greene, March 15, 2009.

From the previous comments, we see that the meaning of the F Street wall is socially constructed and differentially-interpreted. The comment which referred to West Las Vegas as a ghetto was echoed many times by those white residents I spoke with who admitted they had never visited West Las Vegas. These comments further demonstrate that “place” matters (Borer 2006; Gieryn 2000). Places are perceived and interpreted (Soja 1996), even though we may have never even visited the place in question. The barrier to social intercourse to which Goffman (1961) refers is symbolized by the F Street wall. A symbol becomes institutionalized and embedded within the culture of a community when members of one community have little or no access to another community (Schudson 1989), whether by choice or by design. I believe when that occurs an object’s shared meaning (the physical barrier that separates them) becomes culturally-specific and differentially-interpreted. Consequently, social actors within the cultural system produce meaning, through interpretation and reinterpretation. They produce norms of behavior for interacting with those objects (Goffman 1959; Blumer 1958; Mead 1934).

No one disputes that portions of West Las Vegas are economically depressed. But how the economic decline occurred, and the reasons for the continued decline, are hotly

contested, with opinions divided mainly along racial lines. What has happened on the Westside, and continues to happen, mirrors the same conditions seen in larger inner-city urban locales in the U.S. (Anderson and Massey 2001; Anderson 1999; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Wilson 1987, 1978) and also provides a similar framework for the discussion concerning the cultural values of inner-city blacks (Alba and Nee 2003; Wilson 1996).

### *Racialization*

The African American residents of West Las Vegas are further stigmatized by *racialization* (Omni and Winant 1986) that seeks to ascribe certain negative characteristics to their race. By constructing the F Street wall, the power structure successfully exercised their political influence to erect socioeconomic, cultural, and moral boundaries (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003; Lamont 1992)—justifiably from their perspective—further separating the residents of West Las Vegas from themselves.

The online comments suggest to me that some residents harbor deep, negative feelings about race and only reveal their true nature when their identity is shielded from public view by the Internet. One can safely hide behind the anonymity of the Internet and post things that they might not otherwise say in public (Blee 2002). The Internet provides a unique medium for expressing one's views, without necessarily experiencing the negative social consequences one might encounter in the social world (Meyrowitz 1985; Matei and Britt 2011). In my conversations with those whites who favored the wall, I learned that the tone and tenor of the Internet comments were consistent with what they expressed to me.

Maybe it was because I am white that this group felt it was acceptable to use racial epithets in my presence (Simi and Futtrell 2010.) Geertz (1973:220) recognized that ideologies have the capacity to foster “projections of unacknowledged fears, disguises for ulterior motives, phatic expressions of group solidarity-they are, most distinctively, maps of problematic social reality and matrices for the creation of collective conscience.” A paucity of social intercourse between opposing social groups, nurtured perhaps by a racist ideology appears to have created a collective ideology as evidenced by those whites opposed to reopening the street.

### *Conclusion*

My data suggests that the wall’s symbolic meaning was shaped by the perception one shares with other members of their cultural group about the community of West Las Vegas. These shared cultural interpretations are handed down from one generation to the next (Geertz 1973), and internalized as taken-for-granted “socially constructed consciousness” (Alexander 2004:290). This animosity exists despite the fact that these two oppositional groups engage in no meaningful social interaction. The construction of the F Street wall only reinforced that a lack of interaction between the African American residents of West Las Vegas with tourists and white residents of Las Vegas would continue.

This study also suggests that the absence of meaningful social interaction between two culturally different groups may account for the differentially-interpreted meanings of the wall. In his discussion of the relationship between “attitude” and the “social act,” Blumer (1969:94) states: “The human act is not a release of an already organized

tendency; it is a construction built up by the actor.” The impetus behind the decision to build the wall remains shrouded in political double-talk, as city officials continue to deny that their actions were racially motivated. But among those whites that I spoke to, public support for the wall was almost universal.

Schudson (1989:155) acknowledged that “cultural objects are seen as enormously powerful in shaping human action—even if the cultural objects themselves are shown to be rather simply derived from the interests of powerful social groups.” For the residents of West Las Vegas their outrage was inspired by more than just the actual construction of the wall, but by what the wall signifies to them. For them, the wall symbolizes a collective sense of alienation and discrimination on the part of city officials that has persisted for nearly eighty years.

The longer a symbolic object exists, the greater the potential exists for attaining cultural significance (Lamont and Molnár, 2002; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz 1991), as does the object’s ability to affect social action (Swidler 1986). Ora Bland and Estella Jimmerson are the lead plaintiffs in the lawsuit against the city and NDOT. Both black women have lived in their homes for more than forty years. Every morning they wake up and see the enormous wall that is situated less than one-hundred yards from their home. The wall and the street closure serve as constant reminders of their struggle against oppression. As long as the street remains closed and the wall remains in place, they and this community will not rest. Just as they always have, the community will continue to draw upon every available resource to combat this injustice.



## Notes

1. <http://www.lvmpd.com/crimeviewcommunity/wizard.asp>
2. “Bloody Summer on Strip.” Francis McCabe. *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. July 27, 2010.
3. “F Street: Taking on the Road to Nowhere.” Sam Skolnik. *Las Vegas Sun*. May 14, 2009.
4. “Wasteful Project.” Richard McGarrity. *Las Review Journal, Letters to the Editor*. July 28, 2011.

## CHAPTER 6

### THE PAROCHIAL REALMS OF HISTORIC WEST LAS VEGAS

The worlds formed by intimate interaction and primary relationships have been thoroughly studied and theorized throughout the history of sociology. In recent decades, urban scholars have provided solid descriptions and analyses of the social sphere dominated by strangers, the public. In the past, sociologists have also investigated a third social realm quite extensively, one of ‘communal’ or ‘parochial’ interaction and relationships. However, theorizing in this particular area remains underdeveloped. –Kusenbach (2006:279)

#### *Introduction*

The above quote challenges sociologists to further examine the concept of the parochial realm – that place between the public and the private spheres in society – because these “third places” (Oldenburg 1989) afford valuable insight into the unique culture of a community (Fine 2010). They tell us not just about the food or drink being offered, but also about the social life of the neighborhoods within (Kusenbach 2006). My primary goal in investigating the community’s parochial realms was to gain a greater understanding of the involvement of the West Las Vegas community in the Stop the F Street Closure project. Understanding the parochial realms of West Las Vegas provided for me a glimpse into why the residents fought so hard to reopen F Street, in response to

those who felt that the disenfranchised community should be “walled off” from downtown.

Parochial realms are also part of a vast networking mechanism in a community (Hampton 2007). Networking has been shown to be an effective grass-roots tool for collective social action and as a method for enhancing social capital (Mix 2011). According to the coalition members I spoke to, many of them learned about the street closure, or received updates about meetings and other community activities concerning the protest, from their friends, neighbors, and coworkers while patronizing one of the community’s many parochial realms.

By exploring these “third places,” I gained a deeper understanding of the cultural pride of this historic community. I often heard critics express the opinion that West Las Vegas is a “dying community,” as a reason to justify the street closure. There is evidence of economic distress in some areas, as indicated by the boarded up buildings and empty lots scattered around the neighborhood. But does economic decline necessarily mean the community is dying? Or, is there an alternative way to examine a community’s viability? To answer this question, I framed this portion of the study by analyzing the community’s socioeconomic pulse in terms of its parochial realms (Lofland 1998).

Very little is known about the parochial realms of Historic West Las Vegas as they exist today. My research will help to elucidate the cultural viability of this community; and might also provide social scientists with additional tools with which to assess the quality of life in urban areas. I studied the parochial realms of West Las Vegas, because I wanted to find out where these realms exist, how they operate, and what they consist of (e.g., restaurants, bars, social clubs). I wanted to uncover the ways these realms

reflect the social culture of the community and whether they are indicative of the community's verve. By studying the parochial realms of West Las Vegas, I gained a greater appreciation for the pride the residents have for their community, why they have fought their protracted battle against marginalization, and how these places play a part in social action networking.

I begin with a review of the literature, concerning the concept of “community” and examine sociological standards by which to gauge the viability of a community. I discuss public, private, and parochial realms, and what it means to be the “stranger” in a community. I also examine the collective meanings and memories behind the places that used to serve as parochial realms and have now disappeared into the past. I close with my findings and conclusions and some thoughts about what parochial realms say about a community's vitality, cultural pride, and as an informal facilitator for social action networking.

I want to make it clear that I am not out to prove some hypothesis—evidence of parochial realms does not *prove* that the community is viable. Instead, I hope to address the negative comments that this is a “dying community” by exploring examples of a thriving socioeconomic environment, replete with parochial realms, despite having seen more than its share of economic hardship and perhaps in spite of it. I also wanted to witness firsthand the inner-workings of the social networking mechanisms that contributed to the grassroots effort to reopen the street.

My methods for this portion of the study differed from those employed in studying the F Street protests. I will briefly describe them here, instead of in the methods section (Chapter 3). I used the *reactive* mode of observation because it is one in which

“the researcher intervenes in the action, but only in the role of outside observer” (Angrosino 2007:3). The urban culturalist perspective (Borer 2006) begins with a place and asks what happened or what happens here? What meaning do these places hold for the residents? What makes these places significant?

I provide a “thick description” (Geertz 1973) of the sites, the social interaction, and the individuals who populate the sites. Entry to some of the sites was facilitated by “informal gatekeepers” that I have come to know through my participation in the F Street movement. Informal gatekeepers are those who live in the community; they are accepted and trusted by the members of the community (Angrosino 2007). Other sites were selected through snowballing, or as a flâneur—randomly traveling throughout the community in order to experience it.

I conducted unstructured ethnographic interviews with owners, customers, workers, and residents in order to explore the connection between the community and the spaces that make it a parochial realm. I began with general questions: Are there places in West Las Vegas where neighbors, coworkers, and friends go to socialize and converse? What kinds of activities go on there (e.g., eating, drinking, dancing, music, games, or religious gatherings)? Do you think the regulars would be receptive to my presence? It was my hope that a gatekeeper would accompany me to some of the sites, as a way to ease my presence into the environment. Kusenbach (2006) employed a similar method by using her participants as “go alongs” and “walk alongs” in order to investigate and experience the community from the viewpoint of the locals. In my case, the gatekeepers merely contacted the owners of some of the sites and secured their consent for me to visit, listen, and observe.

Critical to this study was the act of listening to conversations; eavesdropping if you will. I attempted to analyze not only the tone, tenor, and content of the conversations, but to determine, as Duneier (1999:1269-1270) states: “precisely how individuals, through mutual awareness of unfolding conversational trajectories, manage to talk with one another.” The researcher must also be critically self-reflexive in the analysis of conversation because how we hear and translate the meaning of conversation enables us to define and convey “reality” (Thomas 1993). I was less concerned with what was said but with how individuals interacted with each other (i.e., laughter, touching, engaging interaction).

I relied on ethnographic field notes, as opposed to tape-recorded conversations, because of ethical and other considerations. Ethnographic field notes can be a less obtrusive, yet effective, method of recording conversational data (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). Since I was conversing with participants in their natural settings, I believed they would be more relaxed and less suspicious of my intentions if I didn’t record their conversations. My objective was not to gain a sense of belonging in the places I visited, but to analyze the space in terms of whether it qualified as a parochial realm. I didn’t participate in any prolonged conversations with individuals in these places. Instead, I was more an observing-participant, than a participant-observer (Angrosino 2007).

### *Community*

The concept of community has a rich and varied tradition in the social sciences (Delanty 2003), though some sociologists, like Vaisey (2007:851), contend that the study of communities “has produced little generalizable knowledge about the social world.” A

long-standing debate among community scholars is whether to define community in terms of a spatial territory or as a social network (Luloff and Wilkinson 1977). I view community as being both spatial and social. A community is a “geographic space of shared experience” (Fine, Weis, Weseen, and Wong 2000:111). There should be discernable geographic boundaries and identifiable groups who populate it.

Ferdinand Tönnies conceptualized two basic forms of communal organization: *Gemeinschaft*, and *Gesellschaft*. The former refers to a tightly-knit, intimate kinship community and the latter a larger more impersonal social grouping akin to modern society (Tönnies 2001 [1912]). In a broader sense, *Gemeinschaft* has been described (perhaps romanticized) as the way of life in the pre-industrial, rural villages, of Western Europe (Brint 2001), with a shared moral order or culture (Vaisey 2007).

