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BECOMING RESPONSIBLE ADULTS: AGING OUT OF CHILD WELFARE IN KENTUCKY

Elizabeth Saldaña

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation is based on ethnographic, participant observation and virtual fieldwork conducted with four former foster youths who had experienced aging out of foster care or social services in Kentucky, beginning in 2019 and concluding in 2022. In addition to former foster youths, I also incorporate participant observation fieldwork with lobbyists, child welfare experts, and other local advocates and service providers, as well as analyses of archival sources, journalism, government reports, text messages, and art objects. The central question of the dissertation is: In the absence of normative familial pathways to adulthood, how do young people who age out of foster care in Kentucky learn and understand what it means to be a responsible adult? Using a framework of ethical subject formation, drawn from Foucault and Foucaultian scholars, the dissertation investigates former foster youth's reflective practices and notions of freedom, in concert with the political, social, religious, racial, gender, and spatial structures that shape and inform the ways they come to understand their own responsibility and craft a good life for themselves. I argue that listening to former foster youths on their own terms reveals insights about both child welfare and family regulation, but also about an array of other aspects of adulthood that many social scientists might take for granted.

The dissertation is organized into four Parts, each of which examines ethical and moral conundrums in different aspects of normative adult life in Kentucky. Part I examines the moral landscapes into which former foster youth age out, specifically the historical religious origins of Kentucky's child welfare system and the narrative blind spots produced in the shifting of local and federal politics of child welfare reform. Part II tracks the mobilities of former foster youths, investigating the ways they move around Louisville and engage with the bureaucratic and racial organization of the commonwealth. Part III examines their relationships with caring adult mentors, and considers the challenges and difficulties associated with youth mentoring. Part IV examines their artistic and creative practices as a commentary on work and notions of the good life. In treating former foster youth as ethical subjects, capable of reflection and critical thought, I show how they incorporate, refuse, or invent new ways of abiding by normative notions of adulthood imposed on or offered to them by a number of social and state actors.

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1. INTRODUCTION

IN LOCO PARENTIS

Late in the fall of 2014, I walked in to start a Saturday night shift at the psychiatric residential treatment facility where I was working. The residents, teenagers who were either in the temporary or permanent custody of the commonwealth[1] of Kentucky, were supposed to be in their rooms for the 4:00 PM shift change. As I walked in, however, I noticed that one resident was not in her room but was instead sitting in the open space of the milieu. She was perched on one of the heavy blue plastic chairs, arms folded across her chest, a stormy look on her face.

I wasn't technically on the clock yet, and I also knew that she didn't have any particular affection for me, so rather than address her, I walked into the office to check in with my colleagues from first shift. According to them her parents had cancelled their visit for the next day, and she would not be seeing her younger siblings this weekend. I groaned internally: not only would she be unable to see her siblings, whom she loved, but she was also likely to be obstinate and difficult for the rest of the evening. First shift clocked out, we clocked in, and my supervisor and I went to talk to her.

Knowing the answer in advance, we sat down and asked her what was wrong anyway. She huffed, annoyed: she knew that we knew why she was angry, and she had no interest in rehashing the details with us. Without saying a word, my supervisor and I sat quietly, waiting her out. Eventually she gave up and started talking, explaining her frustration at losing her family visit.

[1] Kentucky is a commonwealth, not a state – I refer to it here as such to distinguish it both from other states and from "state" as a category that refers to governing.

“I don't understand,” she said, “Why am I in here, but they’re out there, getting to be a family? If they're my parents, aren't they responsible for me?”

My supervisor and I stared at each other for a moment, surprised. She had a point. It did seem incongruous, to say the least, that her parents and siblings were on the outside while she was in a locked facility. We knew we couldn’t give her a coherent explanation, so we didn’t bother to try.

“You’re right,” we said, “that *doesn’t* make any sense.”

***

Although this incident happened many years ago, I continue to tell this story when introducing my research. She asked a question that neatly captured an ongoing debate in what anthropologists call kinship: the tension between the apparently “natural” parent-child relationship and the ways actual parents diverge from it (Faubion 2001a, 3).

For many – including the foster youth in this vignette – “mother, father, and child” are categories with “required” “forms of relationality”, specifically relations of care (Trnka and Trundle 2017, 13). Normatively, parents take care of their children until they become adults; when parents are old, their adult children might be expected to take care of them (Faubion 2001a, 8–11). This duty of caring for children includes providing material needs – food, shelter, clothing – and socializing them into shared cultural understandings, behaviors, practices, emotions, and values (Chapin, El Ouardani, and Barlow 2016; Ochs and Izquierdo 2009). She understandably believed that her biological connection to her mother, father, and siblings meant that she would be, at the very least, close in proximity. She was confused and angry when the actions and attitudes of her birth parents seemingly did not match with onto the care, affection, or closeness she associated with being a family.

She couched her frustration in the language of responsibility. When people use the word "responsibility", they are almost always referring to a set of meanings that include "obligation, accountability, interdependence, and culpability" (Trnka and Trundle 2017, 3). She was noting a failure of obligation, a duty shirked. She was requesting from us a moral accounting, an explanation for their inability to fulfill their responsibilities to her, but not to her siblings.

When I first started working in child welfare, I took for granted that the legal and moral responsibilities to children were one and the same: they are not. Parents who retain legal responsibilities for their children do not always fulfill the moral responsibilities. Inversely, the people who take moral responsibility for children do not always have legal responsibility for them. When the legal responsibility for children is refused or undone – as in cases where children are removed by governments and placed with foster parents or other caregivers – the moral responsibility of the parents is not a given.

As her parents, either purposefully or inadvertently, had relinquished her into state custody, their legal responsibility for her was diminished. As staff members of the facility, *we* were legally responsible for her – we were acting *in loco parentis*, in the place of the parents, on behalf of the state. We filled out her medical forms when she was sick, told her when to do her homework, made her do chores, made decisions about her clothing and food and mental health treatments. As a psychiatric institution, we were also tasked with some of the socialization responsibilities, teaching her how to manage herself – her behavior, her emotions, her body – in ways that aligned with societal expectations outside the walls of the facility. To do this, we were paid to bond with her, to show her how to build "healthy" relationships with adults, and to encourage her to take responsibility for her own role in her family's dynamic.

