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# Navigating, Resisting, and Subverting Hegemony and Carceral Violence: Understanding the Racialized College-Going Experiences of Black Foster Youth

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## Dedication

*Dedicated to my late sister Kelly Whitman. Rest in Peace.*

# ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

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by

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Using narrative inquiry this study sought to further understand the college-going experiences of Black foster youth within a racialized context. Much of the research on the foster youth community treats them as raceless. Minimal research, especially around education, explores the differential experiences and outcomes of foster youth based on race. Yet, Black foster youth face significant educational disparities in comparison to their foster youth peers of other races. Critical race theory, critical race praxis in education, and community cultural wealth were used as the theoretical framework and analytical tool in this research. Together the theoretical framework centered the lived experiences of current and former foster youth and the staff that support them. Findings reveal how staff and students subvert traditional higher education practices that are oppressive to create counter spaces.

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## Chapter One: Problem Statement

The disenfranchisement of foster youth of color, particularly those who are Black,[1] make them more vulnerable to being traumatized and criminalized (Roberts, 2001), facing structures (policies, practices, norms, and more) that track them out of the college-going process. Black foster youth are more likely to be criminalized and becoming crossover youth,[2] even though Black, White, and Latina/o youth are charged at the same rate (Williams-Butler, 2018). The hyper-criminalization of students of color in the schoolhouse is also widespread (Curtis, 2014); the school-to-prison pipeline is an institutionalized social trap that students of color must navigate (Curtis, 2014); in addition, foster youth must navigate another set of realities that shape their everyday lives and ultimately influence their postsecondary educational trajectories—that is the foster care-to-prison pipeline (Krinsky, 2010).

Foster youth face a particularly grim reality at the intersection of several institutions (i.e., criminal justice system, child welfare system, and education system); together, these institutions create and maintain a nexus of social and racial inequity that is normalized, thus thwarting any progress toward social change (Fong, 2020; Meiners & Charity Tolliver, 2016; Roberts, 2001). The state failing to properly care for foster youth can be seen in the data—foster youth become more vulnerable to homelessness, mental health issues, and dropping out of college (Courtney et al., 2010) due to the trauma

[1] I use "Black" instead of "African American" to include the diverse experiences of people connected to the Pan-African diaspora, as a racialized group who share histories, cultural traditions, and kinships.

[2] Youth involved with juvenile justice and child welfare (ChildWelfare.gov, 2021)

inflicted by these institutions. This is especially problematic as there is a disproportionate number of Black children in foster care that overlap with the overrepresentation of Black youth targeted by the criminal justice system (Alexander, 2010; Roberts, 2001). Foster youth in America are living in carceral-like conditions, while their where-a-bouts are monitored by social workers, educators, foster parents, probation officers, and group home providers (Meiners & Charity Tolliver, 2016; Roberts, 2001)—all of these state-sponsored entities ensure these youth comply, otherwise they will deploy the police state to subject them to further injury of their mind and body.

It is important to note that the school system and child protective services work in tandem with the police state to criminalize foster youth and their parents (Meiners & Charity Tolliver, 2016); more than law enforcement or any other state agency, schools report the most child abuse and neglect allegations (Fong, 2020). As with many American institutions (e.g., criminal justice system and health care), the foster care and postsecondary institution is racialized and racist (Alexander, 2010; Roberts, 2001; Washington, 2006). Thus, the question begs: What are the college-going experiences of foster youth when examining the impact of race and racism?

How do Black foster youth traverse the postsecondary landscape given their experiences in multiple institutions designed to marginalize and erase them? Furthermore, how can higher education practitioners and administrators better support this population in resisting, persisting, and thriving? I study foster youth in the college context because research shows that college dramatically improves an individual's personal and professional life. People who graduate college increase their career earning

potential over a lifetime (Baum et al., 2013). In the section to come, I briefly outline the background of the problem, purpose of the study, research questions, definition of terms, significance of the study, and a summary of the section.

## Background of the Problem

Foster youth[3] are young people that have been deemed wards of the courts and thereby live in a non-relative foster home, group home, or kinship care (relative foster home), because of *alleged* signs of neglect and/or abuse from their parents. Due to policies and practices designed to track them towards remaining wards of the state and the distressing and traumatic experiences of those who are able to escape carceral traps, foster youth have limited opportunities to be college ready (Courtney et al., 2010; Meiners & Charity Tolliver, 2016; Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006). The carceral trap of foster care impacts foster youth's ability to have a consistent school placement, and foster youth's K-12 experiences distinctly disadvantage them in pursuit of a higher education degree (Krebs & Pitcoff, 2006). This disadvantage is not happening by accident—over the past several decades there has been an intentional divestment in secondary and postsecondary education, thus creating an *education debt* (Ladson-Billings, 2006)—already pushed to the margins, pursuing a college degree becomes even more difficult for foster youth.

### Outcomes of an Education Debt

The emergence of prisons and carceral systems have arisen in concert with the divestment in education. California has constructed 23 prisons and one University of

[3] I utilize the California Department of Education (2021) definition of foster youth.

California campus, since 1980. UC Merced in 2005, and three California State University campuses: San Marcos in 1990, Monterey Bay in 1995, and Channel Islands in 2002. Nationally, America has over 6,600 degree-granting institutions and over 7,100 sites of incarceration (including but not limited to state prisons, federal prisons, juvenile correctional facilities, local jails, immigration detention centers, and more) (Prison Policy Initiative, 2020; U.S. Department of Education, 2019). With the increased investment and profit of locking up bodies—mainly those who are Black and Latina/o—we see the increase of an education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Prison Policy Initiative, 2020).

Due to the education debt, foster youth struggle in their schools. In California, 25% of the state's foster care population was found to be chronically absent, the highest among all demographics and sub-groups of students (California Department of Education, 2017); this is in large part because the child welfare system does not invest in their education by offering a stable living environment; on average, foster youth will be in three or more placements during their time in care (Connell et al., 2006). Krebs and Pitcoff (2006) discuss this in their book *Beyond the Foster Care System* when they ask, "Shouldn't a child in the custodial care of a government system be assured of an education?" (p. 27). Krebs and Pitcoff (2006) find out that educational stability and consistency become difficult because of frequent placement changes and a lack of care and educational advocacy from foster parents, social workers, and educators. Due to the lack of investment in secondary school stability, the foster care system disadvantages youth. Foster youth do not have access to the same resources or opportunities as their peers. In fact, two-thirds of foster youth attending a four-year university in California felt

that the foster care system did not adequately prepare them for college (Merdinger et al., 2005).

When foster youth enter a college campus, it is difficult for them to persevere because of the child welfare and educational institutions' failure (Dworsky & Perez, 2009). In Los Angeles County, they reported enrollment rates for Black foster youth at a University of California campus as low as 0% (Harvey et al., 2020). Courtney et al. (2010) reported that 24.4% of foster youth did not have a high school diploma by the age of 24, and only 3.6% of foster youth obtained a college degree by the age of 26. Given the low postsecondary outcomes, it is disturbing that the child welfare and education institutions are not meeting their needs, given that 80% of students from foster care want to go to college (Okpych & Courtney, 2018).

Research shows that when foster youth do have the proper academic and social programmatic support in higher education, they do achieve in college (Gamez, 2017; Lopez, 2018; Whitman, 2018). Historically, however, American colleges and universities have not prioritized the experiences of foster youth; it was not until 1998 that the first foster youth support program was created at California State University, Fullerton (California College Pathways, 2012), even though foster care was modernized in the early 1900s (Rymph, 2017). Nearly a 100-year gap took place before colleges and universities made institutional efforts to support this particular population. While they vary, generally, foster youth support programs provide support in the form of academic and personal advising, housing, career development, financial literacy, and scholarship funding (California College Pathways, 2012). Since their inception, foster youth support

programs have been instrumental in supporting foster youth in higher education (California College Pathways, 2012).

**Caught in a Carceral Nexus**

Earlier in this chapter, I highlighted the ways in which child welfare and schools function as a mechanism to disenfranchise foster youth, especially those who are Black (Roberts, 2001). In this subsection, I critique foster care and the institution that funds it, child welfare, as a function of carcerality. Drawing upon the scholarship of Rodriguez (2006), carceral logics expand beyond the boundaries of a prison and the walls that surround it: "the prison is inscribed as both a localization and a constitutive logic of the state's production of juridical, spatial, and militarized dominion" (p. 41). The power to be able to change norms and culture, and manipulate symbols is what fuels carceral logics (Rodriguez, 2006). Prison is a punitive system that operates outside juridical norms, thriving within generously interpreted rules of institutional policy and practices (Rodriguez, 2006).

Prison is not just a place, but an arrangement, a way of thinking that is rooted in human domination through the state (Rodriguez, 2006). Prison and carceral logics have become more than a place but an idea that possesses the state (Rodriguez, 2006). Prison and carceration logics now shape the way we interact and engage; we do so with punitive policies that subjugate people. I argue that child welfare and school systems are possessed by carceral logics (Rodriguez, 2006). Black youth who interact with the child welfare system find themselves at the intersection of being disenfranchised by the criminal justice system and school system. I assert school, child welfare, and prisons

work in tandem with each other to express dominion (Rodriguez, 2006) and surveil foster youth, particularly those who are Black, creating a nexus of carceration.

The rate of foster youth being schooled in juvenile halls is confounding; the top three public schools in Los Angeles County (all run by Los Angeles County Office of Education) with the highest foster care populations are all located in juvenile detention centers (Harvey et al., 2020). This carceral nexus shapes the pre-college experiences of foster youth.

The nexus of carceration foster youth must navigate has a deleterious impact on their ability to access and pursue college. For the 3.6% of foster youth that are able to enroll and graduate from a college, they do so because of advocates and supporters who stood up for them and they themselves have had to actively resist and at-times subvert hegemonic norms and policies that otherwise would have locked them out.

### *Resisting the Carceral Nexus*

As foster youth navigate this nexus, they succeed in large part because they actively resist the carceral nexus and exercise their skills of resilience, moreover they have a network support that provides counterspaces for them to succeed. Counterspaces are "revolutionary settings embedded within larger settings and contexts. That is they are pockets of resistance that may, to one extent or another, disrupt the dominant narrative of the larger setting and context" (Keels, 2019, p. 18). In college, students use counterspaces to think through radical concepts, develop their voices and language towards advocacy, and share important information about the rights of minoritized people (Keels, 2019). In postsecondary education, foster youth support programs often called Guardian Scholars

or Renaissance Scholars become counterspaces (Gamez, 2017). Research highlights how the spaces provide social and navigational capital that helps students succeed (Gamez, 2017; Whitman, 2018). To note, much of this resistance work is done with little to no funding from their campuses or university systems. Program staff rely heavily on community benefit organizations, foundations, and donors to provide the necessary support. Despite the lack of institutional support, the foster youth support program staff understand the carceral environments foster youth are navigating, through student affairs and academic training, and sometimes their own lived experience in foster care they create spaces of safety, care, and advocacy, to support their educational trajectories. These staff member become key—they are able to navigate campus policy in ways students cannot, and they also understand what is at stake for the foster youth collegians.

**What is the Public's Duty?**

The limited educational success of foster youth is problematic for the individuals and the citizenry; the myriad of barriers the child welfare and educational institutions put in foster youth's way is a social justice issue. Until this point, the data suggests that youth growing up in foster care are living in separate but unequal homes from their non-foster youth peers. With foster youth being considered wards of the court, both their state and local child welfare agencies are responsible for their well-being; it is incumbent upon public officials and their constituents to uphold the human rights of foster youth. When a child is placed into foster care it is because of allegations of abuse and/or neglect. In no uncertain terms, the state and child welfare agency also puts the family through trauma, which has life-long effects (Roberts, 2001). Along with state-induced trauma, it is

difficult for foster youth to navigate educational institutions because they have been stripped of privileges and support of family (Seita, 2014) as they face numerous institutional barriers (e.g., lack of financial aid, housing insecurity, and documentation for enrollment) (Dworsky & Perez, 2009).

At the least, these outcomes are problematic, and at most, they are inhumane, with research showing that individuals without postsecondary credentials will have lower lifetime earnings and will more likely be subjected to poverty (Baum et al., 2013). While the students display a level of resilience, it is important to unpack and interrogate these systems—the oppressive cultures must change, as opposed to assuming students will simply adapt to them. I grapple with this tension of highlighting and celebrating the ingenuity and resistance of foster youth that lifts them to be college graduates, while trying not to fetishize their success or glorifying the trauma they had to endure to graduate. I must ask, what is the public's duty to care for young people they took away from their parents and raised in government-funded foster care? It is irresponsible for students and staff to be consistently exercising resistance and resilience without changing the systems to better support foster youth.

**How College Shapes Lives**

Limiting the opportunities for foster youth to obtaining a four-year degree makes them more vulnerable to homelessness and incarceration (Okpych & Courtney, 2018). Depending on the city in the U.S., the homelessness and/or incarceration of a person can cost taxpayers anywhere between $35,000 and $85,000 a year (Aidala, 2013); in contrast, the average annual tuition at a public university in the United States is $10,200 (College

Board, 2018). As a community, it is our responsibility to ensure youth raised in foster care have equal access to a quality education, no different than if they were our own children. There is a real human cost in denying foster youth the resources to pursue higher education.

Supporting foster youth's postsecondary degree attainment is beneficial for them, their family, and community. Pursuing a postsecondary degree has a positive impact beyond just those related to the economic health of individual people and their governments. Research shows that students who pursue a higher education are more likely to obtain a career-track position (Buam et al., 2013), as well as increasing their own community engagement and awareness of social justice issues (Buam et al., 2013). Research also shows that historically disenfranchised students use college as a means to for social mobility for their family (Parrot, 2019). Disenfranchising foster youth from postsecondary education is a social justice issue.

## Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which Black foster youth navigate their postsecondary institution from multiple perspectives. Utilizing student and staff narrative, this study sought to understand the experiences of foster youth from a nuanced and multidimensional perspective utilizing qualitative methods and critical race theory. First, I investigated how Black college-going foster youth's racial identity impacts how they navigate their postsecondary environment. Second, I investigated how Black foster youth cultivate and leverage their community cultural wealth to gain access to and persist in the postsecondary environment. Third, CRP-Ed allowed me to

interrogate higher education policy and how it may hinder or support this unique population; more specifically, it draws attention to the challenges and contradictions of working within White supremacist structures and policies toward liberation. Taken together, this approach enabled me to dig deeper and understand the nuances of this population and the impact of race through individual interviews of Black foster youth and their institutional advocates.

## Research Questions

My overarching research question is: *What are the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth?* Below are my secondary research questions:

1) How do college-going foster youth who identify as Black navigate race and racism on-campus?
2) How do foster youth who identify as Black cultivate and leverage their community cultural wealth to gain access to and persist in postsecondary environments?
3) In what ways do institutional policies hinder or promote the success of college-going foster youth who identify as Black?

## Definition of Terms

In this next section is a list of defined terms. Language matters and gives meaning to various experiences. Language has the power to shape perception; the terms frequently used are intentional but not definitive. “The language used to talk about foster care and people who are or have been in foster care is dynamic” (Gross, 2019, p. 3). It is important to understand that the experiences of people who were in foster care have a profound

impact on them when they become adults; these impacts are not inherent to the individual, but rather are a function of the intuitional environment they were exposed to (Gross, 2019).

I must also say that I do give pause at naming all youth who experience foster care as foster youth. There is a myriad of diversity in the foster care population when it comes to race, ethnicity, geographically (Gross, 2019)—I would also add gender, sexual orientation and what type of placement they are in (e.g., group home, foster home, and kinship care) and what were the alleged circumstances of their removal from their home of origin. All these contexts matter, and my choice of terms in the study is purposeful, practical, and critical. To note, these terms are not meant to be conclusive.

*Foster Care System* is a public system where children who are removed from their biological or adoptive parents, or other legal guardians, are placed in foster care in a variety of settings. They may be placed in the care of relatives other than the family members involved in the neglect or abuse (kin placement), non-relatives, therapeutic or treatment foster care, or in an institution or group home (Encyclopedia of Children's Health, 2015). It is important to identify that other scholars are moving to name or re-define foster care as a system of family regulation (Roberts, 2020). Defining (or renaming) foster care as family regulation highlights (a) the ways in which foster care is designed to regulate and punish people color, and (b) how foster care does not "care" or support families and children, but actually harms them (Roberts, 2020).

*Child Protective Services (CPS)* is the major system of intervention of child abuse and neglect in California. Existing law provides for services to abused and neglected

children and their families. CPS's goal is to keep the child in his/her own home when it is safe, and when the child is at risk, to develop an alternate plan as quickly as possible (cdss.ca.gov, 2021, para. 1). I would be remiss to not point out that scholars critique whether or not CPS is actually "protecting" youth and families. Roberts (2001) argues that at times CPS serves as a mechanism to surveil and criminalize Black and other minoritized families.

*Foster child/youth* is a minor who is removed from their home of origin and placed in a variety of substitute living arrangements such as a foster home, group home, residential facility, or other substitute care facility (Unrau, 2007).

*Transitional-age foster youth* are between the ages of 18 to 25 years old who are currently or formerly in foster care system (Children's Advocacy Institute, 2013).

*Orphaned* is a verb as one who is deprive of parents or parents or deceased.

## Significance of the Study

In this last section, I contend that this research is significant for four reasons. First, it augments and shifts our current understanding of college-going foster youth into a new knowledge utilizing critical race theory, thereby centering race and racism in their lived experience and subverting hegemonic ideologies. Second, this research deepened our understanding of the multiple forms of community cultural wealth as it relates to foster youth, thus better informing practitioners from multiple sectors that support foster youth on how to create a college-going culture. From a CRT perspective, this study intended to re-write the master narrative of what it means to be a foster youth in higher

education. Moreover, this study centered the voices of foster youth who are often silenced and invisible within higher education research and practice.

Third, research on foster youth has yet to highlight the nuances and complexities of race and ethnic identity. It is understood that foster youth intersect with different identities; it is important to unpack how their race impacts their college experiences. This is particularly important when understanding how the child welfare system marginalizes youth of color, specifically Black youth. This research is emergent; most studies on foster youth do not address the nuances of the college experience while centering race. As an intervention in the existing scholarship, this study dove deeper into their experiences, rather than focusing on just numerical outcomes.

Finally, this research focused on the institutional context and institutionalized structures that may have contributed to participants' racialized experiences. Often, research focuses on the downstream effects; this study also centered the upstream effects that both supported and hindered foster youth pursuing a postsecondary degree. Therefore, this study is significant because it exposed and deconstructed structures of oppression that Black foster youth collegians may encounter on a daily basis. Findings from this research guide implications and recommendations for higher education research and practice that focus on foster youth and racialization on college campuses. This study enables administrators, student affairs practitioners, social workers, and policymakers to have data to drive their practice in critical ways.

## Summary of Chapter One

We are only beginning to understand the educational experiences of foster youth. Using CRT, I grapple with what Ladson-Billings (2006) describes as the paradox of education research, where we have created an enterprise toward the study of poor and racially marginalized students, which is important in understanding their plight. Yet we rarely examine the structures that cause these inequities and rarely offer solutions to problem solve. I grapple with the tensions of previous research that present findings as race-neutral, enabling a casual observer or a non-critical scholar to think that foster youth are in fact responsible for the shortcomings, divestment, and violence of state-run institutions. The canon of research on foster youth and education has its value and informs scholars, practitioners, and policymakers in real ways—the absents of a critical lens also informs the same constituents through the lens of victim blaming.

I cannot steer away from the grim outcomes of foster youth, which is important as higher education practitioners need to know and understand the pre-college experiences of this population to properly serve them. Likewise, critical race researchers need to know the ways in which the current literature lacks a racial framing in order to know how and where we collectively need to push future research. In Chapter Two, I balance this reality, and then offer counter narratives in Chapter Four where I present the findings. Finally, I offer solution-based recommendations in Chapter Five.

Next in Chapter Two, I provide an overview of the literature: (a) what is foster care, (b) who is in foster care, (c) the college going experiences of foster youth, (d)

supportive networks-foster youth support programs, (e) foster youth educational policy, and (f) the racialized experiences of foster care.

## Chapter Two: Literature Review

The literature review is broken up into nine sections, beginning with my theoretical framework, namely critical race theory (CRT), critical race praxis in education (CRP-Ed), and community cultural wealth (CCW). These three theories are useful in critiquing and understanding the racialized experiences of Black foster youth collegians; each theory in their own way challenges and subverts hegemonic cultures and structures that marginalize people. The eight sections following the theoretical overview address (a) foster care as an oppressive force; (b) a brief history of foster care; (c) who is in foster care and how does it work; (d) college-going foster youth; (e) foster youth support: practices and policies; (f) racialized experiences of foster youth; and (g) personal narrative.

The theoretical overview offers a critical resistance framing that I draw upon throughout the study. It enables me to understand how foster youth are racialized in the research and the multiple ways the research helps us understand how they navigate White spaces, specifically child welfare and schooling. Critical race theory reminds us that race and racism are real and exist. These theoretical frameworks help to understand the ways in which community is essential to resist, survive, and thrive in hegemonic spaces (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015; Yosso, 2005). As this study focuses on the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth, these theoretical frameworks reminds us of the inspiration we draw from our community and kinfolk; the power we harness in community service and organizing; and the utility in counter storytelling through poetry, humor, and hip-hop, to name a few (Iglesias, 2019; Yosso, 2005). I use the theory to push

us to grapple with the policy as we push for justice, and at the same time find spaces of interest convergence to help ease the harm that is being caused in real time (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). Lastly, I use theory in the literature review to enable me to understand the history, research, policy, and practice from a racialized and critical lens. Ultimately, my goal is to have a praxis that is emancipatory.

## Theoretical Overview

There is a dearth of research that employs critical theoretical frameworks that explore the college-going experiences of foster youth. I frame the literature review utilizing three theoretical frameworks: CRT to center race and racism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). I utilize CRP-Ed to interrogate policy from a racial justice lens. CRP-Ed was born from the tradition of CRT, as it interrogates laws, polices, and practices—to that end CRP-Ed is about enacting policy change by intervening within and outside of a White supremacist legal system. Lastly, I use CCW to subvert and shift our understanding of traditional notions of cultural capital in postsecondary environments and to recognize the assets of minoritized students and communities (Yosso, 2005).

Together, these theoretical frameworks highlight the duality and contradictions of institutions that are both spaces of liberation and oppression (e.g., education, research, policy change, health care, the law, and foster care). Foster care is a system that was made to provide support and services to children and their families, however, through racist policy, foster care has also created further harm and injury to those same children (Roberts, 2001). Together the theoretical framework will center the lived experiences of current and former foster youth, the staff that support them, and the ways in which the

staff and students resist and subvert traditional higher education practices that are oppressive to create spaces of safety and achievement.

**Critical Race Theory (CRT)**

CRT emerged in the mid-1970s with the work of Derrick Bell and Alan Freeman (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Bell a Black man, and Freeman, a White man, were troubled by the slow pace of racial progress in the United States (Ladson-Billings, 2009). CRT is a product of a separate body of scholarship from an earlier legal movement called critical legal studies (CLS); CLS is a progressive legal movement that challenged the traditional legal scholarship at the time (Ladson-Billings, 2009). Doctrinal and policy analysis was the focus of CLS (Gordon, 1990). CLS scholars critiqued majoritarian legal doctrine but did not center racism in its analysis (Ladson-Billings, 2009).

Also influenced by CLS is scholar Cheryl Harris, whose foundational work centers race and racism. Harris (1993) highlights how Whiteness is endemic to society and remains protected in the same way as property—within the legal system. Furthermore, racism is a phenomenon that is intentional, as racial hierarchy and specifically a property interest in Whiteness has been codified into law through various court decisions (Harris, 1993). The courts protected Whiteness while discriminating against those who were not considered White. In a society that frames the criminal justice system, education system, and the foster care system as race-neutral, it is important to understand these systems operate in racialized ways (Alexander, 2010; Morris, 2018; Roberts, 2001). Through the law, White people are protected while those who are not

White are subjugated and dehumanized through these systems (Alexander, 2010; Harris, 1993).

Yes, people of color are able to graduate from college, emancipate from foster care, or be released from prison and live productive lives. However, their success has much to do with their community and their own ability to be self-determined individuals. Furthermore, Whiteness gives White-identifying people immunity from these carceral traps (Cabrera, 2017), while non-White people must endure them—CLS and the theories inspired by it highlight the ways in which American institutions are racist and shape the living conditions of people of color. CRT is important to this study because it places a focus on investigating and critiquing the social systems that produce and uphold racist structures that oppress people of color (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012), in this case college-going Black foster youth.

CRT is utilized to center race and racism and to give voice to a systematically oppressed group (Black foster youth). I use CRT because it is multi-disciplinary—extending its tenets to different areas of research. CRT being born from CLS, was developed to critique race-evasiveness (or color blindness) within legal scholarship (Crenshaw, 2002; Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). While there are core tenets, CRT scholars do not subscribe to one set of tenets, there is room for a scholar's own take on it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). For the purposes of this research, five tenets of the theory are foregrounded.

First, CRT acknowledges that race is socially constructed and race and racism is central to understanding U.S. society and social institutions (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012),

including higher education (McCoy & Rodricks, 2015) and the foster care system (Roberts, 2001). Second, the theory challenges dominant ideology, such as race-evasiveness, a post-racial society, and meritocracy (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Third, centrality of experiential knowledge is vital as it is a tool to combat hegemonic narratives (Yosso, 2006). Fourth, racial realism is the understanding that race is socially and politically constructed, consequently racism and White supremacy as a social structure are the primary framework for racial phenomena (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Racial realism is about the permanence of racism in a White supremacist society, which re-establishes itself in the face of challenges and mutates to preserve the status quo.

CRT asserts that White people are not naïve or ignorant oppressors—they actively find illogical reasons to label Black, Indigenous, and Latina/o people as inferior to justify the kidnapping, enslavement, and violence done to them and the theft of their land (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Fifth, in terms of intersectionality, CRT scholars recognize that racial identity and this form of oppression (racism) intersect with other disenfranchised identities and forms of marginalization that influence lived experiences (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991); CRT is useful as this study grapples with race and youth who are in the child welfare system. Next, I unpack each tenet.

### *The Centrality of Race and Racism*

Race and racism cannot be overstated in this study. Toni Morrison "asserts that race is always already present in every social configuring of our lives" (Ladson-Billings, 2009, p. 19); race is even present in an all-White town (Roediger, 1991). The creation of racial categories is not designed to create a racial binary; rather, it submits to how in a

racialized society Whiteness is positioned as normalized (Ladson-Billings, 2009). I assert that race and racism are central when understanding the lived experiences of college-going foster youth, specifically those who are Black.

### *Challenge of Dominant Ideology*

CRT challenges dominant ways of thinking and critiques liberalism (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012); challenging dominant ideology is central to this research because foster youth are disproportionately Black (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2018); however, much of the research on foster youth in higher education looks at them as a monolith and raceless (Whitman, 2016). CRT critiques dominant narratives such as the notion that we live in a post-racial America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012); CRT calls out race-evasiveness and the idea that we should prioritize a non-racial identity (e.g., foster care status) over racial identity. CRT also points out how dominant ideology hides racist structures that perpetuate and maintain racial inequities (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Dominant ideology enables oppressive structures to be seen as normal, and allows their existence to operate in the shadows of society and its structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). People of color must name and challenge these structures (policies, practices, norms, and more) in order to achieve racial equity (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### *Experiential Knowledge of People of Color*

In order for people of color to gain access, equity, and power (and be seen as human), their stories must be told. Stories have power, and CRT encourages a focus on counternarratives that center the experiential knowledge and voices of racially

minoritized populations (Yosso, 2006). Due to the positionality of youth in foster care, experimental knowledge and centering their narratives is important. The stories of people of color are essential in understanding the ways in which institutionalized racism persists (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Counternarratives are useful in that they challenge revisionist history that majoritarian society has been able to tell (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Counternarratives serve as a tool of change by pushing us to engage with the ignored evidence and forgotten voices—reminding us of our larger collective community (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### *Racial Realism*

Racial realism asserts that race is a socially constructed idea that has been invented and reinvented over time by people who have power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Racial realism seeks to maintain a social order that preserves Whiteness and the privileges that go along with it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Race is not a static concept, but is dynamic and always changing. Delgado and Stefancic (2012) explain that "races are categories that society invents, manipulates, or retires when convenient" (p. 8); because of this, race becomes normalized and shapes everyday encounters of race and racism experienced by people of color in the United States (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Racial realism is the harsh reality that race is not going away; White supremacy will re-create and re-imagine race when it is challenged to preserve a racial hierarchy.

Derrick Bell argued that civil rights advances for Black people seemed to happen when it was convenient for the nation (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Bell asserted that with America in the grips of the Cold War (1947–1991), and having just ended World

War II (1939–1945) and the Korean War (1950–1953), America was trying to maintain its standing on the international stage and prevent a domestic uprising (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). White people obliged and passed *Brown v. Board Education* (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012); this was not a watershed moment that meant racial progress was being made, just that White supremacy had shifted, changed its shape and the disenfranchisement of people of color in schools and elsewhere became more covert to maintain a racial social order (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012).

### *Intersectionality*

Race influences every aspects of our life, however, our lives are also influenced by other seen and unseen identities and experiences (Oluo, 2019). People's racial identities interact with social identities, it is at this intersection of racial and social identities that create people's distinctive social, economic, educational, and political lives (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991, Oluo, 2019). For example, a foster youth who identifies as Black may not be able to attribute their lived experiences to just their race or just their foster care experience; these two identities interlock and have an impact on their daily lives. Said another way, a foster youth who identifies as Black will navigate the world as a Black person and endure anti-Blackness and racial oppression, while simultaneously navigating the systemic marginalization (e.g., criminalization, family separation, and stigma) within the foster care system. In order to understand the entire college-going experience of a foster youth who identifies as Black, the intersections of their race, foster care status, and other seen and hidden social identities (e.g., gender and sexual orientation) must be considered.

An intersectional lens enables the researcher to shift and create a new framework because it challenges conventional understandings of oppressed groups (Crenshaw, 1991). CRP-Ed is discussed next as it puts CRT into action. CRP-Ed works in concert with CRT and community cultural wealth, which will be discussed later. CRP-Ed is incredibly useful in that it enables higher education policymakers, practitioners, and researchers' tactics to resist and offer relief to oppressive logics and practices while working towards a new emancipatory framework. In the next subsection, I unpack the tenets of critical race praxis in education.

**Critical Race Praxis in Education (CRP-Ed)**

Drawing from CRT, CRP-Ed seeks to apply critical race concepts while engaging in advocacy within hegemonic White supremacist structures. It encourages moving into the contradictions and tensions of such work, toward seeking immediate relief from current material conditions experienced by people of color and long-term radical transformation. The purpose of utilizing CRP-Ed as a theoretical framework is because it is useful in undertaking racial justice work, such as projects aimed at advancing racial diversity, equity, and inclusion through race-conscious admissions practices (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). CRP-Ed pushes for recognizing the contradictions of advocating for racial justice and equity through traditional research practices that have historically been and continue to be utilized toward advancing racial subordination and White supremacy (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015).

My research approach is mindful of these contradictions and guided by the four tenets of CRP-Ed: (a) relational advocacy toward mutual engagement; (b) redefining

dominant and hegemonic systems; (c) research as dialectical space; and (d) critical engagement with policy. CRP-Ed originates from CRT and more specifically from critical race praxis legal scholarship (Yamamoto, 1997). The idea of critical race praxis is to engage in racial justice advocacy despite racial realism, engage in the gray area, and grapple with the intersections of racial identity and multiple facets of oppression—as scholars work towards racial justice (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). CRT and CRP-Ed complement each other—while CRT pushes for racial justice, CRP-Ed adds a focus on how to achieve justice within the constraints of problematic constructs such as the legal system or in this case the child welfare system and postsecondary schooling, which both have racist legacies (Dancy et al., 2018; Robert, 2001). Next, I further explain each of the tenets.

### *Relational Advocacy towards Mutual Engagement*

Advocating for minoritized people requires developing relationships in multiple capacities, in the community and in institutional spaces (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). Social movements that lead to policy and legislation do not happen in silos (Ramirez, 2018); an example of this in the foster care community is the foster care policy advocacy group *California Youth Connection* (CYC). Over the years, CYC has engaged current and former foster youth, adult supporters (volunteers 24 years old and older), community members, and elected officials to pass legislation for foster youth (CYC, 2018). CYC was founded on the fundamental principles that youth in foster care must be empowered at the center of all decisions focusing on legislation and policy (CYC, 2018).

In postsecondary spaces, specifically community colleges, foster youth support programs like *Single Stop* provide a range of holistic support, many of these services reach beyond the traditional college student services model (White, 2018). Single Stop and other programs build relationships across campuses and communities to offer: public benefits, free tax services, case management, and even legal services for its foster youth college students (White, 2018). These higher education practitioners support and advocate for their foster youth students although the campuses themselves do not always adequately support them; at the same time, they engage with policymakers and legislators to enact policy change.

### *Redefining Dominant and Hegemonic Systems*

Racial oppression has been normalized overtime; a racial apartheid has existed in America for well over 400 years, one that was cemented, legitimized, and legalized by the criminal legal system (Alexander, 2010; Harris, 1993). These racist laws and practices have also evolved over the years; as the definition of Whiteness shifts, so do the practices of racial discrimination (Alexander, 2010). Calling out these forms of oppression enables communities to dismantle systems of oppression (Freire, 1970). In order to shift and redefine hegemonic systems, though, we must name them first.

### *Research as a Dialectical Space*

This tenet "acknowledges the racist legacy of research and White methods" (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015, p. 43). This tenet recognizes the role that research can have when research does or does not utilize a critical lens, and the ensuing implications of these approaches (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). When research is conducted in

uncritical ways, it enables deficit perspectives, encourages hegemonic ways of being and knowing to be normalized, and allows for the upkeep of racist policies (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). Bonilla Silva and Zuberi (2008) highlight how the dominant view in research privileges White people in the U.S. and Europe. This is problematic, as the legacy of White methods has created a racial stratification that some researchers have come to accept as empirically legitimate. Ultimately, this *White logic* is rooted in White supremacy (Bonilla Silva & Zuberi, 2008). The lack of criticality in foster youth educational research is apparent—as I discuss later in this chapter, there is a dearth of literature that examines the racialized experiences of foster youth utilizing critical or racialized theories. nor are there foster youth secondary or postsecondary policies that center race and racism. Understanding research as a dialectical space helps researchers to name and understand how carceral environments and counterspaces shape educational and overall life outcomes.