Durkheim (1984 [1893]) distinguished between “mechanical” and “organic” solidarity in his discussion of community types, which were based on the division of labor. For Durkheim, mechanical solidarity was that type of traditional community characterized by kinship organizations, with a common set of values and a common religion. He envisioned these societies as small, isolated, homogenous populations composed of clans; where religion was dominant and labor was simple. This was a society with little individual freedom and social cohesion was based on similarities and shared values. He saw organic solidarity as indicative of a more complex society; it was individualistic not collective. A society characterized by organic solidarity was one in which members were interdependent upon each other.

By Durkheim’s account we would expect to see mechanical solidarity in the type of society defined by Tönnies as *Gemeinschaft*, or that which existed prior to the

Industrial Revolution. By contrast, organic solidarity evolved from mechanical solidarity and is found in a modern society that is large, with a complex division of labor and strong individualism. With so much labor specialization, the individual is dependent upon others to perform tasks that he cannot do for himself. Interdependence facilitates social cohesion and group solidarity.

Durkheim perceived of society as following an evolutionary or “natural” process (1972 [1893]). Just as organisms evolved from simple to more complex forms, so also societies evolved into newer and more complex forms of relationships. A similar natural science model was adopted by the early Chicago School of urban sociology. They approached the concept of community as a *natural area* (Hunter and Riger 1986). The early Chicago School stressed the natural, fluid composition of social relationships at the local level (see also Burgess 1967). They saw similarities between the environment of plants and that of animals and humans; a method McKenzie (1925:64) described as “the ecological approach.” The Chicago School’s urban ethnography studies focused on such “natural areas” as the Jewish ghetto (Wirth 1956 [1928]) and Little Germany (Park 1971 [1922]).

The ethnographic work of the early Chicago School provided a qualitative analysis of class differences in a complex society, one supposedly based on “Jeffersonian ideals” (Hollingshead 1961 [1949]). But none of these studies in class inequality would be starker than that of E. Franklin Frazier and his examination of the American Negro (see Frazier 1939, 1957). Frazier’s work was a departure from the other ethnographies of the Chicago School because he drew upon his personal experiences as a black man as well as those of his subjects.



Perhaps inspired by Frazier's desire to improve the lives of his subjects, William Foote Whyte, in *Street Corner Society* (1943), transformed what was designed to be formal research into part of his personal life experience and called it "participant observation." Instead of the previous relationship between the researcher as the "other" to his subject: "Whyte is as much a researcher as he is a subject of his own book; the other had become the brother of Italian ghetto dwellers" (see Vidich and Lyman 2000). Participant observation has become a methodological staple of ethnographic studies as a tool for the experientially-gained knowledge of other groups and cultures (Tedlock 2000). Participant observation enabled me to explore the public spaces of this community, grasp an understanding of the culture of the community, and to assess comments by outsiders that West Las Vegas is a community in decline.

### *Declining Communities*

Community scholar Robert Nisbet (1953) examined the phenomenon of declining communities. While his concept of community is chiefly territorial in nature (Kusenbach 2006), others define community as social and not spatial entities (Wellman 2005). A more contemporary approach has been offered by urban scholars like Albert Hunter (1974), who define community in terms of a social network within a spatial domain. Hunter's approach suggests that economic decline does not necessarily coincide with social decline if the spatial domain maintains a vibrant social network. Hunter (1985) posits that "ecological processes" such as urbanization contributed to the decline of inner-city neighborhoods, signaling a loss of community. For Hunter, those ecological processes include meeting a community's fundamental needs, to serve as a unit of

patterned social interaction, and provide for a cultural-symbolic unit of collective identity (see Hunter 1985:537-538). By contrast, Luloff and Wilkinson (c. f. 1977) argue that Hunter overlooks his own finding that residents in a supposedly declining community still engage in friendly interaction and have a sense of identity with their neighborhood. Gans (1962) came to a similar conclusion in his study of Italians in Boston's West End.

Lucio and Barrett (2010) studied relocated public housing residents in order to understand the factors that contributed to their sense of satisfaction with their new residences. What they concluded was that the quality of the new neighborhoods was associated with the residents' sense of satisfaction and "collective efficacy." They determined that most residents were satisfied with "losing" their old community, but retained their sense of "community" because their new neighborhoods achieved their expectations. Aside from markets and services, residents reported finding suitable locales for socializing with their friends and neighbors.

It would be easy to look at the boarded up buildings or empty lots in West Las Vegas and conclude, as others have, that the community is in decline. Such pejorative opinions have been used to justify the street closure in the minds of those from outside of the community. But to do so would require one to ignore the vibrant culture and sociability in the community. My hope for this project is to seek out an alternative method with which to analyze the socioeconomic pulse of this community by examining the parochial realms. I wanted to understand the cultural pride the residents felt when discussing and defending their historic community. I also wanted to experience the networking mechanisms that facilitated the community's grassroots effort to communicate the news of the street closure and subsequently the activities of the protest.

*Public, Private, and Parochial Realms*

Unfortunately for my attempt at mapmaking, realms are not geographically or physically rooted pieces of space. They are social, not physical territories. Whether any actual physical space contains a realm at all and, if it does, whether that realm is private, is parochial, or is public is not the consequence of some immutable culturally or legally given designation. It is, rather the consequence of the proportions and densities of relationship types present and these proportions and densities are themselves fluid. –Lofland (1998:11)

Lofland’s quote explains that what distinguishes a parochial realm from the private or public realm is not dependent upon geographical boundaries. Instead, the defining characteristic of the parochial realm is the nature of the relationships that occur within that space. According to Lofland (1998), Hunter’s concept of community included a triadic distinction among various “realms” within a geographic locale: *public*, *private* and *parochial realms*. Lofland describes the public realm as “the world of strangers and the street” (1998:10). The public realm is one that is accessible to all members of a community (e.g., a public park, a community center, or a shopping center). These public spaces can also serve as a place for social interaction between diverse groups (Zukin 1995; Oldenburg and Brissett 1982).

Public spaces are comprised of strangers interacting with other strangers; and seem to be “more racially, ethnically, and socially diverse than ever. Social distance and tension as expressed by wariness of strangers appear to be the order of the day”

(Anderson 2004:14). However, some have argued that certain marginalized groups, like the poor and the homeless, have been denied access to seemingly public realms due to structural constraints (Stillerman 2006). Others recognize that there are quasi-public spaces like commercial shopping malls that are “privatized” by the actions of owners and managers who serve as informal gatekeepers (Morrill, Snow, and White 2005).

The private realm generally refers to one’s home or “ties of intimacy among primary group members” (Hunter 1985:35). The private realm is the world of the household; it is the place reserved for intimate friends and kinship networks (Lofland 1998). But the private realm is not to be confused with the notion of privacy. Lofland cautions that one’s vehicle may provide a sense of privacy, but it does not equate to the kind of privacy one has in his or her own home.

The parochial realm is “characterized by a sense of commonality among acquaintances and neighbors who are involved in interpersonal networks that are located within communities” (Hunter 1985:35). This definition opens up the concept of the parochial realm as one that can be experienced in a variety of venues. Lofland sees the parochial realm as “the world of the neighborhood, workplace or acquaintance network” (1998:10). For Lofland, the parochial realm refers to a social, not a physical, territory that might include a neighborhood tavern or a coffee shop. Places then, do not determine interactions, but they can influence and structure them (Borer 2008; Oldenburg 1989). For example, one might expect a more intimate level of sociability between friends in a neighborhood tavern than in a public library.

In her research of neighborhoods, Kusenbach (2006) argues that a parochial realm is typified by a communal relational form; it suggests community and social interaction.

Although she never mentions the term “parochial realm,” Pattillo-McCoy (1998) describes this same sense of community and social interaction in the black Christian church of Groveland (pseudonym), an African American neighborhood in Chicago, which served as a mechanism for social action in the community. As my research suggests, there are times when the public realm—a public park or community center—can also serve as a venue for the parochial realm. A parochial realm is not defined by the type of place where interaction occurs. Instead, it is the degree and quality of sociability between social actors that determines whether a place is a parochial realm.

One key indicator of the parochial realm is that it encourages public sociability in a way that involves “intimate-secondary” relationships, rather than just conversation between strangers or the mechanical discourse as experienced between someone at the DMV and the person behind the desk. Intimate-secondary relationships, sometimes referred to as “quasi-primary” relationships are those types of relationships with friends, coworkers, neighbors, or others with whom we share regular contact, but do not quite reach the level of a primary relationship (see Lofland 1998:56-80).

Oldenburg’s concept of the “third place” seems to fit the notion of the parochial realm, although he tends to limit such places to coffee shops and neighborhood taverns. According to Oldenburg (1982:270), the third place—that place between work and home—provides an opportunity “for experiences and relationships that are otherwise unavailable.” Key amongst these opportunities is that for pure *sociability*, or the “play form” of association (Simmel 1950 [1908]:254-261). But as I discovered, for someone who is a stranger in that third place, the opportunity for playful social interaction can be severely limited if not entirely impossible.

## *The Stranger*

He is fixed within a certain spatial circle—or within a group whose boundaries are analogous to spatial boundaries—but his position within it is fundamentally affected by the fact that he does not belong in it initially and that he brings qualities into it that are not, and cannot be, indigenous to it. –Simmel (1950 [1908]:143)

The above quote accurately describes my sense of detachment from the community of West Las Vegas. Despite my familiarity with some of the neighborhoods, and having spent almost three years studying the community, I still perceive myself as a stranger. I am a stranger to most everyone else who resides, works, and lives there. Even when I am *in* the community, I am not *of* the community. I am a middle-class white male, in a community largely composed of African Americans, many of whom are struggling financially.

In *The Stranger*, Simmel (1950 [1908]:63) tells us that a stranger is “close to us, insofar as we feel between him and ourselves common features of a national, social, occupational, or generally human, nature. He is far from us, insofar as these common features extend beyond him or us, and connect us only because they connect a great many people.” Lofland (1998) uses the standard dictionary definition of the stranger: “a person with whom one has had no personal acquaintance” (Random House 1987) and “a person or thing that is unknown or with whom one is unacquainted” (Merriam 1971). Karp and Yoels view strangers as “cultural strangers”...those who occupy symbolic worlds different from our own” (1986:97-98). I prefer this definition in my situation because of

the racial, ethnic, and in some cases social class differences between myself and the residents of this community. There are public and private spaces in the community where I have felt less like a stranger, and at times even part of the group. But in the parochial realms of West Las Vegas that I visited, I was keenly aware that I am the stranger, in a strange place, trying my best to fit in.

### *Sociability*

*Sociability* is a sensitizing concept and a key indicator of the parochial realm (Lofland 1998; Hunter 1974). I looked for the degree and content of sociability in the sites, in order to determine if the site constituted a parochial realm. Wiseman's (1979) take on the concept of sociability tends to imply a sense of "pleasure" and "enjoyment;" it is a social encounter between quasi-primary relationships or secondary-intimate relationships (Lofland 1998). The "pure sociability" that Simmel (1949) discusses is that which seems to occur almost spontaneously; it is not the kind of interaction that is present in secondary group meetings or organized functions with a prescribed agenda. As Oldenburg (1989:26) contends the sort of conversation that is observed in the "third place" is "scintillating, colorful, and engaging. The joys of association in third places may initially be marked by smiles and twinkling eyes—by hand-shaking and back-slapping—but they proceed and are maintained in pleasurable and entertaining conversation." Lofland (1998:92-93) tends to limit her discussion of sociability to that which occurs in the public realm, although she does acknowledge its presence can also be observed in the more intimate locales of the parochial realm. The absence of sociability in some social environments, particularly in the public realm, has been viewed by some

researchers as a way to prevent different social classes and gender groups from mixing in what otherwise might be a congenial social atmosphere (Hart 2010).

*Cooperative Motility*

To provide a basic framework for my data analysis, I use the coding scheme developed by Kusenbach (2006:288), that in turn borrows from Lofland’s (1998) template of cooperative motility in the public realm, but which Kusenbach modified for use in her study of “neighboring” in the parochial realm.

