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Hello, my name is "Foster Kid"

"Once I knew, it was like, foster kid became my name and my identity. That is how everyone saw me, and no matter how hard I tried to escape, it was there like a permanent tattoo (LC, 2019)."

The United States foster care system is commonly praised for its goal to serve helpless children, while portraying foster parents and social workers as the noble servants of society. Unbeknownst to most people, the historical context of the foster care system derived from the orphaned children paying for their living wages through forms of indentured servitude. The first hand interviews in this paper, conducted from February to March 2019, as well as my own experiences, bring exposure to the oppressive, slave-like nature that fuels the the foster care system. Contrary to the goals of the Foster Care system, which include providing youth with a family-like home and support system that leads to reunification or permanency; youth are placed under unnecessary surveillance, thus engulfing into the distorted model of kinship that produces negative effects in the academic, psychological, and social realms. The foster care system acts as a mechanism of perpetuating inequity, differentiation or "othering" and overall trauma for youth. Although there is not a doubt that this institution is run by dominant forces, possessing legal, economical, and the governmental authority to enforce rules unto others, in order to raise awareness and enact reformation to bring about justice, the youth voices must be put at the center of the system. This research paper serves as as a platform to unveil the raw experiences of real trauma youth have faced within the foster care system. I will also explore the layer of an historical lens, that exemplifies how the roots of injustice within the system continuously oppress youth today. The analysis of the interviews, in combination with research around foster care and

its discrepancies, are the beginning point to exposing injustice, while raising awareness to this privatized realm.

Foster Care: A History of Injustice

To inter-sectionally understand the positionality of youth in foster care, we must begin with the origin of its welfare program in order to comprehend its gradual development into the system of hidden oppression. The foster care system does not create a long term pipe line for youth success economically, socially, or mentally. Not only does the foster care system perpetuate trauma and harm, it also fails to aid youth in their transition out of foster care and into a self-sufficient adulthood. The official establishment of the foster care system came about during the 19th century. Despite a minor reformation during the former President Lyndon B. Johnson's vision of a "great society," the system today is not far from its unjust origin. Johnson envisioned a society where "no child will go unfed and no youngster will go unschooled (Conlin, 801)." Still, foster care alone has not been successful in preventing this from happening, and evidently perpetuates the suffering of youth. According to a 2018 report conducted by the *First Place For Youth Foundation*:

"40% of the nation's former foster youth experienced homelessness by age 24. Only 78% of foster youth earn a high school diploma or GED by 21. Just only 20% of foster youth nationwide will be eligible to enroll in a postsecondary program. Only 29% of California's foster youth are employed after exiting foster care (FPFY Annual Report, 2018)."

Homelessness, unemployment, extreme poverty, neglect and lack of access to education are all reasons the Child Protective Services would be forced to remove children from their biological families. The purpose of foster care is to protect and cultivate children's growth despite their unfortunate circumstances. Ironically, the system puts children in a position that punish them for

being in these situations which are completely out of their control, for many foster homes prove to be no better than their original homes.

Foster Care in San Francisco

San Francisco's Foster youth are a marginalized group. We struggle to obtain resources to meet our basic needs, thus making us more prone to traumatic experiences that affect our persona, interpersonal relationships, academics and professional lives. The system is publicised as being a “blessing” and carefree for the “helpless children,” when the reality is that it provides little to no stability resulting in the unbroken cycle of youth falling through the cracks and ultimately being forgotten, socially rejected, and dehumanized. Another factor that contributes to the fallacy of the “haven” like foster care system is the mere fact that social workers are swamped and because they are swamped, certain checklists that have to be met on the monthly basis have been created in order to help with the load of children. Although this notion of trying to help as many children as possible may seem like a good thing, it unfortunately results in the domino effect of prioritizing the checklist, but not the children. Often times foster children find themselves living in multiple homes, some only staying for a short periods of time. Realizing that the home aspect is completely dependent of the homeowners, many of the approved foster “parents” are not driven to “take care” of these children because they genuinely care about their safety and wellbeing, but because of the one thing that many people want in abundance; money. What needs to be understood is that more money is not the only thing foster youth need and that the daily struggles of foster youth do not simply disappear because of some financial gain provided by the state. Most of the time, foster kids end up being exploited for this government

money, which creates a distortion of care and kinship that destroys any hope of youth truly fitting in and feeling whole.