Eventually, she would leave our facility, hopefully sufficiently socialized and emotionally regulated to rebuild her relationship with her family: our legal responsibility was not forever. It was a temporary status, as the facility where I worked was not a long-term care facility. At most, we would have four to six months with residents before they would move on to their next "placement", the official term for a new state-approved living arrangement. The deadline was enforced whether or not they felt ready to leave. Although she was my professional responsibility for those months, once she – or I – left the facility, she would become someone else's legal responsibility. Presumably, because we were also discouraged from having contact with her once she left, she would become someone else's moral responsibility too.

Alternatively, as is the case with most of the former foster youths who are my primary interlocutors in this dissertation, they might age out; turn 18 in state custody, thus becoming ineligible for care given to children, and in many cases, unceremoniously released from the foster home, group home, or care facility with no specific destination afterwards (M. Courtney et al. 2021). Aging out is a worst-case scenario for many child welfare officials. It means that the ostensible objective of state-run foster care – to temporarily house a child until a family can assume responsibility for them – has failed. In aging out, legal responsibility shifts from the state or state actors to the former foster youth. Moral responsibility, on the other hand, can theoretically be picked up or refused by anyone: former foster youths, birth families, foster parents, staff members, service providers, friends, partners.

These early changes in legal responsibility – from parent to state to employee to self – the moral responsibility for socializing and caring for foster youths *could* have meant that responsibility was widely distributed, that everyone played a role. Like parenting, however, this responsibility hardly a given. Instead, the ways that we as staff members cared for foster youths

in state custody were influenced by all manner of possible conditions: situations at home, physical capacities, value systems, on-the-job experience, homes of origin, race, education. In short, decisions about how to care for children in our custody – to act *in loco parentis* – were as much the product of individual choices as they were subject to economic, interpersonal, and political conditions.

I have found James Laidlaw's work on agency and responsibility a productive way to understand how responsibility works while accounting for both individual choice and a range of structural contexts (Laidlaw 2010). In outlining a theory of responsibility, Laidlaw argues for a more consequentialist approach to understanding "agency". Instead of understanding agency as the ability of someone to enact their own will, he understands agency as an emergent quality, visible only in the ways that people morally account for the roles people play in an event. To analyze responsibility as an interpersonal, social phenomenon is to analyze the ways people take or assign responsibility for their actions and inaction. In Laidlaw's way of thinking about responsibility, people might "take responsibility" for something over which they had no apparent direct control – a late bus, tripping and knocking someone over, a sneeze. This phenomenon of apologizing and making amends, he argues, shows that people take or assign responsibility as a way to explain the moral linkages between occurrences and consequences.

He derives this way of thinking about responsibility from a long line of anthropological thinking about moral cause and effect. Citing Douglas (1980) and Gluckman (1972), Laidlaw returns to Evans-Pritchard's comparative writings on the Azande and the Nuer (1976; 1940). These, he argues, directly deal with the idea of an accident. To call a misfortune an accident – something Evans-Pritchard frequently saw among the Nuer – is to acknowledge an absence of human agency in causing that misfortune. An accident is no one's fault. However, Laidlaw

contrasts this with how the Azande attributed harm or misfortune to witchcraft. With witchcraft, a human agent – who may or may not have done witchcraft on purpose – is responsible for the harm, and to address the witch directly is to address the harm. It is subtle, but Laidlaw sees Evans-Pritchard as disaggregating notions of culpability and repair; one can be sorry for harm even if it wasn't purposeful. Figuring out where these notions of responsibility match or diverge, Laidlaw argues, can be fruitful sources of insight in anthropology (Laidlaw 155-157).

Laidlaw's theory is helpful to think with when it comes to foster youths and the cast of people – government officials, facility employees, their families and friends – that make decisions about caring and taking responsibility for them. What do former foster youths and these other actors take or refuse responsibility for? How do they explain their reasons for doing so? What do they blame others for, and why? In keeping with the temporary nature of childhood, there is also a gradual shifting of both moral and legal responsibility from parents – or their substitutes – to their children. Part of that responsibility means guiding foster youths into adulthood – how does this change when children become young adults?

I start here, with this young woman's question, and all the questions I had in response. In this dissertation I examine Kentucky's child welfare system and aging out from the perspectives of those who lived in it, or who are supporting those who did. I examine the ways former foster youths and a variety of other actors understand, reflect, and articulate their own agency and responsibilities, amidst changing policy landscapes (Part I); their mobility through built environments and infrastructures (Part II); in the relationships between caring adults and former foster youths (Part III); and in their creative practices and work habits (Part IV). The argument is simple and follows from my experience with the young woman in this opening vignette: listening

to young people can be challenging, but can also offer tremendous insights into responsibility, care, and what it means to become an adult.

THE SHIFTINESS OF "ADULTHOOD": UNCOUPLING AGE, MILESTONES, AND RESPONSIBILITY

In the United States, arguably the clearest dividing line between "adult" and "not-adult" is a legal definition of biological age. Legally, eighteen-year-olds are adults. When people turn 18 years old, they are eligible to vote, ostensibly because they are now old enough and therefore responsible enough to take on the burdens of civic participation. Because they are able to take on this responsibility, they are also understood to be responsible enough to be held accountable for violating the social contract of the law: criminal punishments become harsher at 18 years old, and as legal adults they can be subject to capital punishment. They can also join the military, and for young men, are required to register for the selective service: as full civic participants, they are also understood to be willing and able to share in the defense of the country.

Of course, these definitions fall apart almost immediately. Restrictions tied to age abound. Driving, gambling, drinking, and age of consent laws are different nearly every American state, and one right does not imply another. Young people who receive draft exemptions, for instance, do not subsequently lose the right to vote, nor do women lose the right to vote because they do not register for the selective service. Minors – especially Black and Brown children – are routinely "tried as adults", especially those who are 16 or 17 years old (Hawkins and Kempf Leonard 2005). Those who are tried as adults are sentenced as adults, and trial and sentencing disparities along race, class, and gender lines illustrate that, even in these ostensibly transparent and clear legal definitions, the line between "youth" and "adulthood" is

quite malleable (Emens 2008; D. Scott 2013; E. S. Scott, Steinberg, and Bonnie 2015). Biological age and the rights and responsibilities it confers are not attached to one another.