Public Realm (Lofland 1998)	Parochial Realm (Kusenbach 2006)
<i>Cooperative Motility</i>	
Civil Inattention	Friendly Recognition
Restrained Helpfulness	Parochial Helpfulness
Audience Role Prominence	Proactive Intervention
Civility toward Diversity	Embracing and Resisting Diversity

FIGURE 1: Principles of Interaction in the Public and Parochial Realms

Lofland (1998:29) defines cooperative motility as the patterned behavior where “strangers work together to traverse space without incident.” But like Kusenbach (2006), I envision cooperative motility in all three realms. Goffman (1963:83) reminds us that “civil inattention” is recognized as a standard of interaction among strangers in public spaces: “It is also possible for one person to treat others as if they were not there at all, as objects not worthy of a glance, let alone close scrutiny.” But in the parochial realm, civil inattention can also be construed as friendly recognition (Kusenbach 2006). In this



setting, neighbors might often glance up and acknowledge each other with a nod or utter a friendly hello as more of a mechanical reaction than an attempt at sociability.

Lofland refers to “restrained helpfulness” as the sort of interaction between strangers in public spaces that involves the reasonable expectation of small favors (1998:32). She notes that it is the same type of interaction Gardner (1986) calls “public aid.” For example, asking someone what time it is or how to catch the bus going downtown. In the parochial realm, Kusenbach’s equivalent to restrained helpfulness is “parochial helpfulness.” For example, asking a neighbor to watch your child for an hour while you go to the store or watching your house while you are away on vacation. These acts do not require significant cost to the giver “yet may mean a lot to the receiver because of a particular situational constraint” (Kusenbach 2006:291). They also imply a sense of trust between the giver and receiver that is not normally a part of stranger interaction.

Davis (1991) tells us that public interventions by strangers are a rare occurrence; it is one that tends to happen when a helpless victim is in immediate risk of danger. The principle of “audience role prominence” instead constrains an individual from intervening in the problems of others in public spaces; “inhabitants of the public realm act primarily as audience to the activities that surround them” (Lofland 1998:31). Kusenbach argues that in the parochial realm, a “proactive intervention” is the equivalent to “audience role prominence.” Proactive intervention or “watching out” exceeds “parochial helpfulness;” it involves a certain amount of proactive concern for others that is “generally expected from people who consider themselves members of a neighborhood community, even though it cannot be claimed explicitly” (Kusenbach 2006: 294). For example, you might

call the police if you witnessed a crime taking place in your neighborhood. Or, you might intervene in a dispute between two neighbors if you thought someone was getting violent. It is the type of behavior that is done without being asked, out of a concern for a member of one's community.

According to Lofland, the final overarching principle of public conduct is "civility toward diversity." This principle specifies that "in face-to-face exchanges, confronted with what may be personally offensive visible variations in physical abilities, beauty, skin color and hair texture, dress style, demeanor, income, sexual preference, and so forth, the urbanite will act in a civil manner" (1998:32). Lofland reminds us that "civility towards diversity" is not to be confused with friendliness between strangers; it involves a civil, evenhanded approach to a stranger in a public setting that one might otherwise find offensive or repugnant in a different social setting. For example a white man might be comfortable sitting next to a black man at a sporting event, but not as welcoming if that same black man was a guest at his private country club. For Kusenbach, "civility toward diversity" is "embracing and resisting diversity." Lofland (1998:33) posits that such civility is more likely the result of "indifference to diversity than from any positive appreciation of it." However, in the parochial realm, Kusenbach (2006:297) asserts that residents have a greater sense of identifying with the community. And as a result, they may be less tolerant of those they consider outsiders and more likely to embrace or at least "interact kindly" with those they consider members of their community.

I was aware that I would be conducting research in a community that is predominantly African American. I have come to understand that many blacks in the community of West Las Vegas have a genuine dislike and mistrust of whites. I am never

as aware of my race as a white man as when I am in West Las Vegas. On one particular trip before the closing of the New Town Tavern, I was followed around the front of the business by a young black woman in her car. She had just come out of the tavern with a baby in her arms. She drove around yelling out of her car window at me: “Hey white boy, what you doing over here.” I bolted for the safety of my car and drove away. As a white man, I anticipated obstacles in gaining access to some settings because of perceived racial differences (Dunbar, Rodriquez and Parker 2002). I was concerned that access to certain sites might be denied or place me in harm’s way. Harrington (2003) notes that many important ethnographic studies were nearly derailed because of the resistance of participants. Accordingly, my research was not as exhaustive as I would have liked, but every research project has its built-in limitations (Thomas 1993).

The most pressing ethical consideration when conducting research into a marginalized community may be the danger of reinforcing stereotypical views held by its critics (Liebow 1967). I didn’t know exactly what I would find in the course of this project. My hope was that the outcome of my research would be positive and that I might shed some light on the affirmative social interaction of this community. However, I wanted to give an honest and accurate depiction of my research without regard to how others might characterize my findings.

### *Civic and Social Parochial Realms*

I visited thirteen locales that in my opinion reflected the characteristics of a parochial realm. They all portrayed a communal sense of commonality between friends and neighbors involved in interpersonal social relationships within the community

(Lofland 1998). I then subdivided each realm into one of two spatial subtypes or categories: *civic* or *social*, according to their primary function (see Hudson 2006). Five spaces were deemed to be civic, five social, and three spaces were a mixture of civic and social. But all of them had shared characteristics of a parochial realm as defined by Lofland (1998).

I define civic spaces as those places specifically designed to serve a particular civic function in the community (Ramakrishnan and Viramontes 2010). They are public places where individuals may more readily engage in “civil inattention” without an expectation of sociability that one might find in social spaces (Monti 1999). For example, one might engage in polite conversation or “friendly recognition” with a stranger while waiting at the DMV, but one does not go there with the intention of meeting people. And, the stranger-interaction is usually over as soon as one’s number is called. These spaces are often government buildings, crafted for the purpose of conducting public business and civic events like voting or political debates. While their manifest function is instrumental, the latent function in this case may be social. These places are not in the business to make money or entertain, yet they still have the capacity to bring together community residents who may socialize while at the same time performing some civic function.

The Pearson Community Center is located near the intersection of Martin Luther King, Jr. Blvd. and Lake Mead. The center’s director is a young black man by the name of Lou Collins. Mr. Collins is proud of the fact that he grew up in West Las Vegas—calling himself a ‘product’ of the community—and he is especially proud of his family’s longtime connection to the community. His father, Gene Collins, was the former head of the Nevada Chapter of the NAACP and an active member of the F Street committee.

The center was clean, very well lit with plenty of natural sunlight coming through the large windows in the front of the modern building. Every time I visited the center, I was impressed with how orderly it is run and how congenial the staff and visitors were. The center offers classes in a host of subjects including citizenship, learning English, child care, avoiding drugs, family counseling, and senior wellness. The center also has a large workout facility, an indoor gym, and an outdoor track and field. According to Collins, the success of the center hinges on its ability to meet the needs of all of the residents in the community. He emphasizes that West Las Vegas is beginning to see a sizable increase in the number of Hispanics moving into the community and as such, he makes sure that all of the literature in the center is both in English and Spanish.

People would often bring baked goods to distribute at city planning and redevelopment meetings here, as well as meetings concerning F Street. Before these meetings commenced, friends and neighbors greeted each other warmly, caught up on the latest news, and joked around with one another. While the manifest intent of the gathering was to conduct meetings concerning issues of relevance to the community, it was clear to me that the residents also used the opportunity to socialize with their fellow neighbors, friends, and coworkers. Long after the meetings were over, many of the residents lingered about talking, laughing, and socializing.

On another occasion, I spoke to two high school girls who were at the center to attend computer classes. They were excited to be learning how to use a computer for researching their school papers and, of course, for social networking. "I don't have a computer at home," one girl told me, "and the ones at the library are always taken by the time I get there. So it's nice to be able to come here and use the computer and feel safe. I

don't worry about somebody messing with me, or anything like that here," she said. The other girl liked the fact that she can see her friends from school here and when she is done with the computer class, she has time to sneak into the gym and watch the boys play basketball. Both of the examples reflect Lofland's view that "realms are not geographically or physically rooted pieces of space. They are social not physical territories" (1998:11). When pressed further, one of the young girls coyly admits that she has a crush on one particular boy who does not attend her school and this is the only time she can visit with him since her parents don't allow her to date.

Regardless of the type of space – civic or social – they both enjoy a "covenant of comity" (Monti 1999) or a general consensus on acceptable norms of behavior and agreement on sanctions for breaking the rules. Though civic spaces have the potential to become places for sociability, social spaces are specifically designed for it. Social spaces include, but are not limited to, bars, restaurants, and theaters for concerts and plays. Unlike the civic space, a social space serves a business function. It is usually privately owned and the owner is in business to make money by encouraging the potential for intimate social interaction.

I visited five business establishments that were social spaces. The common thread among them was food. In West Las Vegas, as in most African American communities, there is a paucity of grocery stores and a lack of fresh produce (Zenk et al. 2005). However, the community has numerous family-owned and operated restaurants and food outlets. Their handmade signs advertise Louisiana cooking, ribs, catfish, southern fried foods, and soul food. Most of them are small, with only one or two tables. The owners often sit out front with the door open, conversing with neighbors as they pass by on the

sidewalk. The food establishments are not only popular with the residents, but with those who may have once lived in the community and now reside elsewhere. They come because they can no longer find the kind of food being offered in the community, or to visit with old friends and relatives. On any given day, I saw utility workers alongside men and women in business attire and casual dress. In *The Cosmopolitan Canopy* (2011) Elijah Anderson emphasizes the appeal food has for bringing together diverse groups of people. While most of the customers were black, it was not unusual to see Hispanics, whites, and Asians.

One example of a social space is Mario's Westside Market, located at 1960 N. Martin Luther King Jr., Blvd. The market is teeming with residents who live in the nearby neighborhoods. The market is reminiscent of the old "mom and pop" type grocery stores I knew as a youngster growing up in Cleveland, Ohio. The store has a full selection of fresh produce items and a very large meat counter. The owner, Mario Berlanga Jr., is a large Hispanic man, in his late 40s. Like Lou Collins, he is proud of the fact that he is a "product of the community." Also, like Collins, Mario credits his success for understanding and meeting the needs of *his* community. The reason other grocery stores in this area have failed he says "is because they didn't understand the types of food the residents like to eat. I stock the type of food items that the people in this community want to buy." As I observed, the shelves contain food items one might expect to find in a largely African American community whose culinary tastes tend to reflect their rural southern roots.

The market is unique in some ways, in that it has a very active food counter serving a variety of "southern foods." Just inside the front door, to the right, is a quasi-

liquor department. There is a man behind the glass enclosure with every variety of alcoholic beverage imaginable stacked neatly behind him. To the left are two checkout aisles, staffed by young women who appear to be in their teens. Even before reaching the busy food counter, I could smell the delicious odor of fried catfish and apple cobbler. Among other items, the menu includes fried chicken, hot links, collard greens, oxtails, pig's feet, and ribs. The food area has three tables and the city councilman, Lawrence Weekly, who grew up in West Las Vegas, eats there about once a week. He calls it his "second office." There, residents routinely talk to him about their concerns and he greets them warmly, as friends and neighbors. Because of the limited seating, customers often share tables. I observed that before sitting down at an occupied table, one would almost always ask if the seated person would mind sharing their table with them. In other instances, the seated person would offer to share their table in an example of "helpfulness."

For Lofland, an example of "restrained helpfulness" might be when a stranger asks someone for the correct time, followed by a curt response "It is 3:15." More often I saw the offer to share a table as a genuine invitation to sit down and converse over lunch. On one such occasion, an older African American man in a jogging suit invited me to share his table. We talked about our children, our wives, and sports. He even offered me a bite of his collard greens, which I politely accepted despite my wariness. Surprisingly, they tasted like spinach and were pretty good.

An example of *parochial helpfulness* is observed in the pride Mario takes in being active in the community. He was recently recognized by the City of Las Vegas as "Citizen of the Month." He told me he prefers hiring from within the community; thirteen



of his sixteen employees live in West Las Vegas. Mario extends credit to his customers. He showed me a corkboard in the back office where he keeps the receipts with customer's names on them. He says that occasionally people don't pay him, but for the most part they do. He emphasized that he has never been robbed and that when the store was in another location in North Las Vegas, during the Rodney King riots, neighbors came over to help board up the windows and protect the store. Kusenbach (2006:294) recognizes this extreme form of neighborly helpfulness as "proactive intervention" or "watching out;" it stresses that neighbors often help each other even without being asked.