### *Critical Engagement with Policy*

Engaging with policy means to understand that many of the policies and laws that build America were created to disenfranchise and dehumanize people of color and other minoritized groups (e.g., Jim Crow laws, voting, housing segregation, and interracial marriage). Outside of a few scholars (e.g., Dorothy Roberts and Alan Dettlaff), there is a lack of critical interrogation of race and racism within the landscape of child welfare policy broadly. Engaging with policy critically also charges us to be aware of the effects of educational advocacy within the present legal context. This requires us to have an astute awareness of the persistent and ever-changing nature of racism that leads to

resistance toward policies fashioned to bring racial justice (Harris, 1993). The racial equity gains we have made in higher education (e.g., race-conscious admissions practices) continue to be vigorously challenged (see Ledesma et al., in press), and for these reasons, we need to remain vigilant.

CRP-Ed helps us to understand how we can seek justice, it requires us to work within policy that is oppressive while at the same time working to change the policy. Through its four tenets, it offers a way forward to change systems from the outside, while also helping those on the inside survive and thrive. CRP-Ed highlights how we must maintain a critical consciousness and work within and outside oppressive systems to create change. It is not an either / or, but rather a "both and" approach—through organizing, negotiating, agitation, and service, we can move towards praxis. In the next sub-section, I discuss how I used CCW in my framework. While CRP-Ed challenges us to change policy and the ways in which we do research and practice, CCW offers us a framework that we can use as a model to also resist and subvert the policy and practice in educational spaces.

Community Cultural Wealth (CCW) is useful in meeting CRP-Ed's call of translating theory into practice towards social justice. CCW challenges the idea that people of color enter educational spaces with cultural deficiencies (Yosso, 2005). In challenging racism and other tools used for oppression, *cultural wealth* is revealed (Yosso, 2005). Hegemonic narratives create racialized deficit assumptions that students of colors are not active learners or that their parents do not care about their education

(Yosso, 2005)—to be sure, these are false narratives and CCW confronts this deficit thinking in schooling and offers ways to counter this logic.

**Community Cultural Wealth (CCW)**

Rooted in CRT, the CCW framework challenges normalized forms of White cultural capital legitimized by societal institutions such as selective colleges, which undermine the strengths and assets of minoritized communities. Introducing this framework is important to develop educational environments that affirm the many assets of Black foster youth**.** The six forms of CCW are: (a) aspirational capital, (b) linguistic capital, (c) familial capital, (d) social capital, (e) navigational capital, and (f) resistance capital (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) maintains that all forms of capital already exist within students and communities of color, and her argument helps us understand how they continue to succeed in accessing higher education. It challenges the idea that success requires or even would result from assimilating into White cultural capital; these forms of capital are instead a source of empowerment and advancement.

Yosso (2005) designed this model to capture the talents, strengths, and experiences that students of color bring with them to their educational environment. Yosso's CCW model represents a framework to understand how students of color access and experience college from a strengths-based perspective. CCW enabled my study to focus on the assets students bring with them to college campuses and offer counter narratives of foster youth towards racial equity among Black students who experience foster care. CCW is important as it de-centers the master narrative and centers the voices of historically marginalized students.

### *Aspirational Capital*

Yosso (2005) defines this as the hopes and dreams students have. She explains that students of color and their families continue to have high educational aspirations despite persistent educational inequities (Yosso, 2005). This is also true for foster youth, given that the research shows that approximately 80% of foster youth want to pursue a college degree (Okpych & Courtney, 2018); many foster youth have aspirations and goals that include a postsecondary degree with hopes and dreams of changing the trajectory of their lives and their families' lives (Gamez, 2018).

### *Linguistic Capital*

Linguistic capital refers to the multiple languages and communication skills students bring with them to their college campus. Yosso (2005) further defines this form of capital by discussing the role of storytelling, particularly for students of color. Yosso (2005), asserts that because storytelling is a part of students' lives before they arrive on college campuses, they bring with them "skills [that] may include memorization, attention to detail, dramatic pauses, comedic timing, facial affect, vocal tone, volume, rhythm and rhyme." (p. 79).

A study by Iglesias (2018) showed that music (i.e., hip-hop) was an effective and culturally relevant medium for communication and self-expression. Through the musical, social, and political cultures that make up hip-hop, foster youth students were able to express and communicate their frustrations, happiness, and stress of their day-to-day lives in a safe space, while also learning about political resistance and collective-communal power.

### *Familial Capital*

Familial capital signifies to the social and personal resources students have in their pre-college environment, drawn from their extended familial, and community networks. Yosso (2005) explains that students' pre-college experiences within a communal environment come with knowledge that can help students leverage into positive experiences in postsecondary spaces. It must be acknowledged that because foster youth do not grow up in a nuclear house hold, in some ways they lack family privilege. In short, Seita (2014) defines family privilege as "strengths and supports gained through primary family relationships" (p. 8). Seita (2014) further asserts that a child's primary source of strength and support is their familial unit.

Family privilege affords individuals with loving and stable relationships, continuity through life transitions, and spaces to counter worthlessness and indignancy (Seita, 2014). For people of color, family privilege also affords youth with privilege of knowing where they came from, knowing their familial, ethnic, and cultural history (Seita, 2014). In collegiate spaces, familial bonds are advantageous. In her book *Campus Counterspaces*, Micere Keels (2019) discusses how the encouragement and involvement of family played a significant role in whether or not students continued their college education and graduated. In the coming narrative, published in *The Imprint*, a foster youth, Sabrina Alvarez (2021), highlights how family is complex and not easily defined.

> My family is like a jigsaw puzzle constantly missing the last piece. After foster care, at age 20, just a few months ago, I introduced myself into my biological father's life again. The concept of family is still underdeveloped. I try to find that feeling of home through family but I think it is so hard for me because I still am trying to put back the pieces of my broken family. I used to think family were people you shared blood with, but life itself has taught me that family are the

> people that choose to stay regardless of how ugly or hard things get. Family are people you choose and that choose you. You choose your own family and they choose you. (para. 4)

Later in the article, Sabrina concluded:

> With the support of the people who genuinely love me, I am able to every day try to be a little bit of a better person than I was yesterday. I am able to question myself and others. I am able to learn how to love and how to most importantly love myself. (para. 12)

Although Sabrina did not benefit from the privilege of a traditional nuclear family, she was beginning to understand and develop her own chosen family. While many foster youth maintain bonds with their biological family, they also make meaning of family in other ways. Foster youth will create a chosen family, consisting of their social worker, foster parents, and friends (Whitman, 2016); this chosen family becomes a part of their broader network of support and village.

### *Social Capital*

Social capital, according to Yosso (2005), is defined as students' *peers and other social contacts* and emphasizes how students utilize these contacts to gain access to college and navigate other social institutions. For Black and Latina/o students, navigating higher education can result in an isolating experience, and create feelings of homesickness, and lead to attrition (Keels, 2019). However, when students of color are connected to racially/ethnically oriented counterspaces—namely student organizations and clubs—those feelings of isolation fade; students feel more connected and less embarrassed to ask for help among their same-race peer group (Keels, 2019). The gain from these identity-centered organizations creates a counterspace that fosters social capital (Keels, 2019).

Similarly, foster youth are able to access a bevy of networks and support systems, some key support systems that make up their social capital are their case workers, Independent Living Program, school-based foster youth support programs (e.g., Guardian Scholars Program, Next-Up, and First Star Academy), Court Appointed Special Advocates also known shorthand as "CASAs," and their foster parents (Okpych & Courtney, 2017; Whitman, 2018). Together, these formal and informal social networks give foster youth a space they feel seen and understood as they navigate college life.

### *Navigational Capital*

Navigational capital refers to students' skills and abilities to navigate *social institutions*, including educational spaces (Yosso, 2005). Yosso (2005) further explains that students' navigational capital empowers them to maneuver within unsupportive or hostile environments. Having to grow up in the child welfare system, foster youth learn to navigate a complex and bureaucratic system. In many ways, this equips them with the navigational skills to maneuver vague and ambiguous college policies and practices. As well, foster youth gain navigational capital through their foster youth support programs (Gamez, 2018).

### *Resistance Capital*

Resistance capital has its groundworks in the experiences of communities of color in fighting for and securing equal rights and collective freedom (Yosso, 2005). According to Yosso (2005), the sources of this form of capital come from community members, parents (biological or non-biological), and an historical legacy of engaging in social justice. This historical legacy of resistance leaves students of color particularly well-

poised to leverage their postsecondary education to enter society prepared to solve challenging problems such as inequities in health, education, and other issues oppressing marginalized communities (Yosso, 2005). Emerging research from Iglesias (2018), shows that foster youth used the social and political resistance music of hip-hop, their peer group, and mentors to cultivate resistance capital. By being indoctrinated in carceral and oppressive institutions (e.g., child welfare and schooling), foster youth become acutely aware of their surroundings. These experiences enabled them to develop a reflexivity that was useful in navigating higher education institutions and resisting its White oppressive practices.

These three theoretical frameworks, CRT, CRP-Ed, and CCW, function together to frame and guide this research. CRT is utilized as a lens to name structures of racism as they impact the racialized experiences and lives of foster youth of color. CRP-Ed is used as a tool to critically engage with policy and research to advocate for change. CCW works to subvert our normalized notions of social capital most prevalent in White middle- and upper-class communities, and highlight the strengths and assets youth of color embody and enact when they arrive on a college campus (Yosso, 2005). Working together, these frameworks allow for a critique and deconstruction of the interlocking systems of oppression, specifically racism, that impact the daily experiences of foster youth in a U.S. context. Furthermore, together these theories enable higher education to create strategies and interventions of resistance and create campus counter-spaces where foster youth feel safe and seen. Next, I offer a history of foster care in America. This history is pertinent to understanding the contemporary realties of foster youth in America.

## Foster Care as an Oppressive Force

Historically, foster youth have been stripped of power and control while in the child welfare system (Bruskas, 2008), this is especially true for Black foster youth. Sade Daniels (2020), a Black former foster youth, now social worker discussed this in her op-ed entitled "A Letter to Black Foster Youth":

> One thing not readily understood by others is the intimate nature in which we Black foster youth have been hyper-aware and subjected to the presence of police in our lives. Many of our experiences throughout our dependency in foster care were underscored by police involvement almost as much as that of a social worker. Through their foster care experiences, they learn how to advocate for themselves and speak up against the system's failures. (para. 3)

The child welfare system operates from a space of power and oppression, so much so that scholars describe foster care as "*family regulation*"—a vehicle to regulate and police the ways in which families live (Roberts, 2020). Forces of power and oppression do not happen in a vacuum—they operate through media, policy, research, and communities at-large (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021). Many folks often retort the critique that there are nice officers and good child welfare placements too. However, as well-meaning as an office or social worker might be, their niceness still does not redress the decades-long institutional harm that has ravaged minoritized communities (Hill, 2017).

Furthermore, it does not redress the reality that they are still agents of the state who can and will assert their dominion over someone else (Alexander, 2010; Hill, 2017; Rodriguez, 2006). Daniels (2020) further highlighted this experience in her own narrative:

> Some of us group home kids can even attest to law enforcement being used as a first responder to any teenage rebellion we exhibited while in congregate care. Oftentimes, this aided in our introduction or complicated a path into the juvenile

> justice system, increasing an ever-growing foster care-to-prison pipeline. We can recall seeing a man, often White, standing over us, gun in holster, instructing us of what we're doing wrong and how if we continue it, we'll be headed down a wrong path, ending with incarceration.
>
> We'd get nice officers, too, sometimes, but it was always difficult to listen while being lectured by someone carrying a gun and baton as reinforcements. Even when their mannerisms were kind and empathetic. If the calls came too frequently or our behaviors became more erratic, some of us can even recall being handcuffed and driven to a local psychiatric hospital. We remember being as young as 10, in the back of a squad car, wondering if all children were handcuffed and sent to psych wards at any sign of misbehavior. Did parents call the police on their own children this often? (para. 8–9)

These oppressive force create the deficit orientated mainstream views of foster youth—where foster youth are consistently seen as the problem, underestimated and seen only as victims (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021) with no critique of the way in which the system has created these conditions by not treating them with humanity nor meeting their basic needs. Utilizing Young's (1990) *Five Faces of Oppression* model, Bruskas (2008) highlights how the foster care system has historically oppressed foster youth. Bruskas (2008) discusses how foster youth are *exploited*; she asserts that youth enter foster care not by their own will. Youth are forced to participate in a foster care system where people (social workers, foster parents, judges, and lawyers, to name just a few) make money off of them being in the system.

Bruskas (2008) continued to discuss the ways in which foster youth are *marginalized* and how oppression becomes a predicable arrangement due to the established failures of the government. Bruskas named that despite many state and federal programs, the government fails foster youth: "many children need help adjusting to foster care and being supported through the developmental stages of childhood while

in care; without this, a feeling of oppression is inevitable" (p. 73). Bruskas discusses how the foster care systems denies foster youth of their power: "the powerlessness of children in foster care is dramatically increased when knowledge and information about their future is withheld" (p. 74). Agents of the child welfare system deny older foster youth the opportunity to make decisions over their own lives, as well as an explanation of what and why certain things are happening to them (Bruskas, 2008).

The last two faces of oppression Bruskas' (2008) applies to the foster care system include being cultural imperialists and perpetrating violence. I argue these two go hand in hand. Bruskas states that "another aspect of oppression observed in *cultural imperialism* is the portrayal of the 'other' group as abnormal" (p. 74)— to see them as deviant or less than (Bruskas, 2008, Young, 1990). *Violence* is asserted on foster youth through the trauma associated with removal of their home, sibling separation, and multiple placements being normalized, as they are seen as "interventions" and disregard the potential long-term consequences and harms (Bruskas, 2008). In order for this violence to be accepted, cultural imperialism needs to be exerted; imperialism renders a person as inferior, abnormal, allows for violence to be perpetrated on them because they are othered or seen as subhuman (Bruskas, 2008).

## A Brief History of Foster Care

This section unpacks the history of foster care, I place the section: *foster care as an oppressive force* prior to this section: *a brief history of foster care* to ground these histories with a critical race lens. Scholars opine as to why foster youth struggle to establish independence after emancipation; when we understand that the creation of

foster care is linked to oppression and using children's bodies as tools for capitalism (i.e., indentured servitude) (National Foster Parents Association, 2019), and the creation of modern out-of-home foster care is linked to racist policies aimed at denying Black families in-home child welfare services, then we can understand the system was designed to create these outcomes.

**Ambiguous, Complicated, and Bias by Design**

Many of the themes to follow are difficult to discuss, reading them at face value, one would assume a deficit view of foster youth, and however, it is important to understand the statistics and outcomes presented is a function of the oppressive forces of foster care and the child welfare system (Bruskas, 2008). It is vital to have a trauma-informed framework (Hoffman-Cooper, 2021); the trauma foster youth face come with stigma and shame, this stigma impacts their ability to have a positive sense of self and success in schools. When educators, staff, foster parents, and social workers overlook this trauma or turn the other way, foster youth students end up not getting the support they need. They overlook the trauma for a myriad of reasons. Regardless, it is important to continue to name the trauma foster youth encounter as it has life-long implications.

Rymph (2017) states that the foster care system is a "system" with the purpose of supporting children who have been allegedly abused, and/or neglected, who need to be temporarily removed from their biological families. Foster care is a system in which state authorities intervene in family life to meet the public's duty to protect the children involved (Rymph, 2017). Furthermore, foster care is a system that is bureaucratic. Some have called foster care *the foster care complex* (Rymph, 2017), highlighting how vast and

difficult it is to navigate. While the system has many caring social workers and child advocates, studies have found that children in foster care face higher rates of physical and sexual abuse in foster care than in the general population (de Sá et al., 2017).

Investigative journalists with the *San Francisco Chronicle* found that foster youth shelters were criminalizing children as young as eight years old (de Sá et al., 2017). Children were being arrested for dubious charges. One child was arrested for assault for flinging books across the room as they went to grab their teddy bear and blanket in frustration. Another child arrested for battery for hitting someone with a pack of hot dog buns during a disagreement (de Sá et al., 2017). In many households, the aforementioned incidents might result in timeout, being grounded, or another reasonable form a disciplinary action, yet these children are being criminalized for normal adolescent behavior (de Sá et al., 2017).

In the same way the state's definitions of criminality or illegal is nebulous and biased—and ultimately used to oppress minoritized people—neglect is operationalized in the same way. Most child removals happen because of neglect; thus, it is important to offer a nuanced understanding of neglect and its causes. Roberts (2001) states that child neglect is often the outcome of parents' economic shortcomings and it's a result of their inability to care for their children. The state of California defines neglect as "the negligent failure of a parent or caretaker to provide food, clothing, shelter, or supervision where no physical injuries has occurred" (Roberts, 2001, p. 33). Roberts urges us to understand neglect in its totality; when cases of neglect are opened up, it is often because the family is living in poverty. She continues to state that the way we look at child

maltreatment in America is problematic. In our national discourse we conflate neglect and abuse as the same thing, they are not; the former stems from poverty (Roberts, 2001).

Roberts (2001) asserts that many parents are criminalized and labeled as neglectful and/or abusive because they live in poverty; a vast majority of these parents are Black. Child welfare agencies often do not offer the necessary services to assist Black parents, to help them provide for their child in the same way they do for White parents (Roberts, 2001). This is another example of how the foster care and the child welfare system is racialized (Cloud, 2019). Again, I do not describe the above outcomes of foster youth to paint a deficit view of them; on the contrary, children in foster care are no less capable than those who do not experience foster care. I need to make it clear, it is the system to blame for exposing these children to physical, sexual, and mental trauma and violence. A critical racial theory lens then helps us understand how the child welfare system is culpable in the marginality of communities of color. The review of literature explores the intersections of racism and the marginality of their realities as foster youth. To understand the experiences of foster youth, it is important to understand foster care as a system and its history.

**Early Beginnings of Foster Care**

Foster care in the United States dates back to nineteenth-century orphanages that were established to rescue children from the terrible conditions of almshouses (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). The idea of foster care can be discovered in the Old Testament and in the Talmud—these religious texts discuss caring for children without parents as a responsibility under law (National Foster Parents Association, 2019).

Christian Church records show that in some cases, the children were sent to live with women who were widowed, the Church congregation compensated these women through their collections and donations (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). The advancement and administration of family foster care in the United States, was modeled after Britain's English Poor Law (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). In 1562, English Poor Law allowed the placement of poor children into indentured service until they came of age (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). The practice of indentured servitude was eventually brought to the United States and was the beginning of placing children into non-relative homes (National Foster Parents Association, 2019).

In 1853, Charles Loring Brace created the orphan trained, he sent children to the South and Mid-West for families willing to provide shelter for these children (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). As stated above, in many situations, these children were placed in conditions akin to indenture servitude (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). During this time period, a missionary named Etta Wilson and an animal advocate named Henry Berg took legal action to remove her from the custody of her guardians (Gross, 2019). This was a tipping point in realizing the need to protect child from abuse and neglect. Berg then created the New York Children's Aid Society in in 1865. The Aid Society supervised child placements, and helped create welfare agencies (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). States like Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania created policy to improve living conditions for foster youth; in Massachusetts, the state began paying board to families who took care of children too young to be indentured. By passing a foundational pieces of legislation in 1885,

Pennsylvania mandated caregivers had a proper licensed to care for multiple unrelated children without a proper license, otherwise you could be charged with misdemeanor (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). These efforts sparked the shift of professionalizing foster care into what we now call child welfare and social work. In the 1900s, the foster care system continued to modernize its efforts to support children.

**Modernization of Foster Care**

Social agencies began to manage, train, and supervise foster parents, during the early 1900s (The Adoption History Project, 2012). During this time period, nearly 300 organizations were created nationwide to protect the safety and well-being of children (Gross, 2019). Official records were being kept, children's individual needs were being assessed when placements were made, and agencies began doing home studies before placing children (The Adoption History Project, 2012). Services were provided to biological families to facilitate reunification, and foster parents were now seen as part of a professional team working toward reunification or find permanence elsewhere for dependent children (The Adoption History Project, 2012).

In the early 1900s juvenile courts were being created to specifically serve children and youth, they existed in nearly every state in the United States (Gross, 2019). Also during this same period of time, Henry Dwight and Alice Chapin founded one of the country’s first adoption agencies, The Alice Chapin Nursery, in 1910 (The Adoption History Project, 2012). The Chapins began advocating that it was better for a child to live in a home that might not be economically well off, than to live in an institution. Chapin had evidence that showed how orphanages were making children sick and killing them at

shocking rates; Chapin's research and advocacy began to change the culture of child welfare and public health professionals (The Adoption History Project, 2012). However, the system was still problematic, in part because children had to earn their room and board by working—it still resembled the early beginnings of foster care that included indentured servitude (The Adoption History Project, 2012).

Adopted children were called foster children during the early decades of the twentieth century (The Adoption History Project, 2012); the conflation of terms made it difficult to identify what children qualified for what services. These same issues exist today as kinship and out-of-home foster care placements; both fall under the banner of foster youth services, creating issues for child care advocates to know how to deliver services. Adoption was not always commonly used. Before adoption, child welfare workers used two terms to describe adoption: permanent kinship and temporary residence in someone else's home (The Adoption History Project, 2012).

During the early parts of the 1900s, many social workers were progressive and intended to keep children with their own families, out of respect for the importance of maintaining the family unit (The Adoption History Project, 2012)—maintaining biological connections is still the espoused goal of child welfare (The Adoption History Project, 2012). However, during this time, social workers also began to understand that maintaining those connections with biological parents were not always safe for the child (The Adoption History Project, 2012)—placing these children with a new family also became an option, which highlights the complicated field that is child welfare. It was important to give children emotional security; research on attachment, sibling separation,

and early separation from child and parent gave way to policies of early placement and created a more pro-adoption climate after 1940 (The Adoption History Project, 2012). Despite child welfare's attempt to maintain familial bonds, it is important to critique the foster care system, as it still holds onto heteronormative and racially bias discipline in the emergence of the modern foster care/social system—and of the state more generally. As child welfare began to expand its adoption and out-of-home foster care placement, often it was Black and Native American children being taken away from their home of origin (Roberts, 2001).

**Mid-to-late 1900s**

After the second World War and the New Deal, two developments distanced adoption from foster care: the growth of public welfare services and a new awareness about the plight of African American, Native, and disabled children (The Adoption History Project, 2012). Created by the New Deal, Programs like Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) was supposed to give poor and working-class parents a substitute to placing their children in institutions. When the AFDC program expanded in the early 1960s, federal funding for foster care was added (The Adoption History Project, 2012); a great surge of out-of-home foster placements was created because of the AFDC. By 1960, children in foster care doubled (The Adoption History Project, 2012); a reason for the increase of the foster care population during this time, were mandated reporting laws that were passed across the United States (Gross, 2019). Many child welfare advocates have since critiqued mandated reporting laws to be problematic (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016).

In the 1960s, the Civil Rights Movement extended public benefits (e.g., Social Security and child welfare) to Black families; as there was more money dedicated to child welfare, this program became more punitive. The in-home services family support services child welfare provided White mothers was gone. As more and more Black families began to be entitled to child welfare services, they began to expand the practice of child removal and the practice of foster care, rather than in-home services. Black families now had access to social programs that were once supposed to support primarily White families. Even with emergence of the Civil Rights Act, racial realism highlights how White supremacy will change and shift to maintain a social order. Rather than allow Black families to use child welfare benefits in-home in the same way White families did, they created racist practices where they took Black children away from Black their families that were in need of aid and used that funding to pay other families (mostly White) to take care of those children.

By the late 1970s, the number of children in foster care exceeded 500,000, about where it still stands currently (The Adoption History Project, 2012). In theory, foster care placements were supposed to be temporary so children could maintain ties to their birth parents; however, foster care placements were numerous and lengthy in practice (The Adoption History Project, 2012). During the 1930s and through the 1970s, foster care placements became more common. During this time adoptions also increased, practices such as confidentiality, closed adoptions, and sealed records became the norm. It is also important to name, during this time families preferred to adopt infants and toddlers rather than older children—a practice that continues today (The Adoption History Project,

2012). In sum, the government spends 10 times more on foster and adoptions than it does on reuniting families (Brico, 2019).

During the last fifty years, foster care has become the main form of assistance provided to poor families in the United States who cannot remain in their own homes (The Adoption History Project, 2012). Racist tropes like the "Welfare Queen" (see Levin, 2020) fueled White racist hysteria that Black people, specifically Black women en masse, were each "stealing" thousands of dollars abusing America's welfare systems. This was furthest from the truth, historically and in the present—White people have been the racial group that relies on and accesses welfare programs the most (Levin, 2020).

Race, gender, and class became the bases that fueled the growing gap between who is adopted, who is fostered, and who is reunited with their family (The Adoption History Project, 2012). During the postwar Civil Rights Era, poor families of color, had gained access to social services, however, rather than provide in home services, agencies were tracking them into non-relative foster care placements (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). It is during this time that children of color, specifically those who were Black, began to be disproportionately represented in foster care (Children's Bureau, 2017); while some foster care providers were also Black, they were undercompensated and underresourced (National Foster Parents Association, 2019).

It is during this time foster parents were licensed and paid by the government for being foster parents. (National Foster Parents Association, 2019). Foster parents were expected to provide homes and safety for children, they were also responsible for keeping children connected to relatives and social workers. Foster children who were Black or

Latina/o; or might have been older with complex ties to their birth family and foster family and had histories of separation and trauma were associated with behavioral and health problems. These challenges made these children unwanted in the eyes of potential adoptive parents, and that made their adoptions difficult and expensive to arrange (The Adoption History Project, 2012). In 1965, the practice of subsidizing adoptions was supported by the federal Adoption Assistance Program and eventually written into law via the Child Welfare Act of 1980 (The Adoption History Project, 2012).

The practice of subsidizing adoptions was at best complicated and most of the time racist. Subsidizing adoptions highlighted the ways in which neo-liberal capitalism fuels institutional oppression by offering financial incentives to adopt children (The Adoption History Project, 2012)—placing a price tag on children. Often that meant families were offered more money to adopt Black and Latina/o children, as they were deemed less desirable (The Adoption History Project, 2012). This practice emphasizes the centrality of race and how in America racism is endemic. This adoption practice also highlights the ways in which Black life is seen as fundamentally less than in White institutions, and how still the legacy of American chattel slaves lives today, where affluent White people and White institutions at-large are able to benefit from and make money off of Black bodies.

**Native Americans in Foster Care**

Highlighting the experiences of Native Americans is important because it shows how our freedoms are bound together, and how people of color are oppressed in various ways under White regimes. Often erased from the history of foster care is how it was

complicit in stripping Native American children from their families (Hopkins, 2018). In the 1800s the United States instituted policy for the removal of Native Americans from their homes. The policy of assimilation was created to abolish Native American culture, tradition, and language. The dominant narrative offered by the American government, was that if Native Americans did not assimilate to White-American ways of life, they would not survive (Minnesota Historical Society, 2008). This White Savior complex allowed White folks to feel like good people while participating in the erasure of Native bodies from their own land (Minnesota Historical Society, 2008).

It cannot be overstated the detrimental impact this settler colonial legacy had on the Native American community—this legacy was abusive, coercive, violent, and genocidal. The theft of Native youth and the atrocities that followed throughout the first half of the 1800s continue to be felt today (Minnesota Historical Society, 2008). Tens of thousands Native children we taken to boarding schools, where they were summarily abused, their names taken away from them, and practicing their native traditions were forbidden (Native Partnership, 2021). These colonizing practices continue today. In South Dakota, National Public Radio reporters uncovered a troubling pattern of Native American children being taken away from their families and tribes (NPR, 2011). Many of the child removals were in violation of federal policy, the Indian Welfare Act.

**Conclusion**

The history of foster care is complex it does serve a space of safety and refuge for abuse, neglected, and orphaned children. However, it is also rooted in settler colonization, the enslavement of Africans, and genocide of Natives. Child welfare

scholars grapple with this tension—while it has provided resources and support for children, racially minoritized families experience child welfare as a punitive system of family regulation (Roberts, 2020). Since the 1980s and into the new millennia, families of color have been torn apart by the state-sanctioned war on drugs, mass deportations, and mass incarceration—subjugating children (mostly Black and Latina/o) into the child welfare system (Roberts, 2001; Thompson & Cohen, 2014). Even with the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (which sought to transform grandparents, aunts and uncles, and other birth relatives into certified foster parents or legal guardians) many of these children end up aging out of care and never being adopted or being reunified with their biological family. Such policies reflect the United States' complicated, contradictory, problematic, and often indigent values in supporting and protecting its children, especially those who are Black.

## Who is in Foster Care?

The most recent data shows that there are approximately 687,721 children and youth in the United States foster care system (Children's Bureau, 2017). About 11% (or 74, 752) were ages 17 to 21, or transitioned aged youth, which means their time in foster care is coming to an end and they will be on their own (Children's Bureau, 2017). A foster youth is typically a minor who is removed from their biological parent's home. They are then typically placed in a foster home, group home, residential facility, or another substitute care facility until emancipation (Unrau, 2007). Sometimes a foster youth is placed with an extended relative; this is called kin-gap or kin-care (Unrau, 2007).

The process of emancipation (or aging out) is when a foster youth turns 18 or 21 (depending on the state) and leaves foster care (Unrau, 2007).

Ideally, a young person transitioning out of foster care would pursue a postsecondary education, employment, or a combination of both; however, the foster care system marginalizes these youth and shuts them out of these opportunities. For example, 51.3% of foster youth read below a ninth-grade level at age 17 (Okypych et al., 2015). Research shows that about 50% of foster youth graduate from high school (Pecora et al., 2006); of that group about 10% enroll into a four- year college (Pecora et al., 2006), and only about 3.6% of foster youth earn a four-year degree (Okypych et al., 2015). Other research says that about 65% of foster youth will end up homeless or incarcerated at some point after emancipation (Shirk & Stangler, 2006).

The idea that foster youth are emancipating, or gaining their "freedom," is simply not accurate. Given their struggles post-foster care, the system relegates foster youth to second-class citizenship, as they are tracked from foster care to being homeless and/or incarcerated at shockingly high rates. These grim outcomes expose how even when foster youth leave care, there is no emancipation or liberation. For many, they must navigate a carceral nexus. In the following section, I discuss how foster care works as a carceral state.

## Foster Care as a Carceral State

Child welfare advocates (e.g., California Youth Connection) have and continue to challenge the status quo and push state and county agencies to rethink the foster care system (CYC, 2018), however, what is not realized in their critique of the child welfare

system is its overlapping involvement with policing and the juvenile justice systems. Rodriguez (2019) describes how the convergence of policing and the criminal justice systems are regimes that systemically perpetuate racial, sexual, gender, colonial, and class violence. For the purposes of this study, I define the "state" as government entities that possess the coercive power to surveil, criminalize, and separate communities and families (nuclear and non-nuclear) under the assumption of assistance and safety (Alexander, 2010; Roberts, 2001; Rodriguez, 2018).

Carcerality refers to political and social systems that legally and informally promote the regulation, policing, and incarceration of individuals; ultimately, these systems serve to maintain economic power (Lawston & Escobar 2009-2010; Roberts, 2020; Rodriguez 2006). Given the oppression, policing, and surveillance of children in the foster care system and their parents (Roberts, 2017), child welfare serves as a family regulation system, not child protection (Roberts, 2020), forcing children and families to live in carceral-like conditions, constantly in fear of state violence (Roberts, 2017).

**Foster Care Agencies and Facilities**

The state removes children from their families under the assumption of child protection, however, the state is failing at protecting these children and injuring the children in their custody. Palomino et al. (2020) shined a light on how California sent thousands of children to out-of-state, for-profit facilities. Palomino and colleagues reported how abuse was rampant at a facility in Michigan called Lakeside Academy, which is backed by a $500 million Bay Area investment group. The academy promised to put boys "on a pathway to lead healthy and successful lives" (para. 3), but instead, the

children were subjected to being choked, hit, and slammed to the ground. The Lakeside Academy became deadly, as Palomino et al. (2020) documented the horrors in greater detail:

> Seven employees piled atop a 16-year-old boy who had thrown bread in Lakeside's cafeteria, suffocating him as he cried out, "I can't breathe," according to surveillance footage and a civil lawsuit. Cornelius Fredericks died of cardiac arrest two days later. In the aftermath, brawls erupted and residents ran away. Dozens of children at the California-certified campus in Kalamazoo tested positive for the coronavirus before Gov. Gavin Newsome's Office of Emergency Services ordered a $200,000 flight that brought them home to California. (para. 6)

The children ended up at the Michigan facility because a California judge had ordered them to go despite it being against California law to send youth to for-profit residential programs (Palomino et al., 2020). At these facilities in Michigan, Iowa, Wyoming, Arizona, and Utah, the teenagers were disproportionately Black, and were subjected to abuse ranging from broken bones to sexual assault at the hands of the employees (Palomino et al., 2020). The reports of abuse get worse, but out of respect for the victims and readers it is not necessary to go further.

The above story documents first-hand how the state is not protecting children but further inflicting violence and harm. Government employees are violating state policies and licensing standards (Palomino et al., 2020); Palomino and colleagues (2020) documented how these privately run facilities prioritize profits over children; they cut cost by underpaying their staff and underinvesting in the quality of food and facilities provided, ultimately significantly reducing the quality of care given. Ultimately, they are allowed to do so when the state continues to funnel money to them, despite conditions that breed abuse and low standards of care.

**Educational Institutions**

Schools are described as places of safety and learning; however, this is not true for all students. In a research brief released by UCLA's Black Male Institute, foster youth enrolled in Los Angeles County public schools made up 28% of the students being educated in Los Angeles County juvenile halls (Harvey et al., 2020). Moreover, Black foster youth in Los Angeles County public schools are being suspended at a much higher rate than their peers. The overall suspension rate of Los Angeles County public schools during the 2018–2019 school years was 2%, but for Black foster youth it was 17%, a vast disproportionality (Harvey et al., 2020); in the most populated foster youth county in the country, Black foster youth are being disenfranchised at every level of their education (Harvey et al., 2020). Some scholars (Roberts, 2017) have described foster care as a pipeline to prison, however, it is important to rethink it as a version of carceration unto itself.

Research does highlight that foster youth do have positive experiences, primarily with reliable foster parents and mentors (Greeson & Bowen, 2008). Nevertheless, when looking at the data, the vast majority of foster youth are struggling to navigate the schooling system (Harvey et al., 2020) and life after emancipation (Courtney et al., 2014). Youth are leaving foster care without high school diplomas and ill-equipped to handle adulthood on their 18$^{th}$ birthday (Courtney et al., 2014)—the system is failing these youth. I re-assert critiquing the state is vital—the state is responsible for the harms suffered by foster youth; Rodriguez (2019) described prisons as a system that reinforces violence when its intended goal is to alleviate those who are most vulnerable to such

violence. Foster care's objective is to provide a safe environment for youth, but since it is ineffective at achieving this goal, this approach ultimately reinforces a violent system (Dettlaff et al., 2020).