Age – and its association with rights and responsibilities – is not a stable, 1:1 correlation, making it what Deborah Durham calls a "shifter" (Durham 2004; 2017). A shifter, a term Durham borrows from linguistics, is a general word that refers to something at once specific in space or time: "today" and "tomorrow", "here" and "there" are terms that, to be fully understood, require not only a speaker, but dates, times, and locations, orientations in time and space. Shifters index and constitute a specific relationship between the person uttering them and the referent. They are both "relational" – indicating a relationship between two things – and "pragmatic", where people adapt the term towards their own ends, but not without a broader negotiation about the acceptability of using that term.

"Youth", Durham argues, is a shifter because when people make claims about "youth", they are indexing specific relative relationships between those designated "youth" and a larger claim about the meaning of youth in that place and time. She compares usages of the word "youth", in Botswana and across a range of anthropological inquiries about youth; she observes that people use "youth" to refer to a wide range of ages, biological states, social statuses, and legal rights and responsibilities (Durham 2004; 2017). What she shows is that "youth" is malleable, available to anyone who wants to make use of the term, and that understanding its definition in context reveals dividing lines between different parts of the population. One of Durham's examples the way men order themselves into a hierarchy of rings at weddings and funerals at her field site in Mahalapye. The hierarchy is based partially on age, marital status, number of children, and income or educational achievements; younger men who are brave or accomplished attempt to move from the outer ring into the inner ring (the higher status). The

relative acceptance, deference, or hostility of the already in in the inner men reveals the varying ways that men might be considered to be more or less "youth" or "adult". In this sense, "youth" shifts, depending on the men present and the relative value of different adult-like qualities present.

Durham doesn't limit shifters strictly to youth studies, but rather notes that many social categories are equally if not more malleable: racial, gender, and class categories are also shifters, indexing relationships between people and groups. Likewise, kinship terms – mother, father, sister, brother – are shifters too. Durham's analysis is helpful to think with because it offers some context to the assortment of legal and social definitions of youth and family which former foster youth must navigate. Thinking of these categories as shifters also places a demand on researchers: to fully comprehend what these terms mean to people who are using them requires that I take stock not only of their statuses, dates, places, and times, but also analyze *why* they might use these terms, and what kind of work such terms accomplish for them.

I start here with legal definitions of adulthood – and the ways social life undoes them – because the legal assumptions about biological age are the basis of aging out: when young people reach age 18, the state cedes legal responsibility for housing, feeding, clothing, and nurturing to young people themselves. The shift of responsibility from state to young adult is not absolute. Increasingly, most state governments offer newly minted 18-year-olds the opportunity to "recommit" themselves into extended care for up to three years; they age out at 21 instead of 18. Recommitment typically involves staying in some form of an Independent Living Program (ILP), which offer a variety of services including free or subsidized housing; job and life skills training; educational support; cash and childcare assistance; mental and physical health care; and support networks of mentors, volunteers, and paid service providers who help youth navigate

social service bureaucracies. For those who do not recommit, they nonetheless are eligible to receive a variety of other services. Former foster youths qualify for an education voucher, many of which are federally funded through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program which allows them attend college or vocational training free of charge (Fernandes-Alcantara, n.d.); this expires at 26 in Kentucky. Similarly, former foster youths are eligible for health insurance coverage through Medicaid, regardless of their income level, until they turn 26.

Recommitment is a relatively new phenomenon; it became more widely available, and a more desirable option for foster youths, in the wake of the pandemic (discussed below). Still, nationally, around three-quarters of foster youth actually recommit to the full length of time that is offered (Wulczyn et al. 2017).[2] In exchange for services and resources, foster youths relinquish some of their freedom to stay in the programs. They might be asked to forego friendships or romance, live in undesirable neighborhoods or poorly maintained facilities, maintain specific grade point averages, or take jobs or job training that do not interest them. These restrictions can, for many foster youths, feel overly constraining. This may be especially true for foster youths who age out of facilities highly restrictive facilities: in my former workplace, girls could not go to the bathroom or grab a tampon without asking a staff member, as access to these basic human needs were behind locked doors.

Even for those who do recommit, foster youth sometimes find that they don't necessarily feel any more prepared for adulthood at 21 than they did at 18. In a conversation I had with one young man who recommitted, he described his ILP as delaying, but not preventing, feeling thrust

[2] The data on these numbers is quite old, ranging from 2001 to 2016, depending on the report used. Wulczyn et al. (2017) found this three-quarters figure from survey data collected in 2016, based on 47 states or territories. Surveys were sent in 2015 to Independent Living Coordinators in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, and the District of Columbia. I could not locate Kentucky-specific information as of October 2022, though it is likely that the numbers exist in the National Youth in Transition Database, through the Children's Bureau.

into the world without being ready. Although he had received housing and support services for an additional three years, he moved in with his mother and grandmother upon aging out and felt ill-equipped to either go back to school or join the workforce. The availability of services and resources does not guarantee that foster youth know enough to access them, nor does it guarantee that an additional three years will give them enough time to learn and practice the skills and habits necessary for the vision of successful adulthood implied by the provision of housing, educational resources, and job training. Think of Us, a research thinktank founded by and for former foster youths, put it succinctly in their report on aging out: "For foster youth, we found that "aging out" is simply a system-sanctioned euphemism for being abandoned and left to their own devices—unhealed, unprepared, and unsupported" (Cancel et al. 2020).

Although I have sketched here only the barest contours of services available to foster youth once they age out, the variability of ages at which services expire illustrates Durham's point about the shiftiness of "youth" and "adulthood". The ages at which young adults are expected to shoulder more of the responsibility for their basic needs shows how adulthood is not merely a switch to flip upon turning 18, or even 21. Instead, it is a gradient of skills, practices, and privileges that foster youth might choose, refuse, or be unable to access.