Foster youth make up a significant part of the public school system and streets, these youth are part of our neighborhoods and they are not as “safe” and “supported” as the SF foster care system claims they are. According to the official website of *San Francisco foster youth services* (Sf HSA):

“Over 1,200 San Francisco children are in foster care. Most children placed in foster care have suffered trauma as a result of parental neglect or abuse... Studies of youth ... have shown they are more likely than those in the general population to not finish high school, be unemployed, and experience homelessness.”

Notice how the report only mentions the trauma faced outside of care, but fails to disclose that trauma is perpetrated within their care as well. The SF HSA website loosely defines the goal of foster care as to: protect youth, provide them with the services and funding they need for their success, recovery and wellbeing, and to overall find them a permanent home that has been extensively matched to them as a good fit. However, with the lack of dedicated on behalf some of the social workers, lawyers and advocates, corrupt homes and parents, as well as the lack of monitoring within the system, foster youth go from one dangerous and shaky situation to another.

As reported by the *National Working Group on Foster Care and Education*: “...studies indicate that foster parents, social workers, and judges who are entrusted with the welfare of the child in care too often lack the training and awareness to provide the...advocacy that children in care especially need (2007).” There is a lack of research and statistics on the abuse rates of children in the foster care system because most of them go unreported or “unnoticed...” Although the system portrays a narrative of success among children in the foster care system, the

high statistics of foster youth having low success rates in multiple areas of life does not support their supposed accomplishments of helping children. Foster youth lack protection from their biological parents and families, and have little amounts of resources that would allow for their elevation from the system. The system itself perpetuates the vulnerability of these youth and part of its continuation is due to a lack of knowledge within the general population. Many people in San Francisco, as well as in the U.S. as a whole, are unaware that the mistreatment of foster youth is so prominent because they have no connection to the system and these people also do not have access to the true histories and experiences that could make them understand. To evoke a feeling of humanity and injustice from non-foster youth and adults, the first hand stories of the oppressed youth must be heard through their own voices.

Youth Voices: Behind the Scenes of Foster Care

I have learned to live with the consequences of coming from the faulty system, but I have long questioned why the foster care system is so damaged. Foster care claims to be able to treat every child the same, by providing them with the same amount of care, resources and safety. Nevertheless, our society has learned to ignore the larger structures of inequality, racism and sexism, thus allowing for foster youth and their struggles to be erased. Factors that come into play, such as being a child of color, being older, entering care with siblings, living in a disenfranchised location and entering care in a traumatic way, all affect the quality of the care, the resources and the child's experience. Despite the various support programs that have been created, none of them are universal and as impactful enough to recreate the system as a whole and bring upon justice for every child. The label "foster youth" comes with a certain stigma, a negative connotation that sets someone apart from the societal norm. For this reason, things that

might come naturally for children who live with their biological families are a struggle for foster kids. Take for example, TW, a former SF foster youth who struggled with how to address his foster parents and siblings.

“I didn’t really want to call her mom, but I just felt so weird calling her Mrs. Laura. So eventually, when I would talk about her to friends or teachers, I just would call her mom. It came to the point where none of my friends knew that I wasn’t with my real family. Well, until they actually saw her, because I’m Black and she’s white (TW, 2019).”

TW wanted to do anything he could to fit in, even the simple title of mom versus calling his foster mom by her name was his attempt to make his life a little easier. This facade could only be established for so long as his cultural and racial identity did not match his foster family. From multiple accounts of youth, this often possesses a big issue among children of color because society, indirectly or directly says “your black, therefore your mom should be black, not white,” thus placing foster children in the awkward position of being looked at differently and not fitting in. The undeniable difference between the so-called family makes it harder to feel part of it. The dominant notion of Race and being labeled a foster youth can pose a very unique oppression for some.