One afternoon while eating lunch at the market I had the opportunity to test whether the realm there *both* embraces *and* resists diversity. I arrived just before noon to find the parking lot at Mario's Market already busy. From the parking lot, I detected the pleasant scent of fried catfish and hot links coming from inside. I entered through the clean and shiny glass front doors, plastered with Budweiser posters. The meat counter was buzzing with customers. As I walked towards the back, I passed a male employee—a young Hispanic man—who was busily stocking shelves. He said hello and asked how I was doing. "Fine," I responded and kept walking. As I reached the small food court in the back of the store, next to the long meat counter, I noticed there was already a line forming at the food counter. The young black man behind the counter was filling an order for the woman customer. A worker had just brought out a fresh pan of cobbler and the steam rose from the pan when he removed the foil covering. There were two other people in front of me in line: a young Asian woman dressed in office attire; and in front of her a black woman in her mid-60s, also dressed in office attire. Every food item on the large menu board hanging on the wall behind the counter was within view through the glass

counter. I could not decide what I wanted to eat. The hot links looked good, but I was also drawn to the lingering scent of catfish, which was very popular.

The older woman in front of me asked the man behind the counter if Damien (pseudonym) was still working there. She told him she was an old friend of Damien's and has not seen him in six years. The worker left momentarily and came out with Damien in tow. Damien, a black man, appeared to be in his late twenties, with long curly hair and a goatee. He was wearing a green cloth apron and worked behind the meat counter. At first he did not seem to recognize the woman and eyed her suspiciously. She introduced herself and he asked cautiously how she was doing. She replied fine and said "I'm glad to see you are doing well." He said it was good to see her too and told her not to wait so long before coming back. She promised to visit again soon when she had more time to talk. As Damien walked back past the counter man I heard him say in a soft voice, "that used to be my parole officer." Both men laughed and got back to work. Damien recognized that I overheard his conversation and gave me a discerning look. I nodded and looked away. Having spent my youth growing up in the blue-collar neighborhoods of Cleveland, I knew how to do the delicate dance between being respectful without appearing to be fearful. Damien then disappeared behind the meat counter.

Still unable to decide on what to eat, I ordered a hot link, two pieces of catfish, and a large coke. The lady working the cash register was an attractive black female, in her mid-40s. She asked if I would like tartar sauce with my fish to which I replied "Yes." I sat my order down on one of the three wobbly kitchen tables in the food court and ate my lunch. Just before finishing my lunch, I offered my table to a young Hispanic couple. They accepted and we talked briefly before I left.

I concluded that I was not treated any differently than any other customer in the store, despite the fact that I was the only white, non-Hispanic person I saw during my time there that day. The market resists diversity by selling the kind of food people in the neighborhood want to eat. Yet, the market embraces diversity by having treated me – the stranger – like any other customer. I had the same experience each time I visited the market.

### *Vanishing Spaces*

Longtime residents of West Las Vegas wax nostalgic about the many social clubs and restaurants that no longer exist in this community: the Cotton Club, the Brown Derby, Hamburger Heaven, Mama's Place, and the Moulin Rouge are but a few of the many businesses that have come and gone since the late 1940s. Sociologists Massey and Denton (1993), Wilson (1987), and Pattillo-McCoy (1999), have focused on the economic hardships faced by black-owned businesses in African American communities resulting from spatial and social isolation. Many residents no longer have the kind of disposable income that once supported these businesses. Furthermore, due to the stigmatized status of the community, few people from outside of West Las Vegas dare patronize the remaining businesses. As these local businesses close, residents lose jobs, further contributing to the economic decline of the community.

The most recent business to close in the Historic Westside is the New Town Tavern and Casino, which dates back to 1955. In its day, it was one of the most exciting and popular hot spots in the community. Not able to frequent the taverns and casinos downtown, blacks from the community as well as some of the most popular entertainers

of the 50s and 60s made the New Town Tavern *the* place to be: “It was nothing to walk into the New Town Tavern and see Sonny Liston (at that time and up-and-coming boxer), Chubby Checker, Cab Calloway, Nat King Cole or Sammy Davis Jr. shooting craps or sitting at the bar mixing and mingling with the other patrons” (Geran 2006:111).

Residents still speak of the tavern as though it has retained its luster, despite the obvious deterioration. This “collective memory” (Borer 2006; Olick 1999) is part of what connects people to their cultural past, while they remain steadfastly rooted in the present.

After integration, the tavern, like many of the other social clubs on the Westside, saw its business dwindle. In 2003, the ceiling collapsed and in 2010 the business was closed by the city because of the dilapidated condition of the building. The owner, Tara Jackson, had been fighting with the city for financial assistance since the tavern was in the city’s redevelopment zone. To date, Ms. Jackson has received no financial assistance from the city, even though the city has committed in excess of \$200 million to lure new businesses to downtown Las Vegas, a mere \$10 million has been spent in the last couple of years in West Las Vegas to repair and refurbish an existing building that is now being used as offices for the local cable television provider (King 2009).

There is for virtually everyone a deep association with and consciousness of the places where we were born and grew up, where we live now, or where we have had particular moving experiences. The association seems to constitute a vital source of both individual and cultural identity and security, a point of departure from which we orient ourselves in the world.

–Edward Relph (1976:43)

I hope now you understand the difference between West Las Vegas and ‘Historic’ West Las Vegas. When white people hear West Las Vegas, they think we are talking about Summerlin (an affluent community). Historic West Las Vegas is where the black pioneers who first came to Las Vegas were forced to live back before integration. We made our homes here, raised our children here, and we operated our businesses right here in this community. Now be sure you remember that when you write your paper. – Interview with Catherine Duncan, President Ward 5 Chamber of Commerce

### *Conclusion*

One of the more interesting observations I made during my research is the high degree of impromptu socializing done by blacks and Hispanics in West Las Vegas. I witnessed a lot of friendly recognition, boisterous laughter, and excited conversations as friends and neighbors came together in these public spaces. Perhaps a protracted existence of being treated as marginalized groups in Las Vegas has fostered a culture of socialization—a survival tool within their cultural toolkit—that expresses itself in these ways. This culture of socialization suggests to me how the community was able to quickly spread the word concerning the activities of the F Street coalition. Residents who did not have ready access to email or cell phones could learn about upcoming F Street meetings and other events through this informal method of networking.

As the above quotes implies, there are certain immutable qualities that define a parochial realm. The parochial realm is about public and private spaces that serve a social

function within a community. They have the ability to bring together residents of the surrounding neighborhoods in a communal manner (Monti 1999), who may support each other in community events like the F Street protest (Kusenback 2006). Parochial realms are replete with friendly recognition and helpfulness. Parochial realms embrace diversity in ways that are expressed in civility towards outsiders. Parochial realms resist diversity, not in an overt attempt to keep others out, but because these special places are most often frequented by neighbors, coworkers and friends who make up the surrounding neighborhoods. Parochial realms tend to reflect the ethnic culture and social class of the community they serve. Since West Las Vegas is primarily African American, with a growing Hispanic population, the parochial realms here reflect the cultures of these two groups.

I routinely spoke to many people who were former residents but whom no longer live in West Las Vegas. They continue to come back to the places that have meaning to them: stores, restaurants, and churches. As Borer (2008:188) reminds us: “Communities harbor within them a diversity of interests and dispositions, but that should not detract from the idea that an urban community can exist that stretches beyond the borders of neighborhood while still being rooted in a place.” These places give them a sense of identity and an opportunity to stay connected to the people, their culture, and the community.

The multitude of parochial realms in West Las Vegas should give one pause to question the suggestion that this community is no longer viable. The people of West Las Vegas are very social and they utilize many public spaces for socialization. Whether it is Mario’s Market or Pearson Community Center, or any of the other social and civic spaces

that make up the many parochial realms I encountered in West Las Vegas, these places represent a vital piece of the social landscape that the residents here have come to associate with other culturally relevant symbols of their community. For every New Town Tavern or Moulin Rouge that has gone out of business, there is an Annie's Kitchen or Family Food Market that has come along to continue the tradition of serving the needs of the neighborhood while providing a welcoming environment for sociability among friends, neighbors, coworkers, and strangers.

This study demonstrates the importance of qualitative research, in conjunction with descriptive statistical data, when examining the socioeconomic pulse of a community. It is a community that would be greatly enhanced by an improved focus on economic redevelopment, and one that is worthy of preservation. But until then, rest assured that the parochial realms of West Las Vegas will continue to serve as sources of cultural pride and as "places" for informal social networking. They will continue to thrive and breathe life into this historic community.

## CHAPTER 7

### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

The community resource model (CRM) is an effective tool for evaluating and assessing the available resources a community possesses and employs in times of collective social action. In the present study, the CRM was used to unpack the community's "tool kit" of resources to reveal a host of cultural, social, and economic resources. Unlike examples from other African American communities, the residents of West Las Vegas relied less on the church and church culture and more on their historically shaped cultural and social resources of resistance, perseverance, and networking. The coalition was largely led by women from the community who were inspired by their ancestors of recent past generations to resist social injustice, distrust the white men and politicians who held sway over their lives, and to join forces with those from outside the community who could aid their struggle.

In this concluding chapter, I review some of the theoretical arguments concerning the mobilization of resources within other African American communities during times of social action as they pertain to my two main examples from the literature: *The Origins of the Civil Rights Movement* (Morris 1984) and "Church Culture as a Strategy of Action in the Black Community" (Pattillo-McCoy 1998). While both studies credit the church with providing resources for combating social ills, the authors also offer contrasting views on the particular contributions of the black church in response to social action. Morris emphasizes the economic and organizational resources of the church for the



success of the civil rights movement, while Pattillo-McCoy stresses the cultural resources of the black church for organizing and mobilizing community action.

I discuss their respective analyses in relation to the present study. I also analyze the F Street coalition using the Black Organizational Autonomy (BOA) model (Horton 1992). I discuss the potential for culture to create and shape resources from which social actors can pursue an agenda. I discuss some of the limitations of this study and I provide a brief update on some of the key figures who were involved in this study. I conclude with a call to action for sociologists to become more critically engaged in the activities of their respective communities.

### *Mobilizing Resources and the Black Church*

In his analysis of the civil rights movement, Morris (1984) draws insight from three sociological theories: classical collective behavior theory, Weber's theory of charismatic movements, and resource mobilization theory. Morris emphasizes that the organizational structure of the black church was the primary social and cultural basis for the success of the civil rights movement. Pattillo-McCoy (1998) finds that such studies of black social movements overemphasize the networks and resources of the black church. She posits instead that black church culture provides "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986) for the everyday organizing activities in African American communities. Pattillo-McCoy contends that church culture is a critical resource that has been neglected by social movement theorists.

Classical collective behavior theory stresses that collective behavior tends to arise as a relatively spontaneous, irrational, and emotional response to an unusual situation that

is geared toward social change (Smelser 1962). Other theorists have rejected the assumption that collective behavior is irrational and emotional (Turner and Killian 1957). Morris acknowledges that emotions were evident in the civil rights movement, but contends that they were tempered by the well-defined organizational structure of the movement. Their actions he argues “were as rational as the actions of individuals and groups in other contexts” (p. 277). He proffers that the collective behavior model is not a good fit for analyzing the civil rights movement because of the emphasis on irrational and emotional behavior, among other premises of the theory. However, as I observed in this study, motivation and decision-making are often based on rational *and* non-rational factors (see Lester 2011).

Pattillo-McCoy (p. 769) argues that social movements consist of more than rational actors: “social movements are assemblages of testimonies, conversations, rallying cries, banners, and handshakes.” She suggests that emotional and non-rational behaviors are legitimate sources of data in the study of how social action is constructed. She points to affecting church hymns that symbolize calls for freedom from oppression, and emotional sermons that resemble political speeches. Pattillo-McCoy reiterates the black church’s overarching message that God is directly involved in human affairs and encourages social activism in their community.

From the initial reaction of the residents of West Las Vegas to the proposed street closure, to the boisterous exchanges exhibited in public meetings (including city council meetings), and in the chants during the protest march, emotions were ever-present. Members would often appeal for support from their fellow residents on an emotional level. At a meeting in March of 2009, Beatrice Turner stood up and shouted “This is just

another example of what they have been doing to us for two-hundred years. If we let them get away with this, what will they do next?" These types of emotional pleas were often greeted with excited applause and shouts of agreement. They had the effect of unifying the group, despite personal differences between members.

There were also times when I questioned whether the group's approach was truly rational in terms of the best interests of the community. I found myself agreeing with some of the business leaders in the group who suggested using the protest action as leverage to wrest long-denied redevelopment money from the city. Although the street closure posed a minor logistical problem for commuters, the estimated \$20 to \$70 million dollars it would cost to reopen the street would go a long way towards redeveloping this economically struggling community. The residents repeatedly insisted that their outrage was about more than just the street closure. Among other complaints, it was also about being ignored by the city when it came to redevelopment funds. It seemed more rational to me that they should parlay the success of this social action into other improvements (schools, parks, and businesses, etc.), rather than reopening the street. There were others in the group who felt we could accomplish both goals, beginning with the street reopening and then with a push towards economic redevelopment.