Former foster youths are not, of course, the only young people who might struggle with this transition to adulthood: with perhaps the exception of the Samoan girls who were the center of Margaret Mead's work, the space between "childhood" and "adulthood" is often portrayed as fraught, tumultuous (Finn 2001). What is new, however, is a growing concern about a perceived delay in adulthood. One only need look at news headlines about the deaths of various industries, attributed to millennial or Gen-Z under-consumption of everything from paper napkins to houses, to get a glimpse of a creeping concern about the inability of young people to fully "grow

up". This phenomenon is not limited to the United States. Rather, versions of it seem to be happening globally: in the opening pages of *Elusive Adulthoods*, an edited volume about this phenomenon, Durham describes how elders characterize young people from Zambia, Rwanda, Guinea-Bissau, Ethiopia, India, China, Japan, and post-Soviet Georgia as people who "cannot grow up" or "attain adulthood", who are "waiting but not progressing", unable to find a foothold in "an employment landscape that no longer promises stability" (Durham 2017, 1).

The sense of delayed or elusive adulthood points to a central piece of how youth and adulthood are problematized. Delay implies a timeline, a tempo, in which transitions normatively occur (James and Prout 2003; Kromidas 2020). It is this temporal aspect that produces what are broadly construed as social problems in sociology and social work. The youth services literature, for instance, treats teen pregnancy as a problem because young women are having children "before they are ready", they are "out of time". Such temporal problems are understood to have discernible causes and implementable solutions: sex education, contraception, job training, education. In this way, young people can be brought into line with the appropriate or properly timed order of this transition from youth to adulthood.

I explore some of the structural dimensions this transition to adulthood in the first two parts of this dissertation. In Part I, I consider the ways that journalists, policy makers, and child welfare experts have produced narratives and expectations about childhood and adulthood. In Part II, I consider how responsibility is baked into the built environment and regulatory landscapes of Kentucky, specifically through cars and transportation. In both parts, I outline what Faubion calls "subjection"[3], or the ways that people are labeled or *subjected to* forms of power

[3] To clarify, Faubion characterizes "subjection" as a "backdrop" of Foucault's much broader concept of "subjectivation", the process by which people are "labeled or made into subjects of one or another kind" (Faubion 2001a, 12). The distinction is important: subjection, as I use it here, concerns the shifting

(Faubion 2001a, 12). In both cases, I look specifically to laws and policies that govern former foster youth when they are children and some of the new forms of bureaucratic regulation to which they become subjected when they become adults. I start with laws and examine how specific policies became politically possible, and make inferences about the motivations of those legislators, public interest groups, or individual actors who were involved in making those laws a reality.

People are not merely subjected to power, however, and even in tightly constrained circumstances, they are also capable of making choices. Law hardly determines the course of life, and in the latter part of the dissertation, I move from a consideration of how foster youth navigate forms of legal subjection to how they develop a sense of self as not only legal actors, but as social actors. How do they absorb, reject, or rework the terms of their subjection as adults, and how do they relay their desires and priorities to the legal and bureaucratic apparatuses that shape but do not determine their lives?

BECOMING ETHICAL SUBJECTS

Earlier, I distinguished between legal and moral responsibility for former foster youth. In the last section I discussed how assumptions about age, biology, and legal culpability are yoked together, and how the lengthening of "adulthood" is altering policies affecting foster youth who age out. In this section, I continue this line of discussion, moving from analysis of legal

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relations of power and domination; as they age, former foster youths become subjected *to* different laws, regulations, and other forms of formal power that they did not when they were in the custody of the state as minors. Subjectivation, on the other hand, is not strictly the imposition of identity, but rather how people wrestle with being labeled as racial, gendered, or kinship subjects. Subjectivation includes all the ways people might grapple with such imposed labels, along with the ways they cultivate a relationship with themselves *as* subjects. As a whole, the dissertation explores the ethical subject formation – the subjectivation – of former foster youths; in these chapters specifically, I focus on the forms of self-cultivation made possible by legal subjection.

responsibility to questions about moral responsibility. In anthropology, discussions about moral responsibility appear most often in writing about ethics (Mattingly and Throop 2018). In particular, scholars borrowing from Foucault's work on ethical subject formation have produced fascinating and illuminating commentaries on individual and collective choices amidst changing and conflicting institutional and social norms (Robbins 2004; Mahmood 2011; Davis 2012; Trnka and Trundle 2017). My questions are in this vein: How do people learn and implement an idea of a responsible self? What do they think are their duties and obligations? To whom, and from whom? What constitutes a "good life" for former foster youth, and most importantly, who decides – those with forms of structural power or social capital, or former foster youths, who most often have neither?

In *The History of Sexuality Volume II,* Michel Foucault turns to Greek ethics from the fourth century B.C.E. as part of his broader genealogical project investigating how "we" – meaning Western Europeans and Americans – developed a moral sensibility around sex and pleasures (1990). For Foucault, ethics is a consideration not only of the actions and practices people take and assign moral meaning to, but also the ways people come to understand their own motivations, moral values, and selves. In the book, he analyzes how Greek philosophers wrote about dietetics, economics, erotics, and true love. In each of these arenas, ethics is less about following strict moral rules about right and wrong than it is about developing a relationship to oneself as ethical material, as a self that can be worked on, altered, and shaped according to one's own judgment (Faubion 2001b, 85–86; Keane 2014, 8; Foucault 1990).

For Foucault and for many of the anthropologists he inspired, ethics is "the reflexive practice of freedom", a term I borrow from James Faubion's reading of Foucault in his work on the ethics of kinship (Faubion 2001a, 12). In this model of ethics, ethics requires two things:

reflection, a period of deliberation, rumination, thought; and freedom, the ability to purposefully choose from a variety of actions. In the absence of choice, people cannot become ethical subjects, but simply enact rules or habits. In Foucault's theorization, ethics cannot be forced or mindlessly enacted; it is not a habit, or something done unthinkingly. Ethics is not only about the actions or decisions one makes, but about the process of deliberation and the sense of self enacted through deliberating and acting. Ethical subjectivity is the state of thinking of oneself *as* a self, capable of choosing between different moral values, rules, and systems.

It is this capacity for critical thought and reflection that I saw in my dealings with the young woman in the opening vignette – a glimpse of a person who was deliberative, grappling with competing understandings of what it means to be a responsible adult, of assigning duties to one person and trying to figure out how she might respond to the perceived failures of others in fulfilling their obligations to her. She asked *us* the question about her family's responsibility, though it is hard to say if she expected an answer – perhaps her question was more rhetorical than literal, but the possibility of deliberation captured my attention, then and now. In this dissertation, I am interested in not only the terms of subjection – legal, economic, political – but in considering more broadly the possibility of ethical deliberation and actions among former foster youth.