Foster Youth - An Intersectional Identity

Foster youth are constantly subjected to feeling different and it is allowed through the actions of foster parents and social workers who are supported by the larger system as a whole. TW expressed that there were multiple factors that made him feel different from his foster family. Not only did he look different, but he was also treated differently than his foster parents’ biological children. TW went on to expand on what it was like being Black in a white foster home:

“It was different, I missed my family. I felt like they were scared of me. I never ate with them at the table and when I asked my foster mom why, she just told me I should be

grateful that I actually had food. I couldn't even tell anyone, because who would understand? If I said anything she'd just tell my social worker before I could even explain. (TW, 2019)"

In this case, TW's feelings of exclusion were not simply because he was a foster youth, or just because he was Black, or even just because he was a boy. It was all of these things combined - this specific experience during TW's time in foster care imposed negative ideas about many aspects of his life. Why was his foster family treating him this way? Could it be due to the fact that they had implications of the quality of care Black parents provide? There could possibly be an aspect of adultification going on due to the fact that TW was a Black boy. Oftentimes Black boys are subjected to unfair treatment because of the stereotype of danger that is attached to the label of "Black boy." Gender and race also affect the experiences of foster youth differently, this rings true for school and prison institutions as well. The stigma around this label is the first step to trying to justify why foster children, specifically youth of color *need* to be surveilled.

In foster care, social workers serve as watch dogs, on the surface level this would seem good for youth that are in need of protection, but the problem is that social workers often miss the important signs of abuse and neglect, while only being on the lookout to ensure youth are "behaving well in their homes." This is especially true for children of color; in a white dominated society, their positionality, being both black and male, such as TW's case, takes away from their identity as a child. Being perceived as older than they are and are associated with violence, results in compassion for these children to be taken away. Showing leniency for foster is key for as they are constantly being affected by unfortunate circumstances that are simply out of their control. Black boys are often treated as a danger to themselves which then warrants extra discipline and surveillance.

In her book *Bad Boys*, Ann Ferguson discusses the adultification of Black boys that can be traced to the era of slavery, and shows itself today in multiple systems including foster care. She explores how society imposes adultification on black boys as they subscribe them to being older, larger and more dangerous because of their role their intersectionalities, which include blackness and maleness. Black Boys are expected to act a certain way, there are low expectations for their success and behavior.

Specifically, blacks have been represented as essentially different from whites, as the constitutive Other...Images of Africans as savage, animalistic, subhuman ...rationalized and perpetuated a system of slavery. After slavery was abolished, images of people of African descent as.... shiftless, lazy, and of inferior intellect, legitimated a system that continued to deny rights of citizenship to blacks on the basis of race difference. And for three hundred years, from the seventeenth century to the middle of the twentieth century, this racial distinction was policed through open and unrestrained (79).

Ferguson reminds us of the roots of the “othering” of Black people that comes from the after affects of slavery, this is how the foster care system is able to operate in such a manner. The foster care system is usually made up of youth of color as families of color are more disproportionately affected by drug and alcohol abuse and criminalization. The foster care system does not properly allow children to heal from this as they are set apart from both their families and their foster homes for the intersections of their race, class, gender and age.

The themes of TW’s experience in care are very similar to that of LC’s story, which is completely different. LC, also an SF foster youth, was placed into foster care as a baby and did not find out about this other piece of his identity until he was in high school. Unlike TW, LC was able to fit into his family on a surface level because both his foster family and himself identified as Black. Since LC’s foster mom never disclosed that LC was not her biological son, calling her

“mom” came naturally for LC. He describes his experience finding out that he was a foster kid as traumatic and life changing.