I also received comments from whites opposed to reopening the street. They too questioned whether it wouldn't better serve the community by forgoing reopening the street and instead investing in the community's infrastructure. This suggestion also seemed to offer an opportunity to mollify tensions between the two groups. Many of the whites I spoke to referred to the cost to reopen the street as a waste of money. They felt that legislators capitulated to the charges of racism instead of using so-called "common

sense.” Regardless, the coalition continued to press for reopening the street with the hope of then pursuing more funds for redevelopment.

Weber’s theory of charismatic movements posits that charismatic leaders arose in society during times of social upheaval (Parsons 1947). Charisma is a quality imposed on individuals by others (Weber 1978 [1922]). The devotion of followers to a charismatic leader is likewise considered irrational by some (Andreas 2007). Morris finds this theory deficient in his analysis of the civil rights movement. He emphasizes that it was both charisma and the black church’s organizational backing of the movement that was responsible for its success. Conversely, Pattillo-McCoy recounts a political gospel rally for an alderman, led by several charismatic religious leaders, which filled the crowd with “spiritual exhilaration” (p. 780). She explains that the rally was so similar to church, that it was difficult to distinguish the political figures from the religious leaders.

I observed that the F Street coalition lacked charismatic leadership. Trish Geran, the committee chair, was a strong and effective leader. But she did not exhibit the same type of charisma evident in Dr. King – a prime example of a charismatic leader – or some of the other prominent religious leaders of the civil rights movement (Morris 1984). Her authority, and that of the committee, was often questioned outright by some of the more vocal members of the group. The local religious leaders also failed to rise to the occasion in any significant way. Though they had members from their respective congregations in attendance at the meetings, not one of the religious leaders was able to capture the enthusiasm and support of the majority of the group. Despite these challenges, Trish and the committee managed to keep the group focused on the goal of reopening the street by utilizing their social and organizational skills.

Morris concludes that resource mobilization theory fits his analysis of the civil rights movement in several ways: 1) the participants acted rationally and were well integrated into black society; and, 2) preexisting social organization and communication networks aided the movement's development. Most significantly, his analysis finds the urbanization of Southern blacks during the first half of the twentieth century created the social conditions that spawned the indigenous resources needed to sustain a prolonged resistance to racial domination (pp. 280-281). Hannerz (1969:178) said "there is a residual category of blackness, including such foundations for behavior as the African origin, the Southern background, and the subjection to racism." This is consistent with my findings. The residents of West Las Vegas were cultural products of their ancestral heritage of the Old South. But they also adapted their cultural and social resources to combat the systemic racist power structure they encountered in Las Vegas.

Pattillo-McCoy insists that the unique cultural tool kit of the black church provides "strategies of action" (Swidler 1986), despite class differences. She interjects the demonstrative and behavioral aspects of cultural sociology that enhance social movement theory by adding cultural resources to the existing research on networks and material resources. Similar to my findings, Pattillo-McCoy recognizes the impact communal cultural resources have on collective social action when combined with social and economic resources.

One advantage of using the CRM is that it does not attempt to generalize or extrapolate the findings of one community to other similar communities. For example, Hannerz (1969) associates blackness with poverty and limited access to resources. Hannerz's understanding, however, is based on his analysis of "ghetto culture," a

characterization the community of West Las Vegas vehemently rejects. It is true that the community may have lacked significant economic and political resources, particularly in the early stages of this social action. The F Street coalition, however, recognized these shortcomings and compensated through the skillful use of their communal resources. The coalition was truly a grassroots organization. It began with the concern of a few neighbors who lived nearest to the street closure. This small group possessed very little in the way of economic resources or political clout. This loosely organized group of neighbors and friends came together to form a strong coalition by utilizing their social and cultural capital in the community, which they used to mobilize residents into a force for change.

Contrary to other black community groups, they successfully networked with individuals and organizations from outside the community to build support for their cause. Unlike Morris's or McCoy's examples, they defied the conventional perspective of African American culture as one deeply ingrained in religion and heavily dependent on the church to thwart attempts at social injustice. The community possessed certain unique social and cultural tools that were forged in the crucible of their ancestral heritage in the Deep South and shaped by their structural conditions in Southern Nevada.

### *The BOA Model*

As discussed in Chapter 2, the Black Organizational Autonomy model (BOA) was conceptualized by Hayward Derrick Horton (1992) in response to his involvement with an African American community social action group, the Black Community Development (BCD) in Little Rock, Arkansas. The model provides a guideline for community

organizations that seek to improve the living conditions of their community serving as a strategy for those community activists who are working to promote social change.

According to Horton (pp. 8-9) the success of the BOA lays in three factors: 1) the empowerment of indigenous groups to plan and act independently of external factors; 2) the support of the black church; and 3) group members who consist of those with a grassroots orientation to community problem-solving. This last factor often excludes the more prominent members of the black community, who are most often the clergy. For Horton, economic autonomy does not signify separatism; instead, it encourages outside support and assistance that will only come when the group can demonstrate they are capable of sustaining themselves financially. Horton posits that “the BOA model involves acceptance and cooperation among black leaders of significantly different political philosophies and social policy orientations” (p. 7). While the BOA maintains strong ties to the black church, the organization considers itself a model of social inclusiveness.

My analysis is somewhat consistent with the BOA model in several areas, but I find the model insufficient in other areas. Like the BCD, the F Street committee consisted of a socially inclusive group of religious leaders, social activists, academics, including working class individuals and business professionals. While the committee members shared similar goals, often there were contentious discussions on how to achieve them. Religious leaders, who normally comprise the elite in an African American community, were neither a majority nor at the forefront of this social action. In the BOA model, despite Horton’s assertion that the group purposely avoided having religious leaders in prominent roles, the BCD was integrally joined to the church. In both cases, however, the church’s presence was felt, but to a much lesser degree in the F Street coalition. About

twenty-five percent of the general membership in the F Street coalition was recruited from the various churches in the community. At times, the meetings were overtly religious in nature, beginning and closing each meeting with a prayer. When discussions turned into shouting and name-calling it was the religious leaders who usually encouraged the group to be civil and to focus on our objective of reopening the street.

Similar to the BOA model, the F Street coalition reached out to the greater community for additional support. The difference being that in the BOA model, autonomy, particularly economic autonomy, is imperative. While the F Street membership and committee leadership were primarily African American at the outset, the group eventually evolved by including outside organizations such as *Se Su Puede*, ACORN, and the ACLU. Over time I noticed more Hispanics and whites coming to the meetings. The group was self-funded by soliciting donations at each meeting. According to Trish, the churches leaders donated very little in terms of money to the cause. A lawsuit was filed on behalf of the residents by a white attorney, Matthew Callister, working *pro bono*, although in one court action, Callister told the court that if they prevailed in this suit he would be asking the court for attorney's fees and costs.<sup>1</sup> It was organizers from ACORN who provided logistical and organizational advice for the protest march and the ACLU agreed to oversee the march and protect the civil rights of the marchers.

Like the BOA model, it is important to recognize the value of the individuals who worked at the grassroots organizational level and were responsible for recruiting other members in the community. These were the residents who went door to door in their neighborhoods making their fellow residents aware of the street closure and soliciting



whatever support they could offer or afford. They talked to their friends at the stores and shops and they met with other neighbors in their homes over coffee. They apprised and recruited their friends and family members who no longer lived in the community but remained connected through church attendance. These members were instrumental in building support for the cause in the weeks and months immediately after the bulldozers began to block the intersection of F Street and McWilliams with mountains of dirt.

Finally, the BOA model encourages females in leadership roles. In the F Street protest, the most active members were women. I am convinced that without their leadership this movement would have lost its momentum after a few weeks. It was neighbors Estella Jimmerson and Ora Bland who first brought the matter to the attention of their fellow neighbors, one of them being Trish Geran's mother. Mrs. Jimmerson gave Trish the first cash donation, consisting of \$100 dollars. Trish immediately contacted her close friend Shondra Summers-Armstrong, who lives in the West Las Vegas housing complex Bonanza Village. Shondra then notified other residents of Bonanza Village, including her husband Karl an attorney, Colin Jacobs a media consultant, and Dahn Shaulis a sociologist and community activist.

At this point they began to hold regular meetings and a committee was formed, with Trish as the chair and Shondra as vice-chair. They recruited longtime community activists Barbara Crockett and Beatrice Turner. Turner told me she liked to "turn up the volume and the keep the pressure on the politicians." Turner was a constant irritant to the officials at city hall. By the time the city created the "F Street Connection" meetings, Turner was well known by City of Las Vegas Communications Director David Riggleman. The women behind the F Street coalition often invoked the names of pioneer

activists Ruby Duncan (see Orleck 2005) and Ethel Pearson as their inspirations in the present action.<sup>2</sup>

The F Street protest group also departs from the BOA model in terms of overall objectives. While the BCD continues to serve the social and economic needs of their community, the F Street group was formed in response to one issue, the street closure. Although we have not officially disbanded, the group no longer holds regular meetings as our goal – the street reopening – will soon become a reality. However, in passing AB-304 legislators deemed that the Historic Westside should be part of the Southern Nevada Enterprise Community (SNEC), and thus eligible for redevelopment funds.

Several members of the F Street coalition committee are now members of SNEC and many of the residents regularly attend SNEC meetings, providing input into the community's long-term redevelopment plans. Overall, the actions of the F Street coalition fits well within the BOA framework as a model for social action, with the exceptions previously noted. The BOA model is an effective strategy for community social action, whether the group's objective is a singular short-term goal or one with long-term social and economic implications. However, the BOA model is optimized when the community maintains economic autonomy with financial backing from the church.

## Notes

1. United States District Court, Civil Docket for Case #:2:09-cv-00061 in Bland v. City of Las Vegas et al. Filed January 9, 2009.
2. In 1968, Ethel Pearson led a group of community residents in a protest action to close six streets in West Las Vegas for the construction of Interstate 15.

## CHAPTER 8

### CONCLUSION

#### *Culture and Community Social Action*

Culture influences action not by providing the ultimate values toward which action is oriented, but by shaping a repertoire or “tool kit” of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct ‘strategies of action.’

(Swidler 1986:273)

Swidler’s comment supports my thesis that culture can affect a group’s ability to create and shape resources from which social actors pursue an agenda. Applying the analytical techniques of social constructionism, I have studied how the cultural and social resources of an African American community can launch a successful protest campaign without heavy dependence on the church. In West Las Vegas, the goal of reopening F Street was accomplished through a culture of resistance that employed informal social networking, community grassroots organizing, appeals to racial justice, and a protest march that challenged the authority of the white power structure. Despite internal and external forces that at times pulled the group in different directions, the community-led coalition maintained a consensus that the street must be reopened.

The success of this group can be observed not just in what resources were used but in how they were applied in this particular case. Some have suggested that it was the lawsuit that prompted the legislature to act. Others credited the relentless outcry from the community as reported by the media, including the protest march on the Las Vegas Strip.

And then there are those who say it was the ability to join forces with organizations and individuals from outside of the community that gave the coalition their power. Whatever it was that finally tipped the scales of justice in favor of this largely African American community, their pooling together of indigenous resources formed the impetus behind their success. Upon learning of the street closure, the residents could have just shrugged their collective shoulders and said that to fight back was futile. But that was not, and is not, the culture of this community.

As for cultural theory, this study supports the interpretive perspective of culture as a socially constructive, active, and dynamic agent in the everyday lives of social actors (Borer 2006a, 2006b; Pattillo-McCoy 1998; Swidler 1986, 1998). The study also emphasizes how structural issues influence the resources a group employs. Culture shapes structure and structure shapes culture. It is a dialectical relationship between the interpretive perspective and the structural view of culture that jointly impacts resources and social action. This view perceives culture as both an independent variable (Spillman 2001), with interacting social actors performing their roles to meet group expectations (Goffman 1959 [1956]), and also emphasizes the structural components that shape culture (Eliasoph and Lichterman 2003). This study furthers our understanding of how culture affects the interpretation of cultural objects (Swidler 1986; Wagner-Pacifici and Schwartz. 1991), and how culture is used to make sense of the world in our everyday lives.