FREEDOM AS PRACTICE

At the outset of this project, I focused on the failings of the state to provide for the children they had taken into custody, and in the aftermath, the barriers and hindrances that former foster youth had to navigate. I understood child welfare involvement as a form of unfreedom, surveillance, and harm. I understood young people in foster care to have little or no

power: they rarely got to choose how they were going to be mobile, where they would go, when they would go, or how they would be treated when they got there. At the conclusion of the project, I stand by those initial assumptions. Foster care is a system of restraint, wherein the people who are affected by child welfare might try compliance, defiance, or other legal apparatuses to get out of dealing with it (Fong 2020; D. E. Roberts 2001; Lee 2016a; D. Roberts 2022; Dettlaff et al. 2020).

It was this presumption of unfreedom that prompted me to look towards the maneuvering and work that foster youth did in state custody as a *practice* – not an achievement or a state – of freedom. I understood them to subjected to the power of others, struggling to become subjects of their own power. While I was working in residential care, I primarily thought of my job as enforcing unfreedom, but every day I also saw how the young women in state custody wrestled control away from us. I saw them as striving for some kind of freedom, whether through refusal of care (Shange 2019a) or a strategic reframing of the terms of their subjection (Carr 2010b). The young woman in the opening vignette was a clear example of both: she refused our concern, at least initially, and called into question the moral coherence of her parents' decision to send her away while keeping her siblings at home. Although her only audience for this critique were staff members who, like her, had little control over her home life, the challenges she posed to her own subjection transformed how I understood my job and role in reproducing a system that legitimized her suffering.

When foster youth age out of care, they acquire a new kind of freedom[4] from state constraint, though they become subjected to other forms of state and social power. The freedom

[4] Freedom is not synonymous with liberation and Laidlaw is careful to distinguish between the two. One might exercise freedom within moral, political, or other social constraints – much as the young woman in the opening vignette – without fully undoing those constraints. Liberation, in contrast, works to undo

involved in being released from state custody was a freedom to move, act, and fashion oneself in ways that felt "right". In Laidlaw's reading of Foucauldian ethics, these practices of freedom are always contingent on historical and political conditions; there is no freedom without contextualization (Laidlaw 2002, 324). In Part I, I describe these political and historical contexts, which come to bear on the legal and social circumstances in which former foster youth existed during fieldwork. Throughout the rest of the dissertation, I trace the ways that former foster youths exercised their newfound freedom in their interpersonal relationships, their attempts to navigate infrastructures and bureaucracies, and the ways they organized their "free" time. In analyzing these practices, I show how they were both navigating the moral discourses prevalent in Louisville and Kentucky, while making active decisions about how to abide by them or refuse them, or to invent new moral rationales for themselves altogether. In order to access these practices of freedom, I sought out the other aspect of Foucault's theorization of ethics: their reflective practices, and the absence of them.

REFLECTION

Reflection is a curious ethnographic object, something that on its face seems easy to locate but in practice might not be. Cognition and language are not universal, and neither is rapport – can researchers ever really tell when someone is reflecting on themselves or their actions? What form does reflection take, and how can people relay what appears to be an inward-facing activity to outside viewers? Importantly, how can ethnographers trust when someone is being honest with them in their reflective practices? Identifying and analyzing reflection are

these systems (Laidlaw 2010, 162). Their practices of freedom did not always lead to liberation, for themselves or for others.

methodological problems for me – what utterances, or bodily activities tell me that someone is reflecting, and how can I discern the moral values or rules under consideration?

Anthropologists of ethics have grappled with reflection, most often identifying reflection in interactive language practices (Laidlaw 2016). Joel Robbins, on his work on the Urapmin of Papua New Guinea, notes a handful of familiar reflective practices: the Urapmin write down their sins, go to confession, keep track of their own wrongdoing and seek forgiveness and accountability for it (Robbins 2013). Webb Keane locates reflection in a wide variety of occasions and contexts: quips (2014, 4), conversations between parents and children (2014, 18), gossip (2014, 12). Nearly all of his examples are, perhaps unsurprisingly for a linguistic anthropologist, focused on language interactions – it is in the realm of interactive discourse that he finds and analyzes ethical reasoning and accounting for oneself (2014, 4). He takes a different tack than Robbins, in that he is looking for the unconscious ways that people work out ethical dilemmas – his starting point is that everyday life presents occasions for ethical reflection, and that there are moments where implicit moral codes and conflicts become explicit.

In the field, I also focused on interactions, looking for ethical reflection in conversation, quips, offhand comments, and other spoken language. Keane's suggestion that ethical values become most apparent when people are asked to account for themselves – when others explicitly ask people questions about the motivation or meaning behind such unconscious comments – are the moments when ethical reflection becomes most prominent (Keane 2014, 5). When former foster youth and adults alike had qualms or dilemmas, I asked questions about which values and which selves were at stake for them in their wonderings and listened carefully for mentions of value, insights into their views on right and wrong.

Most often this took the form of "feelings talk", when people named explicit emotional states ("I'm angry") or expressed a sense that something felt "right" or "wrong". Feelings talk worked as a good proxy for ethical talk, because often, feelings were a reaction to disconnection between actions they felt they should or must do, obligations that fulfilled different virtues but contradicted with one another. Moreover, feelings talk was often readily available. I describe more in the methods chapter some of the challenges I faced in earning the trust of my interlocutors, but after some time, I became a person with whom people discussed their problems, worked out their thoughts. This was especially true for mentors to former foster youth, most of whom found their preferences and behaviors to be confusing or infuriating. They asked me to listen, and they asked for advice – in these moments, reflection became a shared activity, the two of us working through the conflict between their feelings and their values. Former foster youth occasionally asked me for advice, but our conversations were often far more meandering; gossip, popular culture, music, and discussions about family and loved ones were typically the substance of reflection. Like Keane, Robbins, and other anthropologists who analyze ethics through interaction, I was often directly involved in the reflective practices of my interlocutors.