“I didn’t know I was in foster care growing up. I just thought everyone had a social worker and it wasn’t a big deal. Everything changed when I found out, I never felt different, but after that I couldn’t help but know and feel that I was. I wish I never knew, it was the label that changed everything for me. Now I’m always obligated to check an extra box. If i ever get a foster kid, I won’t ever tell them because they deserve to feel not different and part of the family.”

LC’s analysis of his own identity in relation to being a foster kid is crucial to understanding the stigma that youth face even if they are not mistreated within their homes. Both LC and TW felt different and set apart from their foster families, however, this came about in different experiences. The fact that the foster care is a system that offers money as an incentive to take in children destroys the family dynamic. Motives can not simply be pure and out of love, such as in a traditional home, as the government is appointing the public sector to engage in private work. This distortion of kinship is a mechanism that enforces the differentiation that foster youth feel, no matter how good or bad their families may treat them.

The *Othering* of Foster Youth

Thus, foster youth struggle with trying to live a life as a “normal kid” while also dealing with the associations that come along with the label of “foster kid.” Even if they themselves feel that they lead a normal life, such as in LC’s case, the label and how others around them react to this label, cause a sort of identity crisis. The foster care system requires a lot from foster youth and their families, including but not limited to, weekly meetings with a social worker, dependency court every six months, proof of school enrollment and report card submissions. On top of that, foster youth may be required to participate in certain counseling or self help programs if their social worker determines that their trauma has affected their potential to be in a

permanent home, but these resources come with a catch; as they are not voluntary and serve as a mechanism of “othering” in comparison to their peers...

The difficulty in understanding the struggles of foster youth is in fact that foster youth make up such a small amount of the population, and not many people are affected by the foster care system. Beginning to understand this sort of unique oppression that foster youth face, is connecting it to different forms of oppression faced across multiple areas of intersection. The erasure of the intersectionality of the women in Mohanty’s analysis and the children in foster care allows the multi faceted structure of oppression to continue to function as it isn’t looked at for its crucial historical roots.

In Mohanty’s work “Under Western Eyes,” the Syracuse University women Gender studies professor highlights the injustice that comes with thinking sexual differentiation of women, in comparison to masculine dominance, is a singular lens. She argues that this singular view allows for the systemic oppression of intersections to continue. She writes:

An analysis of ‘sexual difference’ in the form of a cross-culturally singular, monolithic notion of patriarchy or male dominance leads to the construction of a similarly notion of what I shall call the ‘third-world difference’ – that stable, ahistorical something that apparently oppresses most if not all of the women in these countries. It is in the production of this ‘third-world difference’ that western feminists appropriate and colonize the constitutive complexities which characterize the lives of women in these countries.

In this quote, *difference* is referred within the sexual realm, highlighting the seemingly “singular” category that oppresses all women exactly the same. This is similar to the strain of difference we see with the seemingly universal foster care system that supposedly provides care and resources to all children evenly. This system assumes that all foster youth share the same

oppression of lacking living and capable parental guardians, when the many intersections of these children within the foster care system can perpetuate their suffering.

The California foster care system's goal is to provide housing, basic needs and access to education for children whose parents are incapable of caring for them for reasons such as death, violence, substance abuse and the list goes on. However, being a foster youth is just one layer of a child's identity. The systems goals are to root for reuniting children with their family if possible, if not possible, foster homes will consider adoption. This affects children differently depending on their age, race and sexual identity. Family usually desire young children while it is very difficult to keep older siblings together which are they children who have been most traumatized going from home to home and possibly facing abuse. Every foster home isn't the same; foster parent certifications are easily attainable and foster parent motives aren't closely assessed, as it is a system that grows daily. An opening in a foster home affects children differently depending on the location, if the parents are willing to spend their own resources on the child, if the foster parents have children of their own, and if cultural identities and practices align. Many older foster youth experience more time in group homes which are treated similarly to a juvenile detention center, in the sense that there are house rules, sleeping commons, limited access to personal items and electronics, and strict rules on coming and going to and from school and work. Some group homes monitor dress codes as well as strict separation by binary gender categories. This would affect a nonconforming child very differently and in turn the system oppresses them rather than lift them from the oppression they have already endured.