Cultural values, norms, beliefs, rituals, language, and the symbolic significance of material objects must be shared collectively, at least in a general sense, in order to have meaning that resonates with the entire group (Mead 1934; Blumer 1969). This collective

meaning can provide the group with the needed impetus to come together at critical times to rectify social injustice through communal social action (Weinberg 2009; Taylor and Whittier 1992). As I saw in the F Street protests, religiosity was at times an overarching theme. But religion alone did not characterize the cultural values of the majority of the individuals in this group. Some of the group's leaders were community activists, a politician, an academic, business professionals, and blue-collar workers who espoused little or no strongly-held religious beliefs. Instead, they all shared the sense of outrage over the construction of the wall and in a more collective sense expressed the opinion that the wall's symbolic presence was racially motivated by city officials and their property-developing allies. The "moral crusaders" (Becker 1963) on the committee parlayed the group's emotional outrage into a defining line of right and wrong.

While the symbolic meanings of cultural objects are influenced by social structure, they are also interpreted in various ways by individuals and small groups. As such, the social actors may be differentially-motivated into social action. For example, while in a larger sense the residents of West Las Vegas outwardly proclaimed the F Street wall to be racially motivated, different factions within the protest group expressed varying reasons for objecting to the wall. Some residents complained about the lack of convenient access to downtown Las Vegas, while others saw the wall as a hindrance to their business interests. Whites living outside of West Las Vegas perceived the wall as a necessary barrier to protect them from the negative elements of a perceived ghetto. They described the money being spent to reopen the street as wasteful. And they faulted the politicians for giving into the charges of racism.

There were also a lot of “players” in this “game” (Long 1958). Some of the key actors in the coalition used the protest action to promote their own personal or political objectives, despite their outward position that the wall was part of a racist scheme by city officials to further oppress the community. The players in this game all knew though that they had to work together in order to accomplish if not the reopening of the street, then at least the furtherance of their own personal agendas. Many of these key actors came to the coalition having achieved some measure of success both within and outside of the community. On one hand, the players relied on a culture of resistance to oppression by the white power structure by challenging the construction of the wall. At the same time, they were integrally connected to the power structure and they recognized the necessity to work within that framework if they were to achieve their ultimate personal objectives that extended beyond reopening the street.

In the course of my research, I found a mix of religiosity among the members. Some, particularly the religious leaders, espoused deeply religious sentiments. At every meeting at least one, and often several, of the black men in the general membership would stand up to make a statement prefaced by his devotion to his faith. Ironically, these same men were nowhere to be found at the rallies or at the protest march. Others took a more cynical view of the involvement of the religious leaders, as evidenced by this comment made to me during a conversation with one of the coalition members: “The religious leaders are just as crooked as the politicians. Every year their wallets get bigger, their waistlines get bigger, their cars get bigger, and their houses get bigger. But, the community stays the same.” I also observed that the elder participants were more likely

to refer to “Christianity” while the younger members insisted that political activism and civil disobedience were the only solutions to this social injustice.

### *Limitations of the Study*

I believe this study could have been enhanced had I known about the attempt to close the street when bulldozers first appeared at the intersection of F Street and McWilliams in July of 2008. Unfortunately I didn’t get involved in this study until seven months later when I saw an article in the newspaper about the community meeting to protest the street closure. Had I been aware of the street closure at this nascent moment, I would have been in a better position to study the earliest efforts by the residents to combat the street closure.

One major disadvantage concerns my being a white man studying a largely African American community. I don’t think my race seriously impeded my ability to gather data related to the community’s resources, though I believe some members may have avoided me because of my race and outsider status. My race may have also biased some of the comments made to me regarding the symbolic meanings of the wall and of the opinions about the community, particularly from whites. Prolonged engagement and familiarity with the protest group may have eventually aided my data collection on this front and strengthened the validity of the study. But I suspect my race as a fellow “white guy” might have actually encouraged racist comments by whites from outside of the community who were opposed to reopening the street. Similar observations have been made by those studying hate movements and white supremacy groups (Simi and Futrell 2010; Blee 2002).



Another limitation was my inability to puncture the wall of the black church in the community. Although I had numerous conversations with the religious leaders of West Las Vegas and with members of their congregations, I was never invited to attend a church service. I suppose I could have just asked, or shown up at church on a Sunday morning. Nevertheless, I was hoping for an unsolicited invitation in order to gauge the content of the sermons as they pertained to the protest movement. Several of the religious leaders mentioned to me that they often discussed the protest action with their congregants. But others told me that they did not recall any mention of the subject in their church aside from the conversations they had with other church members. Had I been privy to the church services, I may have had a better understanding of the role the church played in this matter. However, I do not believe the lack of an invitation affected my perception of the church's role in this protest action.

### *Moving On*

As we await the start of the construction activities that will eventually reopen the street in the fall of 2012, I think of how those of us involved in this social action have moved on with our lives. Drinking coffee with Trish Geran and discussing the success of the F Street coalition, she mentioned she was thinking about moving back to San Francisco, possibly getting a master's degree from Berkeley. But she insisted she would remain actively involved in the community of West Las Vegas. Currently she is teaching part-time and working on another book about the politics and power brokers of Southern Nevada.

I confessed to Trish that I often thought *she* had political aspirations and that is why she is so heavily involved in community activism. Trish seemed to fit Becker's (1963) description of a "moral entrepreneur." By defining what was moral – the street reopening – she also defined what was deviant. Trish denied any interest in local politics and said in a very sincere tone: "I do it out of respect for my parents." Her father passed away years ago, but her mother still lives in the community. Trish said that when her mother first heard about the street closure, she was heartbroken. Her mother felt it was another blow to the community that was already struggling economically and socially. For her mother, the street closure harkened back to the discrimination she faced as a child growing up in the South. It reminded her of the constant stigma of racial oppression that didn't go away when she came to Las Vegas as a teenager. Trish said her mom was ashamed of the negative image the community had and she longed for a time when West Las Vegas would not be thought of as a ghetto by outsiders.

Brandon Greene is in his third year of law school at Boston University. Dahn Shaulis moved away and now lists his occupation on *Facebook* as "Street Sociologist." Beatrice Turner continues to attend most every city council meeting and community event having to do with West Las Vegas. She remains an outspoken supporter for equality in her community. Due to term limits, Oscar Goodman served out his third and final term of office as mayor. His wife, Carolyn, was elected mayor in 2011. Reportedly, Oscar will now be paid \$60,000 by the Las Vegas Convention and Visitors Authority to chair a "nebulous host committee;"<sup>1</sup> and, in December 2011 he opened a steak house in the Plaza Hotel downtown named, what else, "Oscars Beef, Booze and Broads."<sup>2</sup> He

recently appeared in an episode of CSI,<sup>3</sup> and is currently filming a television pilot tentatively titled “Las Vegas Night Court with Oscar Goodman.”<sup>4</sup>

Goodman’s role behind the street closure remains mired in mystery as the defendants continue to thwart activity on the lawsuit. On September 1, 2009, the court approved an order removing the City of Las Vegas and Mayor Oscar Goodman from count two of the complaint, which alleges that these defendants violated the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA).<sup>5</sup> On September 18, 2009, NDOT filed a motion to dismiss the case citing that due to the state legislature’s passage of AB-304, the matter had been resolved. But attorney Callister appealed their motion, stating that the plaintiffs have a right to know the names of those individuals who were behind the street closure, and the court agreed to let the matter proceed to discovery.<sup>6</sup> In October of 2011, State Senator Steven Horsford announced his candidacy for U. S. Congress and he is considered a strong contender for the seat.<sup>7</sup> If elected, Horsford would be the first African American from Nevada in the U.S. Congress.

On September 21, 2011, at the Las Vegas city council meeting, Katie Duncan (daughter of Ruby Duncan), a West Las Vegas businesswoman and community activist, and a former mayoral candidate, questioned the wisdom behind the effort to reopen F Street.<sup>8</sup> Previously Duncan was a vocal supporter of the effort to reopen the street, but Duncan now agrees with Councilman Bob Coffin, who questioned the plan to spend \$20 million to reopen F Street. Duncan insists that the unintended consequences of the street closure have been an improvement for the people who live and own property along F Street and McWilliams. “The homeless people are now on the other side instead of our side,” said Duncan.<sup>9</sup> I do not question Duncan’s commitment to the economic and social

health of the community. She is the president of the Ward 5 Chamber of Commerce and an outspoken advocate for the community. But she also has political aspirations and perhaps sees the need to appeal to a broader audience. Councilman Barlow insists that Duncan does not speak for the community. Barlow said “the majority still remain and continue to emphatically proclaim they are in favor of open access for commerce to flow in and out of the community.”<sup>10</sup> As for now, the project to reopen the street remains on schedule.

Meanwhile, Ora Bland still wakes up every morning to the sight of the huge wall overlooking her backyard. Her longtime neighbor and co-plaintiff, Estella Jimmerson, died on December 9, 2010, at the age of ninety-six, never getting to see if her dream of reopening the street would be fulfilled. But even when the F Street wall is eventually removed and residents and tourists on both sides are again free to travel more easily between West Las Vegas and the greater Las Vegas community, I suspect the racialized stigma attached to living in West Las Vegas will endure for years to come.

### *Closing Thoughts*

One question that has haunted me since I first became involved in this study is why the local religious community was not more active in this protest action. Approximately twenty percent of the general membership was recruited directly from their respective churches. Many of the men in attendance at the meetings also served as part-time ministers or were church elders. And, as I have previously noted, the meetings took on a religious overtone. Despite all of this, the coalition was not heavily supported by the leadership of the religious community.

One possible explanation may lay in the fact that Historic West Las Vegas is populated with approximately seventy-seven different churches and places of prayer.<sup>11</sup> They range from small groups who meet in someone's home, to quaint, aging structures, and to large brick and mortar buildings. The denominations also are quite diverse. There are Baptist, Catholic, Adventist, Methodist, Muslim, Pentecostal, and a host of non-denominational churches. Hence, the sheer number of churches and denominations may have actually diluted the impact any one church may have had on the community; with no single institution possessing a dominant presence. Neither did there appear to be any unity or organizational structure linking the various churches and places of prayer.

Another reason for the lack of support from the church may have had to do with the early formation of the committee, which consisted primarily of socially active women in the community who did not initially seek out the support of any particular religious institution. Couple that with the patriarchal nature of the church that discourages women from leadership roles and the general mistrust, if not outright disdain, for many of the local religious leaders and I can begin to understand why the protest group was somewhat disenfranchised from the organizational structure and support of the church.

Additionally, I have learned that while the church plays an important institutional role in the community, the residents have rarely sought out the abundant resources of the church or its religious leaders in times of social action. Despite the tepid involvement of the community's religious leaders, West Las Vegas appears to be teeming with socially active residents, particularly women, who stand ready to combat perceived instances of social injustice.

Meanwhile, I continue to follow and document the progress to reopen F Street, and the efforts of the residents of West Las Vegas to rebuild their community. However, the long-term solution to altering the perception of West Las Vegas as a ghetto lies in the hearts, minds, and more importantly, actions of city and state political leaders. Instead of investing millions of dollars in downtown redevelopment projects like the “Mob Museum” (pet project of former mayor Oscar Goodman), urban planners need to design projects for West Las Vegas that will provide jobs and economic opportunity to the business owners and residents of this proud community.

Redevelopment projects should also emphasize greater social intercourse between tourists and residents of Southern Nevada, in order to dispel the myth of West Las Vegas as a ghetto, and to dismantle the racialized image of Westside residents as undesirable members of society. The closure of F Street with the construction of the wall, symbolized the insidious attempts by the power-brokers of Southern Nevada to further segregate this community from the potential for economic and social opportunities. By focusing instead on projects that will encourage social interaction between the residents of West Las Vegas, and those from outside the community, it is possible for this community and its residents to overcome their stigmatized image.

Such a change will not occur without considerable efforts by those of us with resources of our own to contribute, including academics. I believe that as sociologists we must continue to engage in work that has a positive impact in the communities we serve. In proposing a politically-charged cultural studies project, Norman Denzin (1992:167) commented: “It will work instead, at the level of local political resistance. It will seek to assist those groups in which personal troubles are transformed into demands for a greater

stake in the public good.” Whether we choose to call it applied sociology, critical ethnography, public sociology, or participatory action research, the goal of a better society is the same.