At the same time, I also understood the limits of language for ethical reflection. Language might not capture everything, but actions or activities might. In Part IV, I describe the creative practices of former foster youth – art, music, hairstyling, craft – to try to understand their value systems regarding the balance between pleasurable pursuits and the necessities of providing for themselves. In combing through artistic endeavors, I watched, celebrated, and in some cases, taught the production of arts and crafts. I listened to both language and bodily reactions to understand what feelings art brought up for them, and for how they reacted to work and earning a livelihood.

In understanding the limits of language, I also wanted to make room for the analysis of nonengagement, for the reflection that might not be available to the public – me, or anyone else. In his work on quiet, Kevin Quashie posits that interiority – of keeping things to oneself – is itself a practice of freedom, in that doing so is a way of escaping the confines of the social. In *The Sovereignty of Quiet*, Quashie reaches for Black literature and art forms, forms of expression that can capture a quality of quiet and preserve what he calls the sovereignty of the interior (2012). Quashie starts with the premise that there are forms of expression and resistance among Black communities that often take the form of public, open defiance. He lists examples of marches and protests and acknowledges the importance and the power of loud and public fights against racism. However, he notes, a problem emerges when these forms of expression become the *primary* mode of engagement for Black communities. He levies a critique of the idea that in order for Black communication and resistance to be powerful, it must be available to the public.

Instead, he offers "quiet" at once concept, metaphor, quality, and practice, one that is essential, "inevitable" and "already there" (2012, 6). He writes,

> Quiet is often used interchangeably with silence or stillness, but the notion of quiet in the pages that follow is neither motionless nor without sound. Quiet, instead, is a metaphor for the full range of one's inner life—one's desires, ambitions, hungers, vulnerabilities, fears. The inner life is not apolitical or without social value, but neither is it determined entirely by publicness. In fact, the interior— dynamic and ravishing—is a stay against the dominance of the social world; it has its own sovereignty…In humanity, quiet is inevitable, essential. It is a simple, beautiful part of what it means to be alive…An aesthetic of quiet is not incompatible with black culture, but to notice and understand it requires a shift in how we read, what we look for, and what we expect, even what we remain open to. It requires paying attention in a different way. (2012, 6)

For Quashie, quiet is a metaphor for the interior, an escape from oppression "outside", not because Black people are independent of others but because they are not strictly bound by the unfreedom of social and racial systems of oppression. Although I am not in the business of

critiquing forms of expressivity or political engagement among Black communities, it is important to acknowledge that Quashie's theorization emerges from a specific set of debates and questions among Black literary theorists. He carves out a space for something else, forms of expression that do not require the public or the exterior: instead, he wants to theorize quiet, a sense of stillness and of inwardness, of not allowing or offering up one's resistance or defiance.

Quiet poses a soft barrier, a way of engaging with the world through disengagement. To simply disallow external forces into one's thoughts or inner world is a form of resistance to resistance – it is not the denial of access, but a shift in focus to oneself rather than reaction to external forces. It is this retreat inward that characterizes the sovereignty of the interior, the power to be found in eliminating a focus on others.

Quashie's theorization of quiet stayed with me as I considered my fieldwork practices, and on the practice of reflection itself. Although anthropologists have productively and powerfully theorized refusal as a practice of denial, boundary-making, and reclamation of space (McGranahan 2016; Shange 2019b), I found former foster youths were more likely to simply change the subject, or go silent during our times together. I did not understand them to be refusing relationships or help, but rather to be preserving the sovereignty of their own interiors. They were embracing quiet. There are things I will never know about them, and to note and respect this boundary is an ethical choice for me, though it of course leaves significant gaps in my understanding of them and of their experiences in and out of foster care. It also meant, for me, respecting the boundary established by families and friends of my interlocutors – many of them did not want to talk to me for reasons I will never know.

The forms of public expression and unknowable interiority Quashie analyzes in Black literary forms are specific to Black cultural studies, not necessarily generalizable to everyone

who experiences state violence. His project is a critique addressed to other Black literary scholars, and the alternative he proposes is intended to address the specific problem of imposing an idea of confrontational expressiveness onto analyses of Black culture. To recuperate quiet as an analytic is to recuperate the full lived experience of Black life, to not reduce Black experience in the United States to resistance and violence. He is not, by any means, glossing over or denying the presence of political violence or racism or the formation of identity: instead, he is arguing that people making dinner late at night in the kitchen after a long day's work is also significant, that the unmarked mundane moments are also important (Quashie 2012, 51). Taking cues from Quashie's project of uncovering the full spectrum of human experience amidst various kinds of violence and regulation, I hope to also attend to these dynamics – and to make space for the quiet to which I do not have access – in the cases of former foster youths.

Quashie's concept helps me account for both the explicit and unknowable aspects of moral reasoning. External viewers, whether anthropologists, social service providers, families or friends, might never get an answer about the motivations for actions or practices that seem unfamiliar or ill-advised, and how anthropologists react to these unknowables is also the subject of ethnographic description and analysis.

CONCLUSION

In this Introduction, I have outlined the origins of this project – in an institution, with an angry and hurt fourteen-year-old girl, who wanted moral coherence where there may not have been any. I have also attempted to sketch some of the theoretical and conceptual debates that inform my scholarly analysis of the question she posed about responsibility and the freedom to make choices that can help as often as they can harm.

In the pages that follow, I want to do the work of putting the voices and actions of former foster youths into context, to prioritize and engage with them on their own terms. However, they do not exist in isolation – their projects of self-making are social, political, material, and in some cases, invisible, unknowable.

Throughout the dissertation, I show how the goals of former foster youths sometimes match, but often diverge from, the goals held by other actors who hope to engage them. Mentors, family members, friends, state actors, social service providers – all of them have opinions and ideas about how foster youths ought to live their lives. Many of those ideas are to be found in culturally normative claims about what defines adulthood, such as employment or educational achievement. On a far more intimate level, caring adults and peers might have had a personal stake in the decisions of my young interlocutors – hoping to help them avoid struggle, confusion, hurt, and defiance, but without any real control over the outcomes of their choices.

