Feature

Black Youth in Foster Care and the School-Prison Nexus

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In October of 2015

a disturbing video surfaced of a white male school resource officer, Ben Fields, brutally slamming a 16-year-old Black girl, Shakara, to the ground at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina.

Fields, a deputy sheriff assigned to the school, was called to the classroom after Shakara refused to put her phone away and leave the room at her teacher's request. Deputy Fields is recorded on camera telling Shakara, "Either you're coming with me or I'll make you." Moments later, the veteran officer is observed violently grabbing, flipping, and dragging Shakara across the room as her peers watched. This viral video was instrumental in fostering national conversations about policing in public schools in the U.S. and its complicity in the overrepresentation of Black students in the school-prison nexus (Love, 2016), referring to the "web of punitive threads… which capture the historic, systemic, and multifaceted nature of the intersections of education and incarceration" (Meiners, 2007 p. 32).

While the video is jarring, there is one important detail that has frequently been left out of the dozens of stories written about the unconscionable situation at Spring Valley High School. That is, Shakara is among the 97,000 Black youth who are disproportionately represented in foster care—a system that is touted as a protective intervention for those who have been subjected to abuse and neglect (Goldman, 2003; Johnson, 2019). When minor disciplinary infractions at school are criminalized among Black children/youth in foster care, as was the case for Shakara, these youth are often labeled as behaviorally or emotionally unfit to be in a traditional school setting.

Black children/youth in foster care are disproportionately represented among those who are recommended for and subsequently placed in congregate care facilities, which provide 24-hour therapeutic care and treatment for those who have been identified as having behavioral and mental health needs (Palmer et al., 2020). Despite what is known from research about the role of racial bias in the overidentification of Black youth with disabilities (Losen et al., 2014), children/youth in foster care generally lack the advocacy of family members and other supportive adults that is needed to challenge such (mis)classifications. In this way, we see the school-prison nexus in action. That is, Black youth in foster care are funneled out of traditional school settings and into congregate care facilities, which often mirror the juvenile detentions and employ similar technologies of surveillance, punishment, and labeling.

Beckett and Murakawa's (2012) notion of the shadow carceral state offers a useful heuristic for considering the role of child welfare services in the extension of carceral state power. The shadow carceral state refers to the ways in which non-criminal institutions have acquired the capacity to impose sanctions that mirror the coercive practices of penal facilities. I argue that the foster care system, and more specifically congregate care facilities, are indeed part and parcel to the enhancement of carceral state power. This is reflected not only in their physical composition, but also within their culture (e.g., practices, policies, pedagogies), which subjects mostly Black children/youth to hyper-surveillance, hyper-punishment, and hyper-labeling—what Annamma (2018) refers to as the "pedagogy of pathologization" (p. 13).

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That research has consistently linked placement in congregate care to elevated risks of dropping out of high school, experiences with physical and sexual abuse, homelessness, and contact with the criminal justice system (Goodkind et al., 2013) is thus no surprise. Black youth in foster care are uniquely positioned within a matrix of oppressive systems (e.g., education, criminal justice system, foster care) where they experience constant criminal scrutiny, with the consequences of sanction in one system reverberating across the other. A school-foster care-nexus, perhaps?

Future Directions for Research

The foster care system is not absolved from its role and complicity in the expansion of the shadow carceral state in the U.S. Educational researchers and social scientists alike concerned with the academic, social, and life outcomes and experiences of Black youth in foster care and other racially/ethnically minoritized groups must broaden the aperture in their work to account for the ways which carceral logics permeate the multiply marginalizing structures and systems in which they are positioned. Here are four recommendations I hope scholars will consider in their research with Black youth in foster generally, and to illuminate their experiences in the school-prison nexus specifically:

1. As I have argued elsewhere (see Johnson, 2019), research on the educational experiences and outcomes of Black youth in foster care is largely race-evasive. Homogenous representations and depictions of youth in care obscure the ways in which race, and its intersection with other systems of oppression (e.g., ableism, homophobia, gender discrimination) coalesce in their marginalization and relegation. It is incumbent upon researchers to center race as a primary axis for interrogating the lived experiences of Black youth in foster care.

2. To address and minimize power asymmetries among researchers and youth, scholars should consider employing participatory research designs that position participants as collaborators in the systematic examination and co-creation of knowledge to mobilize change.