**Mandated Reporting**

Mandated reporting is an often overlooked function the child welfare system relies on to protect children. "Mandated reporter laws require people who have interactions with children (or other vulnerable or protected populations) to report reasonable suspicions of neglect or abuse" (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016, p. 107). The issue with mandated reporting laws is they are punitive, promote racial bias, and serve as a way to further police children and those who are required to be mandated reporters (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). Research asserts that children are less likely to report claims of abuse or neglect to mandated reporters out of fear of their parents being criminalized and family separation (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). However, in the school house, teachers are doing police work through the surveillance, regulation, and punishment of families who are members of the schools, all via mandated reporting laws (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016).

On the surface, mandated reporting laws might seem like a good idea. No one challenges a teacher when they report a suspected claim of child abuse to law enforcement, but in reality, these laws do little to help vulnerable families including children (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). Data suggests that professionals including teachers are more likely to suspect and report child abuse and neglect in low-income families of color when the overwhelming majority of abuse and neglect cases are found to be unproven. Even when CPS investigates, they find no evidence of neglect or abuse

(Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). The question begs, Why are children removed from their families with little to no evidence of abuse or neglect? It is because CPS and family courts are allowed to operate with a lower burden of proof than criminal courts (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). Such a low burden of proof within the law supports the flourishing of racial biases and disproportionately targets and harms Black people (Alexander, 2010). Ortiz (2019) highlights her experience working with families in New York as she documents first how these systems criminalize Black and Latina/o families:

> Then we have our public school system, where in low-income areas particularly, the teachers are underpaid and overworked, and the only way they know how to deal with struggling students is to report them—you guessed it—to the police. Because they, too, are mandated reporters. It leaves me with no doubt as to why family courts are filled with low-income black and brown families. It's because these are the families who are surrounded by mandated reporters at every turn. We're talking about the kind of difficult-but-not-disastrous personal situations in which White, wealthy families would generally maintain their privacy, turn to social networks and professionals for support, and enter drug treatment if wanted and warranted. (para. 24)

Child welfare professionals and mandated reporters do not reduce or eradicate violence toward children, as teachers are even complicit in participating in state violence on foster children (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). Mandated reporting aids in the policing and criminalization of children and their families (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). Child welfare fails to create needed public dialogues about the structural contexts that facilitate harm (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016). In an already racist intuition, bestowing educators as mandated reporters create a carceral like environment for students, especially for those who are Black. It is important to understand that the foster care system works in tandem with schools—both are state entities that marginalize and cause further trauma to foster youth (Meiners & Tolliver, 2016).

**Policing in Urban Cities and Black Communities**

Inner cities become a place where college access is rare, policing is hyper, and racism is prevalent. “The impact of the state’s disruption and supervision of families is intensified when it is concentrated in inner-city neighborhoods—what I call the system’s racial geography” (Roberts, 2012, p. 1487). In many urban cities, child protective cases are opened in low-income Black neighborhoods, the majority of child welfare cases occur where Black people live (Roberts, 2012). Black children and families are often living in neighborhoods targeted by police (Alexander, 2010). Thus, they grow up in carceral-like conditions, placing Black families at risk of being separated in the name of child protection (Roberts, 2012). The spatial concentration of child welfare supervision creates an environment in which state custody of children is normalized (Roberts, 2012). This level of state-sanctioned surveillance has damaging effects on the overall community; moreover, it violates any possible decent relationship between families and the government (Roberts, 2012).

The child welfare system is particularly interested in policing Black women and their children (Roberts, 2012). The child welfare system is not always intended to serve families in-home, for a poor Black mother to receive support it requires them to make the sacrifice of resigning custody of their children in exchange for the state support needed to care for them (Roberts, 2012). Families who are involved in the child welfare system must endure demanding and intrusive supervision by child protection agencies, which often involves losing parents right of their children to the state (Roberts, 2012). Like the prison system, placing large numbers of children in state custody interferes with the

ability of community members to form healthy connections and to engage in collective action (Roberts, 2001).

Black women are particularly more vulnerable at the intersection of carceration and foster care, according to Roberts (2012): "An intersectional perspective reveals that Black women suffer the combined effects of racism and sexism and therefore have experiences that are different from those of both White women and Black men" (p. 1491). When unpacking Black motherhood and how it is realized in both the prison and foster care system, it exposes that these systems operate as a larger nexus—they work together to intensify discriminatory hierarchies of race, class, and gender (Roberts, 2012). Prisons and foster care work in concert to punish and lord over low-income Black women by keeping them under hyper-state supervision and then blaming them for the hardships their families face as a result of the societal inequalities (Roberts, 2012). The fear of giving Black women public welfare created the racist stereotype of the "Welfare Queen"—the fear of in-home public welfare services, created out-of-home public service, foster care. With this emergence of out-of-home services, Black children now are over represented in the foster care system—their bodies are needed to maintain this system.

***Defines their Pre-College Experiences***

Although most education scholars are not focused on examining the barriers of foster youth students in the context of U.S. carcerality, I argue that such a context is central to understanding the experiences of foster youth. The foster care experience cannot be examined in a vacuum devoid of the punitive laws and policies that define child welfare and child protective services. Through understanding the deleterious, life-

long impact of the carceral conditions that make up child welfare, it is important to understand the pre-college experiences of foster youth in this context. These carceral conditions shape and impact how student affairs practitioners support and counsel these collegians on-campus. Their pre-college experiences also offer a guide to the systemic hurdles they must endure to be college ready and enrolling—using this guide, legislators can create policy that helps to remove the aforementioned hurdles. In the upcoming section, I discuss their racialized college-going experiences.

## College-going Experiences of Foster Youth

This section offers tangible examples of how some foster youth develop community and social capital in postsecondary spaces. This section highlights the unique challenges foster youth must navigate because the foster care system leaves them underprepared with a lack of resources. Below I outline four major themes across the literature that documents the everyday experiences foster youth face in the college enrolling and going process: (a) financial aid, (b) housing insecurity, (c) family privilege, and (d) mental health. Many of these experiences remain unseen and therefore underresearched. I would be remiss to not explain that research on college-going foster youth is limited and has yet to employ critical race theory or use what Hoffman-Cooper (2021) call emancipatory (or liberating) research practices. Much of the research to be presented is from a race-neutral lens, enabling scholars, practitioners, and policymakers to evade race, ultimately upholding racism. I do believe this research is important, however, I did not want the reader to feel as though in the upcoming sections I intentionally disconnect my theoretical framework from the literature. A body of foster

youth research that is framed using critical theory has to surge, and it is my goal in this dissertation to change that narrative.

**Financial Aid**

Foster youth reported that their financial status was worse than other college students their age (Merdinger et al., 2005). The foster care system leaves foster youth entering college with a lack of financial resources to sufficiently support their personal needs and the cost of attending college (Merdinger et al., 2005); 85% of foster youth attending college reported that their primary sources of income were a combination of financial aid and employment (Davis, 2006). Approximately 73% of youth from foster care who were enrolled in college or a university received the Pell Grant, compared to 27% of non-foster youth students (Davis, 2006); for many foster youth, financial aid serves as their primary source of income (Davis, 2006; Merdinger et al., 2005). Because foster youth have no financial assistance from parents (Davis, 2006; Merdinger et al., 2005) this becomes problematic as foster youth are overly reliant on financial aid.

Frequently, foster youth in college work one or more part-time jobs to supplement their financial aid (Davis, 2006). Even when foster youth had a job, it was reported that 90% of foster youth were earning poverty-level wages (Davis, 2006; Merdinger et al., 2005). For students from marginalized backgrounds, working while attending college to pay for basic living needs creates undue psychological pressure and stress that undermines their academic stamina (Strayhorn, 2008). These financial burdens detract from foster youth's ability to focus on school and can have a negative impact on their

ability to persist in college. Foster youth also face the challenge of finding documentation to qualify for financial aid (Cochrane & Szabo-Kubitz, 2009).

The verification required to demonstrate involvement with the foster care system is known as ward of court documentation. Obtaining this ward of court documentation can be time-consuming and challenging for students (Gamez, 2017). Social workers fail at ensuring foster youth have the basic paperwork when transitioning into adulthood such as birth certificates, Social Security cards, and ward of court verification (Gamez, 2017). These documents are crucial for foster youth in order to enroll in college and find employment. Not having these documents can create challenges with foster youth receiving their financial aid refund checks (Gamez, 2017).

**Housing Insecurity**

The foster care system leaves youth underprepared for adulthood; during the first 12 months following emancipation, nearly 50% of foster youth experience homelessness at some point (Dworsky et al., 2013). For this reason, housing security is easily considered to be the single-most pressing concern for foster youth. For many foster youth, housing instabilities pose a direct threat to their success in college. Many youth transitioning from foster care face a lack of affordable and safe housing options, as well as without the option of returning to a caregiver's home when in need (Dworsky & Courtney, 2010; Salazar et al., 2016). Even if enrolled, foster youth are more likely to attend a community college before a four-year institution (McNair & Heldman-Holguin, 2018; Okypych & Courtney, 2018). Community colleges do not provide access to on-campus housing in the same way four-year universities have historically provided for

students, so foster youth must seek housing off-campus, which is unaffordable (McNair & Heldman-Holguin, 2018).

**Family Privilege**

As documented in previous sections, the child welfare system breaks apart families, tracking children into foster homes and group homes and sometimes incarcerating their parents in the process. Both parent(s) child(ren) are left having to deal with persistent shame and stigma, from being system-involved and the constant surveillance and violence of the state. Upon emancipation, foster youth are on their own with little to no family unit to help them to navigate adult life—foster youth lack *family privilege* for traversing college spaces.

Seita and Brendtro (2008) introduced the concept of family privilege which was inspired by their reading of McIntosh's (1990) early outlining of White privilege. They describe the ways in which family dynamics help and hinder children's experience within institutions. Seita (2014) defines "family privilege as strengths and supports gained through primary family relationships" (p. 8). During the transition to adulthood, parents provide multiple resources to their emerging adult children such as emotional and financial support (Liebmann & Madden, 2010; Seita & Brendtro, 2008), sending a teenager out on their own via emancipation is problematic as most American adults do not realize self-sufficiency until they reach about 25 years old (Swartz, 2005). Research suggests that family and more specifically *family uplift* is a key factor in students' ability to access and persist through college (St. John, 2012). Parents offer guidance, resources,

and access to their networks. Foster youth in many ways do not have family privilege. Liebmann and Madden (2010) state:

> I find it sad that once kids in [foster] care turn a certain age they are left to fend for themselves. In a family, even once you leave home, you still have a place to return to. You still have support. So why is it that kids like me will no longer have someone in their life and nowhere to go? It's just wrong. (p. 257)

Seita (2014) notes that a child's primary source of strength and support is their familial unit. Seita describes that over human history, family formations emerged in more nuanced ways, often stemming from multigenerational and tribal dynamics where the community—fictive kin and extended families—contributed to child rearing. Nonetheless, defining family privilege highlights and problematizes institutional and interpersonal advances made through a privileged family unit. Family privilege as a concept highlights how institutional arrangements favor or promote success for specific family compositions and scrutinizes families through a deeply classed, heteronormative, and racialized lens (Meirner & Tellivier, 2016). The promotion of a specific family composition functions to reproduce this country's cultural priority to privilege hegemonic groups (Letiecq, 2019); because of the child welfare system's involvement with breaking apart families, foster youth lack the privilege of a place to call home; they lack an emotional, spiritual, and personal bond to buffer against the everyday challenges of life (Seita, 2014).

**PTSD from Foster Care and Family Separation**

In the previous sections I document how the child welfare and foster care systems are perpetrators of violence toward these youth; because of this, youth who experienced foster care have higher rates of mental health concerns compared to their college-age

peers (Pilowsky & Wu, 2006). Findings from Pilowsky and Wu (2006) discovered that foster youth were at high risk for prevalence of psychiatric symptoms. In a national study of undergraduate students, Taussig et al. (2014) found that over a quarter of foster youth who spent a year in foster care, had a history of suicidality. Indeed, 15.3% of foster youth attempted suicide. Moreover, Salazar et al. (2013) conducted a study of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), specifically examining the types of trauma associated with PTSD in foster youth. Their research found that foster youth experienced PTSD at double the rate than youth the same age (Salazar et al., 2013). Their study reported that specific traumas are associated with higher prevalence of PTSD. These traumas include rape (39.7%), molestation (32.8%), or victims of tortures (45.2%) (Salazar et al., 2013). Those who experienced two or more traumas were three times more likely to have PTSD diagnosed (Salazar et al., 2013).

It is paramount to highlight mental health. Inevitably foster youth carry this trauma with them to college campuses, where it often stifles their ability to persist and graduate (Merdinger et al., 2005). College campuses are trying to do more to support foster youth and their mental health concerns, however, these obstacles still persist (Gamez, 2017). It is important to highlight mental health to normalize it and remove the stigma and shame associated with it so that college-going foster youth are willing to seek support (Gamez, 2017). Campuses struggle to meet the full needs of their foster youth collegians because they are not highly resourced, prioritized, and well-staffed; programs are largely reliant on external funding, which then the staff have to raise this money, which is another addition to their jobs (Lopez, 2017).

## Foster Youth Support: Practices and Policies

This next section outlines foster youth educational policy and how it has impacted the ability for foster youth to gain access to postsecondary institutions. I do this by discussing foster care policy and initiatives, and the emergence of foster youth programs over the past twenty years on the national level and within the state of California. Since 2000, 28 states have created policy in the form of tuition assistance to increase the likelihood of foster youth entering postsecondary education (Sarubbi et al., 2016). In 1998, the first ever campus-based foster youth support program designed to increase the educational opportunity for youth from foster care was established at California State University, Fullerton (Dworsky & Perez, 2009).

In 2006, the Community College Chancellor's office created the foster youth success initiative; the Community College Chancellor's office identified liaisons at every community college in California. Four years later, there were over 80 comprehensive foster youth support programs throughout California's Community College, California State University, and University of California systems (California College Pathways, 2012). In 2016, California passed the Local Control Funding Formula, legislation that came with over 18 billion dollars in funding that would be phased-in over the course of eight years. Since then, California now boasts over 100 campus support programs, most of them at the community college-level. Although services may vary across campuses, a majority of the programs focus on four primary components: housing assistance, academic support, mental health services, and financial aid (California College Pathways, 2012).

Most of the foster youth support programs in California are campus-based at a specific college or university (Dworsky & Perez, 2010). There are various names for foster youth support programs: Renaissance Scholars, Hope Scholars, Promise Scholars, and Guardian Scholars being the most popular (California College Pathways, 2012). With dedicated staff providing wrap-around services foster youth support programs help students from foster care navigate college and assist with the transition into and out of college (California College Pathways, 2012; Dworsky & Perez, 2009; Unrau, 2011). In some cases, there are college supports for foster youth but they are not affiliated with a postsecondary institution; rather they function as a non-profit organization such as Yes Scholars in San Jose, California, or Just in Time for Foster Youth in San Diego, California (California College Pathways, 2012). Foster youth support programs have demonstrated a positive impact on the retention and graduation rates of foster youth students. California College Pathways (2012) found that foster youth participating in foster youth support programs were three times more likely to persist and have a GPA equal or greater than their non-foster youth peers.

## Foster Youth Educational Policy

### *Assembly Bill 12 (AB12)*

In 2010, California passed AB12 (also known as Extended Foster Care Program) that extends foster care to age 21. This provides foster youth who opted into the program with a monthly stipend. Assembly Bill 12 (AB12) was signed into law on September 30, 2010 and took effect on January 1, 2012. AB12 is a provision of the 2008 Fostering Connections to Success law which extends title IV-E assistance to eligible child welfare

or probation youth that remain in foster care up to age 21. There are many prerequisites for youth to qualify for AB12—they must be attending school, employed, participating in a vocational training program, or have a verifiable medical condition that limits their ability to work or attend school.

AB12 is important legislation in that it has the ability to support foster youth in their postsecondary pursuits. However, there are three particular areas of AB12 that are problematic. First, AB12 is insufficient in the amount of money the county gives to the foster youth to help them pay their living expenses. Research has stated that foster youth face extreme financial hardships (Barth, 1990). More specifically, in the *Chronicle of Social Change*, Gonzalves (2013) discussed the story of a foster youth who opted into AB12 and lives in San Francisco, California. Lisa received $499 dollars a month from AB12. In San Francisco, though, the median rental price for a one-bedroom apartment is $2,765 (Gonzalves, 2013). Lisa's AB12 check does not go far, to say the least.

The second issue with AB12 is a confusion with the requirements. Many young people leave foster care not knowing they may qualify for AB12 (Gonzalves, 2013); furthermore, many college campuses and high schools do not have staff that are adequately trained to support this unique population and their needs. AB12 does not facilitate meaningful connections with key college personnel to ensure the foster youth are supported holistically during their pursuits of a higher education. Lastly, the AB12 program is only monetary; foster youth still need trusting and caring adult in their lives.

***Assembly Bill 194 (AB194)***

AB194 calls for priority registration in public postsecondary education: Existing law requires the California State University (CSU) and each community college district, and requests the University of California (UC), with respect to each campus in their respective jurisdictions that administers a priority enrollment system, to grant priority for registration for enrollment to foster youth or former foster youth.

AB194 is required at California community colleges and CSUs, however, not requiring the UCs to implement this policy is problematic; it sends a message that foster youth are not welcome to attend a UC even if they qualify, it sends the message that foster youth deserve to be relegated to a less prestigious public university system. Another challenge is administering this policy; "foster youth" is broadly defined and some campuses are not equipped to assist students who have unique cases.

***Senate Bill 1023 (SB1023)***

The last piece of policy to be discussed is SB1023. This authorizes the Office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges to enter into agreements with up to 10 community college districts to provide additional funds for services in support of postsecondary education for foster youth. The bill would provide that these services include, when appropriate, but are not necessarily limited to, outreach and recruitment, service coordination, counseling, book and supply grants, tutoring, independent living and financial literacy skills support, frequent in-person contact, career guidance, transfer counseling, child care and transportation assistance, and referrals to health services, mental health services, housing assistance, and other related services.

SB1023 does create more support for foster youth at the California community colleges, however this program is rolled into the Extended Opportunity Programs and Services (EOPS). This is can be somewhat problematic because foster youth have very unique life experiences and it would be entirely remiss to overlook this fact (Whitman, 2018). EOPS has a history of supporting underrepresented students, however, foster youth have a much more nuanced experience (McNair & Helman-Holguin, 2018; Shirk & Stangler, 2006). Given the state-sanctioned violence foster youth had to face, special attention needs to be given to those collegians.

Policymakers lack the awareness of how race and racism exist to maintain racial inequities (Felix & Trinidad, 2020). This is important name as we continue see policies fail to make any gains for minoritized students (Dowd & Bensimon, 2015), particularly for those students who are Black. Scholars point to the failure of equity gains is also in their design, as their intent does not match their goals (Felix & Trinidad, 2020). Educational policy makers and practitioners need to understand underrepresented students are not a monolith. It is important to recognize that foster youth define family much differently than other underrepresented groups. Foster youth have to struggle with the revolving door of foster parents, social workers, and mentors that come in and out of their lives (Orme & Buehler, 2001). As stated in previous sections, the child welfare system is racist, considering Black youth are disproportionately represented in the foster care system, educational policy makers need to confront this racist institution and create anti-racist policies to protect youth.

## Racialized Experiences of Foster Youth

To date there is limited empirical research that discusses the racialized experiences of foster youth of color in postsecondary education. One article looked at educational outcomes of ethnic minority foster youth. The article "Racial and Ethnic Differences in the Outcomes of Former Foster Youth," authored by Dworsky and colleagues (2010), is a continuation of work that researched education outcomes of former foster youth. The two studies used were The Midwest Study, which is a longitudinal study that followed a sample of 732 young people from Iowa (Courtney et al., 2005). The other is The Northwest Study, a cross-sectional study that examined the outcomes of 659 young adults between the ages of 20 and 33 who had been placed in family foster care between 1988 and 1998 (Pecora et al., 2005). Dworsky and colleagues took those two data sets and employed a racial lens to analyze the data. The findings by Dworsky et al. were noteworthy. Dworsky et al.'s data was aligned with Day et al.'s (2011) study, which will be discussed later. Dworsky et al. stated that there was no significant difference in educational success among foster youth when you look at Black and White foster youth, because the responses varied so much.

Day et al. (2010) found that in their quantitative study on the examination and retention of among foster youth enrolled in a four-year university, although not significant at the multivariate level, the students who identified as Black foster youth did drop out of college at a higher rate than their White peers. These two articles highlights the race evasiveness in the research. A qualitative study by Amechi (2016) is one of very few studies that sought to understand the educational experiences of a specific ethnic

group within the foster youth cohort. Amechi discusses how the experiences of foster care aided the Black male students to create self-authorship. Amechi examines the experiences of foster youth from an asset perspective. His study also described how other adults were instrumental in the Black male foster youth's ability to persist in college spaces. Furthermore, his study highlights the agency and self-determination Black male foster youth possess when given access to the resources.

In another article, "An Examination of Postsecondary Retention and Graduation Among Foster Care Youth Enrolled in Four-Year University," authored by Day et al. (2011), similar results were reported. Although the main focus of this study was not on ethnic minority foster youth or Black foster youth, the article's the results varied when looking at the retention of Black foster youth and White foster youth. Furthermore, when looking at the non-foster youth group, it was clear the Black students persisted at a much lower rate than their White peers. Day et al.'s results are important for research. Both of the articles above where quantitative articles, and relatively modest sample sizes, the question that begs is what are the experiences of Black foster youth in higher education. Perez and Romo used qualitative methods to address this issue with another ethnic minority group—Latinx. Perez and Romo (2011) published a compelling article about Latino foster youth and their struggle to make after emancipation.

### *Latina/o Foster Youth*

In a recent article on Latina/o foster youth, Perez and Romo (2011) found convincing evidence as many of the youth in their study had experienced a form of homelessness called "couch surfing." To remain housed and off the streets many of the

foster youth began relying on romantic partners and family friends. These individuals became important in their struggle to stay off the streets. The concepts of family and extended relatives are very important (Perez & Romo, 2011); this article reasserts Sieta's work that familial units are important for the success of foster youth—many of the participants described a desire for reconnection with their family members.

The importance of family, culture, community, and tradition among people of color highlights again, the long lasting impact the child welfare system has on youth and their families when they dismember families by removing children from their homes, criminalize their parents, because they are suffering from poverty (Roberts, 2017); because of the child welfare system's divestment in reunify families, it creates a larger cultural and familial impact (Perez & Romo, 2011). Not to say that Latina/o culture and Black culture are the same—it is important to identify what experiences Black foster youth face. It is important to find an understanding of how Black foster youth gain access, matriculate, and graduate from postsecondary education. This upcoming section will discuss the disproportion of Black youth in foster care, the lack of training Black families receive, and institutional barriers to financial support.

**The Disproportionality of Black Youth in Foster Care**

Before having the discussion of disproportionality, it is important to understand how the research is using this term. Harris et al. (2009) state, "the concept of disproportionality in child welfare is based on the assumption that a group of children and youth is represented at higher rates in the system than the general population" (p. 1151). With that said, Black youth are disproportionately represented in California's child

welfare system as well as nationally (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). In 2013, there were 24.3% of Black youth in foster care and 22% Hispanic/Latina/o youth in foster care (U.S. Health & Human Services, 2013) at that time Black people made up 13% of the U.S. population and Hispanic people made up 16% U.S. population (U.S. Census, 2013). In comparison to White youth, there were 42% of youth in care (U.S. Health and Human Services, 2013) and White people made up 77.7% (U.S. Census, 2013) of the U.S. population.

Black youth are at a significantly higher risk of being placed into foster care compared to their White peers (Dettlaff et al., 2011; Knott & Donovan, 2010; Rivaux et al., 2008). When compared to their White counterparts, Black youth are 44% more likely to be being placed into foster care (Knott & Donovan, 2010). Socio-economic status is also a determinant on whether or not foster youth are placed into foster care; Rivaux and colleagues (2008) found that families from lower-income households were at a higher risk for removal. However, when race was factored in for African American children, socio-economic status became a non-factor, as they were more likely to be removed regardless being from high- or low-income households.

**Lack of Training and Financial Support**

The unfair treatment of Black children in foster care extends beyond just placement into foster car. Rivaux et al. (2008) and Harris et al. (2008) discuss how Black children are underserved. It was reported that African American foster youth who are placed in kin care; their guardians receive less training and support from social workers. The idea of kin care is supposed to be positive, kinship care allows a child to continue

their cultural connectedness, and bonding with family (Anyon, 2011). However, Harris and Skyles (2008) stated that when an African American child is placed in kinship care, the parents are not receiving equitable services to assist them in reunifying back. It is argued that social workers may not put in the same effort of finding a permanent home or continuing with reunifications efforts for a Black child in a kinship placement versus a child placed a non-relative foster family (Harris & Skyles, 2008).

Studies show that kinship care providers tend to be older, single parents, are less formal education, and receive less resources from foster care agencies (Harris & Skyles, 2008), often placing an undue burden on the guardians. Kinship providers often receive less support as they are unlikely to receive foster parent training, counseling, or education support services for the child in their care (Harris & Skyles, 2008). Ryan et al. (2008) found that children placed with relatives were at an increased risk of being criminalized.

**Racism in Foster Care**

Foster care, itself is a racialized experience (Roberts, 2001). In Dorothy Roberts' 2001 groundbreaking book *Shattered Bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*, she describes foster care as a racist institution. Roberts (2001) goes on to say that Child Protective Services (CPS) in some cities is used to surveil Black families—to criminalize their parents and force re-entry of their children into foster care. Foster care becomes a precursor to the children whose parents are incarcerated; in the same way that school is a pipeline to prison for many Black youth in the United States (Kim et al., 2010). The foster care to prison pipeline is especially problematic when Black youth are overly represented in foster care (see U.S. Health & Human Services, 2013).

Leathers (2006) found that race became a strong predictor of placement interference with Black children. Black children were two and a half times more likely to have a placement disruption when compared to other races (Leathers, 2006). The American Institute for Research (AIR) (2013), released a report that stated that African-American children are twice as likely to have poor outcomes across child welfare and education systems. Institutional racism creates the disparity that exists within these institutions (AIR, 2013). With the dearth of literature that examines the nuances of the racialized college-going experiences of foster youth, Whitman (2016) offers his experience:

> I spent my whole life in foster care. I can attest to the detrimental effects foster care had on me. Many times, I felt lost and unheard. It was not until I was placed in a foster home with someone who was Black that I began to feel comfortable. My foster mother offered me a home and school stability, and even more importantly a sense of family. With that said, I still had to endure a child welfare and educational system that I felt did not value me because I was Black. I remember in high school that a social worker was surprised when I told her I was going to college. I remember her telling me I should attend community college because as she put it, "someone with my background would not be able to handle the challenges of college." What I experienced then was a microaggression on my ethnicity and my identity as a foster youth. She undermined my intelligence. These instances were all too common throughout my K-12 educational pursuits. The stigma of being a foster youth, along with the racial microaggressions of being a Black male, were experiences not easily escaped outside of my home. When I started college, I was able to enroll in a college support program for foster youth. The support program gave me language and an understanding of my identity that made me proud of who I am. I grew up in a system that dehumanized me, yet the support program gave me a place to heal emotionally, and a positive avenue to express myself.

It is narratives such as these that need to be centered in the research. This narrative is not unique, there are many other Black and Latina/o foster youth pursuing an education who feel lost, we must bring a human face to this issue and push for critical

scholarship that challenges the status quo. We need scholarship that crosses race, class, and gender to provide nuanced storytelling of the lived experiences of underrepresented students (see Harper, 2009; Patron & Garcia, 2016) and specifically foster youth. The limited research that exists among foster youth highlights how the child welfare and higher education institutions do not value Black lives (Dancy et al., 2018; Roberts 2001). It highlights how Whiteness seeks to erase the racialized experiences of Black foster youth in an attempt to preserve the innocence of Whiteness.

Dumas (2016) describes how in a nation that is supposedly post-racial, it is the Black that becomes obsolete, an impediment to the understanding of Americans' national popular imagination of who "we" want to be. Even with America embracing a form of multiculturalism, there is still tension and anxiety in acknowledging darker-skinned people (Sexton, 2010; Wilderson, 2010). With the proliferation of violent acts committed against Black people by the police state, vigilantes, and child welfare workers (Dumas, 2016; Palomino et al., 2020), it shows a first-hand account of the diminished value of Black life in America. Wilderson (2010) states:

> Nothing remotely approaching claims successfully made on the state has come to pass. In other words, the election of a Black president aside, police brutality, mass incarceration, segregated and substandard schools and housing, astronomical rates of HIV infection, and the threat of being turned away in masse at the polls still constitute the lived experience of Black life. (p. 10)

The above account serves an understanding of how Black people in America navigate Anti-Black racism. The environment Black people must traverse is in many ways inhumane, as Dumas (2016) describes:

> The legitimization of the very anti-Blackness that has motivated centuries of violence against Black bodies. In this sense, even as slavery is no longer official

> state policy and practice, the slave endures in social imagination and also in the everyday suffering experienced by Black people. (p. 14)

Anti-Blackness in postsecondary education extends its legacy to slavery; it is documented that college presidents were enslavers, using Black bodies as personal assistants and servants to maintain the president's residence (Watson, 2008). Patel (2017) forces us to take particular attention to the ways in which Black women have been subjected.

> Black peoples' labor, particularly the labor of Black women. Because the nation was built upon the economic system of slavery, Black women were pivotal to the founding fathers' projects and success. They could bear children, which meant more property for slave-owning office holders, university presidents, farmers, and school headmasters. (p.1)

In the present day, Black bodies on college campuses are seen as producers of capital and sources of entertainment (Dancy, 2012). This White supremacist ideology and explicit anti-Blackness cannot be divorced from the structures of historically White institutions (Dancy et al., 2018). The concentration of power and influence that stem from White supremacy and settler-colonialism is reflected within the political organizational structure of college campuses (Dancy et al., 2018), with formal power concentrated to senior-level administrators, a respect for capitalistic goals, White entitlement, and the silencing of people of color (Dancy et al., 2018).

It is important to name that anti-Blackness does not only exist in a White-Black paradigm. Sexton (2008) analysis highlights how schools put the educational achievement of Asian American students against the educational challenges of Black students. Policymakers point out these instances to serve as evidence that the end of racial animus and racial barriers in society have ended (Dumas, 2016); these White

people or non-Black people of color who buy into this construct are negating the centuries-long racist history of America and blaming the failures of the Black population for their own failing, thus robbing Black of any chance at freedom and their own humanity. In their path to earn bachelorette degree, Black foster youth must navigate two racists' institutions: foster care and postsecondary education. It is important to understand how they traverse this nexus in order to remove these barriers.

## Personal Narrative

Ladson-Billings and Tate (1995) explained that when people of color share their stories, the reader may be forced to see the covert racism and learn about their experiences and communities, which would not be uncovered without the "authentic voices of people of color" (p. 58). Here I offer my own narrative to frame the college-going experiences of foster youth, I have been working in the higher education setting for over 10 years. I have held many positions in various units of higher education and student affairs. As an undergraduate student I worked as a student assistant for the foster youth support program Renaissance Scholars, I went on to also work for the program as a masters student. In the second year of my master's program I also worked as a Resident Director for Housing and Residential Life. At the completion of my master's degree, I enrolled in a doctoral program at the University of San Diego, where I was a graduate assistant in the Center for Awareness and Social Action (a service-learning center); during this same time frame, with the support of the Assistant Vice President of Student Affairs, I helped create a foster youth support program Torero Renaissance Scholars.

Currently, I direct a foster youth support program at the University of California, Riverside called The Office of Foster Youth Support Services.

I was motivated to pursue this career field because of my own experience in foster care. I spent nearly my entire adolescences in the foster care system from the ages 0-1 and 6-18 years old. I emancipated at 18 years old—at that time there was no extended foster care program (AB12) that provided financial support until 21 years. I was essentially on my own when I turned 18. During my undergraduate experience, I developed a passion for serving adult learners, mainly those who identify as people of color. As I stated above, growing up in foster care is difficult; in my case there was instability, sibling separation, and at times physical and emotional abuse. In the moment I was merely trying to survive, but as I grew older I began to process the harsh and unfair treatment I was subjected to along with my siblings. I was fortunate enough to have spent over 10 years in the same foster home. This gave me stability—it afforded me the ability to go to one middle school and one high school, as documented in previous sections of the literature review, many foster youth have multiple school placements, which puts them behind in their studies.

My foster mother whom I affectionately call my grandmother was also Black. She was born in 1941 in Jackson, Mississippi. I attribute growing up with a Black foster parent as an integral aspect of my development. Because she was Black, I was not automatically outed as "foster," I was able to pass as a non-foster youth as I told many of my peers she was grandmother. She provided me with a nuanced understanding of my positionality as a Black boy growing up in America. Having conversations over dinner,

road trips to the Bay Area, attending Church services at our nearly all Black Baptist Church, or watching a Black television programs (e.g., *Family Matters* and *Soul Food*) together were the many spaces where conversations of race, power, and privilege emerged. These experiences nurtured a healthy and positive understanding of my Blackness.

Having to navigate multiple forms of marginality at once gave me a unique understanding into the ways in which American institutions oppress Black people. While my foster care experience was generally more favorable than my siblings whom I was separated from and never re-united with, I still had to endure the reality of proving my humanity to social workers, teachers, and other adults in my life because of my race and foster care status. Being Black and foster meant I was constantly disproving racial stereotypes; and refuting the many stigmas and assumptions that go along with my foster care status.

Now having worked in higher education for more than 10 years, I see first-hand the role race plays in the college student experience. Young people who experience foster care often have endured a lot, however, because of their experiences in foster care, they come to understand the world in a nuanced way. Foster care providers and advocates often overlook the strengths they possess, this is in due part because of stigmatization, marginalization, and institutionalized oppression that exist in child welfare. The "savior" syndrome that exist in these spaces limits foster youth's ability to do for themselves and it stifles their development, their experience of foster care is stigmatized. The injuries that foster youth must heal from is a consequence of the system.

## Summary of Chapter Two

The racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth is under researched. Chapter Two takes on a critical race theory approach while covering a range of topics, I offer a history of foster care in America, which reveals the predatory and racist foundations of child welfare. A review of the racialized experiences of foster youth reveal a system that is oppressive, racist, and carceral; foster youth experience a system that is not protecting rather it is abusive and traumatizing. A review of literature highlights the policy and practice chapter of the study moved through a range of provocative matters that document the experiences of foster youth in the post-secondary environment. This chapter provided a broad overview of the barriers of foster youth in higher education and how they gain access and successfully navigate higher education. With the literature of the racialized experiences of foster youth in higher education being scant, this study sought to highlight the research that exist and ultimately investigate this under-researched college student population.