I linger on the importance both of ethnographic blank spaces and the importance of sustaining the ambiguity of their newfound freedom as a cautionary measure for myself – working with foster youths, I have found it easy to fall into a trap of either subjugation or romanticization, something Aimee Meredith Cox cautions against in her study of Black girls at a homeless shelter Detroit (Cox 2015, 9, 34). To treat young people as ethical subjects amidst shifting cultural notions of adulthood, policy landscapes of child welfare, and the challenges of ordinary life – infrastructures, relationships, hobbies – is to recognize their agency as reflective and thoughtful decision-makers, and also to understand that neither I nor my readers will always like their choices. I contend, however, that this is a productive starting point. Rather than reassure myself that those of us involved in child welfare always have it right, I hope this

provokes an approach that might more broadly address the needs, desires, and motivations of foster youth themselves.

2. RESEARCH CONTEXTS AND METHODS

RESEARCH CONTEXTS

Representing Kentucky

Kentucky is apparently an odd place to do research, based on reactions from both my colleagues and interlocutors. Some of the people I met during preliminary fieldwork laughed when I told them that my most of my cohort had jetted off to places like Morocco or Russia for the summer: "And you came *here*?"

Kentucky is rarely considered to be a hotspot for research in child welfare. Much of the research on state child welfare systems takes place in highly populated states like Texas, California, and New York (Lee 2016a; Asgarian 2019), or even more granularly, in cities or counties with large numbers of young people living in out-of-home care (Marquez 2021). Although the commonwealth has the dubious privilege of having had the "highest rate of child abuse in the country" for several years (more on this in Chapter 1), it actually has a comparatively small child welfare population. Kentucky's entire child welfare population – which has hovered around ten thousand children per year for the past decade – is smaller than the child welfare population of Los Angeles County in California (DCFS 2022). Moreover, although service providers have insisted to me for years that they are at the forefront of implementing new, evidence-based practices in child welfare settings, much of the research and news attention focuses on experiments with universal basic income programs for young people who age out or are working to overhaul juvenile justice systems (Loudenback 2021; The Imprint Staff 2021)). In short, in the national child welfare research and practice arena, Kentucky might be doing new and exciting things, but is not necessarily understood to be the vanguard of child welfare reform.

Why choose to work there? First and foremost, I had lingering, unanswered questions about my first encounters with child welfare systems, and Kentucky's system had been the place where I had been introduced to those questions. It is within the context of this space that I first became curious about the role of child welfare institutions within larger cultural and governing contexts, and I wanted to continue to follow those threads. What did child welfare accomplish in Kentucky? When I started my job in residential care, I thought I might be able to be supportive to young people or their families. I quickly realized that, while kindness and compassion could be helpful to children while they were in state custody, I was far less sure that any healing they achieved in custody could potentially be undone as soon as they left the facility. I also doubted that I had much to offer to young people – I had not experienced child welfare intervention when I was young, so could not speak from experience about what they should do or who they should become.

I also caught glimpses of larger structural forces at work during my eight months of work in residential. I started in 2014, right as Kentucky's government expanded Medicaid access as part of the rollout of the Affordable Care Act. Kentucky was one of the few "red" or right-leaning states to take the Medicaid expansion from the federal government, which made it a political outlier. The reorganization of mental health services under the ACA allowed my agency to charge for every possible therapeutic intervention, as opposed to charging a lump sum with a variety of services included. Staff members were encouraged, early in 2015, to keep more detailed, precise notes about our activities and their effects. Prior to the ACA, my supervisors rarely returned insurance paperwork for any reason, and my coworkers and I were convinced no one ever actually read any of our notes. After implementation, supervisors began returning our submitted charts and notes, highlighting places where additional detail was necessary in order to

received Medicaid reimbursements. The flows of money into the facility where I worked seemed to depend not on the services we staff members provided, but rather on our ability to note and document them under a new insurance regime. In short, at a personal and structural level, I was still curious about *Kentucky*'s child welfare system specifically: I still had work to do in this place, *about* this place.

Second, on the more pragmatic side, I believed that my employment background and affiliation with a very well-respected institution would smooth my access into research. I had quit my job on relatively good terms with my supervisors, many of whom had stayed on and been promoted to leadership positions. My eight-month employment period was two months longer than the six-month turnover period that was standard for most employees at the time. I thought that my mostly amicable parting would lend itself to building trust and rapport with my former place of employment, essential for my eventual dissertation research. Indeed, during my first summer of preliminary work, my former supervisors happily invited me to employee retreats, met me for coffee and extended conversations, and gave me important and useful background for my project.

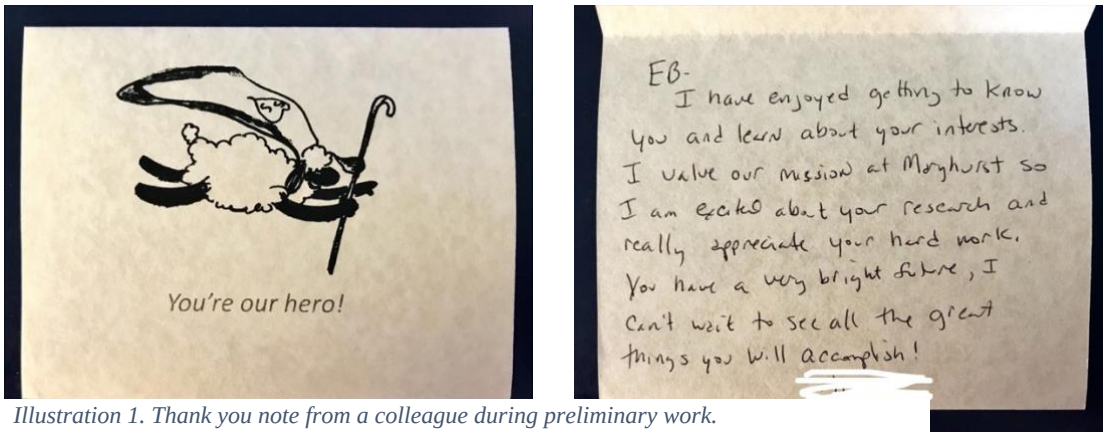

Illustration 1. Thank you note from a colleague during preliminary work.

However, as I will show below, although my relationships with the institution seemed good, I could not leverage them into institutional permissions for this version of my project.