We must find a way for our research to reach a greater audience than just those few scholars who scan the articles in academic journals. The magazine *Psychology Today*, for example, has been around since 1967. The bi-monthly publication has a readership of about 290,000. They publish jargon-free articles, based on research studies and surveys, about such topics as race and ethnicity, sports, memory, relationships, parenting, sex, and deviance.<sup>12</sup> The magazine also has a popular interactive website, [www.psychologytoday.com/blog](http://www.psychologytoday.com/blog). I believe our research is at least as interesting and informative, if not more so, than that of psychology. We also need to support such nascent projects as *The Socjournal*, a media journal founded in 2010, which “aims to bring sociology to the world by providing blog space, regular columns, and academic reports designed to popularize and disseminate the fascinating world of sociological research” (see [www.sociology.org](http://www.sociology.org)). We can also take advantage of the electronic media (e.g., YouTube) by producing pieces that will pique the interest of the public, particularly young adults.

We also need to encourage our graduate students to do more qualitative field research, with the potential for improving our local environment. As Robert Park (1927) proclaimed: “Go sit in the lounges of luxury hotels and on the doorsteps of the flophouses; sit on the Gold Coast settees and on the slum shakedown; sit in the Orchestra Hall and in the Star and Garter Burlesque. In short, gentlemen, go and get the seat of your pants dirty in real research.” With apologies for the term “gentlemen,” we

need to step away from our offices and computers and participate in the activities of our communities. By becoming socially active sociologists, we may not change the world, but we can have a positive impact on our local communities. And, isn't that what sociology is about? Jane Addams, the founder of Hull House in Chicago in 1889, and the only sociologist to win the Nobel Peace Prize, thought so.<sup>13</sup>



## Notes

1. "Las Vegas convention authority proposes to pay \$60,000 to Oscar Goodman." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. August 4, 2011.
2. "Plaza steakhouse to carry Oscar Goodman name." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*, Tim O'Reiley. August 3, 2011.
3. "Oscar Goodman to hold court at Las Vegas Hilton." *Las Vegas Sun*, John Katsilometes. November 4, 2011.
4. Ibid.
5. United States District Court, Civil Docket for Case #2:09-cv-0006 in Bland v. City of Las Vegas et al. Filed January 9, 2009.
6. Ibid.
7. "Steven Horsford announces his bid for U.S. Congress." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Christina Silva. October 13, 2011.
8. "Plans to reopen F Street questioned." *Las Vegas Review-Journal*. Benjamin Spillman. September 22, 2011.
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. <http://yellowpages.superpages.com/listings>. Categories=churches, Neighborhoods=West Las Vegas.
12. See [www.psychologytoday.com](http://www.psychologytoday.com).
13. Hull House was founded by Jane Addams in 1889 as a refuge for poor immigrants. For 122 years, it continued to serve the needs of the poor in Chicago, until it closed its doors on January 27, 2012, for financial reasons. See "Chicago social services agency Hull House shuts after 120 years." Associated press article by Tammy Webber, *Las Vegas Review Journal*, January 28, 2012. Addams also founded the Women's International League for Peace and Freedom. See *The Education of Jane Addams*, by Victoria Brown, (2007), University of Pennsylvania Press.

APPENDIX A: Tables

**Table 1.** Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months of Families

Census Tract	All Families	Married-couple	Female-householder
2.01	9.2%	0.8%	30.3%
3.01	37.5%	15.1%	50.9%
3.02	43.7%	0.0%	58.4%
34.25	14.3%	0.0%	31.9%
35	35.0%	27.6%	40.3%
Total	27.9%	8.7%	42.7%

Data compiled from U.S. Census Data Set: 2005-2009 American Community Survey

**Table 2.** Racial Breakdown (white non-Hispanic/black) and Income by Census Tract

Census Tract	Population	White	Black	Per Capita Income	Mean Income
2.01	4,270	12%	38%	\$16,581	\$47,336
3.01	2,247	2%	53%	12,138	28,879
3.02	4,723	8%	71%	11,136	32,857
34.25	7,106	11%	30%	14,288	44,201
35	2,723	6%	75%	12,702	40,047

Data compiled from U.S. Census Data Set: 2005-2009 American Community Survey

**Table 3.** Educational Attainment by Census Tract

Census Tract	2.01	3.01	3.02	34.25	35
Less than high school graduate	37%	47%	38%	36%	38%
High school graduate (includes GED)	34%	32%	35%	37%	35%
Some college, associate's degree	21%	18%	25%	21%	16%
Bachelor's degree or higher	8%	3%	2%	6%	11%

Data compiled from U.S. Census Data Set: 2005-2009 American Community Survey

APPENDIX B: Exhibits



**STOP THE "F" STREET CLOSURE, LLC**

<http://westlv.blogspot.com>

**West Las Vegas Library  
951 W. Lake Mead Blvd.  
Monday February 23, 2009  
6:00 p.m. to 7 p.m.**

**AGENDA**

- I. Invocation - REV. RODGER S
- II. Update on Fundraising/Donations
  - PAY ATTORNEY
  - LAST MTG \$ 171.00
- III. Update on Court Case - FEDERAL COURT
- IV. Old News - Feb. 2<sup>nd</sup> Meeting - ~~EB~~
- V. Protest March
  - A. April 18, 2009
  - A. National Association of Broadcasters meeting in Las Vegas April 18-23, 2009
  - B. Mini protests
- VI. Strategic Plan
- VII. Diverse TV Documentary
- VIII. Email your friends
  - A. Web Address is <http://westlv.blogspot.com>
  - B. On line petition
- IX. Discussion & Questions
- X. Benediction

-----  
**Next Meeting: West Las Vegas Library Monday March 9, 6 - 7 p.m.**



Stop the "F" Street Closure, LLC  
P.O. Box 271786  
Las Vegas, NV 89127  
702.379.8966  
[tlgeran@aol.com](mailto:tlgeran@aol.com)  
[www.WestLV.org](http://www.WestLV.org)

April 3, 2009

Steve Wynn  
Chairman & CEO  
Wynn Resorts  
3131 Las Vegas Boulevard South  
Las Vegas, NV 89109

**Re: Protest March on Las Vegas Strip to Las Vegas Convention Center**

Dear Mr. Wynn:

On Saturday April 18, 2009, the *Stop the F Street Closure LLC* is scheduled to hold a peaceful protest march on the Las Vegas Strip, and the Wynn Las Vegas and Encore Las Vegas are included on our route. The *Stop the F Street Closure* is a coalition of the residents of the Black community of Las Vegas, familiar to most as the Westside. Our objective is to protest the closing of two major streets, "D" and "F". It is our contention that state and local officials did not properly conduct the required official public hearings to discuss with the residents the \$34 million I-15 Freeway project. Pursuant to 42 U.S.C. § 1983 Violation of Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, these closings violate said Section and reflect the City's attempt to "wall off" this community from the \$6 billion "new downtown" redevelopment. These actions are unilateral and unconscionable.

The *F Street* coalition's peaceful march will bring awareness of the *F Street* lawsuit and protest the proposed closure by the City of Las Vegas and the State of Nevada Department of Transportation. We feel these attempts were deliberate and a gross violation of their civil rights. Therefore, we have no other choice than to show to the world just how unfair the system is, which is why we chose the weekend the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) convention will be in town.

For more in-depth information, you may browse our website at [www.WestLV.org](http://www.WestLV.org).

Respectfully,

Trish Geran, Chairwoman  
*Stop the F Street Closure LLC*

cc: See attached distribution list

**The -Stop the "F" Street Closure, LLC- is a coalition of the residents of the Black community of Las Vegas, familiar to most as the Westside, concerned Southern Nevadans, civil rights groups and activist organizations. Our objective is to protest the closing of two major streets, "D" and "F".**

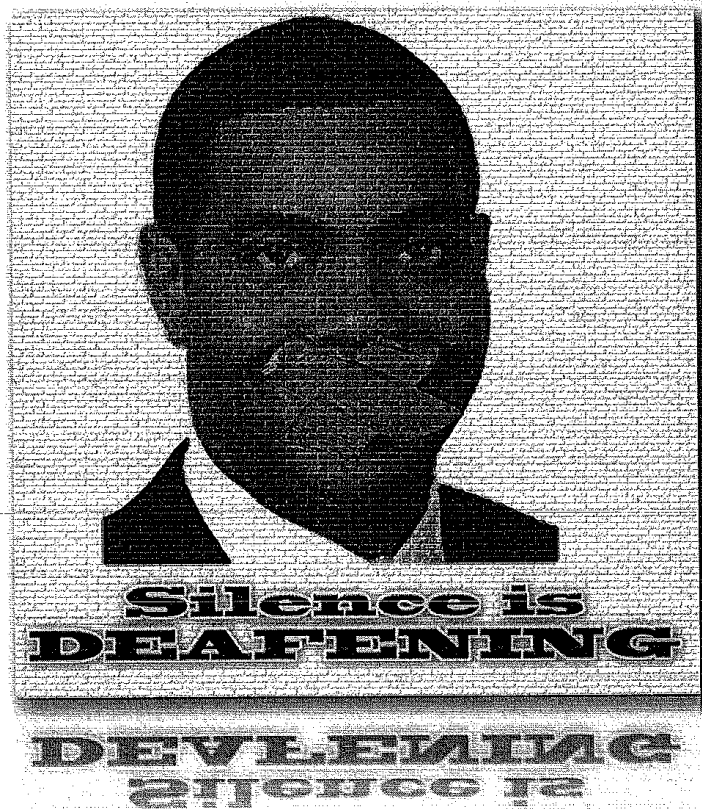
**We believe that the closures of "D" and "F" streets was a plan to segregate the Westside Community, from the \$6 billion "New Downtown." Although an agreement was reached to re-open "D" Street, nothing has been reached for "F" Street.**

**This is the third attempt by government officials over the past 30 years to deprive the Westside Community access to the Downtown Fremont area.**

**Why would government officials wall off the best of Las Vegas? The closure of "F" Street is yet another move to segregate a people, including YOU who might otherwise enjoy a great afternoon where Las Vegas really began....**

**For information, contact 702.379.8966  
[www.WestLV.org](http://www.WestLV.org)**

**STOP THE "F" STREET CLOSURE, LLC**



## Where the F(st) is Steven Horsford?

Nevada Senate majority leader Steven Horsford has been characterized as a man of distinction, who holds the ideals and principles of community service up above everything else. His ability to traverse the perilous world of politics has awarded him many things during his tenure most notably, ability to become the youngest and the first African-American to hold the post of State Senate majority leader. He has been heralded for his ascent into the highest realms of office after overcoming many of the same odds that face black males of his and other generations, such as urban surroundings that include drugs and violence.

In doing so he has established himself as a politician that the residents of Las Vegas' historic neighborhood "The Westside" can count on to ensure that men and women from his similar background have a voice in their government. Using words from the Obama school of politics, Horsford has said, "The question we ask today is not whether our government is too big or too small, but whether it works."



Interestingly enough, it is this very question that residents of the Westside are now asking themselves, as they are currently engaged in a fight for not just a street but the very answer to that question which has so greatly impacted their lives. In the context of the current fight, residents have found themselves immersed in a world where their elected officials are either silent, oblivious, or engaged in shady backdoor meetings when it comes to matters that affect them. In Mr. Horsford's case, his silence is deadly.

The same man who as recently as February was presented with the Ghandi, King, Ikeda Award for individuals who distinguish themselves through outstanding contributions to their community, has been absent from the very cause where his contribution is needed the most. This is a stunning surprise for many who have dealt with Mr. Horsford in the past as he has always seemed to be very passionate about engaging in his community. In fact, upon being presented with the award, he had this to say—"It is an honor and privilege to receive this distinguished award. The legacies of service established by Ghandi, King, and Ikeda have served as inspiration to my own life. They have shown in their own work that in times of crisis, as we are now, we need leaders who are committed to facing the future with courage and competence, understanding the moral responsibility to leave our children a community in better shape than we found it."

Moral responsibility, courage, competence, and inspiration are all very impressive buzz words for a politician to use, but what good are they if they are not followed by an equally impressive action? How can a man who was elected by a majority black district stand by idly while the historic hurts and discrimination are revisited upon them by the erection of a wall which not only serves to block them off from the proposed new downtown, but also seeks to hide them from any tourists who may mistakenly find themselves face to face with the only portion of the city which has yet to be revitalized? Is that what he meant by leaving the children a community that is in better shape than we found it? I would sincerely hope not.