It is important to understand the racialized college-going experiences of foster youth within postsecondary environments. The small amount of literature that does exist does not consider utilize critical theory to unpack the ways in which racism and different of marginalization operate. Moreover, the current canon of literature does put into conversation how their pre-college experiences impact foster youth; nor does it seek to understand the nuances of social capital and higher education policy and practice, and how each of these are racialized. This study seeks to address the gaps in the current research by (a) focusing on college-going Black foster youth, (b) the oppressive forces of

foster care and larger society, (c) their racial experience, and (d) the effect campus policy and practice has on Black foster youth. These research gaps lead me to my research questions and methodology.

## Chapter Three: Methodology

### Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to examine and explore how Black foster youth at postsecondary institutions navigated their college-going experiences. The design of this qualitative study was multifaceted. Qualitatively, the study investigated how college-going foster youth understood their racial/ethnic identity and their identity as a foster youth in the postsecondary environment. This study investigated how Black foster youth cultivate and leverage their community cultural wealth to gain access to and persist in the postsecondary environment. Last, this study sought to understand how students make meaning of their identity and how this informs their community cultural wealth making. Next, I outline (a) the worldview, (c) research design, (d) researchers positionality, and (e) significance and limitations to the study.

### Research Worldviews

For this study, it was important to employ a constructivist worldview (Creswell, 2014). I make the case that utilizing this approach allowed for a more nuanced understanding of their college experiences through a racial frame. It is imperative to have an understanding of Black foster youth collegians from a broad perspective—by utilizing this stance, I was able to better answer the question, Who are Black foster youth and what are their racialized experiences? Using a constructivist worldview, I was able to construct meaning, as well as probe and dive deeper (Creswell, 2014). Understanding how Black foster youth make meaning of their college experience illuminated ways student affairs

practitioners can support Black foster youth. To that end, my research questions are as follows:

1) How do Black foster youth navigate race and racism at a four-year postsecondary institution?
2) How do Black foster youth cultivate and leverage their community cultural wealth to gain access to and persist in postsecondary environments?
3) In what ways do institutional policies hinder or promote the success of foster youth collegians?

## Narrative Inquiry

I found it most appropriate when seeking to understand the lived experiences of one or more people (the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth) and the way they engage with their community, documented through storytelling (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Critical narrative inquiry involves describing, collecting, and telling about lived realities. Critical narrative inquiry is about the person's story, the context, the person telling it, and the positionality of the researcher.

Using critical narrative inquiry as a methodology enabled me to interrogate and resist racism and other forms of oppression by engaging with the counterstories that exist for marginalized populations (Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). "In legal discourse, preconceptions and myths, for example, about black criminality . . . shape mind set . . . Critical writers use counterstories to challenge, displace, or mock these pernicious narratives and beliefs" (Delgado & Stefancic, 2013, p. 44). People who are victims of racial discrimination often suffer in silence, their voices are marginalized (Delgado &

Stefancic, 2013); in this study, a critical narrative approach enabled me to document and center the racialized experiences of college-going Black foster youth. Critical narrative research rely on stories as told by individuals (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The emphasis is on the story, both what and how we narrate it (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Finally, critical race theorists agree that narrative methodology has significant value in research (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

## A Multiple Perspective Interviewing Approach

Multiple perspective interviewing is beneficial when trying to understand a matter from different vantage points. This experience involves individuals who in some way experience this matter together, members of the same group could be: parents and children, athlete and coach, doctor and patient, or teacher and student. A multiple perspective interview is useful because interviewing only one person involved in a matter might not adequately help us to fully understand the varying nuances and sense-making of a context (Gager & Sanchez, 2003). It is assumed that different interpretations occur within a group or context and that different viewpoints on the same matter occur among individuals existing in relationship with one another (Reczek, 2014; Warin et al., Lewis, 2007). I utilize a multiple perspective to understand what is happening on the stage and behind the curtain. In the same way, stage actors, producers, directors, and crewmates all shape our experience at the theater and have their own perspective beyond the audience reaction.

Students, staff, faculty, administrators, and policymakers also shape the experiences that happen at a university. Interviewing students helps us to understand

what is happening on the stage, however, just as important is what is happening behind the curtain. Behind the curtain, interviewing staff, can tell us why certain events happen. Most universities get marred with red tape, students get frustrated when their needs and demands are not being met. Interviewing staff allowed me to investigate why the lack of policy and practice change. Solely relying on a single perspective does not help us understand the complexities of a matter when multiple members make up a school, sports team, or family.

The varying views in multiple perspective interviewing allow for insights regarding the dynamics of an experience and the ability encourage ideas that have more explanatory power than the sum of theories based on a single individual perspectives (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). To garner such power, I conducted interviews with staff and students in separate interviews; these interviews allow for studying individual perceptions and understandings, taking into consideration their interrelation and the context of their relationship (Eisikovits & Koren, 2010). I interviewed participants individually to give them more autonomy in expressing their own perspective; this setting allowed for more privacy and anonymity (Valentine, 1999).

## Researcher's Positionality

This study's design had multiple strands of qualitative data collection and analysis. In turn, is important to understand the researcher's role. Because I utilized narrative research, it was important to consider my positionality and awareness as researcher (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). This study required me as the researcher to reflect on my biases and values throughout the study. Reflecting on research positionality

and awareness is important as it required me to address the lens through which I was looking at the research, which is important to acknowledge as it certainly shapes the research.

I spent nearly my entire life in foster care—grappling with my racial identity as a young Black male adolescent and a foster youth was difficult. Growing up in a Black foster home allowed me to pass as "non-foster" when I was in school. Once I entered foster care, I felt like an outsider during my primary, middle, and secondary schooling. I remembered attending three different elementary schools in one school year until I was placed and settled into the one and only Black foster home, ultimately living there for nearly 12 years with that family. Throughout my experience in foster care, I dealt with the separation from family, the death and incarceration of my siblings, and the constant fear I could be moved to a new foster home, and/or a new school without warning. I also became aware of race and racism—I noticed a difference in the way in which my teachers, social workers, judges, and other agents of the foster care system would treat me compared with my White peers.

My Black foster mother, whom I affectionally called my grandma, saw me for the full Black boy I was. However, in the lens of Whiteness, I was exceptionalized; people would comment in grand surprise on how well-behaved I was or how eloquent I spoke—because no one wants a "bad" foster kid, nor did they expect anything else out of a Black child. I wasn't always the best-performing student, but I was very involved in school and made sure I kept my grades up to be competitive for college. While I enjoyed school and the extracurricular activities I participated in, a part of me also did not want to live up to

the stereotypes society was placing on young Black boys and foster youth. These pre-college experiences were vital; not only did they begin to form my critical consciousness, I now understand that my behavior, while useful, was my effort to try to survive. Moreover, it was a trauma response to the system I was growing up in.

Navigating a college campus allowed me to be finally away from a child welfare system that was dehumanizing; however, I realized very quickly that unlike my peers, I did not have an intact biological family unit to lean on for support. It became clear that I had to advocate for myself if I were to receive support on-campus. This was difficult, as I did not know where to stay during winters and summers break. By filling out a variety of forms (e.g., application for an apartment lease and financial aid documents) with no co-signer, I did not qualify. Ultimately, I had to couch surf during my first summer after college. I name these experiences to acknowledge and own my reality—while informative, it was important to differentiate that from my participants.

Personally and professionally, I connect with the research. I am a student affairs professional at a four-year university and serve students who have experienced foster care. As a director of an office that supports foster youth, the students I serve meet with me and routinely express their frustration navigating racism on-campus and in foster care. In my role, I navigate policy that underserves and marginalizes foster youth students. Benevidas (2017) said, “when educators and policymakers see no value in the cultural assets of students, they design the deliberate removal of such assets” (p. 2). By using innovative practices in my role, I consistently find ways to subvert that system that does not see my experiences. I work to center the assets of foster youth on my campus, mentor

them, and further connect them with funds of capital they can leverage on-campus and in life.

Beyond institutional attempts to remove and devalue the cultural assets of foster youth, this form of marginalization shows up in how the campus has devalued my office. Nearly my entire budget is fundraised through private donors and grants. This devalue of foster youth is not just felt at my campus, but across the state as many of my colleagues have to fundraise their own dollars to keep their offices and programs afloat. While I have been successful in fundraising, this becomes an added task that takes away from supporting the foster youth on campus. I take on this work because I, too, am from the population, and I understand how a $1,000 scholarship can make the difference in being able to meet your basic needs. These professional experiences give me insight into the nuances of navigating problematic policy, working within and outside racist structures, and collaborating with grassroots organizations toward social justice.

Beyond my foster care experience, I identify as Black, but I am also multi-ethnic (African-American and Afro-Cuban). These varying identities and experiences allow me to identify language and research that is problematic toward foster youth and people of color. My various experiences and intersecting identities uphold my awareness of the durability, frequency, and legacy of racism toward foster youth in educational settings. I have experienced being removed from my biological family and placed in the foster care system, I faced racism in both foster care and throughout my educational trajectory. I can relate to the nuances of being a former foster youth and navigating a complex university landscape on one's own, however, I understand that my reality is one of one, and not the

reality of my participants. To remain aware, not make quick assumptions, and be mindful of my positionality, I kept notes in my memos and consulted (while protecting privacy) with authorities in qualitative research reflecting after each interview.

The process of qualitative data collection and analysis requires a greater level of finesse; it is valuable to have an insider perspective. Developing a trusting relationship with participants is perhaps the most important aspect of qualitative research as the relationship established between researcher and participant serves as the basis for the interpretive process considered so central to qualitative research (Bailey, 2007). Being someone who experienced foster care and from a low-income background, these shared cultural backgrounds and experiences allowed me to understand participants' body language, vocabulary, and grammar usage. The cultural similarity of the participants and I hopefully allowed me to build rapport and enabled them to talk openly about topics that perhaps could not have been easily discussed.

## Participants and Sampling

There was no specific research site for this study, utilizing email, phone, and social media, I reached out to various student affairs professionals, community leaders, and organizations that support Black college-going foster youth throughout California and nationwide such as: (a) Guardian Scholars Programs in the California State University and University of California school systems; (b) Silicon Valley Children's Fund; (c) Orangewood Foundation; (d) California Youth Connection; (e) National Center for Youth Law; (f) Foster Club; (g) the California Higher Education Foster Youth Consortium; and (h) the NASPA Foster and Homeless Youth Knowledge Community.

This study employed two methods of sampling. First, a purposive sample was used, meaning I selected individuals that could provide the necessary information to address my research questions (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The second method of sampling was snowball sampling. I utilized snowball sampling because my population is difficult to identify. The participants for this study were students who are currently in foster care or who were formerly in foster care on are after their 13th birthday, who are 18 years old or older and are currently enrolled in or graduated from a four-year institution, I was able to interview 9 students in total. To triangulate and corroborate (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) the student interviews, I also interviewed staff members who support foster youth on their respective campuses, I interviewed 10 staff totals. Admittingly, I had goals of interviewing 15 students and staff, however, the remote working environment created by the pandemic made it difficult to recruit participants. The table 1 students and table 2 staff below. Semi-structured interviews were ideal for exploring perceptions and opinions of respondents regarding complex and sensitive issues; it enabled me to probe for more information and clarification of answers (Barriball & While, 1994). The nature of this research required me to focus on a smaller sample size (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). The shortest interview was about 45 minutes and the longest interview was about 2 hours.

**Data Collection**

As said before, I interviewed 9 students and 10 staff, for both staff and students I conducted a second round of 5 interviews with participants. Prior to the start of the data collection, a pilot interview was conducted with a student and with a student, it allowed

me to reshape and refine what I wanted to accomplish during the interview process. Each interview was conducted for a specific reason and it enabled me to collect data from multiple vantage points; ultimate every step of the data collection was integral to answering my research questions.

*Table 1*
*Student Participants*

| **Pseudonym** | **Institution Type** | **Gender** | **Race/Ethnicity** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Leslie | California Research University | Woman | Black |
| Tiffany | California Research University | Woman | Black |
| Eddie | California Public University | Man | Black |
| DeeJay | Mountain West Research Uni. | Man | Black |
| Tina | California Public University | Woman | Black |
| Diana | California Public University | Woman | Black and Native |
| Ari | California Public University | Non-Binary | Black |
| Elle | California Research University | Woman | Black and Mexican |
| Jessica | California Public University | Woman | Black and Middle Eastern |

*Table 2*

*Staff Participants*

| Pseudonym | Institution Type | Gender | Race/Ethnicity |
|---|---|---|---|
| Lala | California Public University | Woman | Black |
| Tammy | California Research University | Woman | Black |
| Erica | California Research University | Woman | Mexican |
| Vicky | California Research Uni. | Woman | White and Mexican |
| Jacob | California Research University | Man | Mexican |
| Sammie | California Public University | Man | Black |
| Maria | California Public University | Woman | Mexican |
| Sara | California Research University | Woman | Mexican |
| Terri | Southeast Research University | Woman | Black/Caribbean |
| Annie | California Public University | Woman | White |
| Michelle | Midwest Research University | Woman | Black and White |

The theoretical frameworks—critical race theory, community cultural wealth, and critical race praxis in education—and the literature informed the interview process. The theory and relevant literature allowed me to focus on the gaps in the research and (re)explore areas of the research through a new racialized and critical frame. My theoretical framework was tested in the study—the framework was used to ask questions

of the participants and further understand the ways in race, cultural capital, and campus policy work in tandem to inform experiences of Black foster youth.

The first interview was semi-structured and guided by my interview protocol. I did not follow the protocol verbatim, and there were moments where I took liberty to ask follow-up questions, probe, and dive deeper. The second interview was conducted with other five participants from both students and staff (10 in total). My rationale for only conducting 10 follow-up interviews were twofold: (a) there was some attrition—after the first round of interviews, I could not get ahold of some of the participants; (b) time was a factor—all of the participants were volunteering their time, and I was mindful of their availability and did not want to burden them. Also, I needed to move forward with data collection and was on tight timeline. Coupled together, I did not have the ability or access to conduct a second interview with all the participants.

All of the interviews were conducted using Zoom. With Zoom, I was able to record the audio and then transcribe it. There was only one participant who elected to not have their interview recorded, I took detailed hand-written notes. I transcribed all of the interviews myself. After each interview, I wrote memos documenting the interview experience. In my memos I did not just reflect on what the participant said, but also how they said—I was trying to capture the context and animation of the interviews. These memos captured my process of analysis and reflexivity process I took during the data collection.

## Data Analysis

I focused on thematic analysis on content across participants' narratives, rather than (re)constructing life stories (Riessman, 2007). This research was motivated by connecting themes and making meaning of the racialized college-going experiences of foster youth. I used Fraser's (2004) Phases of Line-By-Line Narrative Analysis to conduct a thematic analysis of the qualitative data. The five phases of analysis this research followed included (a) hearing the stories, (b) transcription, (c) memo writing, (d) interpretation of the transcriptions, and (e) examining commonalities and differences between participants.

### Hearing Stories

The first step of my data analysis was listening to understand, and not being quick to synthesize their stories, rather sit with them, ask follow-up questions to the participant or to myself, and seek further understanding. To build rapport, and be reflexive and aware with the participants in virtual space, I paid close attention to mannerisms, emotions, and behaviors between myself and the interviewee. I reflected on the interviews and wrote memos, which enabled me to be more aware and responsive to the data.

### Transcription and Interpretation of the Individual Transcripts

I transcribed all of the data myself. While transcribing I removed filler words, such as "um hm," "like," and "huh." The data was informed by theoretical framework and memos. I uploaded the interview transcript to Dedoose to analyze and code each interview transcript. I conducted data analysis with initial coding by reviewing each line

of data, finding broad general themes and coding quotes that may be potentially useful (Bailey, 2007). Thirdly, I utilized an open coding process to "elaborate, deepen, refine, or discard themes developed at earlier points in time" (Emerson et al., 2011, p. 188). Lastly, I further analyzed the qualitative data using a focused coding strategy. Drawing upon the theoretical foundations of the study I used focused coding; this will allow me to "further reduce the data by identifying and combining the initial coded data into larger categories that subsume multiple codes" (Bailey, 2007, p. 129). As I sorted through the data and codes, I continually asked myself how does this answer my research question and relate back to my theoretically framework. Some of the questions I asked myself while coding were:

- How did Black foster navigate their campus and grapple with race and racism on-campus
- How did hegemonic notions of family and race impact their college-going experiences
- What forms of cultural capital did Black foster youth use and leverage to access and persist in college
- How did Black foster youth make meaning of their identity?
- In what ways did Anti-Blackness show in foster care spaces and school?
- What was the life-long impact of carceral violence, and how is this racialized?

**Memo Writing**

After each interview was transcribed I then wrote a memo, writing each memo allowed me to understand the interviews better. It gave me chance to think larger/broader

themes I was noticing that would help me build my coding tree on Dedoose. The memos also allowed me to formulate further questions I would eventually ask in the second round of interviews. The memos also helped to identify conflicts in the data, for example when interviewing a staff member they said that took pride in serving the whole student, and having a holistic approach to ensuring their Black foster youth were supported. However, when I asked if they did programming that was on racial identity development, they said "No." Another contradiction emerged with the staff, when asked questions about race and racism they acknowledged that it yes, racism exist and Black people are impacted by it in numerous ways, however, when I circled back on the point of supporting the identity development of Black foster youth, many of the staff members said that they found that they shouldn't focus on that. Overall, the memo writing helped with my data analysis.

**Observing Differences and Similarities**

Analyzing and writing the narratives I was careful to not compare the experiences of the students and staff, as that was not the research question. The purpose of including the staff was to provide a unique vantage point into the policies and practices in higher education and the foster care system that shape the experiences of college-going Black foster youth. All of the staff were working side-by-side their Black foster youth—they were the first line of contact and for some only like contact on campuses. This provided a front-line account to triangulate the data from the student experiences.

I compared the difference and similarities within students and staff and across both groups to answer the research question(s). Including staff and students was

incredibly useful as it led for more nuance and complexity in the data. It allowed for me to address the hidden work or experiences that often go unseen. For example, in the interviews some students discussed how they felt their foster youth support program lack staffing and resources for foster youth. They mentioned that their programs did not have the best campus awareness; some had enrolled at their campus without even knowing there was a campus support program for foster youth. When discussing outreach with the students, staff said it was difficult, as many of them were the only professional staff on their campus—in some cases serving more than 150 students—they talked about how they lack the funding, resources, and time to do proper outreach. This too was racialized, one of the staff members said that if foster youth were majority White students they would have a lot more support, resources, and funding for her students. She asserted that because they are mostly Black and Latinx, that they don't necessarily care about serving foster youth. Having both perspectives enabled me to elicit a nuanced perspective on the experiences of Black foster youth.

## Social and Political Events that (Re)Shaped the Study

In this chapter I discuss the social and political events the (re)shaped my study. When I completed my oral exam (the proposal of the dissertation) the study design was very different. It felt disingenuous to not name the immeasurable ways COVID-19 impacted my study. The emotional labor during this moment was unpreceded for all parties involved. As new information circulated about COVID-19 and the killings of several unarmed Black people, so did the tenor and tone of our environment. Friends, family, classmates, and including myself were losing people close to us because the

pandemic. Between COVID-19 and the racial climate, the past 12 months has been abhorrent to say the least.

Below, I outline how the social and political events that (re)shaped my study two ways: first, I discuss the impact of a once and generation pandemic that has decimated the lives of Americans, especially the Black community and foster youth. Second, I discuss the public murder of George Floyd and how it sparked the largest racial uprising in American history and its impact on the Black foster youth community.

**Impact of COVID-19**

On March 13, 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic hit the United States, at current more than 600,000 people in the United States have passed away due to COVID-19, this number does not account for the lives lost that were not a direct result of the COVID-19 disease—the social and emotional consequences from the pandemic. For example, the social distancing mandates, ignited increased anxiety and depression, substance use, loneliness, suicide ideation, and domestic violence (Galea et al., 2020); experts also speculate that with schools closed there was an increase of child abuse. As a director of a foster youth support program my colleagues, students, and I, had to scramble to reimagine student affairs in a remote environment within just a couple weeks. All of our best practices that we spent years learning and honing through graduate studies and professional development was turned up-side down; so was undertaking a doctoral dissertation.

As a researcher, I found myself having to manage my own anxieties and frustrations of the pandemic, while also, being mindful of the anxieties of the foster youth

and staff who were participating in my study. The COVID-19 pandemic had devastated the economy, it impacted marginalized communities the greatest (Hill, 2020). Hill (2020) described a phenomenon that emerged from the pandemic as *Corona capitalism,* how intuitions and corporations took advantage of and profited off the labor of marginalized people while they were economically vulnerable all while not having the necessary protection/equipment from the COVID-19 virus. Klein (2007) discussed how natural disasters and human crises are prime opportunities for predatory forms of capitalism.

Foster youth fell victim to these practices, too. Foster youth overwhelmingly depend on state and federal government programs (e.g., Extended Foster Care and THP-Plus Programs) that are essential to supporting their school costs, housing, food, health care, and child care. As discussed in chapter two, foster youth are particularly vulnerable to homelessness because they lack family privilege and thus they do not have a safety net; these programs require enrollment in some form of postsecondary schooling or part-time work, this becomes problematic because the pandemics impact on the United States economy, many foster youth had to drop out of college and lost their jobs (JBAY, 2021).

Housing and food insecurity became more magnified during the pandemic, John Burton Advocates for Youth (2021), also known as JBAY, recently released a report. The report discussed how the pandemic had destabilized foster youth's housing and basic needs and how it has continued to deteriorate. In their report, they discussed how foster youth were literally being kicked out of their homes (JBAY, 2021). 22% percent of the youth they surveyed reported bouts of homelessness since the start of the pandemic (JBAY, 2021). When asked if the pandemic has had a major impact on their housing 57%

said yes (JBAY, 2021). Moreover, 57% of the foster youth attending college said they received assistance from their campus basic needs center.

College students across the U.S. lost in-person programmatic support that helped them during their college experience. JBAY (2021) reported that of youth enrolled in school, 100% of the students reported the pandemic and the remote environment had a negative impact on their educational success. In the JBAY survey and interviews, students reported they were frustrated and dissatisfied with remote learning, it reduced their communication and connection with instructors and student services (JBAY, 2021).

Without wrap-around foster youth services to support their academic work in college, 54% of students reported reduced communication with student services; 53% reported reduced communications with instructors; and 45% reported a low or failing grade. Prior to the pandemic foster youth support programs operate under-resourced, under-staffed, and under-funded—they lacked campus-based funding and institutional support (JBAY, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic had only increased these funding issues. The COVID-19 pandemic was not the only pandemic that impacted Black foster youth and the larger Black community. During the summer of 2020, the world saw one of the largest racial uprisings in modern history because of anti-Black racism and state violence towards Black people.

**The Black Lives Matter Uprisings**

On May 25, 2020 George Floyd, a Black man, was arrested by the police for an alleged counterfeit $20 bill. Just several minutes later after the cops arrived, the entire world would watch former Minneapolis Police Office Derrick Chauvin take his life, all

filmed vividly on a 17-year-old's cell phone camera. The public killing of George Floyd was one of several that summer. The killings of Ahmaud Arbery and Breonna Taylor were made public that summer; the killing of Arbery also being caught on cell phone video; while Breonna Taylor's killing was not caught on camera, her name and photo circulated on social media countless times in an effort to center the racialized police violence on Black women that often gets overlooked, and hold the police officers accountable in the court of law.

These tragic deaths, along with the countless others from prior years,[4] sparked the largest social protest in modern history. The Black Lives Matter uprisings of the summer of 2020, had the world galvanized. While inspiring, this moment was still scary, particularly for Black folks. People were being bombarded with the *spectacle* of violence on Black bodies (Hill, 2020) that summer. The various social media and television news sources, made it nearly impossible to escape the images of the murders of George Floyd and Ahmaud Arbery, other killings of Black people from years past also resurfaced. The ways in which the killings happened in public view also makes it spectacle (Hill, 2020). When the state inflicts violence in full public view, the impact reaches beyond just the person who suffers the violence (Hill, 2020, p. 61). This spectacle is intentional, and its purpose is to instill fear in the Black community and re-assert the state's power (Hill, 2016).

[4] Black Lives Matter #Say Their Name, https://www.gonzaga.edu/about/offices-services/diversity-inclusion-community-equity/say-their-name

At the intersection of these events—navigating both the racial spectacle of anti-Black violence and the social isolation from the social distancing mandates created by COVID-19—Black foster youth were grappling with two pandemics, anti-Black racism and COVID-19, the former raging on since the first enslaved Africans were brought to America in 1619. It was clear that the foster care community was activated. In the weeks and months following the death of George Floyd, the nation's largest news source on child welfare and foster care, *The Imprint*, published dozens of op-eds and articles about the connection of policing to foster care, the endemic racism in child welfare, and an urgency to reform the system—even I co-authored an op-ed. A couple titles read *Who Will Police Us from The Police*? (Wilson, 2020) and *Being Black in Foster Care Means Surviving an American Nightmare* (Whitman & Thompson, 2020). A former foster youth and now child welfare advocate, Sade Daniels (2020) penned an open letter to Black foster youth. In it, she empathized with the grief felt by many Black youth:

> One thing not readily understood by others is the intimate nature in which we Black foster youth have been hyper-aware and subjected to the presence of police in our lives. Many of our experiences throughout our dependency in foster care were underscored by police involvement almost as much as that of a social worker.
>
> The police were called on us at school when the frustration of a turbulent home life materialized into "difficult behaviors" in the classroom. In fact, we are when identified as foster youth, assumed to be without the accountability of a biological parent to address these concerns, I'd argue the police are used more often and quicker as the premier option. The empathy and patience necessary to guide us to the root of our pain are forgone to the ease of a 9-1-1 call. Let us not forget the Spring Valley High School student, a black girl, who was violently pushed, yanked and thrown across a classroom by a sheriff's deputy on film. She was later identified as a foster youth. (para. 4)

Daniels remind us that Black foster youth are particularly vulnerable at the intersection of policing and race. Daniels ends her open letter, bringing light the pivotal moment and how it impacts foster youth's mental health.

> And while black foster youth cope with their own experiences of police brutality, with the added trauma of watching Black people die at the hands of law enforcement on a consistent basis, this would be a great time to invest in black-led mental health service providers. Black foster youth would benefit tremendously by having therapists and clinicians who look like them and who can effectively assist them in navigating racialized harm. (para. 15)

I believe Daniels' narrative, along with the above titled articles captures the weight of the moment and how many Black foster youth felt emotional, at the same time organizing and calling for systemic change. When interviewing and collecting data, I had to practice awareness and reflexivity, understanding that discussing events related to racial trauma can trigger emotions that can be difficult to process. Understanding many people were struggling with a lack of access to a computer and Wi-Fi, I was also keenly aware that many of the participants might not have had ideal situations to conduct an interview. During the process of dissertating, I practiced deep reflection and sought consul in mentors when needed—I asked questions, listened, and adjusted accordingly.

## Summary of Chapter Three

This chapter outlined the research design that explored the multiple perspectives of 19 participants of the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth utilizing a narrative inquiry. In this chapter I outlined the research questions, my procedure for data collection and process for data analysis. I also discuss my positionality as a researcher and the social and political context the (re)shaped the study. In Chapter

Four, I present the narratives of the 19 participants who discuss the racialized experiences of college-going Black foster youth.

## Chapter Four: Findings and Analysis

### Findings

The purpose of this chapter is to present the findings that were produced from a thematic analysis of the narratives of 9 Black college-going foster youth and 10 staff members that support Black foster youth in higher education (19 total). The findings were a response to the research question, *What are the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth?* In this chapter I report my findings and break them down into five main themes:

1) They put chains on me: Navigating systems of inequity, carcerality, and violence;
2) Being Black and foster, in college, is an anomaly: Looking through the lens of intersectionality;
3) It's not about blood, it's about who shows up for me: Unpacking family privilege;
4) No funding, no sustainable support for foster youth: Navigating campus policies and practices; and
5) It takes a village: A community cultural wealth response.

I illustrate the findings in this specific order to intentionally build and craft thematic counter narratives that tell the story of college-going Black foster youth. First, the findings highlight how Black foster youth navigate violence from various institutions, creating a caste-like system which is motivated by anti-Blackness. Students discussed how they experienced these carceral-like environments first hand. Also, staff discussed how they have seen them throughout their career supporting Black foster youth in child welfare and postsecondary spaces.

Second, the findings highlight the nuanced and unique experiences of the intersections of being Black and foster. The study is first and foremost about race. I underscore this by discussing the racialization of Black foster youth and how race has far-reaching implications. Third, the findings report out how these institutional arrangements break apart family units, further marginalizing foster youth as they must respond to living in a society that privileges people who come from nuclear hetero-normative familial units. Students also described how they created a chosen family, a form of resistance to hegemonic family structures. Staff described the ways in which they also create community for foster youth to make them feel welcome at their campus and in their foster youth support programs.

Fourth, the findings highlight how campus policy and practices impact the college-going experiences of Black foster youth. This finding illuminates the nuanced perspectives of staff, and how they see higher education policy further marginalizing Black foster youth. This finding also discusses how staff members challenge and subvert these policies and practices. Moreover, this policy reveals the unseen and hidden labor of staff members to support their Black foster youth. Lastly, the fifth theme highlights the community that is created in response to the carceral environments foster youth must navigate. The last theme discusses how staff and students seek and create safe, welcoming, and nurturing college-going environments for Black foster youth.

Students talked about how despite their experiences with foster care, they fought to maintain family connections, created life-long relationships with their staff, peers, and community members while attending college. Staff highlighted how they understood

their responsibility to the Black foster youth they served, they spoke about going above and beyond to make sure their students' needs were being met, even opening the doors to their own home to ensure a student had a place to sleep. There was a deep level of care, support, and love many of the staff had for the students they supported. They were committed to provide safe spaces for their students, on or off campus.

Utilizing a multiple perspective approach allowed me to understand the experiences of Black foster youth from a varied and unique vantage point. Incorporating a multiple perspective approach helps to understand a certain event, phenomenon, or experience from a complex and in-depth way (Santoro, 2014). Through analysis, I am able to triangulate data and see what alignments and contradictions exist.

**They Put Chains on me: Systems of Inequity, Carceration, and Violence**

Through the interviews, staff and students told stories that brought to light the inequity, lack of care, and violence Black foster youth are subjected to on an everyday basis during their pre-college and college-going experiences. Understanding the pre-college experiences of Black foster youth is important because it brings into focus the deleterious and for some students, the life-long impact carceral experiences have had on them. To put it simply, the experiences Black foster youth must traverse in foster care and schooling undoubtedly impact them when they arrive to college. These experiences are traumatizing—students told first-hand accounts of how they suffered from PTSD and staff gave corroborating accounts of how they saw first-hand the grave impact the foster care system has had on Black foster youth.

This theme also underscores how the carceral conditions the students were subjected to were inherently racialized. Nearly all the staff interviewed said that foster care would not function in its current state if it were not disproportionately Black and Latina/o. This points to how institutions like education and child welfare operate in anti-Black ways (Dumas, 2016; Roberts, 2001). One staff member had worked with crossover youth before coordinating a campus-based foster youth program. She asserted, "If these kids were White, the foster care system, secondary and postsecondary institutions would have a lot more resources and the default wouldn't be to lock them up in juvie if they mess up." The staff narrative supports students in seeing and acknowledging their realities as opposed to diminishing and further erasing them. This theme highlights the complexities of navigating these systems as well as how the building of community cultural wealth and the foster youth's chosen family was vital in advocating against these system on the outside and from within. These systems of inequity, carceration, and violence were deeply racialized, and the following narratives indict an anti-Black racist system that preys upon Black families, and dehumanizes their children and parents.

Tammy talked about her experience as a social worker and how schools and foster care failed her students:

> When I had my social work case load at the agency, I realized that a lot of my kids, most of them Black, were having tons of trouble in school, from elementary school on up to my junior high and high schoolers. They were being suspended. They were being expelled all the time. A lot of it was because the teachers didn't understand what they were going through, their trauma and their transitions from different group homes. The foster youth were being put in schools without their records. I had a second grader that got expelled. A second grader, really? When I talked to the administration about it, I was like, you realize the day he got expelled was the day his mom's parental rights had been terminated. What's frustrating is the schools don't understand that and they didn't want to understand,

> so he got expelled, regardless of what he was going through in his personal life. Trying to work with counselors, I felt like it fell on deaf ears.

Tammy's story highlights the complexities of a failed system, nearly all of the participants told stories similar to the one of above, they all connected back to a system of carceration that dehumanizes Black foster youth. The lack of care and concern in the narrative above connect to a moral education debt (Ladson-Billings, 2006); it highlights the divestment in public schools and public welfare. In the coming narrative I present three subthemes: (a) violence and abuse; (b) desperate family dynamics; (c) and mental health trauma.

**Violence and Abuse in Foster Care and Schools**

Violence and abuse were prevalent in nearly all of the participants' narratives. This violence and abuse occurred in their foster homes and/or in the school house. It speaks to how Black foster youth were not safe, *either* in their foster home *or* in their school. As stated earlier, these experiences were racialized. Staff and students alike gave their accounts of how this violence impacted their lives for years after they left the system. Elle talked about her experience entering foster care for the first time.

> I was in front of all my friends. He [campus resource officer] handcuffed me in front of all my friends, they put chains on me. I've never been arrested a day in my life, and he knew who I was because I was pretty active on campus. So, it's like, he knew who I was, and I would make small talk with him . . . It's not like I was a complete stranger, and I still had to literally reason and bargain with him so he can take the handcuffs off of me as I was being escorted throughout the school. So yeah, he humiliated me, it was humiliating to be in handcuffs when I didn't even do anything wrong.
>
> Once I got to the office, there was already a social worker there, the social worker said that I was going to be going with a foster family. It was crazy, like everything was kind of already set up. They only let me make like one or two phone calls to

> try to reach a family member. And then before you know it, I was with another family within hours. That was an incredibly traumatizing experience.

When I asked Elle why they put the cuffs on her, she said it was because they were afraid she would run. She elaborated and felt as though it was because she was Black, too. This narrative connects to the hyper criminalization and adultification of Black girls in schools (Morris, 2016). Elle also talked about how this incident impacted her moving forward, she said she suffered from trauma and it took her several years to heal from this moment and being placed in foster care in general.

It is important to name how aware Elle was of what was happening to her and why. To note, this reflexivity was present with many of the participants. This incident stuck with Elle for a long time; she talked about how once she was able to process her foster care experience and cope, it motivated her to apply to law school. She said she wanted to be an advocate for foster youth and wanted to practice law. At the time of the second interview, Elle had applied to several law schools and was waiting to hear back.