Foster Care + Identity = Crisis

The denial of the intersections of foster youth identity, that make their oppression even more unique, allows the cracks in the foster care system to be overlooked. The foster care system is a government funded and run, but outsourced to the public. This gives a lot of room for injustice and the exploitation of these unprotected children, as their circumstances are privatized through a universal system. While funding and resources are supposed to be allocated towards their care, they are easily put into public hands, often unmonitored, of money hungry people who are not the slightest concerned about a child who has gone through a lot, thus continuing the creation of inequality and perpetuating abuse.

This sort of identity crisis happens often at the points of intersectionality, especially in cases of mixed race identity and citizenship. Assistant Professor and geographer, Camilla Hawthorne, takes Hall's theory around crisis and applies it to her research around Italian citizenship for African migrants and their children. She highlights the sort of double consciousness that comes with being of African descent, but being Italian born when citizenship laws that are exclusive and constantly bringing difference to the forefront. Blackness in Italy isn't simply an identity but a target for discrimination and an identity crisis. She writes: "This shared condition is very much akin to what W. E. B. Du Bois called double consciousness, or what Fanon alternately described as dealing with "two systems of reference (159)." She goes on to quote lyrics of a famous Italian-Nigerian rapper named Tommy Kuti "I'm too African to be just Italian, and too Italian to be just African (159)." This same sort of double consciousness and crisis can be seen in foster youth when they age out of the system. In California, foster youth parents receive money every month to sustain the child's needs, along with monthly visits from a

social worker and other possible resources available to them such as educational programs or scholarships. All of these resources end between the ages of 18 and 21.

RQ is a former foster youth who moved around within San Francisco, San Mateo and Martinez county. She talked about her harsh transition out of foster care, that was sort of unexpected for her. She mentioned how she was so eager to get out that she did not realize she wouldn't be prepared for life after care.

“ I hated being in foster care, I hated all the things I had to do like meet with my social worker and go to court. I My foster family kicked me out when I was 18, and the only good thing about that was I finally got the money. It was good because I was able to go to school without working, until I turned 21 and there was no more money, I had no job and I was broke. It felt like I was getting kicked out all over again (RQ, 2019).”

RQ's story echos so many foster youth in the program who make one constantly check in and feel over survailed, but doesn't help prepare youth to become adults that are independent and can function under societal norms. There is so much focus on getting youth out of an unsafe situation without the follow through of making sure that they are growing up to make their own safe environment. RT had a similar situation where she chose to leave foster care at the age of eighteen, since she felt she did not fit into her home, escaping her trauma ment ending her title as a foster youth, or so she thought.

“I counted down the days until my 18th birthday, not just because I wanted to finally be able to be legal but because I wanted to finally get out of foster care. I felt like everytime I introduced myself, all people heard was: “*Hi my name is foster kid.*” But when I signed the papers to get out of foster care, I didn't feel different, the label didn't leave. I still had to check extra boxes on college apps which made me so mad, I didn't even go (RT, 2019).”

Being labeled as a foster youth is itself already a challenge that emits a reaction of pity and separates the student from their classmates, as statistically foster youth have lower rates of success in school and higher rates of arrests and trouble with the law. Having the identity of a

foster youth makes it hard to be viewed as a hard working, capable individual, and to be looked at as more of a child under very unfortunate circumstances, and that he or she belongs to the government. On the other end, the government does not treat youth any better in the sense that they do not help prepare foster youth for adulthood and the transition, as guardians are simply given money that is often exploited and are quick to cut it off once a youth ages out. Similar to how Hawthorne highlights how black youth struggle to challenge and face the structures of italians that exclude them, foster youth are in the same position, as once their foster homes no longer receive money for them, they most likely don't have a home. This sometimes happens with youth who are still in high school, such as RQ's situation, and begins to create the barriers which set them against others in regards to pursuing a higher education and professional job opportunities.