3. Merely seeking to understand social phenomenon is insufficient for transforming the inequitable structures and systems that Black youth foster care navigate. Scholarship in this area much be anchored in critical and transformative paradigms that challenge and dismantle such structures, which maintain white supremacy and reproduce race-based disparities among Black youth in foster care. I advocate for what Denzin (2015) refers to as "ethically responsible activist research" (p. 32)—research that makes a difference in the lives of institutionally marginalized people (Johnson, Anya, & Garces, In Press).
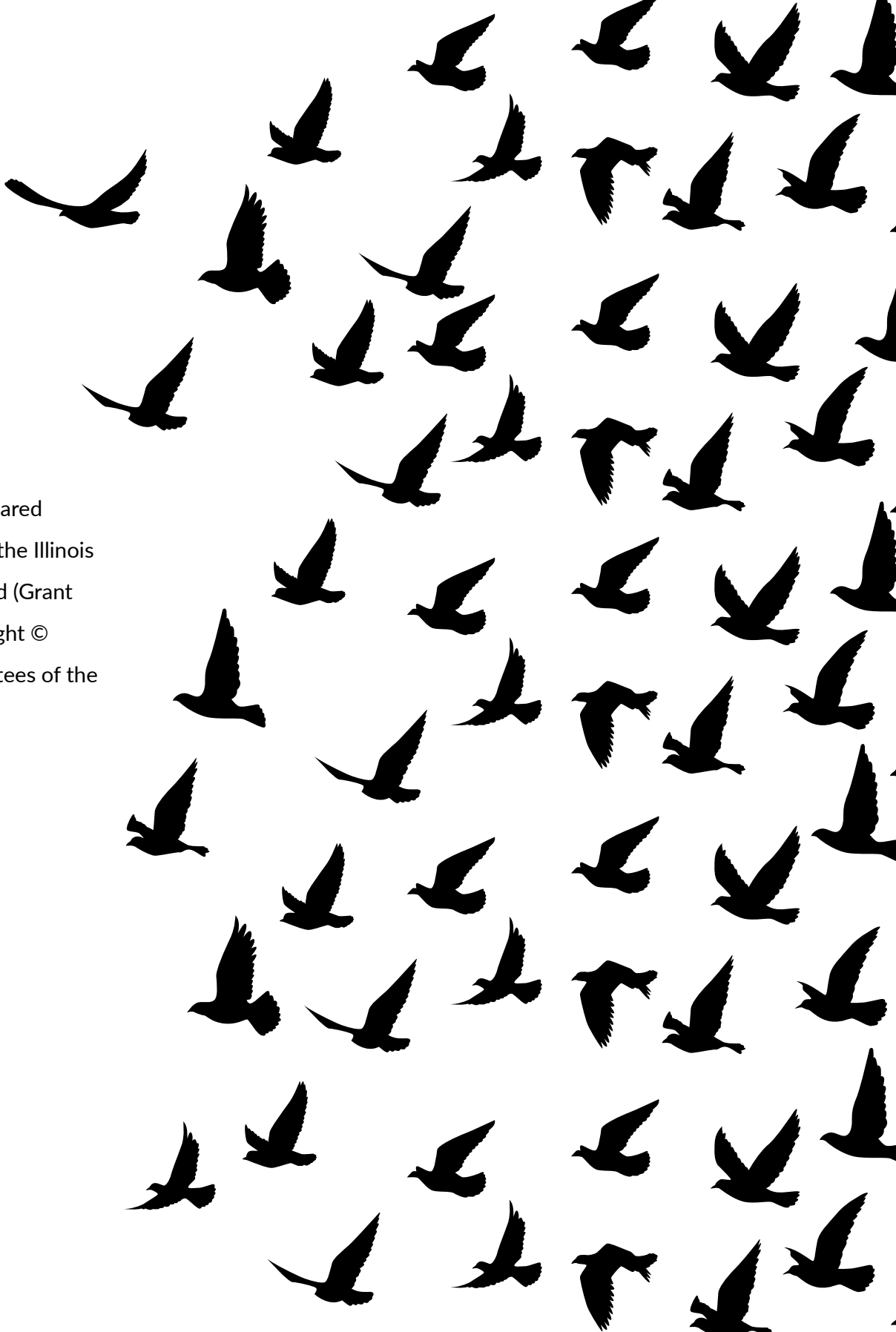
Tracing and addressing the school-prison nexus and its impact on Black youth in foster care will require theoretically grounded analyses that draw on the concept of carcerality, referring to the "social and political systems that formally and informally promote the discipline, punishment, and incarceration of individuals" (Buenavista, 2018, p. 80). Scholars should pay attention not only to the social practices that normalize the criminalization, punishment and surveillance of Black youth in foster care but also the spatial contexts in which these practices are enacted.

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