In this next narrative, Jessica detailed a story of her experience in foster care and she still carries it with her in college.

> I'm a survivor of a lot of different forms of violence. One of the things that have impacted me the most is I am a commercial sexually exploited child survivor. Identifying as Black, North African, and Indigenous was the reason I was in that position in the first place, being a minority makes you more likely to be exploited. That really impacted me going forward, I've found ways to cope with it, in my free time I write poetry, I go to therapy. I love activism and social justice campaigns. I'm really big on protesting, it helps me reclaim my power, but it still makes it difficult for me to feel safe on a college campus, I've had a difficult time at my campus.

Jessica talked about how carceral systems prey upon young Black women and girls, leaving them vulnerable to child prostitution and other forms of sex and human

trafficking. Morris (2016) also highlights how there is a connection between school pushout, and being system involved (i.e., foster care and juvenile hall) make Black girls more vulnerable to sex exploitation and human trafficking. While Jessica still has residual PTSD, she has found ways to reclaim her voice through poetry. Jessica also gives back to her community through activism.

Jessica spoke to how she was a youth leader for a statewide foster youth organization, she said she wanted to use her experience to make policy change. Another student, DeeJay, related his story growing up in foster care. He experienced a group home that resembled a jail. In this story, he described how he had to minimize his own needs and wants to feel safety out of fear of being removed.

> We had cameras in the closets, in the bedrooms, and even a lock on the refrigerator. It wasn't always the best, but it became okay. I learned how to manage the situation, I also learned how to please, in order to find stability, does that make sense? I was afraid of being put out again. At the time it wasn't a great situation, but I had gotten tired of being bounced around.
>
> I knew that every foster home prior to that placement was not great and who knew where I would end up next. So, my objective was to do whatever I can to make this man and his staff like me. I had plenty of issues, I had a lot of things going on. I tried everything to be pleasant and to fit into this mold they wanted me to be. Just so that I could stay. I didn't want to be tossed to some other facility or some other home, who knew what would be next.

In this quotation, DeeJay highlights how his experience in foster care was emotionally and mentally abusive and controlling. He explores how his experiences in foster care impacted his development as an adolescent as he was forced to shrink himself out of fear of being moved to a different placement. Deejay commented about having to settle for a placement that was not caring or loving—out of fear of being placed in an even worse foster home—was an experience that was present across all the participants' narratives. I

asked DeeJay how did this impact his college-going experience, and he said it had a profound impact on him. Because of this experience in foster care, he struggled to find his voice on campus and mostly kept to himself. DeeJay described his experience as isolating, thinking other students would not understand him as they did not grow up in foster care. In later themes, I discuss how Deejay found his voice and gained confidence through a network of other foster youth.

In the next narrative, Sammie, a staff member, talked about his experience supporting Black foster youth at his campus.

> I feel that one of the reasons I see Black foster youth students struggle to engage with the campus is the persisting and unresolved trauma, the harm that was done to them in foster care, it is the forcible removal of that youth's culture, safe space, and racial origins. It's like the same tools they used to separate Black families during slavery; they lose where they come from. In my role on campus I try to support them in reclaiming that. But there is trauma in living in a home where you have to make a foster parent happy to insure your safety. Foster youth shouldn't have to worry about making a foster parent happy, or make this judge happy, or that social worker happy. It's their cup that needs to be filled not the other way around.

In Sammie's narrative, he is describing the trauma that happens when foster youth are removed from their homes. Roberts (2001) discusses how child removals have long-lasting social and psychological impact on their lives. Sammie highlights how foster youth lose a part of their cultural and racial identity in the process while having to appease authority figures to feel safe. Sammie connects the students' lack of engagement to their foster care background. It is not that the students are apathetic or do not care about their college degrees; rather, it is that Black foster youth are experiencing an inordinate amount of stress. Carceral systems not only impact the people in them, but

their family members and their love ones also get caught in the webs of carceration (Alexander, 2010).

I end this subtheme with another staff member Sara. Here, she discussed her experience seeing Black foster youth and their families being criminalized in the juvenile courts:

> So, like I said, the first people that usually show up [to a child welfare call] are the police, the police already have their racial biases that they operate from on a day-to-day basis, whether it's an explicit bias or not. Most of the time, it isn't explicit bias, and I have seen where they show up to a Black family's house and they automatically think the parent or the child did something *wrong*, they start reaching for the handcuffs. So now you have a child being placed in the foster care system, sometimes a parent being arrested too and then this child is automatically labeled a criminal because of policing.

Sara continued:

> People need to understand that the trauma shows up from the moment they are being taken away in that police car. People need to realize they are children, now being forced to be an adult and being forced to have to make decisions for themselves that involve their literal survival. Very quickly they become just a case number, because at that point the state is making decisions for them. In the eyes of the state, they aren't a child anymore, they're less than that, the system treats them like a number. They're already in a justice system, that is racist, most likely their parents have been in that too, because it's a cycle of incarceration these systems create. The police and CPS that show up, they see the parents and they're automatically making assumptions and say the child is going to be similar.

In the first quotation, Sara describes how the foster care system and policing work in tandem and from her experience, how quickly they criminalize Black children and their parents. In the second quotation, Sara also highlights the ways in which the foster care system is not always a loving and caring place, but an institution the forces children to grow up quickly and lose their innocence in order to survive, this what scholars call *adultification* which is common about Black youth, especially Black girls (Morris, 2016).

Sara also bring attention to how entire families are impacted by these systems. Familial bonds are important for students, family provides a community of social and emotional support. In the next subtheme, *desperate family dynamics*, I further unpack how families are torn apart and how it impacts foster youth and their college aspirations.

**Desperate Family Dynamics**

In this subtheme, I highlight the ways in which foster care impacts families. The harm foster care has done on families has an impact on Black foster youth and their motivations to pursue a postsecondary degree. These narratives recount stories of how the system does not just impact the children, but those around them. A majority of the participants talked about this reality. In the upcoming quotation, Tammy, who works with Black foster youth at her campus, discussed how she has witnessed the foster care system create desperate family dynamics.

> The foster care system tears apart families, it's sad. When it comes to a stable family, a lot of my youth don't have that, foster care robs them of emotional and financial stability. In other situations, like being low-income and poor is a challenge, but you could still have a very strong family unit, even though you don't have that much money. You could still be poor, but you could have your grandma, uncle, aunt, mom, and dad. I feel like the trauma of that state breaking up your family is one of the biggest distinguishing factors between foster youth and other college [student] populations like being low-income or first-generation.

Tammy continued:

> Whether you are removed from your home for a year, for week, or a day, whatever, that is a form of trauma that the system has created . . . the parents and other family's members feel that trauma, too. The parents are forced to take parenting classes in order to get their kids back. Sometimes they don't have the means to take time off of work and go. These experiences stick with my students and their families, it's something that most other students can't really say that they are managing. To be stolen from your home.

In the first quotation, Tammy discusses emotional and financial consequences of a youth being removed from their family. In the second quotation, Tammy discusses how the foster care system then makes families jump through hoops in order to get their children back by making them take parenting classes to prove they are good parents, thus limiting their ability to be involved in their child's life in a meaningful way. Education theory examines the importance of family and community uplift (Keels, 2019; St. John et al., 2011; Yosso, 2005), however, this scholarship leaves out what happens to students who are system-impacted and what happens when your family network is stolen from you. Later in this chapter, in the fifth main theme—*It takes a village: A community cultural wealth response*—I highlight how foster youth create a chosen family through their college and community networks in an effort to combat the carceral violence and achieve in college.

In the next narrative, another student, DeeJay, talked about how foster care had impacted his family dynamics:

> We (he and his siblings) stayed on the child services campus, we did that for a few months, then we went to a foster care placement. Once we got there, it was even more abusive. I got kicked out of the house quite a bit. I was forced to sleep outside, food thrown on the ground. It became a very abusive placement. I reached out to caseworkers and I tried to call but no one ever came. I remember a night when my foster mom and I got into it. And she started hitting me, she then called the police and she had lied and said that I had hit her. That was the first time I'd actually asked the police to take me to jail, to take me away. I was just like take me. The police were like, if you hit her, if there's a mark, I'm going to take you to jail. Of course, I did not hit her, but I was asking them to take me away because the placement was abusive.

DeeJay continued:

> Long story short, they didn't, I would stay there for another few months. Then it became March of 2007, and me and my foster mom got into an argument and it

> blew up, I was finally taken back to the child services campus. The idea that was sold to us was that if one of us leaves all of us leaves, I was under the assumption that me and my siblings would all leave, I mean we were all being abused in that placement anyway, I was taking the brunt of it, but if I left and they didn't follow me as well. That didn't happen, my family was torn apart forever.

In the first quotation, DeeJay recounts the abuse he experienced, and in the second quotation he elaborates how his family was separated when he reported the abuse. When I asked DeeJay how this had impacted him when he went to college, he said not having sisters made it difficult for him. He described how he didn't really have much family support, including having no one to spend the holidays with when the dorms shut down. He said it would have been nice to at least have someone for emotional support. DeeJay has since gone to graduate from college. He works for a non-profit that advocates for foster youth—he says that he chose his line of work because he wanted to change the foster care system.

This subtheme described desperate family dynamics that Black foster youth must navigate during and long after foster care when they arrive to a college campus, how the system leaves their family shattered. In the next and last subtheme, I describe how carceral logics continue to reach beyond the walls of a foster care, group homes, and juvenile halls, and impact family units, body, and mind.

**Mental Health Trauma**

I center the narratives of college-going Black foster youth and the ways in which systems of inequity, carceration, and violence have had a negative impact on their mental health as they pursue a college degree. Elle talked about how she did not have many people around her to help her navigate college systems. Coupled with mental health,

these challenges caused by her experiences in foster care set her back in her educational trajectory.

> The first time I thought I wanted to go to college, I was like 20, it was because of the influence of my grandmother. My grandmother was just like, "This is what you do, work in hospice? You know you need to go to school," she told me. But I was not ready. Like, mentally I just was not, mature enough. I had a lot of different, psychological obstacles I still needed to overcome because of my foster care experience, and even to this day I still have to work through my mental health. But at that time, in my early twenties, I was not ready. I tried to go to college after high school, after the first semester I dropped out. I don't even think I finished my classes and I didn't know anything about dropping classes so I got all Fs on my transcripts. When I eventually went back to school, I had to go in and contest that semester and basically get a retroactive withdraw because of my mental health at the time. I can't say that if I never entered foster care I would have been a better student, but, I can say my foster care experience really did mess things up for me.

In the above quotation, Elle relates her experiences of how foster care impacted her mental health and ability to succeed in college. When I asked Elle did she think that her campus had the necessary resources to support her in her mental health, she said, "No." She said that she felt as though her university campus was not equipped to support foster youth. Many of the participants recounted how they believed mental health is not talked about enough in the foster care community. Jessica, a student, talked about how the mental health services she got while in foster care were inadequate. Then, Jessica went on to college and sought out therapy, but she could not find a therapist that was Black nor could she find a therapist that had training working with former foster youth.

Elle and the other Black foster youth's exposures to these carceral environments impacted their mental health. When I asked her and the other participants why do you think a lack of *care* in foster care exist, nearly all of the participants talked about how people who become foster parents are just in it for the money and that they are not

equipped to help foster youth apply for college. Many of the participants discussed the lack of care in foster care stems from the fact that a majority of foster youth are Black and Latina/o. Between capitalism and racism, child welfare breeds a system of foster care that disadvantages youth of color, thus limiting their opportunities to pursue a college degree. The next section discusses the intersection of being Black and foster and how that shows up for Black college-going foster youth.

## The Anomaly of Being Black and Foster in College: Through the Lens of Intersectionality

An intersectional perspective deepens the understanding that there is diversity and a spectrum in the ways in which people have power and privilege. Audre Lorde (1982) famously said, "There is no such thing as a single-issue struggle because we do not live single-issue lives" (para. 9). Within the identities of being Black and foster, there is diversity in how individuals experience the forces of privilege and oppression. Intersectionality encourages us to look more holistically at how racism and other forces of hegemony operate. Many of the students described stories where they did not feel Black enough in certain spaces, or they felt as though they could not connect with Black peers because their foster care experience was a more dominant identity.

When I asked "How did it feel to be Black and foster on-campus?" many of the students expressed they felt alone, isolated, or like an anomaly. Being Black and being foster meant that there were only a select few on-campus. Campus staff also discussed how the foster care system treats and sees Black youth, and the deleterious impacts of anti-Blackness on their college-going experiences. Staff also discussed how they

observed being Black and foster at their campus is a marginalizing experience for their students. In the narratives to come, I unpack the complexity of navigating two identities that are marginalized in White spaces. The students' racialized identities and foster care status colors how they see the world and colors how the world sees them. In this section, I have three main subthemes: (a) navigating being Black in foster care; (b) being Black and foster in college; and (c) making meaning of their identities.

**Navigating being Black in Foster Care**

In the narrative below, Michelle, who worked in a foster youth support program, described her experience as a social worker. She described a story of two Black boys who were placed in a foster home where the White foster parents were racist:

> There was this one family I was working with, I probably hadn't prepared them [the foster parents], but they just sort of like villainize these [Black] boys in a way that was so clearly racist. They thought they [the two children] would be out of control, they thought they're going to be gangbangers, that they're just going to be running the streets, and it was two kids, one seven, another almost eight years old. I was shocked! I was like what are you talking about? That placement fell apart, I'm glad that it did, I wouldn't have wanted those children to be raised in a home where their parents had any of those thoughts, but it just was so clear that this system is so racist.

The account detailed above are not uncommon, several of the students and staff discussed how the foster care system is racially biased towards Black children. Michelle's quotation highlights how anti-Blackness shows up in foster care. In the next narrative, I highlight Tammy, a staff member, who talked about what she had experienced when working with families who have been involved in the child welfare system.

> Having been a foster care social worker, there is a lack of Black families who are foster parents. I think that there's a lot of racism within the system and it dictates who becomes foster parents. I think that there's not a lot of attention brought to that, but I think that that's something that needs more awareness. There's a lot of

> Black families that I remember we turned away because they didn't meet the income requirement, or because they didn't have enough bedrooms in their house. There's a lot of things that I think White families are able to get away with, that Black families aren't. The predominantly Black community where I did home studies were not approved compared to houses on the White side of town. Many times the families have the same economic background. There's a lot of Black families. It's not the Black families don't want to foster, I think that is the myth that gets put out there and the rhetoric is Black families don't want to take care of their own. That's not true. Black families want to provide foster care or want to be foster parents, but they're not approved.

Tammy highlights a prevailing narrative—many Black foster youth are denied the opportunity to be raised in same-race foster homes because the system privileges White families. During our interview, Tammy told me a story of a Black mother whose children were removed from her home. Tammy was still new to social work; her supervisor, who was White was the one overseeing the removal. Tammy discussed how she did not feel a need for the child to be removed, but her supervisor felt as though a removal was warranted. Given Tammy's positionality, she did not have the power to stop the removal. When I asked her, do you think that there would have been different treatment given if that was a White mother? Tammy said emphatically, "Yes!"

> If it was a White mother? Yeah. Especially if it was a White, middle-class mother. Yeah. Oh, definitely. I think the environment would have been different because I think the mom probably could have advocated for herself a lot differently. I think that the mother obviously was really upset and angry. I think that there is a belief that Black women are dangerous, angry, and aggressive. I think the social worker found her "threating." So she made an assumption she was like if you're like this to me, then you're probably doing that to your kids. You're probably beating your children.

The above narrative speaks to how the foster care system unjustly removes Black children from their homes, traumatizing both the child, their parents, and their siblings. In

the next narrative, a staff member, Sara, discussed how she experienced racial disproportionality with cross-over youth she worked with in the system.

> As we were working with kids in the juvenile justice system, it was surprising to me that a lot of these kids that were going through the juvenile justice system also had gone through the foster care system. Once you're in the system, you then just become a number and you're in like kind of a conveyor belt system. The foster youth become a magnet to the rest of the government systems. That's what I mean by foster youth being criminalized and most of the kids are Black and Latinx [sic], and with sheer number of youth of color coming in and out of the system it is not by accident. Foster care is very much racially biased.

In this quotation, Sara brings to light a growing problem where Black and Latina/o youth are being criminalized and tracked from foster care into juvenile hall, often for dubious offenses. In secondary education, we see an overreliance on punitive disciplinary measures. In particular, we often see Black and Latina/o students at large being suspended and expelled at higher rates for exhibiting the same behaviors as their White classmates (Morris, 2016; Wood et al., 2018). Tracking these youth in jail locks them out of the opportunity to attend a university after high school. In the narrative to come, Jessica highlighted how her Black and Middle Eastern identities made her vulnerable to racially charged abuse.

> I have experienced a lot of racism in foster care, because I am Black and Middle Eastern, the foster homes I grew up in no one really spent time getting to know me. Sometimes my foster parents were verbally abusive, because of my Middle Eastern background, I was stigmatized because of people are ignorant and think people who Middle Eastern who people who are Arabs are terrorists. But also, because I am Black, it was a mixture of both.

It is important to also point out that some students reported they had positive experiences in foster care that enabled them to have a healthy understanding of themselves.

> In this next narrative, DeeJay talked about his experience in foster care:

> When I first got into foster care, I was told I wasn't Black enough because my language had changed, they said I talked too proper. I wasn't talking in the country slang like everyone else. I didn't click well with Black people in high school or college. I was kind of in this middle ground. How I grew up in foster care tremendously impacted how I saw Blackness and I viewed myself. My language and my actions shifted once I got to this last foster home, there was a Black educated man, and he taught me that there's nothing wrong with me. I mean, it wasn't the best situation, but it was better than the others.

In this narrative we see how DeeJay the positive benefits of him growing in a foster home with someone who shared the same racial identity as him.

In this next narrative, Marie, a staff member who had also experienced foster care, talked about how she sees youth navigating race in foster care:

> I don't think that their race has been centered in the foster care space or in higher education. Black foster youth face unique challenges as it relates to race. I think some of the foster care agencies will focus just on the foster care identity aspect, and deal with that. They don't always consider how race plays a role in their experience. I think it also connects with the Latino [sic] population. I mean, even for my own experience, I'm not African American, but the foster home that I was placed in and spent most of my time was with a White woman. My sibling was learning to speak, she mostly knew Spanish. So, she couldn't communicate with my foster mom. I had to kind of still play that role of communication between her and my sibling. Because of our foster care placement, there was a loss of culture.

Maria continued to discuss how race and place impact a youth's development.

> Race, identity, and culture, it's something that foster care is not necessarily addressing. It's just like, you need a home, we're going to put you wherever we put you, and then there you go. For our African-American students, our Black students, they're not taking into consideration culture and the richness of learning your own history and culture. It's just a matter of they need to place you somewhere, anywhere. Those things [history and culture] play a role into your self-development and who you are, who you become. Our foster youth have to find that elsewhere, they are forced to have to find it themselves outside the safety of the biological families. They're left alone to flounder and figure it out and in higher education. And if foster youth do get the opportunity to enroll in college that's the opportunity where we as programs play such a critical role in being able to help students make those connections or find those spaces to make the connections that they're seeking. I know in our campus we try to connect our students to our cultural centers.

Maria's second quotation highlights how her foster youth program tries to support their Black foster youth by connecting them with their cultural centers. Using multiple perspectives, the previous narratives recount what it looks like to grow up Black and in foster care. In the next subtheme, I discuss how the 19 participants describe what it means to be Black and foster in college.

**Being Black and Foster in College**

Many of the students use words like "isolating," "alone," and "one-of-one." Many of the campuses the Black collegians attended had a low Black student enrollment, being foster put them further on the margins. DeeJay described his experience navigating college.

> I would describe being Black and being foster in college is an anomaly. I feel like just considering the lack of the diversity at my school and just looking around there's not a lot of Black people in the first place. Being foster and being able to occupy that space, people didn't expect me to be there, you know, considering all of the obstacles, there's so many different intersections of identity.

In this quotation, DeeJay discussed what it feels like to be Black and foster on-campus; grappling with both identities places a particular burden he must navigate. He continued to describe how he did not feel comfortable in Black spaces, and his campus did not have a foster youth support program. He described his college-going experience as keeping to himself.

In the next narrative, Elle described the nuances of being Black, foster, and college-going:

> If you're Black, you could come from an affluent family, there is also the chance you never interacted with any systems of foster care or juvie in your life; so your experiences are going to be different than mine. Overall, if I'm painting a broad brush, there's a lot of different obstacles that I've had to overcome to get to be in

> that space (college). I would say it's almost rare to be Black and a foster youth and be able to attend the university I attend. That's something that I'm not content with I wish there were more foster youth who looked like me. I don't always feel comfortable in certain spaces. What I mean by that is I don't always feel comfortable talking about race around my foster youth peers because they're not Black, and then there aren't that many Black student in general on my campus, and the ones I do know, I can't really talk about being foster, they don't understand. I am caught in the middle ground. It's very upsetting, but yeah.

In this, quotation, Elle talks about that intersection of being Black and foster; she discussed how she found it difficult to fit into Black or foster youth spaces. This narrative was not uncommon. As the students talked about their experiences navigating the college environment, they told stories about how they did not always find community, and it was difficult to relate to students and build a sense of community.

In the next narrative, Deejay elaborated on his experience.

> Since attending college, I'm starting to embrace and love the various parts of being Black. Not that I didn't before, but I think I've come to appreciate it a lot more as I've gotten older and gone through college. I have been able to take some African American studies classes, that was very informative. I have been able to understand it and understand that I'm not confined to other folks or entities thoughts of who I am or perceptions of who I am. I love being Black, more so now than I have ever before.

Here, Deejay describes how his college experience has helped him make meaning of Blackness, it did not always feel comfortable. Although he felt out of place, while he attended college he began to embrace his identity and feel more comfortable in his own skin.

In this next narrative, Tina described her experience.

> In college, I feel like I have to overcompensate because I already know about people's preconceived notions about people that look like me. In classrooms especially, I feel like sometimes I have to do a little bit more than the next person, because I know I'm fighting against, multiple biases and opinions and prejudices. I think my identity just being Black and just existing, you know, I'm in constantly

> like defending my existence or my abilities, you know? I think that's something that I'm still grappling with.

Here Tina describes how she was constantly fighting to be seen, having to do more than those who are not Black, scholars call this the Black tax, having to always do more than your non-Black peers to be seen as equal (Rochester, 2018).

In the next narrative, Leslie talked about her experience with being Black and foster youth in college:

> I would say being Black and foster and in college is very difficult. There's a lot of family aspects. I feel like you don't realize you don't have, until you get to college and you see like there's assignments on your family history, there's family day, there's people talking about their parents and this and that, and you're like, well, I don't have that; but you don't want to really tell people that because they're going to be like, Oh I'm sorry and [pity you] and look at you like a charity case. Then being Black, people see you as a threat, you have to deal with racism. So you're kind of dealing with two identities that are oppressed and have negative connotations to them. It's exhausting trying to navigate that in college.

In the previous quotation, Leslie highlights *family privilege* and the criminalization of Black girls. While some of the Black foster youth students navigated a Black tax or being seen as "threat," other students navigated other forms of racist logics.

One student discussed how they had to navigate the harms of being racially tokenized. In this narrative, Ari described their experience in college.

> I just recently quit my fellowship and it was because I realized that they picked me because I was palatable [to White people], you know they didn't have a lot of Black people in there. Everyone that was in the fellowship fit this picture, they were, the ones that weren't going to cause too much of a ruckus. I realized I was being tokenized. I just felt so much discomfort with that. I sat in that position and I realized that I was I'm doing myself and other people a disservice by being in a seat. So, I stepped away.

This kind of tokenization is common among Black college-going students, however, in the foster care community tokenization is unique. Students and staff talked about how the

foster care community can “hand pick” what students want to give scholarships and awards to highlight them as a success story.

Additionally, Michelle described her experience with supporting Black foster youth at her campus:

> I have noticed over the years foster care foundations and organizations will award and celebrate a certain type of student, I can’t help but notice that often times they are White foster youth and if they are Black they are of lighter skin toned. They pick students to give scholarships to who fit a mold, they are easy to put in front of an audience. Most of those students would get other scholarships, they are already very high-achieving and don’t always need the scholarship from the foundation, but it’s easier for the foundation to give their money to someone who is already achieving rather than someone who needs it.

Similarly, Leslie described how she felt isolated at times in college.

> Being Black and being foster felt like I didn’t always fit in either group. I did eventually become a member of Black Student Union, but there was still like a barrier, during the breaks they still had family to go home to. When I was in my foster youth program I didn’t always feel seen as a Black woman.

The above narratives describe the ways in which foster youth navigate college within a racial frame.

In the next narrative, Sammie discussed his experience supporting Black foster youth. He described how they are particularly more vulnerable at the intersections of their foster care and racial identities:

> As a staff, I would want people to understand that our Black foster youth are so critically in need of the support and . . . . I’m sorry to get kind of lame, but they need love. They are so in need of people showing them the love, acceptance, and support that society at large doesn’t give them. Again, and I had one of my students tell me before as an African-American student, they are the most vulnerable of the most vulnerable. If you’re a Black foster youth. I told her, you’re 100% right. Studies reiterate and prove that over, and over again. Yet, we can’t just . . . I’m getting emotional. I’m sorry.

When analyzing the findings, it was apparent that the foster youth community tends to treat this population as a monolith, the students reported that rarely, if ever they were able to unpack identity and race in the foster youth support programs and other foster youth spaces. These findings are corroborated by staff, they said that they do not do programming that addresses race and racism. In the next theme, students described how they are making meaning of their identities, and staff discussed the support available to them as their students navigate and make meaning of their Black identities.

**Making Meaning of Multiple Identities**

In this subtheme, I share the various narratives that highlight how foster youth are making meaning of the multiple oppressed identities they hold. Elle talked about navigating coming out as a foster youth while being Black on-campus:

> It took like several years of just maturing and going through life experiences and therapy and processing things and being okay with my foster care status. Because of therapy and the other things I was doing, I learned to accept my identity. I became more okay with being visible regarding my identity. So by the time I transferred to my university, I didn't mind identifying as a foster youth. But it took a lot of work.

When I asked Elle if there was a campus program or service that helped her with making meaning of her identity, she said, "Yes." Elle elaborated:

> I was really involved with my foster youth program at my community college. I was familiar with those programs and they were actually helpful and made me feel comfortable and gave me community. So, by the time I got to my university, I was becoming more and more okay with being Black, foster, and queer. Then I actually worked for my foster youth support program, too. I was peer mentoring other students. Even that process, being able to peer mentor other students, helped me to understand my own foster care identity in a different way, in a much more deeper way.

In this quotation, Elle discussed how she did not go it alone—she explicitly identified how therapy and being involved with her campus program gave her a greater understanding of herself. This was a common thread, many of the participants talked about, how being involved in their campus program or a community benefit organization helped them become more comfortable with their foster care status.

When prompted with an interview question, Elle discussed her racial identity:

> I would say, I present more as a Black woman, so like first and foremost, I'm going to identify more closely with being Black, but then I also can't like get rid of or erase the other parts of my identity. For a period of time, I was raised by my grandmother who was Mexican. So culturally, there are some things that I feel closer to being of Mexican background. Overall, I would say I identify more with being African American, because the way I present and the way I was raised in my earlier years. It's still all kind of complicated, I was able to take some African American studies classes in undergrad, that helped me make sense of something, but, it's something I am still working through and trying to understand.

In this narrative Elle talks about how she is still navigating what her Mexican and Black identities mean. Not completely understanding your ethnic and racial identities is normal, however, it does shine a light on how the foster care system disadvantages the students from having access to their biological cultural and racial origins roots. Many of participants interviewed said that because of foster care, they were still trying to understand what it meant to be Black.

In this next narrative, Jessica talked about how she made meaning of her Blackness:

> If someone were to ask me how I identify, I would just say Black, as meaning the motherland. I identify with Africa, no specific country, because of slavery and then not being close with my family because of foster care, I don't know where I'm from . . . I don't feel comfortable taking one of those *23 and Me* DNA tests. I really don't want to do that, I don't want them to have my DNA. I've come to accept my Black identity and I've accepted Africa as my homeland, all of it, every

> single country, the whole continent. I do want to go over there and start exploring the different countries and me figuring out. But—I'm Black.

Here Jessica still holds on to her Black history despite being removed from her Black biological family and growing up in non-Black foster homes. This narrative also highlights how Black people who are descendants of American chattel slavery, which robbed them of knowing where they come from.

Relatedly, Ari talked about how they are making meaning of their identity. Ari detailed how he has found pride in being Black:

> Despite what people say about Black people, I take a lot of pride in being Black. The history that Black people bring and the history that is vast and deep. My grandma, she had this cardboard clipping of Martin Luther King Jr. out and she would talk about how she would march as a little kid and would sneak out. My uncle would talk about how racism was back when he was a kid and how people would come up to him but he would stand up to them. I just love the history. There is a power that's embedded in our history. To know that I come from such a dope lineage of individuals. When I go through certain stuff like foster care, and college, the BLM protests, police brutality. I remind myself my people used to have to work these long hours in the field, and have their babies ripped away from them. I use them as strength. I love how Black people are so creative, my brother is a singer/songwriter and I've got poetry. When I am down, when I am struggling with school stuff or life in general, I remind myself there's just no other demographic that has so many qualities that everyone like wants to take away. You know what I'm saying? I think that's like the biggest thing for me.

Ari talked about the stories of Black history that gave them pride. This is important as this meaning making gives the students a sense of self, and a self-actualization. Ari and many of the other students talked about how they have pride in their cultural identity and how it is important to them.

When asked are there places or spaces they can go to that would help them make meaning of their identity, many of the students said "No." Here, Elle recounted her own experiences:

> Unfortunately, no. I don't remember a time when our program did any workshops on racial identity. I mean, there's a lot of programming that could happen, but I think that their main focus for a while was just having an open space where people can come in and do their homework. If we had questions about their financial aid or academic questions, someone was there to help them navigate that. But yeah, all the other stuff was kind of fell by the wayside to be honest. So no, unfortunately.

When Elle was asked do you think programming on race and identity would help, she emphatically said, yes, stressing that many foster youth are Black and Latina/o—saying "it would be very helpful if our foster youth support programs provided workshops that helped us unpack identity." Elle also identified as queer and because her foster youth program was one of the safest places on-campus, it would have benefitted her a great deal if they explored race and sexual identity.

Another student, Diana, talked about their experience:

> I found out that I'm more than just Black, I am also Native American. Being able to have that identity mean a lot. I actually didn't know I was Native until a couple years ago, because in foster care, they only show you what your skin color is, they assumed I was only Black. They don't care what you actually are. Being in foster care, I wasn't really able to explore that a lot. Now that I am in college it's something that I was really looking forward to exploring. My college didn't really have a space for me. We had a foster youth program, but talking about race and racism wasn't their thing. As for now, I am just kind of figuring things out on my own, doing my own reading.

In the above quotation, Diana helps us to understand how foster youth leave the system having been denied the opportunity to know where they come from, leaving them having to figure out where they come from on their own. Diana's experience also highlights the attempted erasure of Native American people, their culture, and their experiences.

## It's Not About Blood, it's About Who Shows up for Me: Unpacking and Disrupting Family Privilege

The 19 participants gave their personal perspectives of how Black foster youth navigate and cope with family privilege, in this section of the findings, three subthemes also emerged: (a) navigating family disruption; (b) (re)defining family; and (c) family uplift. The findings highlight the impact family separation has on the students and their families as they navigate college. Family privilege explains how traditional forms of family disadvantage those who do not have a heteronormative nuclear familial structure. Nuclear family constructs are steeped in whiteness, when foster youth are taken away from their parents, they lose those privileged structures. Family privilege impacts students in ways that can hinder their ability to access and persist in college. This section is conceptualized to focus on a broader critical and post-structural analyses that details how systems (e.g., child welfare and schooling) of (in)equity mediate the lives of students in asymmetrical ways. Carceral systems are state-sponsored and cause undue injury (bodily and mentally) to people.

Constructions of family is deeply racialized, discourse on family privilege raises inquiries about the ways privilege is codified, regulated, and structured in powerful, White hegemonic systems and how social-cultural norms and mores persist to explain and justify why some families have and some have not (Bermúdez et al., 2016). Participants' stories highlight how their experiences in foster care impacted them in various ways; in later sections participants detail how they resisted and disrupted these

structures in ways that motivated them to go to college and ultimately chose career paths to support and foster youth and dismantle systems of oppression.

This main finding, I believe, is one of the most impactful because it highlights the students' resilience and agility to navigate the carceral nexus while building their own version of family. This finding is important as it gives us an understanding of how foster youth support staff play a part in the lives of foster youth that is beyond the forms of social and navigational capital, but also familial capital. During the interviews with staff, I asked, how do you see Black foster youth navigate the postsecondary environment? Michelle talked about how she saw them being socially isolated:

> They're just isolated in different ways, because they may be the only person in foster care in their school or their faith community. I think that they end up being even more socially isolated and lacking social capital when you talk about Black foster youth. We also don't acknowledge placement type and how kids move foster homes so frequently—they can't build a rapport in a school or you have students whose foster parents are just uninterested in supporting them to pursue hobbies, sports and other extra-curriculars that might help them get into college. I just think the lack of social capital is so significant and hinders their ability to access college.

Here, Michelle describes the unequal and unloving environment foster youth must negotiate.

In the next narrative, Leslie described what it feels like attending a university as a Black former foster youth and not having a traditional family unit:

> For me, it was like lack thereof [family]. During breaks, it was like, okay, where am I going to go? And then it's like, well, if I go too far, am I going to be able to get back to school when we go back?

In the above quotation, Leslie recounts the anxiety of navigating winter and summer breaks, having to figure out where to go by yourself, Leslie had a friend who lived out of

state, but then she had the anxiety surrounding having enough money and resources for the trip. Leslie continued to describe what it felt like navigating a campus that largely overlooked the familial arrangements of foster youth. Although these are the words of Leslie, nearly all of the participants recounted stories of how the summer and winter breaks are particularly difficult for Black foster youth. Campus policy and practice favors students who have traditional family units.

Additionally, Leslie also discussed how not having familial support was emotionally difficult during her college experience.

> You kind of need family to be like, "It's okay, you got this far, you can do it." You kind of need that encouragement, that push. I have friends, they encourage me, but it's not the same. It's not nurturing, like how, a parent would be or someone older, someone more mature, someone that can tell you what you need to do and get back on track. If you need to just cry on my shoulder for a little bit, you can do that and then get back to what you got to do. There were days where I wanted to crawl in bed and for someone to just hold me for a second, but I didn't have that, and I'm not going to have that. So I'm just going to figure it out.