RT's situation is what W.E.B Dubois would call "*peculiar*," the way that she felt about herself was deeply rooted in the ways that other and institutions saw her. "It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity (Dubois, 1968) ." This label and identity of being a foster youth is everlasting no matter the person's age, but the "benefits" make no exceptions. How can a foster youth come to terms with being thrown into the real world when their identity has always made them the "other" and seperate from society? The system then make sure this is maintained, as they are thrown into the world already without parental guidance, possible baggage and trauma, and now with no access to any resources that would help them become college, career and life ready.

Both RT and RQ are Black women, who can be considered the most oppressed group within society alone, not even considering their identity as foster youth. Black women are oppressed for their gender and race, schooling as well as their Black male counterparts, and in this case, within foster care. The face of feminism is viewed as a white woman, meanwhile the face of oppression is a Black man, this is where Black females are marginalized and silenced. In her work, *Against captivity: Black girls and school discipline policies in the afterlife of slavery*, Connie Wun examines the intersectional oppression Black girls face in school for being both women and being black. "Black girls are criminalized and punished by the police, prison system, and foster care system (172)." She claims that Black girls are treated as "captive objects (171)" that mimic the ideology of slavery, and that because of their identities they are denied "access to agency, autonomy, and self defense against multiple forms of violence (171)." Being a woman comes with the expectations of submission, weakness and domesticity, add being Black, and it comes with having to control attitude, anger and promiscuity. Wun recounts stories of multiple girls who were wrongfully over disciplined in school for things they did not do. From all the interviews I conducted, all four people felt that foster care did they same to them; the foster care system wrongfully punished and oppressed them for things out of their control.

Making a Change

As a solution to combat the racialized and gendered intersectionality oppression of foster youth, Wun suggests that we should "encourage them to be more deviant, more defiant, and more disobedient....refusing society's mandate that they be silent about it (192)." Black girls and women are continuously silenced and told to stay in their place by society, so when they do stand up for themselves they are disciplined. This is also true for foster youth, boys and girls, Black or

non black. She suggests that resistance is the only way to be heard, rather than learning to abide by the fear and the oppression of the discipline that can be imposed by social workers and foster parents. This idea of resisting the norm by playing into the roles of “difference, divergence and disobedience” does not mean acting out, but making the oppression within the care known. The misconceptions around foster care have been deeply rooted in history, culture, media, society and education, which makes the idea of foster care being noble difficult to eradicate. So to provide understanding and continue to enforce its fluidity we must play into the narrative that deems non conforming to be bad, wrong, confused or in need of discipline.

The most powerful form of evidence and healing is a personal narrative, which is raw and true. The foster care system is a program put in place to bring justice for oppressed children, but instead has become a form of oppression. Although social workers and foster parents may be the agents that enforce this oppression through surveillance, mechanisms of *othering*, and a distorted family dynamic - they all are also under pressure from the larger system itself. Sarah Ahmed, a feminist scholar, coined the idea of feminism being “sensational” in her book *Living a Feminist Life*. She talks about how feminists are often seen as, Wun also would agree, disruptive and argumentative. This is because exposing structures, which in turn expose those who help keep them going, is disruptive of the oppression that makes daily life flow. She writes:

“Even if you still feel pain, frustration and rage, even if you feel these feelings more as you have given them more attention, they are directed in a different way. Knowledge is this achievement of direction. Your feelings are directed either at some anonymous stranger who happened upon you...nor towards yourself for allowing something to happen...but toward a world that reproduces that violence by explaining it away (31).”

This idea of feminism is the basis of this research on foster care, the feeling, this gut feeling that something is wrong, knowing it from experience and now saying something about it. The

takeaways of this research are not to aim the feelings of injustice and righteous anger at the foster homes, the youth themselves or the biological families but, as Ahmed says, the reproduction of violence which is carried by the system itself.

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