In his letter to President Obama, Senator Horsford said "History has shown that Nevada's citizen legislators possess the capacity to do the very best when they are asked." Yet when he was asked to help right the wrong that was thrust upon the citizens of the Westside he chose to do nothing. Even as Lawrence Weekly professed his ignorance at willfully signing two Westside streets death warrants, Horsford said nothing. After Oscar Goodman and Ricki Barlow stated that they could not comment or speak to community directly concerning the closing of F Street due to a gag order, then blatantly participated in a back door meeting with unverified and unappointed community representatives in a gross attempt to undermine the current fight and litigation, Mr. Horsford said nothing. His reason for not meeting with the coalition? "The Legislature is in session and we are conducting a joint hearing in Senate Health & Education and Assembly Health and Education regarding the Hepatitis C crisis in Southern Nevada which I must attend as a committee member. While I would like to participate in the meeting, I will not be able to do so due to this scheduled hearing to allow public testimony on the issues and the pending legislation on a Saturday. Should the meeting go forward, please keep me in the loop on any developments so that I may assist in anyway possible." Now ofcourse we can all understd a man having to

handle the duties of his position when those duties call, but we can not understand is why I may who expresses his sincere plea to “stay in the loop”, would not have at least made a statement expressing his rejection of the F Street Closure and his demand for it to be reopened as soon as possible. I mean after all, if it is not intention to do that, then why should he be in the loop at all?

Am I the only one who who is confused? How can a man say “I am humbled by the position I now hold as the Senate Majority Leader, and mindful of both the responsibility it brings and the change it represents,” and then turn around and behave in a way that negates that responsibility? The same man who continually speaks of the need for community involvement also through acts of omission and commission propagates the same processes that affect a community much like the very one that birth his desire for public office in the first place.

As a constituent of West Las Vegas it seems that me that “we” are in a perpetual fight with a city that doesn’t want us to be seen and elected officials who don’t want us to be heard. For decades we have been subjected to viewing the dimmest light of democracy, through the hypocrisy and self serving lust of those we have entrusted to represent us. Senator Horsford for all of his media savvy and history making determination has proven to be no different than the rest of the spineless, manipulative leaders who have come before him, and we will no longer blindly cheer for the man who would disgrace us with a silence that is so deafening.



Today is a new day. Change has come to Washington and we will not stop fighting until that same change has come to Nevada. Not from a puppet impersonator but from someone who is in office to make change, not save face in hopes of securing his own longevity.

Brandon Greene

(Full Disclosure Brandon Greene is on the board of the Stop The F Street Closure Coalition)

Quota Usage: 26.38MB / 245.00MB (10.77%) [Updated every 15 minutes]

**Date:** Thu, 14 May 2009 00:03:20 -0400  
**From:** Trish Geran <tgeran@aol.com>  
**To:** mckeer3@unlv.nevada.edu  
**Subject:** Fwd: Dear Muslims Of Las Vegas Nevada Attention Please

 2 unnamed text/html 46.66 KB 

Bob,  
See below timeline. I thought it would be something you could use for your thesis.

Trish

-----Original Message-----

**From:** Hossein Mokhtar <hosseinmzebaei@yahoo.com>  
**To:** Hossein Mokhtar <hosseinmzebaei@yahoo.com>  
**Sent:** Wed, 13 May 2009 8:02 pm  
**Subject:** Dear Muslims Of Las Vegas Nevada Attention Please

**Dear Muslims of Las Vegas Nevada Attention Please**

**Salam**

Please support the struggle of F Street Residents who are fighting to achieve their basic Human Rights in 21<sup>st</sup> Century in the "Land of Free", and the "Home of Brave"; the "Promised Land".

To do so please E-Mail to the below E-Mails the members of the Nevada "Senate" to Support to **Amend AB304 Re-Open F Street**.

On Friday May 8, 2009, **Senator Steven Horsford** proposed an Amendment to **AB304**, which specifically states how the City of Las Vegas will re-open F Street . It passed in the assembly and will be heard possibly on or before Friday, May 15th in the Senate. In the meantime, as we await the time and day, (the place is the government building located across from Cashman Field) we would like each of you to show your support for the re-opening of F Street and the importance of it by emailing Assembly Harvey Mumfor. His email address is: pmanning@lcb.state.nv.us

He will then give your statements of support to Senator Horsford for submission. Please inform as many people as you possibly can. The more numbers we show, the more of an impact we will make. </font>

**Senator Steven Horsford** is a Democratic member and Majority Leader of the Nevada Senate, representing Clark County District 4 since 2004. He is Nevada's first African-American state senate majority leader.

You may also E-mail your supports to the following E-Mails: please with **Support to Amend AB304 Re-Open F Street** in the subject line.

John Lee, Chair jlee@sen.state.nv.us  
Terry Care, Vice Chair tearc@sen.state.nv.us  
Steven Horsford shorsford@sen.state.nv.us </span>  
Shirley Breeden sbreeden@sen.state.nv.us  
William Raggio wraggio@sen.state.nv.us  
Randolph Townsend rtownsend@sen.state.nv.us  
Mike McGinness mmcginness@sen.state.nv.us

God bless you  
Best regards,  
Mokhtar

Here there is F Street Timeline also the background of the Events, and there is a link at the end of this E-mail to view the photos of the Rally "To Stop F Street Closure"

#### F Street Timeline

**1944-1945** Informal urban renewal programs razes 375 homes, causing overcrowding on the Westside

**1945:** Reverend Henry Cook and West Side residents petition Mayor Cragin to pave "E" Street, the main thoroughfare on the Westside. All requests for public improvement are denied.

<https://secure.unlv.nevada.edu/webmail/imp/message.php?actionID=148&mailbox=INBO...> 5/14/2009

Nevada Department of Transportation



**Information Fair**  
Saturday, June 26, 2010  
10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.



The Nevada Department of Transportation invites you to a multi-project Information Fair. Take this opportunity to gather information on proposed improvements within the West Las Vegas and downtown areas.

Please join us for a unique information event in your neighborhood!

**WHEN:**

Saturday, June 26, 2010  
10:00 a.m. - 3:00 p.m.

**WHERE:**

Doolittle Community Center  
Rooms A, B & C  
1950 North J Street Las Vegas, NV

**PRESENTATIONS:**

Identical presentations will be provided during the fair at the following times:

10:30 a.m.  
12:00 noon  
1:30 p.m.

**WHO WILL BE INVOLVED?**

NDOT Director Susan Martinovich will lead the general presentations, while NDOT, City of Las Vegas, consultant project managers, outreach staff and right-of-way professionals will answer specific project questions. Additional stations will include Transit, Environmental/Civil Rights, Landscape & Aesthetics, and Property Acquisitions.

**F Street Connection**

The purpose of this project is to reopen F Street under I-15 in order to reestablish and facilitate access between West Las Vegas and downtown Las Vegas. The project will also include beautification of the area through landscape and aesthetic treatments.

**I-515 Project**

Designed to address increasing demand on interstate and commuter travel, the I-515 Project proposes additional freeway lanes and new interchanges at City Parkway, Pecos Road, and Sahara Avenue. The project also proposes improvements including bicycle and pedestrian upgrades and beautification. The corridor extends from the Spaghetti Bowl to Foothills Drive in Henderson.

**Project Neon**

Project Neon encompasses the busy stretch of I-15 between Sahara Avenue and the Spaghetti Bowl. Project objectives include traffic improvements, corridor beautification, enhanced safety by addressing congestion-related incidents, a direct connection between the existing US 95 High Occupancy Vehicle (HOV) lanes and the proposed HOV lanes on I-15, and better access to area neighborhoods and businesses.

Stop by the Information Fair to gather project information, ask questions, provide comments and meet one-on-one with NDOT project teams. A court reporter will also be available to take comments. Written comments will be accepted until Friday, July 16, 2010. Please submit comments to Julie Maxey, NDOT Public Hearings Officer, 1263 S. Stewart Street, Carson City, Nevada, 89712, or you can email your comments to [info@dot.state.nv.us](mailto:info@dot.state.nv.us).

If you need special assistance, auxiliary aids or services, please contact Julie Maxey, NDOT Public Hearings Officer, at 775-888-7171 in advance of the event.

If you are unable to attend this meeting, general information about each of the projects above can be obtained by contacting the individual projects at the following locations:

**F Street Connection**  
Hotline: 702-229-2207

Email: [FStreetConnection@lasvegasnevada.gov](mailto:FStreetConnection@lasvegasnevada.gov)  
Website: [www.lasvegasnevada.gov/fstreet](http://www.lasvegasnevada.gov/fstreet)

**I-515 Project**

Hotline: 702-260-3570 Spanish Hotline: 702-260-3916  
Email: [i515Project@pbsj.com](mailto:i515Project@pbsj.com)  
Website: [www.i515project.com](http://www.i515project.com)

**Project Neon**

Hotline: 702-486-0486 Spanish Hotline: 702-384-1694  
Email: [NDOTSouthProjects@pbsj.com](mailto:NDOTSouthProjects@pbsj.com)  
Website: [www.NDOTProjectNeon.com](http://www.NDOTProjectNeon.com)

MAY 22, 2010	Public Town Hall Meeting 9 a.m. to 12 noon Culinary Training Academy 710 West Lake Mead Boulevard
MAY 24, 2010	Public Town Hall Meeting 6 p.m. to 9 p.m. Doolittle Community Center 1950 North J Street
JUNE 9, 2010	Environmental Compliance (NEPA) Initial Public Meeting 4 p.m. to 7 p.m. Doolittle Community Center 1950 North J Street
JUNE 26, 2010	NDOT Multi-Project Information Fair 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Doolittle Community Center 1950 North J Street
SUMMER 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Design Work Group Meeting #1</li> <li>• Engineering Team to Vet Concepts</li> <li>• Design Work Group Meeting #2</li> <li>• Focus Group Meetings</li> </ul>
FALL/WINTER 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• General Public Meeting</li> <li>• Finalize Environmental Document</li> </ul>
WINTER 2010/2011	Finalize Preliminary Contract Documents

## I-15 AT F STREET GENERAL TIMELINE



### I-15 at F Street Project Goals/Benefits

- Meet stakeholder/public expectations
- Improve quality of life
- Provide pedestrian and bicycle access
- Support economic development
- Beautify neighborhood



All information presented is preliminary subject to revision

22 DE MAYO, 2010	Junta Pública de Ayuntamiento 9 a.m. a 12 del medio día Culinary Training Academy 710 West Lake Mead Boulevard
24 DE MAYO, 2010	Junta Pública de Ayuntamiento 6 p.m. a 9 p.m. Doolittle Community Center 1950 North J Street
9 DE JUNIO, 2010	Junta Pública Inicial de Cumplimiento Ambiental (NEPA) 4 p.m. a 7 p.m. Doolittle Community Center 1950 North J Street
26 DE JUNIO, 2010	Exposición Informática Multi-proyecto de NDOT 10 a.m. a 3 p.m. Doolittle Community Center 1950 North J Street
VERANO 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Junta del Grupo de Trabajo de Diseño #1</li> <li>• Grupo de Ingeniería a Conceptos Vet</li> <li>• Junta del Grupo de Trabajo de Diseño #2</li> <li>• Juntas de Grupos</li> </ul>
OTOÑO/INVIERNO 2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Junta Pública General</li> <li>• Finalización del Documento Ambiental</li> </ul>
INVIERNO 2010/2011	Finalización de Documentos Preliminares de Contrato

## PROCESO GENERAL DEL PROYECTO I-15 EN F STREET



### I-15 en F Street Metas y Beneficios del Proyecto

- Satisfacer a los inversionistas/  
expectativas de los ciudadanos
- Mejorar la calidad de vida
- Proporcionar acceso para peatones  
y bicicletas
- Contribuir al desarrollo económico
- Embellecer el barrio



Toda la información presentada es preliminar, sujeta a revisión

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### Education

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### Grants

Graduate and Professional Student Association University of Nevada, Las Vegas	1990
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### Awards

Norman K. Denzin Qualitative Research Award	2010
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### Teaching Experience

University of Nevada, Las Vegas Introduction to Sociology Sociology of Mating	2008 - Present
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### Paper Presentations & Conferences

CBSM Workshop Session Organizing Committee	2011
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Panelist: Session on Racial Conflict and Harmony in Las Vegas 2011  
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“The Symbolic Meanings of Boundaries” 2010  
Annual Meeting of Cultures of Movement  
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Annual Meeting of Far West Popular Culture  
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*ASA Footnotes* 39(4):1-6

“The Symbolic Meanings of Physical Boundaries” Under Review  
*Space and Culture*

“Critical Ethnography for Community Studies” Under Review  
*Ethnography*

**Memberships**

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