In the above quotation Leslie described the emotional toll of not having anyone to go to during her college years. In the upcoming subtheme, I highlight how students talked about navigating the family disruption from the foster care system.

**Navigating Family Disruption**

Nearly all the participants described how Black foster youth must navigate the enormities of family disruption. In the following narratives, I recount the stories of foster youth navigating family disruption. The stories are important as they describe the deleterious impacts of the foster care system, especially the resilience the foster youth ultimately demonstrate. In the narrative to come, DeeJay had to minimize his own feelings of feeling unsafe and uncomfortable simply to fit in:

> I had not had contact with my sisters, which was my strongest bond that I had. At the time also my brother, my oldest brother he hadn't entered the system, but he was long gone. I didn't know where he was at. The only support that I had was with my foster dad and his company that he had at the time, but as long as I've known the man, I still feel very uncomfortable going to family dinners with his family. Sometimes they would invite me sometimes he would just invite me last minute, but that wasn't my family. And I identify with them as these are stranger's kind of taking you in and I loved him to death, but he's still a stranger, at that time, that's how I viewed him as just a stranger that taken me in. When it was the holidays *sometimes* I would go over there. I did go over there for Christmas break because we had to be out of the dorms . . . . I wanted those kinds of bonds and relationships, but I knew I wasn't going to get it at the time, and though it hurt, it was something I just had to deal with.

In this quotation, DeeJay points to the tensions of navigating his biological and foster family dynamics. There is real emotional labor that is being expended, participants described how it often left them emotionally fatigued and having to sort feelings of resentment.

In the upcoming narrative, Diana described how she had to continue to put herself in harm's way. She highlighted how adoptions frequently fail to be safe spaces and Black girls are just as likely to be harmed as Black boys:

> I tried to get away from my adopted mom when she was hitting me. But then they were like threatening to take my little brother. He [my brother] was actually doing well, so I chose to stay in an abusive situation so that my little brother could thrive. And a lot of people, when a lot of foster kids find out about that, that I chose. Not to go back into care because I was being hit. They always say that I was weak or that I should have chosen something else because it doesn't matter what happens to my little brother. I was like, that's family. He was the only family I had left. I was not going to subject him to, more of foster care. He was happy. He was going to school, making friends. I wasn't gonna do anything bad for him.

This story illuminates how the foster care system failed Diana and her brother, given the harm and abuse inflicted on Black foster youth. These stories are not uncommon, Diana

continued to describe her experience in foster care and how it impacted her college experience.

> I was eventually adopted, my adopted mom is well off, she owns cars, she has a house. I don'xt get that money. She gives me like $50 here and there. Just so she can say that she's helping me. That's all I get from her, everything else, I can't live on that. I can't live on $50 once a month. And she still claims me on her taxes, even though I'm working, I file all my own taxes and she still claims me. I wasn't able to get a stimulus check. It has made receiving financial aid very difficult, I know that if she didn't claim me on my taxes I would receive a lot more financial aid money.

Diana discusses the complicated and at times strenuous relationships foster youth have to navigate, even when they are adopted.

DeeJay discussed how he had navigated his family dynamics while he was in college and how it had an impact on him.

> When I was emancipating I had not had contact with my sisters, which was my strongest bond that I had. During the same time my brother, my oldest brother he hadn't entered the system, he was long gone. I couldn't figure out what to happened to him. I didn't know where he was at. The only support that I had was with my foster dad and his company that he had at the time. I would go to his house . But as long as I've known the man, I still feel very uncomfortable going to family dinners with his family. Sometimes they would invite me, sometimes he would just invite me last-minute.
>
> It's weird, I consider him family, but it doesn't feel like true family. These were these strangers that took me in and took care me, I love him for that, but he's still a stranger. At that time, that's how I viewed him as just a stranger that took me in. So when it was the holidays sometimes I would go over there, but that was mostly because I had to be out of the dorms. The holidays were not my favorite at the time of the year. During Christmas I always avoided them as much as possible, if I did engage, I was very minimal. I didn't care much about Christmas or Thanksgiving. I wanted those kinds of bonds and relationships, but I knew I wasn't going to get it at the time that, and though it hurt, it was something I just had to deal with.

DeeJay's family dynamics were difficult to navigate while he was in college. As stated earlier, many of the participants talked about how navigating their family dynamics was

exhausting. Participants talked about how they had to navigate biological family relationships and foster family relationships, leaving them caught in the middle forcing to choose one over the other. The emotional labor it took on the students to navigate, repair, and heal from the harm because of foster care impacted their school work and day-to-day lives.

As students navigated the dynamics of their familial relationships, it often comes with them having to (re)define their family. Students sometimes referred to them as their *chosen* family. In the next subtheme, I present findings that discuss how students were (re)defining family for themselves.

**(Re)Defining Family**

Students described how they were making meaning of family. All of the students interviewed described family as non-biological. When asked how do you define family, the students used words and phrases like "people who show up for me," or "people who *love* me." It was clear that college-going Black foster youth were subverting traditional definitions of family. Students were blowing up the idea of a "nuclear family." The (re)defining of family is important, as literature and research discuss the importance of family and the role that family plays in the lives of college students. Much of the literature centers family in a traditional sense, the following narratives subvert those notions. DeeJay talked about how he is (re)defining family.

> I have created family. Family is what I make it. I have a lot of folks that I call my auntie. I call multiple people my mother, because in essence, I feel like they've each given themselves a piece given me a piece of them. For me, family is not blood, its defined by who loves me, so that's how I define family.

DeeJay discussed how he calls various people uncle, aunts, and mothers—he talks about how he created family from the various mentors and caregivers throughout his adolescents. This is important as it highlights how Black foster youth seek and form familial relationships, across racial lines.

In the next narrative, Jessica talked about how she is (re)defining family.

> In order for me to consider you family, it takes a lot for me to trust you, it also takes a lot for me to put you into that family category. Once you've met certain benchmarks you can be placed into that category, what I mean by benchmarks is, how have you made an impact on my life? Or how have you inspired me in some way? You have to understand that your actions and your words have power—and they, in fact, have impacted me in certain ways, in positive ways. When you take that into consideration, I can start to consider you as family.

Here Jessica described how she sees family through actions and people showing up for him in various ways.

In the next narrative, Eddie identified what family looks like for him.

> I feel for me family is . . . you know what I'm going to be honest with you, I'm not close to the men in my biological family. The only person who I am close too in my biological family is my grandmother. My dad, you know, he cool, you know, that's like whatever you know, but I would say, I have more kinship with people that are outside of my biological family. Family for me is just people that love me for me and see me for me. A lot of my friends is family. I got friends who will really do anything for me, also my girlfriend, and her family, literally have my back. I definitely consider them family, too.

How the students are defining family and making meaning of family is complex, fluid, and powerful.

In this last narrative, Elle defined family:

> I stopped defining family in the sense of like blood relation, because sometimes you can have family members, even your immediate family, like your mother, your father that are not playing that your role in your life as a mother or father figure. So those traditional family principles kind of go out the door and I learned new principles and ways of defining family. I think just family in general is a

> network of people that unconditionally love you and support you. Yeah, I think it's just a network of people that unconditionally love you.

As students (re)define family, it important to name how their chosen family uplifts them during their college-going experiences and in their personal lives. Often unnoticed and celebrated is the family support of their chosen family members.

**Chosen Family Support**

In this subsection I discuss how chosen families support the educational pursuits of Black foster youth attending college. These chosen family units were vital to the Black foster youth, within these units they felt cared for, felt seen, understood, and loved. Even in the face of real and perceived hurdles, these chosen family units instilled real aspirations, hopes, and dreams to make future goals and accomplish them. In their chosen family they were able to feel safe and experience joy.

In the following narrative, Tiffany discussed how her chosen family has supported her and how they helped her:

> It's family that played a really big role in my college success. I'm not going to pretend I have it together 24–7, because I don't. When I do fall apart or I need some assistance getting back on my horse, you know, they're there to help me with that. I'm there to help them with that as well. Also, you know, just experiencing life [together], having fun, going out and doing things with people you love is the real joy of life. Just everything that I've done with them, you know, going out, just having a good time or my most precious college memories.

This quotation highlights the benefits of having familial support, Tiffany draws upon her chosen family for emotional support, the time spent with her families gives her a model of emotional consciousness (Yosso, 2005), by experiencing the joys of life.

In this next narrative, Elle gave her account of how her chosen family has helped her through her college experience and in her personal life:

> I'm still in contact with some of my family on both sides. I'm just not in contact with my mom and my dad. But my cousins and friends that I have known for years have been a huge support, it helps that we are all around the same age. They know my foster care background and my history in the obstacles that I've had overcome. They have rallied around me in so many different ways. Whether it be random calls to see how I'm doing, or encouraging words and posting things to social media to encouraging. All of their emotional support, lets me know I am making them proud and I don't have to prove anything to them. Because of them I know I wasn't alone. I had a whole network of people that were invested in seeing me succeed, you know? Because of them I really want to break these cycles. I think that their support has really, we made a huge difference.

In the quotation above Elle talks about how her chosen family helped to minimize her isolation and feelings of loneliness and gave her community (Yosso, 2005), they rallied around her by supporting her in her education pursuits while acknowledging her foster care experience and giving her space to process her feelings. This emotional support lifted her through the college ranks and helped her persist.

Leslie talked about her experience and how network and chosen family helped her through college:

> For me my roommate helps me a lot, she is Black and also a foster youth. We both have helped each other out and it's easy to talk to her about things that I am going through, I don't have to over explain my foster story she just gets it. Also, my mentor, he is a former foster youth too, so he has helped me a lot, he is a part of my village. I don't have many people, but they have been there for me a lot during my college years. For me the best thing was they both listened and understood me. There aren't that many former fosters you know, having them in my corner helped.

Similar to Elle, Leslie describes how her chosen family has helped through college. The emotional support she received from her family played an integral in her ability to persist and eventually graduate from college. All of the participants described how chosen family was vital to the college-going experiences of Black foster youth. Albeit, these chosen family units were not perfect, but no family is. These familial bonds provided

what Yosso (2005) described as the lessons of caring, coping, and providing—these lessons are vital considering the experiences the students have gone through. In the next theme I discuss how policies and campus practices influence the college-going experiences of Black foster youth.

## No Funding, No Sustainable Support for Foster Youth: Navigating Campus Policies and Practices

Campus policies and practices greatly affect students, in many ways they these policies and practices are not made for non-traditional students: low-income, racial minoritized students, women, and foster youth. In the narratives to come, staff and student participants describe how their campus' policies and practices further marginalize Black foster youth. The subtheme is broken up into (a) financial aid policies gate keep, (b) lack of campus funding, and (c) race-evasive programming.

### Financial Aid Policies Gate Keep

In this subsection I discuss financial aid policies that gate-keep marginalized students and how staff attempted to challenge these policies in an effort to support their Black foster youth collegians. Access to financial aid is a vital part of college students' success, without access to financial aid students are not able to pay for their tuition, fees, and room and board. In this subtheme, I describe two policies staff and students observed that disenfranchised Black foster youth: first is the satisfactory academic progress (SAP), and second is the cap on the maximum allowed financial aid award student are allowed to receive.

Michelle, a staff member, described her perspective of SAP policy:

> Any kind of situation where you don't have a lot of support and you are having to make it through your first years of college on your own, probably working, taking care of siblings or family or whatever is difficult, foster youth are navigating a whole other world. It is tough to make satisfactory academic progress when you have to navigate all of that. It's tough to get that 2.0 GPA, not because you're not smart enough to do it, it's because a student might miss a test, because they overslept after working a night shift to pay for college; or they have to worry about caretaking for a sibling or something. The data that I have seen around SAP, there is no denying that it is a racist and classist policy. It is almost designed to keep out poor students from our education system and it creates huge barriers, not only in just the financial aid barriers but also barriers like self-esteem. I think it hurts students' self-esteem to be forced to reach this artificial bar that colleges have set up.

Here Michelle discusses how universities' SAP policies have created a barrier for her Black foster youth.

Michelle continued to discuss how she sees SAP as a problematic policy that marginalizes students:

> Institutions by in large use SAP in their process because they supposedly want to avoid being audited, this is not necessarily true. Financial aid offices are not automatically audited, they don't always check, and financial aid officers also have autonomy. Yes, students can submit appeals, I helped students with them all the time. However, this is an extra level of work that students have to do. Quite honestly, I think students should be able to bypass having to go back to engage with a system that hasn't been particularly kind to them. During the appeal process students are having to show proof that they were part of the foster care system, explain why they didn't do well that semester, this just furthers the stigma of being a foster youth in college.

This narrative highlights the ways in which higher education is arranged to not serve minoritized students (Keels, 2019). Beyond SAP staff and students shared their frustrations with the maximum amount of financial aid a foster youth is able to receive. Staff and students discussed the way in which the federal government factors in expected cost of attendance. They discussed how it is unfair for foster youth as they have to navigate more financial barriers than an average student.

Diana discussed her experience with financial aid:

> It's not enough, the cap they put on financial aid doesn't do enough to help me pay my bills. I didn't emancipate from foster care, because of that, I don't get AB12, I get some help from my family but it's nowhere near enough to help.

In the previous narrative, Diana talks about how her financial aid award does not help her cover rent, food, and other essential items. Diana also discusses a critical and often overlooked issue—she did not age out of foster care, because of that, she does not receive AB12 (or also called extended foster care). There is a history of foster youth who are reunited with next of kin or placed out into guardianship just month before they turn 18. Due to this change in placement, they are not able to benefit from extended foster care entitlements, ultimately saving child welfare departments thousands of dollars despite what is best for the youth.

In this next narrative, Tammy talked about her frustrations with financial aid policy:

> I think the whole maximum of financial aid does a disservice to my students. The formula they are using to account for family contribution and expected cost of attendance just isn't accurate. I feel like it's still from this traditional college student metric. I think they need to increase the maximum they are allowed to get. It's becoming almost impossible for my students to afford attending this school.

Tammy discusses how the metric they use to figure out what a student should get for financial aid is one that assumes a college student comes from a traditional upbringing.

Nearly all of the staff interviewed were very critical of the cap on financial aid. Maria also shared her experience and frustrations:

> I feel like we need to have a more integrated approach to the funding of child welfare and the funding of higher education and I actually don't think that there should be a cap for cost of attendance or max financial aid for students. Many of my students don't have a safety net, I don't think the feds really take that into

> account. I think there are a lot of things that are rooted in classism, maybe not on purpose but it disadvantages students who are low-income. Like housing, only certain students, with a certain level of income can actually afford on-campus housing.

Michelle continued to speak on problematic financial aid polices. She also offered commentary on the issue of financial aid caps:

> I don't understand why we're capping that because to me I'm like they are not a student like every other student. When I went to school, I was privileged, I had two parents who let me go back home and do my laundry, would send me back to college with a bunch of food. I'm not going to pretend like I had the same kind of issues, challenges, or responsibilities that somebody who was in foster care had. My parents weren't rich, and as a college student I didn't know how to budget my financial aid award. My parents weren't happy about it, but they would still give me 50 bucks to put gas in my car and food for the week. If you are in foster care, you don't necessarily have that backup plan, so why should you have the same cost of attendance, it doesn't make sense. Somebody who is in my situation and someone from foster care do not have the same cost of attendance because we don't have the same resources at our disposal.

Beyond financial aid policies, there are other policies and practices that marginalize foster youth. In the same way, the participants believed the financial aid policies were racialized, staff and students talked about how their lack of funding marginalized Black foster youth collegians.

**Lack of Campus Funding**

All of the staff mentioned in some way or another they receive little to no funding from their campus. Students also made mention of how they felt their programs lacked staffing, outreach, and office space. Tammy, who directs a program at a public university, talked about how her program lacks funding:

> Our whole program is privately funded. The only thing we actually get money for is my position and that's temporary funding. We have four or five primary donors, and they're very needy. It could be answering emails from them, having to do lunches with them, or coordinate student visits with them . . . . There's a donor

> management piece that also becomes time consuming and overwhelming . . . . Because we are so reliant on donor funding I have to entertain them, even when it takes time away from meeting with students, it can be frustrating. There have been a couple of times a funder has said some low-key racist stuff; unfortunately my leadership didn't have my back. I even had to figure that out by myself.

Tammy's experiences are problematic, her campus' over reliance on donor funding places her in a position with little power or leverage to create professional boundaries. Moreover, her leadership's refusal to have her back when she is on the receiving end of racial microaggressions further minimizes her ability to support her students and it creates a hostile work environment that is not safe for her or her Black foster youth students. This finding highlights the ways in which neoliberal policies have invaded higher education, further marginalizing people by placing profits over people (Giroux, 2014).

Sammie, another staff, discussed his experiences with funding:

> We don't get much funding, we have to operate on a shoe string budget. We have a couple of donors that give us money, but you know how it is, they give a lot of other programs money too, it's like we are all competing for the same pot of money.

In the previous quotation, Sammie describes what other staff members spoke to as well. Foster youth programs struggled to find funding to facilitate programs and activities, as well, they struggled to be able to work full time. What makes it more troublesome is how all of the foster youth support programs were competing for the same dollars. As a staff member, Sara talked about how she only gets paid to work 20 to 30 hours a week. Yet, she says she works far more than that because there are student issues that she cannot remedy with her part-time schedule.

Lastly, I asked several staff members if their lack of funding was racialized and if more sustainable funding would improve the college-going experiences of foster youth. That all emphatically said, "Yes!" When asked if foster youth were majority White do you think your leadership would give more funding, they replied, "Yes!" Tammy talked about how her university historically has not invested in Black students:

> My university has never invested in Black or Latinx [sic] students. Sure, they put them on brochures and what, but they don't care to really invest in Black and Brown students for real for real. Even when it comes to access, Black students struggle to gain access to this school.

Michelle also spoke to how the funding disparity is racialized.

> The research is clear, when you offer robust support for foster youth they succeed, even graduate higher than their non-foster youth peers. But yes, I do believe the university choses not support a student population that is majority Black. They don't see themselves in those students, they can't connect to their stories like they do White students in the honors programs. When donors or campus leadership do recognize a foster youth student its typically a student who is not Black and is "high performing." Like I said earlier, if the student they are recognizing is Black, I have noticed the student is typically lighter-skinned.

Lastly, DeeJay, a student who attended a university that did not have a foster youth support program, shared his perspective:

> It doesn't surprise me that they didn't have a program for me on campus, they barely had support for Black student in general. Because so many foster youth are not White they don't see us. When it doesn't affect your group, you are less inclined to do something about it. Its messed up to say, but in regards to Black people being killed, until its White boys getting killed by the cops at the same rate, then White people will care. As long as the poor outcomes impact minorities, no one will care. That's what happened in the drug issue, too. When crack flooded Black communities we were crack heads, they put us in jail. Now White folks are dealing with their own drug problem and they compassion for them, they are acknowledging their addiction as a disease. Which it is, but Black folks aren't afforded that same sympathy.

In this subtheme, staff described how their funding is racialized—funding is unequal along racial lines. This form of de facto redlining has been well documented, and it is not situated exclusively on individual campuses, but across university systems. Watanabe (2021) highlights how majority White-populated campuses like UCLA, UC Berkeley, and UC San Diego are well-funded through state dollars, while campuses like UC Riverside and UC Merced are underfunded, yet, they educate a majority low-income and student of color population. *The Los Angeles Times* has written twice about the funding disparities across the University of California Systems (Watanabe, 2021), and a group of faculty members a UC Riverside sent a letter to the University of California Office of the President calling out these funding disparities that marginalize underrepresented minority students (Emmons et al., 2021).

**Color-blind Campus Programming**

In the last subtheme, I discuss color-blind campus programming and practices. Color-blind ideology is those that "ignore racial differences and White privilege" (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017, 913); decentering race stymie our ability to confront racism and make racial equity gains (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2017). When I asked the staff members whether or not they offered programming or integrated policies that were race conscious, all but one of the staff members said, "No." When I asked why they did not offer workshops that unpacked racial identity, most of the staff said they believed it was not a priority in their student services and programming model. Instead, the staff said their focus was on housing and basic needs, and they emphasized that these items were more important. They continued and said students did not need to be exposed to cultural

programs as much as they needed workshops on financial literacy, CalFresh, and leasing an apartment.

On the contrary, the students talked about how they would like to have campus programming that would be beneficial to their identity development. It is important to note that for some staff, there lack of race-conscious programming was not for a lack of trying. Some of the staff members said that it was because their leadership had shut down attempts to discuss race and racism with their students and summarily told them to focus on their basic needs. Here, Tammy recounted her experience trying to implement an identity development program:

> We've done a few dialogues, in light of the BLM protests, we started doing, bi-weekly community dialogues with our students and we'll just talk about different topics. Last week we talked about identity and what intersectionality means, some being race, sexual identity and just different identities that they hold and how that then changes or impacts their experiences on-campus and how it depends on what spaces they occupy. Historically though, doing programming on race, I would say it's few and far between. We don't do any programs that are necessarily centered around race. I feel everything we've done up until now has been a monolithic of the foster youth experience.

Tammy continued:

> My leadership has very strongly told me that that's not my lane. That programming on race is the lane of the multicultural programs. We have an office called the student activities engagement office (pseudonym) and they deal strictly with supporting students of color that's where the Black Student Union is located and where MEChA is located under, too. They have all of the cultural programs under them. Anything race elated, I've been told that it is for those programs and that if we were to engage in that, that it would alienate other students, non-Black and Brown students. What's also weird is we don't have a center ran by professional staff that serve Black and Brown students. So, I'm like who is really serving our Black students, let alone our *Black* foster youth?

In the first quotation, Tammy discusses how she has been able to integrate some racial programming in light of the Black Lives Matter (BLM) uprising during the summer of

2020. Tammy's campus reaction to the activism of the BLM uprising resembled the responses across American higher education institutions and society at large.

In weeks and months following the BLM uprising, campuses retrenched themselves into their color-blind practices. A student, Elle, shared how she feels cultural and identity programming is important:

> I think people don't look at things from a more intersectional lens, they don't see the full me, they don't see me as both Black and foster. They don't see how representation is important. I used to help with the peer mentor program, they didn't really try to recruit Black peer mentors. I think that if you pair a student with somebody that like looks like them, it helps, especially when you are in institutions like mine where you're always the minority. It's not like you going to an HBCU. I know, obviously you can't like 100% identify with a person, but there is power representation. When you share the same identity with someone, you know that they will understand the nuances of your experience. Again, you can't find someone that is a perfect match, but during the hiring process it's important to consider race and identity of the peer mentors, the coordinator, and the director.

This subtheme highlights how color-blind practices work to maintain whiteness and marginalizes students of color. Basic needs, paying for tuition, and housing are all important to the college-going experience. However, foster youth support programs need to be able to innovate, pivot, and provide services that support the *whole* student, including their racial identity development. In the next theme, I discuss how the 19 participants used a community cultural wealth response to resist carcerality, racism, and other forms of oppression.

### It Takes a Village: A Community Cultural Wealth Response

The aforementioned themes discussed the ways in which foster youth were marginalized as a result of their racial identity and being entangled in the carceral nexus of foster care. In my fifth and last theme, I unpack how Black foster youth used a

community cultural wealth response to thwart off the carceral nexus they were entangled in. Yosso (2005) defined community cultural wealth as "an array of knowledges, skills, abilities, and contacts possessed and used by Communities of Color to survive and resist racism and other forms of oppression" (p. 154). Students and staff told stories about the people, resistance, and motivations that empowered Black foster youth to succeed while pursuing a Bachelor's degree. Thus far, I have discussed narratives of (a) inequity and carceral violence, (b) the intersections of foster care and race, (c) family privilege, and (d) how campus policy and practices marginalize them.

Community cultural wealth is useful in describing how staff and students created counterspaces. In this main theme, I describe how foster youth emerged from the systemic racism and displayed ingenuity and brilliance, and how they leverage their cultural capital to succeed in college. The staff discussed how they create cultural capital for the Black foster youth on their campus. Many of the students described stories of how their foster youth support programs were integral in their success. In the coming narratives I present how financial aid officers, mentors, and chosen family facilitated them in their college experiences. Moreover, the narratives demonstrate how they are able to harness resilience and motivation to pursue their goals of a higher education.

One of the more salient themes was that many of the Black foster youth students wanted to go to college to help their family. Staff told stories of how Black foster youth collegians aspired to graduate college to change the living conditions of their loved ones. In this theme I present two subthemes (a) systems of support and (b) resilience and

motivation. Here, Eddie shared his experiences participating in his foster youth support program at his campus:

> I think just having community and being around community and seeing that that are people that came from a similar walk of life [foster care] as me, that's in pursuit of higher education, because there's not a lot of us that are in higher education that will graduate from college. We're a minority! I think seeing other people who were in foster care and then seeing them do better for themselves, give me hope and has helped me in my own process of healing.

In the above quotation, Eddie talked about how being around foster youth gave him a sense of community and his community. There is power in seeing other people who on-campus who look like you. In her foundational book *Why are all the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?*, Beverly Tatum (2003) discusses how it is important for minoritized students of color to find peer groups, organizations, and spaces, that help form and support their identities. Keels (2019) asserts how these are counter spaces that create a sense of belonging and helps to lessen the burdens to code switch.

In the next narrative, DeeJay said talks about how the foster youth advocacy community gave him language and confidence:

> When I was speaking and doing panels, I said, "This is what I want to be." It was during those times of doing a lot of advocacy work in my high school years and eventually college that helped make me stronger. My life wasn't perfect, though I was still dealing with a lot of mess during that time, doing advocacy work helped and gave me a community. Doing advocacy taught me I didn't have to have money to give back, the way that I could give back was through advocacy and making something of myself . . . . It made me determined. During that time, I also started to understand that there was nothing wrong with being a foster youth, but it made strive for more. I started to tell myself I would never be a statistic. I would never be incarcerated, or be in the correctional system. And so, in order for me not to fail I have to do something and I said education was that way. It was that, that was only thing that I knew that I needed to do in order to be successful.

DeeJay found being in these spaces, his foster youth identity was able to blend among the crowd, thus giving him space to develop other parts of himself, in this case his advocacy, public speaking, and overall social consciousness.

DeeJay continued:

> Again, it (foster care advocacy) just helped kind of mold this idea in my head of strength and courage, these things I had; I just did not knew I had them while growing up, even up until I graduated high school I still dealt with low self-esteem. I still dealt with not having a voice, not feeling like I was going to accomplish. In high school I was trying to drum it (confidence) up and I tried to make myself feel deep down inside. I couldn't find it at the time, I didn't have that. So as I've gotten older, as I got older and got more into a lot more of the advocacy, I still was quiet and I still struggled with a lot of things, but my determination and voice got stronger . . . I had to focus on my overall goal. That was to get a degree.

The above quotation illuminated how foster youth find their voices by advocating for themselves and other foster youth. DeeJay's experience speaking on foster youth panels gave him confidence—it gave him a form of *linguistic capital.* As well, DeeJay's experience being in the foster care advocacy arena gave him access to a network that helped him launch his current career.

**Systems of Support**

Students described how it took it a village for them to succeed, how they relied on multiple people and multiple forms of support. They documented how their foster youth program played an integral role. As well, their friends and chosen family supported them in immeasurable ways. They drew upon the support of the Black community at their campus, the campus Black Student Union, their peers, and Black mentors served as a surrogate family. The staff discussed the unique ways they leveraged their positionality to challenge problematic campus policies to support Black foster youth collegians. In the

upcoming narrative I use the social capital tenet of the community cultural wealth framework to discuss the ways in which Black foster youth collegians leveraged their capital during their college-going experience.

***Social Capital***

In this narrative, Eddie talked about how his foster youth support program was an integral part of his college experience:

> They [foster youth program] really provide that family support, they are really big on building community within our program. Hosting weekly workshops and hosting hangouts. They also connect me with key people on-campus, like financial aid and housing staff. The office has computers I can use and just hangout. I find out about internships by just kind of hanging out in the office. I really feel like they are rooting for me, it is a safe place for me to come and hang out.

In the above quotation, Eddie talked about how his foster youth support program is like a family to him. They gave him motivation and a place to belong while he pursued his college degree. Eddie and many of the other students described how their foster youth support program were informative in connecting them with campus staff and community members. Eddie also discussed how his program gave him access to professional development opportunities.

In the next narrative, a staff member, Terri talked about how she supported one of her Black foster youth when they became homeless.

> I do whatever I can to support my students, especially my Black foster youth. Our campus isn't diverse, we are in the deep south, so the neighborhood around campus isn't welcoming. I notice, and they [Black foster youth] often tell me they feel isolated and alone on-campus. So, I am the annoying person that's constantly there, checking in on my students and advocating for their support. I had a student who was experiencing some housing insecurity, so we put him up in a hotel for a couple of weeks. To help him get on his feet.

Here Terri uses her capital and positionality on-campus to help meet the basic needs of one of her students. Terri has an astute awareness of the racial animus of the community surrounding the campus. It was important for her to keep the student safe not just from the elements of being houseless, but also the racist climate in the community.

In the next narrative, Tammy, a staff member, further emphasizes the importance of housing for foster youth. She underscored the importance of building on-campus relationships and at times subverting policy to meet the needs of her students.

> In regards to housing, I would say that that's one of the main hurdles to our students' success. We try to build relationships with the housing staff and in the community. If my student tells me they have a barrier or a challenge with a particular office, I see that as an opportunity to build a relationship and hopefully help educate the people in that office in order to maybe help them re-think some of their policies. For example, our students can be late on their housing payments. Our campus doesn't play. They'll give you a three-day eviction notice super quick. It's a real eviction notice and you'll get served in court. Police will come and your dorm will get locked. We were able to build an agreement with our housing department that basically said anyone of our students that's listed, they will not evict. They will accrue late fees, but they will not evict them. That's been very helpful because even when our students are months late on their payments, we know that they're going to have housing. Then of course housing puts pressure on us to find a way to pay their bills but at least we know they won't be out on the street.

Tammy highlighted how important it is to have advocates on campus who understand the needs of foster youth. Tammy also mentioned that because her campus is quick to call the Sheriff's Department to process the eviction, she did not want her students, especially her Black students to have to interact with law enforcement.

> Tammy continued to discuss how she supports her students.
>
> I think for us, it's really just advocacy. We have a lot of students that come from out of state or somehow were maybe placed in foster care out of state and because of that, their out of state status affects their financial aid. They're seen as out of state student. We've had to fight the battle with the registrar to help them

> understand court documents. The same has been with financial aid. I've had students provide guardianship documents to financial aid, and they're like, no, that doesn't count. We need a word a court letter. I'm like, "First of all, they barely know what a Ward of Court letter is. A random social worker just gave them a piece paper as they were graduating high school and emancipating, the students don't know what these court documents mean." We make sure we advocate for them. We had to have a training for our financial aid officers and basically explain to them documents from foster youth are going to look different. There is no one document that you will get from every student, and if you have questions, call us. We have a lot of students who face challenges where financial aid will reject their documentation for proof of independent status. That's when we have to step in and work with the financial aid counselors to be like, "This is legit. You need to accept this."

In the above narrative, Tammy highlights how she practices a form a *relational advocacy*—she uses her *social capital* to advocates, negotiates, and resists institutional policies for her students in creative ways. Tammy understands what is at stake for her students. With her experience as a social worker, she understands that housing and financial aid are vital to her students' success and she is innovative in building campus relationship to help facilitate the success of her Black foster youth students. Tammy was not the only staff or student to discuss this—many of the participants spoke the various ways they challenged campus policies to meet the needs of Black foster youth.

The next narrative is by DeeJay, who had attended a research university. Deejay detailed what it was like to not have systems of support on campus:

> I ended up going to college and staying in the dorms, and I didn't have a lot of supports. Me and my foster dad, we had a relationship. But there really wasn't much there. Outside of that, some financial supports that was given to me by Chafee yeah, Chafee funds the children's cabinet, as far as supports in general. I just didn't have a lot and I was working full-time as well at a charter school. I didn't do well at all.

In this next narrative, I describe how Eddie draws upon his chosen family as a source of support and social capital.

> My chosen family has played a big role. I'm not going to pretend I have it together 24–7. When I do fall apart or I need some assistance, they're there to help me with that. I'm there to help them as well. Although we are not related, it's nice to have people to experience life [together]. Having fun, going out and doing things with people you love is the real joy of life. They've been a part of my most precious college memories, they've helped me through college.

Eddie's quotation illuminates the power of his chosen family and how they were an instrumental support system in him getting through college. This is important as this narrative highlights how college-going foster youth and their chosen family play a role in their success is a new and emergent phenomenon. I see two things happening at once: first, Eddie and the other participants are subverting our understanding of traditional family, creating a more inclusive familial framework in which all individuals can embrace; and second, illustrating how family is important to students as family provides care, love, and coping strategies (Yosso, 2005). In the next subtheme, I discuss the resilience and motivation of Black college-going foster youth through multiple perspectives of 19 participants.

**Resilience and Motivation**

The students described how their foster care experience raised their critical consciousness and played a role of wealth building along their college journeys that enabled them to succeed. Students described how even through the carceral violence they still had hope and dreams for their future, they were steadfast in breaking the cycle. The students demonstrated resilience as they allowed themselves to dream of possibilities beyond their current conditions, even without the necessary tools for college access and persistence.

### *Aspirational Capital*

In this narrative Elle talks about how she was motivated by her family and ancestors and her maternal grandmother to pursue college.

> I think, we [my grandmother and I] had like several conversations, I came to realize that there's a ceiling to the opportunities that I would get with the high school education that I had. At the time I only had experience in this one sector of work [hospice] and maybe like a little bit of retail experience . . . . I was just thinking about the fact that my grandmother has to work so hard and struggle and she's probably going to be working till she's like 70, I don't really want that for my grandmother. I don't really want that for myself. I felt like I could've done more than that, taking care of old people, most of them White. It was really triggering too, because I started getting more into like Black history, I started to think about how much my ancestors had to fight to get into different positions in society. I felt like I was taking us back, like I was taking steps backwards because I was in this domestic position taking care of people. I know it sounds wrong, but taking care of White people and me as a Black woman, I just started to feel triggering for me. It got to a point where I didn't want to do that work anymore. For me, it wasn't what my ancestors fought for, I wanted a different fight, I wanted more, I needed to go back to school.

All of the students aspired for more—each had their own unique reasons for why they wanted to go to college. The students wanted a life bigger than the one they were currently living. Elle was harnessing what Yosso (2005) describes as "maintaining hopes and dreams for the future, even in the face of real and perceived barriers" (p. 77). Elle and many other students expressed their aspirations and how they saw college as a way for socioeconomic mobility.

In this next narrative, Eddie talked about his motivations for college:

> I respect my grandmother to the fullest, but I didn't want to live the life like we did. We were literally broke, like literally growing up only making $1000 a month in California. Like, come on now. We can't do much with $1000 a month. I never even had my own room until I got to college. I never had much growing up, so I said to myself, when I graduate from college, I want to provide for my family and for myself. I wanted my own room and my own house. I just didn't ever want to struggle like that again. I wanted to be able to take care of my grandma. I want to

> buy her a home because she did so much for me, when she moved out here, she lost her home and her car. She gave that up just to come out here and adopt me—I feel like I owe the world to her.

Eddie being able to give back to his grandmother, who adopted him out of foster care, was a major source of motivation for him to complete college. Another student, Jessica, talked about how college gave her a source of independence and permanence:

> I've always wanted to go to college, but it really hit me before I went into the foster care system. I experienced a year of homelessness and then eventually found my way into the system. During that time, I realized, I need to find a way out. I need to find a source of independence. I was like okay, college is my golden ticket, I could live on-campus and start to do something with my life. I was like I'm going to ride this until the wheels fall off. I was motivated by independence and survival, that's when [the year of homelessness] I really committed myself into being successful in college.

Jessica talked about how college gave her a sense of independence and place a safety and stability to study and pursue her dreams.

Relatedly, Eddie told another poignant story about how college was a motivator for him:

> My residential advisor, was one of my mentors, she was also a former foster youth. There were only eight Black students in the residential community when I was a freshman entering the dorms we were living in. We had a meeting on the first day of the year, the RA was like, look to your right and look your left, most of you guys are not going to graduate and I was like, dang, that sucks for y'all, cause I'm going to graduate, I have to make this thing work. I think that's one thing about foster care, it is really puts things into perspective. The RA was saying how a lot of Black students don't graduate, but I was like, "I can't stay being broke. Like you hear me?" I didn't want to go back to those times. No matter what happens, this has to work. So I just kept that mindset. The whole time I'm like, "No matter what, I'm going to graduate."

Similarly. Ari talked about what motivated her to go to college:

> I hope to develop into someone that shows people who have experienced foster care like. I want to strive for something bigger than me, I want foster youth to know you don't have to stay in the same spaces in order to make impact. I believe

> you can make impact in whatever space that you want to, and it doesn't matter the circumstance that you was given, or, you know what I'm saying? . . . I hope to be a role model for everyone who looks like me and identifies as me, non-binary, LGBTQ plus, for the Black people for all the former foster youth survivors of the child welfare system, I want to be an inspiration for them. But I think that, when we did the interview the first time around, my perception of things has completely changed even the child welfare system.

Along with aspirational capital, students utilized resistance as another form of cultural wealth building. Staff told stories about how they witness foster youth challenge in systems and draw upon a spirit of resilience to get them through hard times, they told stories about how they see Black foster youth as resilience and able to succeed irrespective of their challenges.

***Navigational Capital***

In this section, Sammie talked about how foster youth tap into their resilience to navigate college spaces:

> The message I would say is, "Yes, foster youth are resilient," and people need to respect the struggle, and respect the opportunity that is presented to you whenever you meet a Black foster youth student. Because let me tell you, they have been through stuff that you have no clue about. Due to these multiple marginalized identities that they have, they could teach you a few things. The inner strength and fortitude that Black foster youth have is astronomical. What they have been able to overcome through foster care; if you can support, guide, and love your students, then I think then the sky's the limit on how much they can achieve. Because of their upbringing, they possess a different ability to move through campus. I just wish that people would understand this. I just wish that people would understand their potential and invest in them.

Sammie highlights the resilience of foster youth, he subverts the notion that foster youth are helpless, he also starts to unpack the ways in which the foster care system has failed them, yet he sees his students still find ways to navigate the university and succeed. Lastly, Sammie talks about how love is still needed in their lives for them to thrive. Like

Sammie, Elle talked about how resilient she and other Black foster youth are. She talked about how she does not like the word resilience, she believed it was overused and that foster youth should not have to endure the circumstances they are exposed to, yet she asserted how she and her others peers are unique in their ability to navigate the institutions that are not set-up for them to succeed.

> I think one thing I am proud of when it comes to being a foster youth, is my ability to overcome almost anything, I hate the word, but we are really *resilient*, we don't get enough credit for it. What happened to me shouldn't really happen to anyone, but it's made me smarter and stronger, I now use my experience to fuel my desire to become a lawyer and try and fight to change these systems.

Elle's desire to college to college to want more, surely can also be considered as aspirational, in many ways their narratives had co-occurrence with other subthemes. Many of these students and staff describe how foster youth are courage in their pursuits, surely the need to be applauded, and like Sammie said truly loved and cared for.

## Analysis

The narratives of the 19 participants gave powerful stories of their perspectives as it related to the college-going experiences of Black foster youth. Systemic oppression and structural barriers have impacted Black foster youth's ability to access and persist through higher education in immeasurable ways. I underscore how these challenges are deeply racialized; in this section of the chapter, I give an analysis to further unpack the experiences, structures, and intersectional identities, already discussed. In Chapter Five, I present the discussion and implications.

Critical race theory, critical race praxis in education, and community cultural wealth were theoretical frameworks that the 19 participants' narratives were analyzed

from. Together these three theories enabled me to interrogate the institutional and systemic forms of racism, classism, and family privilege. It also enabled me to name the ways in which the students and at times staff were challenging hegemonic norms related to cultural capital building in the postsecondary landscape. In addition to offering their perspectives of the college-going experiences of Black foster youth, the staff were able to name problematic policies and practices the hindered their college access, persistence, and graduation. Also, the staff named how they challenged and at-times subverted campus policy to meet the needs of the Black foster youth collegians. I offer my analysis of the data four ways: (a) racial realism, (b) intersectionality, (c) the privilege of seeing your family as normal critical engagement with policy, and (d) doing critical race praxis with intentionality and integrity.

**Racial Realism**

This analysis extends to my first finding: *they put chains on me: navigating systems of inequity, carcerality, and violence.* Race is a socially constructed concept, which means that it has been invented and reinvented over time by people who have power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Race as a concept is now real and normalized, and it shapes our everyday encounters, Black people are confronted with race and racism in the United States and globally (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Racial realism seeks to maintain a social hierarchy that sustains Whiteness and the privileges that go along with it (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). Participants in the study discussed the pervasiveness of racism and the intersections with being a foster youth. Racial realism helps to better understand the first finding, how the carceral violence in enacted on Black foster youth to

maintain a social hierarchy through racial violence, while White foster youth are also victimized, the foster care system functions the way it does because of its origins and roots to anti-Blackness.

Students talked about everything from racial microaggressions to racialized violence on their minds and bodies. Staff talked about how they witnessed first-hand this racialized injury being systemic and endemic in the foster care system. Participants in the study told their stories in a way where it was traumatic yet also in a way where it was normal—they have come to expect this experience in foster care. One staff member described her experience in juvenile court and seeing so many Black foster youth—"it was like conveyor belt" as there were so many she saw every day. When the staff and I spoke about race and racism in society and foster care, all of them acknowledged racism as an issue in American society, however, when asked about how racism impacts their Black foster youth students at their campus, many of the staff did not acknowledge racism as a salient issue. Staff identified factors like housing, mental health, and other forms of basic needs as more pressing issues for their Black foster youth. I do not argue that basic needs are not important—housing, food, and mental health are all essential elements to our daily lives. In fact, research shows that foster youth struggle more with housing and food insecurity than any other demographic (Goldrick-Rab et al., 2017), yet I argue it has more to do with race than foster care status.

Research points underscores that the lack of quality, accessible, and affordable housing, mental health services, and food is because of structural racism (Rothstein, 2017; Washington, 2007). Black people have been systemically denied housing, health

care, and access to quality food (Rothstein, 2017; Washington, 2007), to name just a few. A race-evasive framework allows White supremacy to continue to operate as the norm, going unchecked in higher education spaces. I argue that racism becomes so insidious and permeates every aspect of America that we see oppression as normal, so much so that when you challenge it, people think you are challenging America (Delgado & Stefancic, 2012). It even allows us to think the treatment of Black youth and children in foster care normal. The comments from the students in the interviews, highlights how unfazed they are. Racism and anti-Blackness show up in various ways, which necessarily means that treating foster youth as a monolith and as raceless negates the fact that it is a system that is actively disenfranchising and subjugating them to carceral violence because of their race. For these compelling reasons, foster care is another carceral institution used to marginalized Black people.

**Intersectionality**

This analysis extends to my second finding: *being black and foster, in college, is an anomaly: looking through the lens of intersectionality*, and highlights the importance of understanding the various identities we hold. The absence of intersectionality also means the absence of one's full humanity, people become invisible when we do not practice intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). Crenshaw (1991) discusses political intersectionality and how conflicting political agendas of race and gender pushed Black women further on the margins of society. In the absents of intersectionality, people are reduced to a monolith and their identities and experiences are essentialized (Crenshaw, 1991). Using a critical race theory, multiple perspective narrative approach enabled me to

have a more nuanced understanding of the experiences of college-going foster youth who identify as Black. Crenshaw's work on intersectionality began with her research on Black women. Utilizing intersectionality was useful as it centers the Black experience and another marginalized experience, in this case being a foster youth. Different from race, identifying as a foster youth is a hidden identity, making it more complicated and at times difficult for foster youth to claim and own this part of themselves.

Black foster youth collegians have faced a different kind of state-sanctioned discrimination, primarily a state-sanctioned form of discrimination that was rooted in anti-Black racism and *fosterphobia*. Fosterphobia refers to the stigmatization, shame, marginalization, infantilization, and fetishizing of foster youth. Black college students who did not identify as a foster youth did not have to navigate the trauma of family separation and the enduring mental and physically violence the foster care system would then expose and even exert on them. Racism and *fosterphobia* influenced the way in which the Black foster youth navigated their college campus. For example, the participants explained how being Black and foster meant it was difficult to fit into predominantly Black spaces *or* predominately foster youth spaces—having difficulty navigating both these identities at once, they felt isolated and alone. Participants recounted stories of how in their foster youth support programs they rarely, if ever included programming that centered on racial identity, a topic the student participants said they would have liked and needed.

The political intersection of race and foster youth identity center the conflicts between Black foster youth collegians and donors, social workers, and at times campus

staff. Both the staff and students were hesitant to use the word "resilient," the hesitancy coming from how always describing them as resilient, is dehumanizing—as if they are beyond human and can withstand any amount of challenge or obstacle. Resilient also representing something akin to spectacle or trauma porn and lacking a structural critique of how and why do Black foster youth *have* to resilient in the first place. At the political intersection of race and being a foster youth, non-Black people and/or people who never experienced foster care must navigate how they participate in the culture that creates racism and fosterphobia. Furthermore, non-Black people and/or non-foster youth must interrogate the ways in which they tokenize Black foster youth as resilience "warriors," denying Black foster youth the ability to be vulnerable and enabling a system that is dehumanizing them because of their race and foster care status.

**Interrogating Family Privilege**

This analysis extends to my third finding: *it's not about blood, it's about who shows up for me: unpacking family privilege*. Family privilege is about familial identity, people born into families that maintain a class and heteronormative privilege are seen as normal when they arrive to a university (Seita, 2014). Participants shared how they did not have the same privileges as their non-foster youth peers. Their non-foster youth peers did not have to explain themselves when it came to their family makeup, even if their parents were divorced, or one passed away. Non-foster youth did not have to navigate the stigma and shame that mainstream society continues to lead with when it comes to the narratives of foster youth. In the finding, foster youth talked about the difficulties of having to navigate not feeling loved or accepted in a home that is supposed to be theirs,

too. Seita (2001) talks about how when children are deprived of healthy bonds and positive development, it negatively impacts their development. In a healthy family, youth receive emotional reassurance and direction (Seita, 2001).

The students and staff understood the *family privilege* dynamic; in many ways, the foster youth support programs attempted to serve as a vehicle to try and replace the loss of family the student was robbed of because of foster care. Their foster youth support programs became counterspaces (Keels, 2019) of safety, community, and family. The Black foster youth collegians also told stories of how they struggled to make meaning of their identity because of foster care and the displacement of their family. Seita (2014) highlights how family privilege extends to knowing where you come from and your cultural heritage. Typically, and traditionally, Black children would grow up in a household with their biological families, which would then able them to have conversations about race and racism, empowering them to love themselves. Also, what occurs in Black families is "the talk"—the talk is when Black children are at a certain age where they notice racial dynamics. Their parents will often have a conversation or multiple conversations where they talk about race and racism in an age-appropriate way. The talk is important as it prepares their child for a world that does not always love Black people at best, and often dehumanizes them, at worst. The talks prepares Black children to survive encounters with police, security guards, and other agencies of surveillance and authority.

The talk is about teaching young Black children the nuances of race and racism as a means of survival. Foster care robs Black children of these uncomfortable yet

imperative truths, all while living in a racist institution. Most of the staff admitted that they did not understand this dynamic—some were not Black, and nearly all of them interviewed had never experienced foster care. In my analysis, I point to the lack of foster youth support program staff who also identify with the population. To grow up without your nuclear family is a very unique experience that disadvantages many foster youth when they attend higher education. Family bonds are essential pre-college experiences that provide both human capital (Seita, 2001) and human resources (Yosso, 2005) to draw upon once in college.

Yosso (2005) encourages students and practitioners to remain connected to and draw upon the communities and individuals who have been instrumental in their previous educational success. Asking this of foster youth is different, as many foster youth experience upwards of six school placements during their time in care. This lack of stability does not allow foster youth to cultivate the networks or human capital and resources that their non-foster youth peers have. I do not say foster youth do not have family, as I have outlined in the third finding that many of the Black students formed chosen families. This phenomenon is important and vital to the educational success of Black foster youth. I would be remiss to not point out that procuring chosen family comes with an immense amount of emotional labor and vulnerability. Sometimes, the bids for attention, love, and care, go unnoticed. Leaving foster youth with a sense of abandonment. Not having to put in emotional labor and make yourself vulnerable, is a privilege.

**Doing Critical Race Praxis with Intentionality and Integrity: Navigating Campus Policies and Practices**

This analysis extends to my fourth finding: *no funding, no sustainable support for foster youth: navigating campus policies and practices*. In the data, a salient experience of the college-going process of Black foster youth is navigating, grappling, and challenging hegemonic policies and practice. In the data, staff were applying Jayakumar and Adamian's (2015) framework of CRP-Ed. Specifically, staff were working through *relational advocacy toward mutual engagement* and *critical engagement with policy*. Relational advocacy toward mutual engagement calls scholars and practitioners to challenge mainstream (often White, male, and affluent) narratives throughout multiple educational domains (e.g., policy, research, and practice) (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). Critical engagement with policy is knowing when and how to apply interest convergence—to put another way, being able to effectively work across the "aisle" (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). As child welfare scholars call for abolition of the child welfare system, relational advocacy supports this, however, the arc of justice is a long road. Relational advocacy also calls for reform, and understands when the interests of the dominant group align with the short-term goals of activists, they work toward fundamental change, in perpetuity (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015).

In the narratives, the staff members discussed how the child welfare and postsecondary systems are inherently biased, problematic, and marginalize Black foster youth collegians. The staff spoke to ways in which they challenged and at-times subverted policy to support the needs of their students, some of these actions could have

costs them disciplinary action or even their jobs. Narratives from the staff highlighted how they would like to re-imagine long-term change in higher education and child welfare institutions to better support Black foster youth, however, they know that change is slow. Subverting hegemonic narratives requires managing crisis, agitation, and be able negotiate (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015).

Relational advocacy charges us to understand that change is not static, transforming systems in dynamic, it comes with contradictions and powerbrokers can and will move the goal post to maintain their interest; understanding the environment and context of advocacy is vital (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). Relational advocacy requires "an awareness of our own internalized oppression and the countering internalized resistance we embody and constantly work toward strengthening" (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015, p. 38). Challenging systems of marginalization become paramount in working toward an individual and community healing—the contrary of this is charity work or buying into the helper fixer paradigm which ultimate reinforces a hegemonic power structure (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015).

Some of the staff interviewed felt and understood this tension, they grappled with the tension created by their critical awareness to White saviorism. Many of the staff interviewed were frustrated as they relied heavily on funding from external sources (e.g., foundation and families). Staff expressed how they were overly reliant and at times over extending themselves to appease wealthy White foundations and families in order to adequately serve their students—this created an unhealthy and at times problematic power imbalance with their funders. In this narrative, staff recounted the uneven racial

dynamics, predominately White donors fund their programs, while their foster youth students mostly identify as Black and Latina/o. While the staff were frustrated by these neo-liberal policies and dynamics, they did not sit by idle. They still understood that in order to support their Black foster youth students in a meaningful way—to see them through graduation and give them opportunities for a career and/or graduate school—they needed to pursue the funding.

Procuring funds from powerful donors no doubt serves a system of White supremacy—we would be remiss to not also highlight the power of oppressed people (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015). Critical engagement with policy also requires an astute awareness of the implication of educational advocacy—accepting the donations does not diminish their resistance, care, or love of their students. Interest convergence is both inevitable and necessary when recognizing how oppressed people have the power to change systems and how at times it is necessary to do it from within (Jayakumar & Adamian, 2015).

**The Importance of Village Making**

This analysis extends to my fifth finding: *it takes a village: community cultural wealth response.* In the narratives, students spoke to the various ways in which their chosen family, peer group, and foster youth support program helped them during their college-going process. As stated numerous times, their foster youth support program was a major source of support. This was important as they provided social and navigational capital while in college. Staff told stories of how they paid for student housing, put them up in hotel rooms, and even took them into their own homes to provide food and housing.

The staff not only actively critically engaged and challenged policy, but also provided a space of safety and home (figuratively and literally). Students described how their programs leverages their *social capital* and connected them with internship opportunities and scholarship awards, helping them finance their education. At the same time, the staff did what Yosso (2005) describes as "reassuring the student emotionally that they are not along in the process of pursuing higher education" (p. 79). The emotional reassurance was felt throughout the findings, as many of the students interviewed would say that it was in their foster youth support program they felt the safest. In these places, their foster youth status did not matter and they were able to be "themselves." Keels (2019) describes this phenomenon as *counterspaces*—she highlights how when minoritized students (e.g., Black students) have a critical mass, their minoritized identity tends to fade to the background, allowing them to finally have space to explore other parts of themselves.

*Aspirational capital* was another salient finding among the participants that were interviewed. It highlighted the ways in which foster care robbed the students their family, however, it also showed how much they still loved their family and loved pursuing an education. This finding highlights how minoritized students set goals, even when they might not have the resources to obtain at the moment, continuing to strive beyond their current circumstance. This finding highlights how driven and dedicated the Black foster youth collegians were to their studies. This finding highlights how if society shifted away from an investment in carceration and towards a (re)investment in education on an economic, social, and moral level, foster youth will succeed. Currently, we have a system

of carceration and education debt that denies many foster youth opportunities to higher education.

## Summary of Chapter Four

The purpose of the chapter was to detail the findings that surfaced from my analysis of the 19 participants: (a) they put chains on me: navigating systems of inequity, carcerality, and violence; (b) being Black and foster, in college, is an anomaly: looking through the lens of intersectionality; (c) it's not about blood, it's about who shows up for me: Unpacking family privilege; (d) no funding, no sustainable support for foster youth: navigating campus policies and practices; and (e) it takes a village: a community cultural wealth response. Each of the findings help to fill in the gap of literature. In the next chapter, I present the discussion, recommendation, and implications.

# Chapter Five: Discussion, Recommendations, and Implications

## Discussion of the Findings

The purpose of the study was to explore the ways in which Black foster youth navigate postsecondary institutions. Through critical qualitative inquiry and utilizing multiple perspectives of staff and students, the study unpacked the college-going experiences of Black foster youth within the broader carceral context of the foster care system. The study investigated how Black foster youth made meaning of their identity. Also, the study investigated how foster youth enriched and utilized their community cultural wealth. Lastly, this study interrogated higher education policy and how it may have hindered and/or supported Black foster youth and how success occurred within these subtractive structures. In the sections to come, I present the (a) overview of the study, (b) discussion, and (c) implications for research, policy, and practice.

Systemic oppression and structural barriers in the child welfare and foster care systems have greatly impacted Black foster youth's pre-college experiences, structurally hindering and making it more difficult to access a college education. Through child welfare scholarship, we understand how foster youth, particularly those who are Black and Latina/o, endure carceral conditions in foster care; Black and Latina/o/a families have continually been regulated and often separated by child protective services. We have decades of research that highlight how foster youth are more vulnerable to homelessness, incarceration, and other life categories that denote disenfranchisement and hardship.

Foster youth largely have been left out of the national conversation when it comes to understanding their experiences in postsecondary education (Johnson, 2020). To compound matters, previous literature has often discussed foster youth as monolithic, without unpacking their racialized experiences (Johnson, 2020). Foster youth by and large have been regarded as monoracial in the canon of higher education research. Additionally, theoretical frameworks often deemed integral to understanding college student development, college student involvement, race and racism in higher education, college campus climate, and social capital in higher education, to name a few, have largely left out students who experienced foster care and students who do not have traditional family arrangements. The following research questions sought to fill the research gap.

## Overview of the Study

My overarching research question was, What are the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth? Below are my secondary research questions:

1) How do college-going foster youth who identify as Black navigate race and racism on-campus?
2) How do foster youth who identify as Black cultivate and leverage their community cultural wealth to gain access to and persist in postsecondary environments?
3) In what ways do institutional policies hinder or promote the success of college-going foster youth who identify as Black?

The narratives of the 19 participants gave powerful stories of their perspectives as it related to the ways in which Black foster youth collegians navigate their campus and are racialized. I offer my discussion that draws from the five main findings: (a) through the lens of intersectionality; (b) navigating systems of inequity, carcerality, and violence; (c) unpacking family privilege; (d) navigating campus policies and practice; and (e) a community cultural wealth response. The five findings were powerful; understanding the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth from multiple perspectives gave me insight into not only how race impacted their college-going experience on an individual level, but also on a structural level.

**A Reckoning with History**

Professor Charles Lawrence (1987) discusses how America refuses to acknowledge that we share a collective historical and cultural legacy in which racism has shaped our past and shapes our present lives. Lawrence continued to say that because Americans have this unreckoned experience, we inherently share negative values, ethics, feelings, and ideas about non-White people that define their entire racial groups. In relation, James Baldwin penned an essay that originally appeared in Harper's Bizarre and was republished in his book *Notes of a Native Son*, where he says, "people are trapped in history, and history is trapped in them" (p. 159). In the way foster care was conceptualized, it was a means to create a labor force (Rymph, 2017)—rather than place children with proper loving and caring homes, they chose profits over people. We must reckon with the historical foundations of foster care that continue to harm our children.

At present day, we see a foster care system that pours over $9 billion into the state and federal child welfare system annually through the Social Security Act, and foster parents are getting paid upwards of $2,400 a month in some states (Foster Focus, 2021). Everyone is making money off of the bodies of children and plight of families with no positive outcomes to show. In fact, in many cases the youth and their families are re-traumatized once in foster care. The child welfare system refuses to confront its racist legacy, and it refuses to acknowledge how and why it decided to move towards out-of-home foster care placement.

**The Impact of Carceral Regimes**

The participants discussed how Black foster youth collegians had experienced anti-Black racism in foster care and how this impacted them later in their college years. Their experiences in foster care and school subjected them to physical and mental abuse. Staff also gave accounts of how they have seen Black foster youth harmed by the foster care and schooling system. What was made clear is that neither the students nor the staff could divorce themselves from the certainty that these horrendous experiences were racialized. The treatment of Black people in America has yet to be atoned for, yet there is currently a movement to ban any literature that discusses American chattel slavery (e.g., the 1619 Project) and literature that confronts race and racism (e.g., CRT and Ethnic Studies) from being taught in schools. Color-blind racism and race-evasiveness to preserve Whiteness are not new phenomena.

Delgado and Stefancic (2012) discussed how conservatives have been arguing that race-conscious admissions practices (e.g., Affirmative Action) balkanize the country

and are reverse discrimination. What is clear, “in every state across our nation, African Americans—particularly in the poorest neighborhoods—are subjected to tactics and practices that would result in public outrage and scandal if committed in middle-class White neighborhoods” (Alexander, 2010, p. 96). Anti-Blackness operates in a way that dehumanizes Black people, and the mainstream then normalizes it. Anti-Black racism attempts to place Black people on the margins of society, blocking them out of health care, public welfare, housing, jobs, and higher education, to name just a few.

For readers who question how or why this level of violence happens, we must trace these carceral regimes back to slavery. Roberts (2021) explains that during legalized slavery, America indoctrinated itself as a racialized nation-state, using slavery as a means to control Black bodies. White enslavers put themselves in control of Black families, separating the families by selling them to other plantations. Physical and mental violence was handed out with regularity to control and keep Black people enslaved. Enslavers, slave catchers, and slave patrolmen started the early versions of police patrols. In the present day, these same racist ideologies and carceral regimes exist in American institutions.

Alexander (2010) further highlights how this racialized system “is painfully obvious when one steps back from individual cases and specific policies is that the system of mass incarceration operates with stunning efficiency to sweep people of color off the streets, lock them in cages, and then release them into an inferior second-class status” (p. 100). What fuels this is how officers are able to operate with ambiguous authority and their own racial bias remaining unchecked, giving them license to stop, pull

over, do a welfare a check, search, arrest, and charge for various crimes that will cause someone to lose your child (Alexander, 2010; Roberts, 2001; Rodriguez, 2006). Additionally, the steps it steps it takes to (re)gain custody of your child constitute an ambiguous and daunting process. Black youth are not going to be able to avoid this carceral regime by simply "pulling their pants up," as Barack Obama infamously once said (Alexander, 2010). Respectability politics, boot strap theory, or meritocracy will not save Black children. A serious critique into child welfare practices is long overdue, and I discuss a movement towards abolition later in this chapter.

This theme is not necessarily novel, as child welfare scholars have been writing about how the system harms Black children and their families (Roberts, 2001). What is unique about this theme is understanding how carceral logics operate within the context of higher education and the impact it has on foster youth in pursuit of a college education. The dominant narrative often portrays students of color as not caring about education, but this is not factual and actually quite contrary (Yosso, 2005). From the narratives in this study, we see the ways in which Black foster youth collegians were motivated to pursue a college education, however, the narratives also highlight how structural disadvantages were put in place to make it more difficult for them to achieve. Narratives spoke to how their experiences in foster care created major setbacks.

**The Importance of Intersectionality**

Intersectionality highlights the centrality of race in our everyday experiences. The findings show how race was a factor in how the Black foster youth engaged with their campus, foster youth support programs, and surrounding community. Utilizing

intersectionality was important as it illuminated how their foster care status made them feel like outsiders in Black spaces. While they were Black, they still felt as though their Black peers did not entirely understand them because of their foster care experiences. At the same time, it was difficult for them to connect with their foster youth peers because they were also navigating the tensions of being Black in White spaces. This finding is emergent and should inform how student affairs practitioners engage with foster youth and should incorporate intersectionality frameworks into their policies and programming.

Students used words like *isolating* and *alone*, which points to how there were so few Black foster youth that enroll in four-year universities—the lack of a critical mass. It also points to how unseen identity markers limited their ability to connect with people who might share that same experience. The implications of having unseen or hidden identities, especially as it relates to being a foster youth, is under-researched and still not fully understood in the context of higher education. It is important for student affairs practitioners to create welcoming spaces for their Black foster youth collegians. Similarly, student affairs practitioners must ask themselves, not just if their students feel like they belong on campus, but, how have they made themselves available and welcome to engage (Wood et al., 2015)? J. Luke Wood and Frank Harris III (2015) pioneered a *welcomeness to engage model*, which refers to the surroundings of the campus that dictate if students feel that they can engage with faculty, however, I also found utility for it when discussing Black foster youth collegians.

Within educational spaces, a welcomeness to engage entails fostering conditions that make students feel welcome to ask questions, inquire about their progress, and attend

office hours (Wood et al., 2015). A welcomeness to engage approach can make a large campus feel manageable and less isolating for minoritized students. It is important to understand that at times, students who have been pushed to the margins of society will have a natural and normal hesitation to engage with authority as part of larger institutions (e.g., staff and faculty). In turn, student affairs practitioners need to do the work to make themselves more available and accessible. From my experience working over 10 years with foster youth in higher education, this might mean meeting students outside of your office, at the campus coffee shop, maybe taking a walking meeting, or even giving them the option to meet virtually via Zoom. This also might mean altering your office hours, given that foster youth often have work obligations to put themselves through college. In other words, they might not be able to meet during a traditional 9–5 office hours. Overall, it is important to create spaces where Black foster youth collegians feel safe and seen.

**It Takes a Village**

As stated numerous times, community cultural wealth was used in the theoretical framework. One tenet of community cultural wealth is familial capital, during the interviews, foster youth and staff told stories about how foster youth created a chosen family. All of the students interviewed did not define their family as biological; they were in effect actively redefining dominant and hegemonic constructions of family. Creating chosen family, foster youth are actively subverting a familial structure that privileges those who benefit from heteronormative relationships, class privilege, and racial privilege.

The family unit is instrumental in developing healthy attachments with adults, which can be an essential protective factor for children who have experienced neglect or abuse (Benard, 2004). Sieta's family privilege framework was used to understand how participants of this study were able to navigate risk factors and negative experiences that were encountered within family structures, community, and college systems. Although students struggled to overcome challenges identified within the family sphere, many of them identified important supports within the family system that have facilitated resiliency. Caring adults—usually a grandmother, an aunt, mentor, or even their college advisor—were identified as an essential support to resiliency. Their chosen family made up their community, and they provided navigational and social capital to them during their college years.

The chosen family networks that were emphasized by research participants were noticeably utilized for navigating the academic experience of college and emotional support as they navigated their young adult developmental stages. In the study, Black foster youth collegians found a chosen family-like network in their foster youth support programs. Research shows that foster youth support programs are integral to the success of foster youth (Hallett et al., 2018). Findings from this study indicated that almost all students identified a supportive person from their community and campus that was supportive of them going to college and was someone that they would go to for help or in a time of need.

As shown in other studies of foster youth navigating college, the role of mentors from the community provides a positive benefit for students as mentors who can teach

skills that students may not develop if they are lacking the support of a caring adult in the home environment (Osterling & Hines, 2006). Students from this study discussed the importance of their mentors, friends, and chosen family that often pushed them beyond their own limits by creating expectations for success and achievement. Generally, students reported that their network of support exposed them to a variety of experiences that created a desire to want a better life for themselves. Some students reported that their mentor was the only person there for them in a time of need and provided a place for them to stay or let them borrow money when finances were low.

A secondary component of foster youth students' interactions are campus and community connections. Students were referred to connections on a regular basis to access crucial resources. In many ways, these connections were extensions of the foster youth support program. A primary campus resource for foster youth students is a foster youth support program and the staff in the program. The foster youth support program becomes a one-stop shop for students from which they can be assisted by the staff or referred to partnering liaisons on campus or in the community, all of whom are interested in supporting college-going foster youth (Gamez, 2018). Barbatis (2010) notes that a multitude or key campus resource are essential for the success of first-generation, underrepresented students; this concept holds true for foster youth as well.

The emerging findings on family address a research gap in understanding privilege in higher education contexts. Priorities of the institution cannot always be implemented with foster youth, nor do the priorities align with seeing to it that foster youth succeed beyond academic progress. This finding was significant, as it underscores

the ways in which colleges and universities privilege students from traditional family backgrounds. Foster youth do not always have a safe place to go during the winter and summer breaks. Other activities like homecoming and family weekend reinforce traditional family norms.

Understanding family privilege was not this study's goal; rather, it emerged from the interviews from staff and students, I assert that family privilege is more than a theory; it has real-life consequences that we can and must measure. I call for further understanding of the cultural loss and emotional labor when Black foster youth lose their family because of child welfare and they must go out and create their own. What is wildly missed in the analysis of family privilege is the labor and tax that impacts Black foster youth emotionally, physically, and financially. Ongoing exploration is needed on family privilege and complements critical theory (Matsuda et al., 1993; Tate, 1997) that is applied in important examinations of race/ethnicity, language, sex and gender, and citizenship privilege in higher education.

All students expressed an aspiration to create positive change within their families and communities through education. This finding brought to center how foster youth rely on their community, kinfolk, resilience, and motivations to pursue a college degree. There was not one form community cultural wealth that out-weighed another, they all collectively came together to support Black foster youth collegians. This finding also dispelled the myths that students of color do not care about their education. Through this finding, it is revealed that when they have the necessary support to match their exceptional aspirations and motivations, they thrive in college spaces.

**Campus Policies and Practice**

The research question that informed this study was, What are the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth? A feature of this study was being able to understand this phenomenon from multiple perspectives. Interviewing staff highlighted the ways in which Black foster youth experienced race on college campuses at the structural level. Without the staff perspective, these importance nuances would otherwise remain unnamed. It is important to be able to see the entire production, from the stage to behind the curtain. These findings are emergent, as they challenge campus practices and policies that we have accepted as normal and expose how they further marginalize Black foster youth in postsecondary environments. Understanding the staff perspective helped to comprehend the ways in which they strategically support Black foster youth, subvert policy, and create counterspaces.

Staff spoke to how financial aid policy functions as a mechanism to weed out non-traditional and underrepresented students. Specifically, in terms of satisfactory academic progress (SAP), one staff member highlighted how some of her Black foster youth students struggled in their first couple of years. In particular, the SAP policy placed an undue burden on students who arrive to campus academically underprepared. Colleges should be finding ways to support these students, as opposed to kicking them out. Foster youth in general struggle in college spaces because of their foster care placement history and school instability; foster youth attend several primary and secondary school placements while in foster care, which underprepares foster youth for postsecondary schooling. It is not equitable to hold students to the same standards of those who come

from far more privileged backgrounds. Furthermore, it is recommended to abolish SAP policies in the students' first two years to give them time to reasonably acclimate to their college environment.

Another financial aid policy staff and students spoke to was the federal financial aid cap. This finding is significant as it highlights how financial aid policy is applied inequitably. The narratives highlight how foster youth do not have family to help support them financially, even with zero expected family contribution, which then increases the amount of financial aid they receive. Participants expressed that the current financial aid structure is simply not enough. Research has addressed how foster youth struggle financially; attending college, moreover, they struggle to meet their basic needs. In an effort to support Black foster youth equitably, it is important to (re)envision state and federal financial aid policy to be more equitable and inclusive of students from non-traditional backgrounds, specifically those who have experienced foster care.

## Implications for Research, Policy, and Practice

Studying the racialized college-going experiences of Black foster youth is an emergent and important line of research. Because this area of research has been largely untouched in the postsecondary environment, many questions have not been addressed. This study fills in the research gap, however, future areas of study remain. Using CRT, CRP-Ed, and CCW helped to illuminate how racism and fosterphobia exist and how Black foster youth collegians and the staff that support them find ways to resist these forms of marginalization. Using multiple perspectives allowed for a more holistic

understanding of the college-going experiences of foster youth—I was able to see their experiences in front of and behind the curtain.

It is the behind the curtain vantage point that was important, though. This perspective I enabled me to see the ways that foster youth support staff are in community with Black foster youth. They understood the urgency and importance of their college education. Together, they resisted carceral systems, subverted hegemonic higher education policy and practice, created a community, and for some, they created family. This study is a start of a larger movement to understand how race and foster care status impact students' ability to gain access to, persist, and graduate from college, I offer several areas that are advantageous to conduct further research, shift policy, and reimagine practices.

**Research on Black Foster Youth across the P-20 Pipeline**

A consistent theme that all students identified was the challenges of racism and discrimination within their college campus community and the accompanying social isolation. The role of race and ethnicity in this study had a largely negative effect on students' college experiences and was found to influence students' staff and peer interactions on campus. Future research should investigate how college-going foster youth who identify as Black navigate these negative experiences beyond a university environment. Future research should further unpack the experiences of Black foster youth students beyond four-year colleges and universities; the data clearly shows that Black foster youth and foster youth in general are attending community colleges at far higher rates. It remains urgent that we investigate the systems of support Black foster youth are

using at the community level environment and how four-year universities can learn from their best practices.

Beyond postsecondary schooling, it is important to also research the K-12 schooling experiences of Black foster youth, Harvey at al., (2020) reported that only 51% of Black foster youth graduated on time during the 2018-2019 school year. This research brief also highlighted other grim realities (e.g., higher suspension and incarceration rates for Black foster youth). We know from the current study that these experiences have a deleterious impact on Black foster youth being able to successfully navigate their college experiences. In turn, it is important to know how and why this is happening to better advocate for these young people. I would also charge professional organizations like the American Educational Research Association (AERA), Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE), and the American College Personnel Association (ACPA) to center this population in their national conferences and institutes, as well as support research funding in this area.

**Programmatic and Policy Changes**

The program staff are integral to the success of foster youth in higher education. More work needs to be done to understand their experiences as they continue to work on the front lines with the students. Furthermore, we need to conduct assessment on foster youth support programs to better understand evidence-based approaches that might be applicable at other campuses. Supporting foster youth in higher education is still a relatively new practice in student affairs. I urge researchers to ask how student affairs practitioners can better serve foster youth in postsecondary education spaces.

Many of the students interviewed expressed anxiety, isolation, and sometimes fear during the summer of 2020. They also expressed they did not have anyone to turn to. Some of the staff were naïve and unequipped to have conversations about race, for the staff who wanted to have these dialogues their supervisors were not supportive of them doing programming that centered identity and culture. Findings from this research demonstrated the many ways in which college-going Black foster youth experience racism while attending a four-year university. Race-neutral policies and practices disregard the racism they faced in foster care and continued to navigate while in college. The narrative of the 19 interviewees challenged the dominant ideology that race does not matter when discussing the needs of foster youth. The findings reveal the need to interrogate policy and practice that disadvantages students *because* they are Black and foster. We must deconstruct, dismantle, and re-imagine alternatives to the ways in which Whiteness has been privileged within postsecondary environments.

**Centering Race in Foster Youth Programming**

The harassment of Christian Cooper by a White woman in New York City's Central Park and the brutal murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd and several other Black people that sparked the largest racial uprisings in American history in the summer of 2020. In response, college campuses released letters and statements in solidarity with the movement for Black lives; there was a bevy of teach-ins, symposiums, and panels on racism and policing. However, as weeks and months passed, campuses retrenched themselves into their race-evasive practices. In the study, students expressed that there was no outlet for them to unpack their racial

identities and how the campus and outside community marginalizes them. Students said that their foster youth support program was the place they spent the most time; they preferred for their foster youth support program to take charge and lead these conversations versus outsourcing it to another cultural center.

Some staff were aware of their lack of services that did not create safe spaces for their students to engage in these conversations, the curricula, programs, and pedagogies need to mirror the diverse student body they serve. I do not recommend a one-off workshop on race and racism, but an intentional curricula that foster youth students can participate in throughout their college years. Instead of outsourcing this, staff should *partner* with their campus-based cultural centers and community-based organizations to facilitate these workshops. Along with increased curricula that focuses on social justice and diversity, I also recommend that campuses hire staff that are Black and staff that have a history of foster care. Only two of the staff interviewed had a history of being in foster care.

**Increasing Racial Literacy**

Student affairs professional need an astute awareness of the ways in which race and racism operate. Having staff who are able to identify with the experiences of their students is important. Also, students being able to see themselves in the campus staff creates a welcoming environment. While increasing the structural diversity of a campus through staff hiring, I would also recommend an increased training on racial theory. Staff must know and understand the key frameworks that have utility in combating racism and other forms of marginalization. If student affairs professionals are serious about being

anti-racist and creating change on campus, a racial literate practice needs to be instituted. Student affairs professional need to understand that those who make up the majority group have and continue to manipulate social, economic, and political systems to maintain the status quo (Guinier, 2004); hegemony (in this case Whiteness) will always work in a way to protect itself and the status quo. Consequently, it is vital for us to understand the ways in which race is used to create coalitions and conflicts to produce divisions among class, geography, and within racial groups (Guinier, 2004).

Racial literacy enables us to see how racism normalizes racial stratifications. Racial literacy enables higher education practitioners to notice how race-neutral policies in fact are racist and uphold a system that grants access to White elites. Racial literacy allows social workers, child welfare lawyers, and judges to see how Black foster youth are marginalized within these systems. Racial literacy shows us how racism normalizes the treatment of Black people, and it compels us to notice and not overlook the inequitable distributions of resources and power it maintains. Without racial literacy, though, many poor and working-class White people remain distracted from recognizing that they have much more in common with poor Black people and other poor people of color (Guinier, 2004).

In educational spaces, furthermore, racial literacy is important as it means educators have the knowledge, skills, awareness, and dispositions to talk about race and racism (Howard, 2020, para 2). We fail to see the unique ethnic and cultural backgrounds of students when we evade race (Howard, 2020). When we fail to be racially literate, we

allow racist policies and practice to exist and harm students. By utilizing racial literacy, campuses and university systems need to reexamine the following:

- College applications and admissions;
- Enrollment in University Honors Programs;
- University conduct offices;
- Standardize tests (e.g., SAT, ACT, GRE, and LSAT);
- Retention strategies;
- Campus-based organizations and activities;
- Greek life; and
- College sports.

The above areas of higher education have historically engaged in racist practices. Racial literacy requires everyone who works at the campus to practice on-going reflection and dialogue about their perceptions on race, social justice, and how they will support people of color at their school (Howard, 2020).

**Staff Training: Employing a Trauma-Informed Practice**

When I asked the staff if they felt as though they were properly trained for their job or had access to professional development, most of them said "No." As the college-going foster youth population continues to grow, staff need to better understand the needs of this population and how to make the proper interventions. This study reveals that Black foster youth collegians navigate difficult and even traumatic carceral environments in their pre-college experiences; these experiences stay with them well into their college experiences. This finding is significant, as it underscores how pre-college experiences are

vital to creating or denying access to college. Their experiences with violence underscore what Hartman (2007) describes as the current prevalence of anti-Blackness in "the afterlife of slavery" (p. 6). She asserts that centuries ago, America introduced a strategic political and social system that reduces Black life. This afterlife of slavery disenfranchises Black people from health care and education, ultimately making them more likely to early death, imprisonment, and/or poverty (Hartman, 2007).

Foster care is another institution that is part of the nexus of carceration and violence toward Black people trying to survive the afterlife of slavery; this relates to the awareness legal scholar Roberts raises in her appearance on the digital media platform The Root. Roberts (2021) asserts that we cannot disentangle the legacy of American chattel slavery from its impact on how child welfare and foster care has unfairly and unjustly torn apart Black families. Being indoctrinated in carceration and violence comes with trauma.

The narratives of participants highlight the importance of a trauma-informed practice. Trauma-informed care does not seek to treat symptoms, but encourages practitioners to provide support services (Bath, 2008). A trauma-informed care seeks to see people as humans worthy of healing through safe spaces, connections, and emotional support (Bath, 2008). Trauma-informed care is a framework that should be explored as a tool to support foster youth and other students (e.g., undocumented students) who have been victims of state-sanctioned violence. This student reveals a lack of proper training in student affairs professionals who support Black foster youth collegians and foster youth in college at-large.

### Funding Foster Youth and Foster Youth Support Programs

Across the board, the participants felt as though that there was a lack of funding for their programs. In many ways, the staff felt that it was mostly because they were foster youth and the majority of the students they served were Black and Latina/o. To a lesser degree, students pointed to issues that a lack of funding created, such as a lack of staff, or their foster youth program had no dedicated center/office. This points to a lack of investment at the executive leadership level. Staff felt that without a critical mass of foster youth, it was easy for their executive leadership to overlook them. I would urge campuses to properly fund and support foster youth support programs because research shows that when foster youth have the proper support, they do better academically than their non-foster youth peers.

The research in this study also points to how postsecondary financial aid policy disenfranchises foster youth. The metrics the federal government uses to determine how much aid a student should get is antiquated and favors students from more traditional family households. State and federal legislators must reform financial aid policy to enable students who are foster youth, wards of the court, and orphans to receive more funding to support their education and basic needs.

### What about the other 90%? A Movement Toward Child Welfare Abolition

Personally, these issues and discourse resonate with me first-hand. I grew up in foster care—my brother ended going to prison for several years shortly after he turned 18, and my sister passed away from suicide when she was a teenager, too. Similarly, Ma'Kiah Bryant was only a teenager when police officers gunned her down within

seconds of arriving to her foster home during an altercation with her foster sisters. Tragically, these stories are all too common. The nine foster youth interviewed in this study, including me, are the 10% that are able to escape the system and pursue higher education. Even then, though, some of the trauma we experience still haunts us, thus hindering our ability to succeed. The child welfare system is not working. In the immediate, we need reform to provide relief and respite to the children and families who are suffering from this carceral system. In line with CRP-Ed, a "both and" approach is needed; reform with an essential vision toward radical change. In this last section, I call for a movement toward child welfare abolition.

In recent years, there has been a call for the abolition of child welfare (Roberts, 2021), and scholars have named that the system is not effective and serves more as family regulation (Roberts, 2021). Scholars must interrogate the ways in which child services have colluded with the state to surveil and criminalize Black families, specifically Black mothers. Roberts (2001) writes about how Black mothers are being criminalized because they are poor. The child welfare system—foster parents, social workers, judges, and lawyers—must confront how they participate in this system of policing and criminalizing Black families.

The same dollars that fund the various child welfare agents could be reallocated to the families who are struggling to take care of their children because of poverty—to take a child away from their family because they struggle financially, and then use taxpayer dollars to pay strangers to take care of the child is abhorrent. Removing children on the basis of neglect in the household serves as a mechanism to punish families for being poor

or low-income. Whereas similar cases of maltreatment with affluent families remain unnoticed, when it's White families they receive more resources and services to support their children. Over the past few decades, stakeholders have made multiple attempts to improve the child welfare system; still, Black children and families continue to be greatly overrepresented, and face significant inequalities in the services they receive.

Child welfare has hidden behind the idea they provide "child safety" for too long. With the disproportionate amount of Black youth remaining in foster care, it is imperative that foster parents, social workers, and other foster youth advocates better understand the role of racism in child welfare; foster care advocates need to reckon with its anti-Black racist policies and histories. Policy makers need to reorganize the funding mechanisms to addresses poverty, health disparities, food insecurity, mental health supports, homelessness, substance use, incarceration, policing, and other issues plaguing our communities instead of continuing to separate children and families. Black parents neither abuse nor neglect their children more than other races, yet Black children are overrepresented in every aspect of child welfare. Now is the time that we change that by producing scholarship that honors all layers of humanity held by those in the foster youth community.

Similar to the work of prison abolitionists, we must begin to reimagine a world in which child welfare as an institution does not exist, the research bares that is does not consider the welfare of the child. Undoing systems of oppression and institutions such as child protective services and foster care would give us the ability to reallocate supports and funding directly to the communities that are marginalized. With the disproportionate

amount of Black youth remaining in foster care, it is imperative that foster parents, social workers, and other support workers better understand the role of racism in child welfare, how to combat it, and how to support Black foster youth. We must fund in-home programs and in-home services that help families take care of their children. Child welfare institutions need to stop paying strangers to take care of other people's children.

## Summary of Chapter Five

This study embarked in new territory in a myriad of ways; it highlighted an unseen student population in higher education. The methodological approach was emergent, that lead to findings that help us better understand what it means to be Black and foster while attending college from multiple perspectives. This study's findings build on the important scholarship that discusses Whiteness, carceral logics, community cultural wealth, critical race theory, and critical race praxis in education, to name a few. This study gives higher education practitioners and administration guidance in how they can enact change on campus to support a marginalized group of students. Findings also confirmed that foster youth are not raceless and they experience foster care and higher education very differently than their non-Black peers.

Finally, this study pushed the boundaries of current scholarship on foster youth in higher education. It reveals the way in which foster youth create chosen families to persist in college, as well as highlights how Black foster youth arrive to campus with a host of community cultural wealth and how their foster youth support program. By implementing critical theories (CRT, CRP-Ed, & CCW) and utilizing a multiple perspective narrative inquiry, findings centered the lived experiences of college-going

Black foster youth—it detailed the way in which Whiteness is still endemic in higher education, child welfare, and society. Also, it centers how foster youth and their community of allies are fighting back. Findings from this study offer practitioners, policy makers, and researchers suggestions on how to create change in their sectors. When we are able to abolish dominant ideologies, deconstruct evasive practices and carceral logics, and create spaces for true community, then we can have colleges and universities that truly serve Black foster youth.

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## Appendix A

Staff Interview Protocol

**Personal and Professional Background:**

1. Can you tell me a little bit about yourself and your background?
2. How did you end up working with a foster youth support program? What about this position was interesting to you?
3. What are your day to day job duties? Please describe a typical work day.

**Personal and Professional Experiences**

4. How does your own racial/ethnic identity impact/influence your work?
5. What are some common barriers of your students? How do you navigate these challenges?
6. What are strategies you find effective for making change on campus?
7. How do you go about creating allies and coalition building?
8. How do you think your colleagues/administration perceive your work as a director of a foster youth support program? How does the administration respond to your work?

**Race and Racism**

9. How would you describe the racial climate of your campus?
10. What are the experiences of your foster youth of color on your campus?
11. Does your program integrate conversations about race and racism? If so, in what ways?
12. How does your program support the racial/ethnic identity development of foster youth of color?
13. Do you feel as though your foster youth of color are visible on campus? Hypervisible? Invisible? If so, how?

**Policy**

14. Do you notice any university policies that further marginalize foster youth specifically those who are youth of color?
15. Are there any institutional policies that you find that support foster youth of color?
17. What is your experience like in getting your university to honor the educational polices that have been created to support foster youth?
18. What institutional recommendations do you have to help with the retention of foster youth students on your campus?

**Family, Community Support, and Donors**

19. How is the program funded? Do you have any donors of color?
20. How has the surrounding community played a role in supporting your foster youth of color earn their degree?
21. How do you see family playing a role in foster youth making progress toward earning their degree college?
22. Can you share your experiences with the differences you have noticed in serving foster youth students on your campus compared to other marginalized students (e.g. first-gen, low-income) who have parents?

## Appendix B

Student Interview Protocol

***Foster Care Experiences/Identity***

1. Tell me a little bit about yourself?
2. Do you feel comfortable identifying as a foster youth?
3. What was the racial background of your placements?
4. What would you describe as a difficult experience(s) growing up in foster care?
5. What would you describe as a positive experience(s) growing up in foster care?
6. What about your foster youth identity/experience(s) do you feel the most pride?
7. How do you define family?

***Understanding of Racial/Ethnic Identity***

8. How would you describe your race/ethnicity?
9. Did your foster family identify with your race/ethnicity?
10. What kind of cultural activities or traditions did your foster family participate in?
11. What do you question about your racial/ethnic identity?
12. What about your racial/ethnic identity do you feel the most pride?

***College Experiences (motivations, navigations, and sense of belonging)***

13. When do you first remember wanting to go to college?
14. Tell me about some of the expectations you had for college?
15. How do you think your foster care experience affected your college-going experience?
16. Please share with me some of your thoughts about diversity at your college.
17. Tell me about your interactions with your peers on campus.
19. Do you see many faculty and staff that you racially identify with on campus? What is this experience like for you?
20. How do you identify or experience your race/ethnicity in different areas of campus?
21. Do you feel comfortable sharing your foster care status on campus?
22. Do you feel affirmed on-campus?

***Community Cultural Wealth (social, family, and navigational capital)***

23. How has your community played a role in you making progress toward earning your degree college?
24. How has your family played a role in your making progress toward earning your degree college?
25. How has your friends played a role in your making progress toward earning your degree college?

## Appendix C

Curricular Vita

### EDUCATION

**University of California, Riverside,** Riverside, CA
**August 2021**
PhD, Higher Education Administration and Policy

- Navigating, Resisting, and Subverting Hegemony and Carceral Violence: Understanding the Racialized College-Going Experiences of Black Foster Youth

**California State University, Fresno,** Fresno, CA
Masters of Arts in Educational Leadership and Administration, *With Distinction*
**June 2012**

- Thesis: University Retention Programs that Serve Former Foster Youth: Identifying Predictors of Academic Success

**California State University, Fresno,** Fresno, CA
Bachelors of Science in Kinesiology
**June 2010**

- Emphasis in General Kinesiology

### PROFESSIONAL EXPERIENCE

**Program Director,** University of California, Riverside
Office of Foster Youth Support Services/Guardian Scholars, (August 2015-Present)
*UC Riverside is a research one 4-year public university serving a highly diverse campus of 27,000 students*

- Provide wrap-around support to current and former foster youth
- Create and facilitate co-curricular programs that promote the academic, social, cultural, emotional, professional, and interpersonal development of students
- Build relationships with student affairs and academic affairs units to support the retention of foster youth
- Interface with case management to triage student emergencies
- Develop and maintain relationships with foundation officers, donors, and community benefit organizations
- Work with university development to author grant applications and reports that support student development
- Work collaboratively with budget personnel to oversee and manage program budget totaling over $200,000

**Resident Counselor,** San Diego State University
Educational Opportunity Program (EOP), Summer Bridge (June 2015-August 2015)
*San Diego State is public research university serving a highly diverse campus of 40,000 students in an urban area*

- Provide academic and personal support to incoming freshmen at resident (live-in) counselor
- Facilitate seminar course for incoming freshmen
- Facilitate programs educating and advocating for social justice and equity
- Manage student crisis and coordinate support alongside EOP Counseling staff

**Graduate Assistant,** University of San Diego
The Mulvaney Center for Community, Awareness, and Social Action (August 2012-May 2015)
*USD is a small predominately White private institution serving 6,500 students in an urban area*

- Coordinated week-long New Orleans cultural immersion program
- Served as liaison to the Black Student Resource Center
- Coordinated co-curricular leadership and service programs
- Helped to develop, implement, and facilitate student trainings
- Co-led Black Men's Discussion Group
- Founder and liaison to the Torero Renaissance Scholars (foster youth support program)
- Support and advise student leaders and co-directors
- T.A. Leadership courses
- Serve on campus-wide committees
- Co-create and advise groups that participate in center's spring break immersion programming
- Research and evaluate community engagement programs

**Resident Director,** California State University, Fresno
*CSU, Fresno is a teaching centered, highly diverse 4-year public university serving 24,000 students*
University Housing (June 2011- July 2012)

- Supervise, advise, and manage resident life staff
- Conduct judicial and conduct hearings
- Co-create and implement staff training
- Conduct student mediation and conflict resolution
- Conduct regular health and safety checks throughout the housing facilities

**Outreach Ambassador**, California State University, Fresno
University Outreach Services (August 2010- May 2011)

- Recruit and assist students who aspire to attend Fresno State
- Facilitate CSU Mentor workshops
- Distribute information to students regarding the admission processes to Fresno State
- Travel to various high schools (i.e. Madera High School, Hanford High School, etc.) and outreach to students at college recruitment fairs

**Special Projects Coordinator,** California State University, Fresno
Renaissance Scholars Program (August 2010- May 2011)

- Develop and implement special projects that help serve foster youth attending Fresno State
- Counsel and advise undergraduate foster youth students at Fresno State
- Assist with facilitating seminars and program orientations
- Assist with development and implementation of RSP Summer Bridge
- Develop planning strategies, data collection, and research & grant writing

## TEACHING EXPERIENCE (*Teaching Assistantship; ^Co-Instruction)

Graduate Level Courses

- University of Redlands- Diversity in Higher Education (Summer, 2020; Summer 2021)
- University of California, Riverside- Critical Issues in Higher Education: Whiteness, Power, and Privilege (Winter, 2019)^
- University of California, Riverside- EDU248R: College Student Development (Winter, 2017)^

Undergraduate Level Courses

- University of San Diego- Emerging Leaders Course (Fall 2013, Fall 2014)^
- University of San Diego- LEAD387P: New Orleans Immersion Course (Fall 2012, Fall 2013)^
- University of San Diego- LEAD387P: Leadership for Social Change (Fall 2012, Spring 2013, Fall, 2013, Fall 2014)^
- Fresno State University- University 1 Course (Fall 2010)*

## PUBLICATIONS

Peer Review Journal Articles

- Whitman, K. L., Exharos, S. (2020). The New Jim Crow in Higher Education: A Critical Race Analysis of Postsecondary Policy Related to Drug Felonies. *Journal Committed to Social Change on Race and Ethnicity.*

Special Issues Journal Articles

- Whitman, K. L. (2016). Students Living on the Margins Margin: A Critical Examination of the Literature on Foster Youth in Higher Education. *Urban Education Policy and Research Annuals*.

Book Chapters

- Ledesma, M., Jayakumar, U. M., Whitman, K. L. (in press). Race-Conscious Affirmative Action in U.S. Higher Education in an Era of Pronounced White Racial Backlash. In Lomotey, K. & Smith, W. *The Racial Crisis in American Higher Education,* Second Revised Edition. New York: SUNY Press.

- Whitman, K. L. (2018). Personal Perspectives on Providing Services to Foster Youth. In McNair, D. & Holguin, S. *New Directions in Community Colleges Enrolling and Supporting Foster Youth.* San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Reports

- Harvey, B; Whitman, K. L.; Howard, T (2020). *The Disenfranchisement of Black Foster Youth: An Analysis of Los Angeles County Public School Data.* Black Male Institute, University of California Los Angeles. https://blackmaleinstitute.org/the-disenfranchisement-of-black-foster-youth/

- Newman, C. B., Spencer, J., Leary, M., Williams, J., Powell, P., Huston, C., & Whitman, K. (2013). *Black Student Experience at the University of San Diego.* Prepared for the Strategic Oversight Committee on Retention at the University of San Diego. San Diego, CA.

Public Scholarship

- Whitman, K. L; Harvey, B. M. (December 2, 2020). *The Disenfranchisement of Black Foster Youth: How School Create a "Nexus of Incarceration" Around Them.* The Imprint. https://imprintnews.org/child-welfare-2/disenfranchisement-black-foster-youth-students/49626

- Harvey, B. M.; Whitman, K. L. (July 8, 2020). *From a Moment to a Movement: Envisioning a Child Welfare System We Have Yet to See.* The Chronical of Social Change. https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/child-welfare-2/from-moment-to-movement-envisioning-child-welfare-system-we-have-yet-see/45035

- Whitman, K. L.; Thompson, D. (June, 2020). *Being Black in Foster Care Means Surviving an American Nightmare.* The Chronical of Social Change.

https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/child-welfare-2/being-black-in-foster-care-means-surviving-an-american-nightmare/44704

- Whitman, K. L. (August 8, 2016). *Unapologetically Family.* The Chronical of Social Change. https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/child-welfare-2/unapologetically-family/20183

- Whitman, K. L. (February 25, 2016). *There is No Expiration Date on My Foster Care Experience.* The Chronical of Social Change. https://chronicleofsocialchange.org/blogger-co-op/no-expiration-date-foster-care-experience

## PRESENTATIONS

Peer Review Conference Presentations

- Whitman, K. L, Harvey, B., Mendoza, M. (2019). *The Racialized Educational Experiences of Foster Youth: Unpacking Racism, Trauma, and Family Privilege*. Institute for Teachers of Color, Riverside, CA.

- Hoffman, A., Whitman, K. L., Gamez, S. I. (2019). *Its Takes a Village: Family Privilege and Its Impact on College-going Foster Youth.* NASPA Annual Conference, Los Angeles, CA.

- Lopez, K. M., Whitman, K. L., Amechi, M, Hoffman, A., Gamez, S. I., Bennett, J. (2018). *Understanding Family Privilege: Fostering Inclusive Postsecondary Environments for Alumni of Foster Care.* Interactive Symposium. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Tampa, FL.

- Lopez, K. M., Whitman, K. L., & Young-Alfaro, M.V. (2017*). Foster Care Alumni and Family Privilege: Perspectives and Practices inside College Programs.* Roundtable: Institutional Programs in Supporting Underserved Populations. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Houston, TX.

- Lopez, K. M. & Whitman, K. L. (2017). *Supports and Hindrances of College-going Foster Youth: Perspective from Student Affairs Practitioners.* Topical Paper Session: Towards Leveling the Playing Field: Insights on the College-Going Experiences of Foster Care Alumni. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Houston, TX.

- Whitman, K. L., Amechi, M. H., Gross, J., Gupton, J., Lopez, K. (2016). *A forum on critical issues affecting foster youth in higher education: Cultivating a scholarly*

*agenda and community of scholars.* Symposium. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Columbus, OH.

- Whitman, K. L. (November, 2016). *Is a Foster Youth Liaison Enough: Utilizing Academic Capital Formation to Improve Higher Education Policy for Foster Youth.* Roundtable. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Columbus, OH.

- Whitman, K. L. (November 2015). *Students Living on the Margins Margin: A Critical Examination of the Literature on Foster Youth in Higher Education.* Roundtable. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Denver, CO.

- Whitman, K. L., Torres, J., Singh, M. (June 2015). *From the Community College to the Doctorate: Understanding the Post-Secondary Experiences of Foster Care Alumni.* San Diego Foster Youth Education Summit, San Diego, CA.

- Whitman, K. L. (April, 2015). *Students of Color from a Working-Class Background: A Qualitative Study on their Experiences at a Private, Predominately White Institution.* Roundtable. American Educational Research Association Annual Meeting, Chicago, Il.

- Whitman, K. L. (September, 2014). *Who am I, Who are We: Confronting Identity While Building Community Through Immersion in New Orleans.* International Association for Research on Service Learning and Civic Engagement Annual Conference, New Orleans, LA.

- Whitman, K. L. (June, 2014). *Private Universities Supporting Foster Youth in Higher Education.* San Diego Foster Youth Education Summit, San Diego, CA.

- Murray, D., Whitman, K.L., & Lopez, K. (October, 2013). *College-going African American Male Foster Care Alumni: A Qualitative Study of the Factors that Hinder and Facilitate Resiliency.* Research Paper. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, St. Louis, MO.

- Whitman, K. L, & Lopez, K. (October, 2012). *The Importance of Sense of Belonging Among Former Foster Youth in College.* California Statewide Foster Youth Education Summit, Sacramento, CA.

- Whitman, K. L, & Gonzalez, J. (November, 2012). Former Foster Youth in Higher Education: A Qualitative Study of their Academic Successes and Challenges. Poster Presentation. Association for the Study of Higher Education Annual Conference, Las Vegas, NV.

Guest Lectures

- Whitman, K. L. (June, 2019). *The Racialized College-going Experiences of Foster Youth. Lecture at University of Redlands.* Redlands, CA.

- Whitman, K. L. (April, 2019*). Black Foster Youth in Postsecondary Education.* Online Lecture at University of North Carolina, Greensboro. Greensboro, NC.

- Whitman, K. L. (January, 2019). *Problematizing Athletics and Entertainment: Hip-Hop and Sport as Spaces for Black Liberation and Suppression.* Lecture at University of California, Riverside. Riverside, CA

- Whitman, K. L. (June, 2018). *The Racialized College-going Experiences of Foster Youth.* Lecture at University of Redlands. Redlands, CA.

- Whitman, K. L. (February, 2018). *Personal Perspectives of a Foster Youth Program Director.* Lecture at University of Redlands. Redlands, CA.

Invited Presentations

- Harvey, B., & Whitman, K. (September 2020) Unearthing Inequities: Interrogating the Role of Race and Foster Youth Status in Educational Outcomes for Youth in Foster Care. Presented at the Black Community Higher Education Task Force Meeting, Virtual Presentation

- Whitman, K. L. (January 30, 2020). *Understanding the Racialized College-going Experiences of Foster Youth. Graduate School of Education: Justice and Equity Lecture Series*. Lecture at University of California, Riverside. Riverside, CA.

- Presentation: *Finding Your Voice in the Social Justice Movement. Diversity Dialogues.* Cuyamaca Community College. San Diego, CA. (October, 21st 2014)

- Presentation: *Understanding Social Justice as Means to Building Community.* Diversity Dialogues. Cuyamaca Community College. San Diego, CA. (May 8th, 2014)

- Keynote Speaker: Silicon Valley Children's Fund: *Yes Scholars Award Banquet* (June 2014)

- Keynote Speaker: Silicon Valley Children's Fund: *New Student Orientation* (July 2012)

- Panelist Member: California State University, Fresno**:** *Title IV-E Symposium* (April 2012)

- Presenter: 28th, 29th, & 30th Annual African- American Recruitment Conference (2009-2011)
- Keynote Speaker: Silicon Valley Children's Fund: *Yes Scholars Award Banquet* (Oct. 2011)
- Panelist: Let's Talk Conference: *Foster Parents, Social Worker and Advocates* (May 2011)
- Panelist: CSUF: *The Decline of Black Student Retention and Graduation* (Oct. 2010)
- Panelist: College Of Sequoias Access to Higher Education Conference (Jan. 2009)
- Panelist: Ensuring Educational Rights for Foster Youth Training (Nov. 2008)

## COMMITTEES, ADVISORY BOARDS AND OTHER SERVICE

- Co-Chair-University of California Foster Youth Directors Working Group (Spring 2019-Summer 2021)
- Peace-4-Kids, Board Member (Summer 2018-Present)
- Blueprint Conference Planning Committee (Spring 2017)
- Southern California Higher Education Foster Youth Consortium (September 2017-Summer 2020)
- San Diego Foster Care Education Summit Planning Committee (Spring 2015)
- NASPA-SCIHE Sub-Committee on Students Who Experienced Foster Care or Homelessness (Spring 2015)
- Foster Club/ Stuart Foundation: California Foster Youth Ambassador (July 2014-Sept. 2015)
- Committee Member- Foster Care Collaborative at USD (September 2012- September 2015)
- First Year Rep- SOLES Graduate Student Association (Fall 2012-Spring 2013)
- Advisor- Black Student Union at the University of San Diego (Fall 2012- Spring 2013)
- Silicon Valley Children Fund: YES Scholars Advisory Board (Spring 2012- Spring 2013)

- Renaissance Scholars Alumni and Friends- *Founder/ Vice President* (Fall 2011-Spring 2012)
- African-American Recruitment Conference Planning Committee (Fall 2011)
- California State University, Fresno: Student Success Task Force (Spring 2010)

## GRANTS AWARDED

- $60,000 (Fall 2020) Pritzker Foster Care Initiative: funding grant to support wrap-around services for youth at UC Riverside.
- $15,000 (Summer 2020) California Wellness Foundation: COVID Relief Grant for foster youth at UC Riverside
- $15,000 (Summer 2020) United Way Foundation: COVID Relief Grant for foster youth at UC Riverside
- $8,000. (Winter 2020). United Way Foundation of the Inland Valleys: funding grant to support wrap-around services for foster youth at UC Riverside.
- $17,500. (Winter 2020). In-N-Out Burger Foundation: funding granted to support wrap-around services for foster youth at UC Riverside.
- $100,000. (Fall 2019). Pritzker Foster Care Initiative: funding grant to support wrap-around services for youth at UC Riverside.
- $20,000. (Winter 2018). Borchard Foundation Grant: granted to fund wrap-around services for foster youth
- $250,000. (December 2017). California Wellness Foundation Grant: funding granted to fund year-round housing, professional staff salary support, and student internships at UC Riverside.
- $50,000. (November 2017). Pritzker Foster Care Initiative: funding grant to support wrap-around services for youth at UC Riverside.
- $1,500. (October 2017). Ross and DD's Discounts Grant: funding granted to support educational supplies for foster youth at UC Riverside.
- $15,000. (Fall 2016). In-N-Out Burger Foundation: funding granted to support wrap-around services for foster youth at UC Riverside.
- $20,000. (Fall 2016). Pritzker Foster Care Initiative: funding granted to support wrap-around services for foster youth at UC Riverside.

- $4,500. (Fall 2014). In-N-Out Burger Foundation Grant: funding granted to support summer internship program for foster youth at the University of San Diego.
- $1,000. (Spring 2014). University of San Diego: Center for Inclusion and Diversity Grant: funding granted to support spring break immersion program at the University of San Diego.
- $5,000. (Fall 2010). In-N-Out Burger Foundation Grant: funding granted to support summer internship program for foster youth at Fresno State.

## CONSULTING & TRAININGS

- Stapleton, L. D. & Whitman, K. L. (2018, August). Residential Life Social Justice Training. Facilitator at California State University Bakersfield. Bakersfield, CA

## PROFESSIONAL AFFILIATIONS

Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE)
2012-present

- Conference Reviewer
  2014
- Conference Session Chair
  2018
- CEP Awards Committee
  2021

American Education Research Association (AERA)
2015

National Association of Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA)
2015, 2019

## AWARDS AND RECOGNITIONS

- 2021 University of California, Riverside- Star Award, $1,000
- 2019 University of California, Riverside- Graduate Research Mentor Program Fellowship
- 2017 University of California, Riverside- Spot Award, $500
- 2015 American Education Research Association- Multicultural/Multiethnic Education Fellow, $600
- 2012 Fresno State- Edge Program: Persistence Award

- 2012 Fresno State- Kremen School of Education: Outstanding Masters Degree Candidate
- 2012 Fresno State- Division of Student Affairs: Dean's Medalist Nominee (2012)
- 2010 Nominee for the Outstanding Student Leadership Award at Fresno State
- 2010 Project ASAP Awarded Most Outstanding Student Organization at Fresno State
- 2012 University of San Diego, SOLES-Diversity Scholarship, $4,000
- 2007-10 Fresno State: Renaissance Scholars Program, $2,000 *annual scholarship*
- 2009-10 Silicon Valley Children Fund: YES Scholars Program, $4,500 *annual scholarship*