Finally, as a Kentuckian myself, I had representational concerns about Kentucky. I began treating my questions about child welfare and responsibility as serious research endeavors in 2016, right as Kentucky was being transformed in the national media into "Trump Country" (Arnade 2016; Kliff 2016; Galofaro 2017). Piece after piece in national newspapers contained interviews with the mostly poor, mostly white people in West Virginia and eastern Kentucky – the part of the commonwealth in Appalachia – who were either portrayed as voting for Trump *because* of his hostile and violent racist, misogynist, and homophobic rhetoric, or could overlook that rhetoric because of an unfulfillable promise to economically revitalize hollowed out places, like Appalachian coal country (Ray 2020). The overall tone of this news coverage was disbelief: how could anyone vote this way, against their own interests?

Enter J.D. Vance, a Silicon Valley venture capitalist from Ohio, the man with all the answers. Vance published *Hillbilly Elegy: A Memoir of a Family and Culture in Crisis* in 2016, and it became a New York Times bestseller in August 2016 – the month of the Republican National Convention in which Trump was formally nominated by the party – and January 2017, the month Trump was inaugurated. In the book, Vance blurs the lines between his childhood summers to his grandparents' home in Breathitt County, Kentucky, and his childhood in Middletown, Ohio, a destination for many Appalachians who fled the region after the coal companies left. Throughout, he relies on a familiar cast of hillbilly stereotypes: a strung-out addict mother, a vulgar shotgun-toting grandmother, reprobates and layabouts who would rather accept welfare than work and make something of themselves.

These images of backwards, violent, addicted, lazy people fit neatly into a much broader public discussion in the United States about the moral failings of Appalachians: it offered a "personal look" into the social problems the region and its diaspora, but made no comment on

decades of Appalachian exploitation and labor activism (Wilkerson 2018; Catte 2018); the profound physical and mental health problems of the region (Drew and Schoenberg 2011; Cordial, Riding-Malon, and Lips 2012); high rates of over-prescription for opioids and subsequent policing and incarceration of drug possession and drug users (W. C. Garriott 2011; Macy 2018; Buer 2020; Ray 2021; Norton and Schept 2019), and the environmental devastation in the aftermath of strip mining and mountaintop removal (Ray 2022; B. D. Lutz, Bernhardt, and Schlesinger 2013). In short, Vance critiques the people – his own family – who survived company towns and the swift exit of coal companies, who then demanded compensation rather than revenge. Although he calls the book a memoir, he takes his personal experiences as sociological evidence of a "culture in crisis". He argues that Appalachian "dependency" has no place in his glorious capitalist future and seems nonplussed with the eugenicist overtones of allowing Appalachian culture to simply disappear from the American landscape. I am not Appalachian (more on this below), but like many of those who worked to counter both the national news and the legacy of J.D. Vance, I have a concern with the way Kentucky and Kentuckians are represented.

Although many have commented on misrepresentation and the damage of Vance's personal responsibility rhetoric in *Hillbilly Elegy* (Catte 2018; Harkins and McCarroll 2019), I read his book as a microcosm of discourses of child welfare in Kentucky – themes of addiction, family violence, kinship care, identity, movement, responsibility, punishment, and the choices facing caregivers, all surface in his writing. Mamaw Blanton – Vance's maternal grandmother – raised Vance down the street from his mother's home in Middletown, Ohio. Following an incident in which he ran from home after his mother threatened his life, Vance describes lying to a judge in court to keep her out of jail on domestic violence charges (Vance 2018, 101–3).

Afterwards, Vance's mother retained legal custody, but his primary caregiving and childrearing came from Mamaw, and to a lesser extent, his older sister Lindsey. He and his family were subject to social workers who, as he understood it, were ostensibly there to protect him, but whom he nonetheless feared for their power to take him from his Mamaw. He speculates that, had she not intervened, he might have ended up in a foster home and on an altogether different life trajectory.

This informal arrangement is common in Kentucky. The commonwealth is estimated to have the highest national rates of children living informally with extended family or fictive kin, *and* the highest rates of formal transfer of legal custody from parent to grandparent (Kentucky Youth Advocates 2019; Ambrose 2021). It is for many families a strategy for avoiding the involvement of Child Protective Services (CPS), as it was for Vance's family (Vance 2018, 293–94). Although grandparents often face additional financial burdens and family stress, taking in their grandchildren stems from love and concern for them as much as it does from an understanding that their removal and placement in foster care would likely be worse (Brant 2022).

Vance concludes that neither policy nor governance can resolve Appalachia's problems and insists that what is necessary is a cultural shift – families and communities should simply be better. Appalachians, he argues, should stop blaming companies or governments for their problems and change themselves (2018, 293–98). I disagree: to ignore the economic, environmental, and political conditions of Appalachian Kentucky specifically, and of Kentucky more generally, is to willfully ignore the limited choices that people have there. In fact, his conclusions mirror some of the punitive aspects of child welfare that I discuss in Part I. My disagreement stems from my own research with others who experienced familial violence of the

same sort that Vance did, but who came to a variety of different conclusions about who was responsible for it, and what to do about it. This is one of the fundamental challenges of talking to people who have lived experience in the commonwealth and with child welfare: not everyone agrees about what is to be done. I am not Appalachian (more on this below), but like many of those who worked to counter both the national news and the legacy of J.D. Vance, I have a vested interest in the way Kentucky and Kentuckians are represented.

From Kentucky to the East Coast, and back again

Although I grew up in Kentucky, I spent much of my adolescence traveling to various educational programs with people who lived primarily on the East Coast. Many of them asked questions and cracked jokes about whether Kentuckians wore shoes or whether the roads were paved or dirt. Having grown up in a suburb, I was both confused and surprised by these assumptions. Of course, our roads with paved: of course, we wore shoes. I would later learn that these stereotypes were the result of long media histories going back to the War on Poverty and the cyclical "rediscovery" of Appalachia (Inscoe 2002; Batteau 1990). Although the presence of a real-life Kentuckian probably allowed my childhood friends to revisit some of their stereotypes, such preconceived notions continued well into graduate school. At a party with Rutgers students several years ago, I introduced myself to another graduate student. She asked me where I was from and burst into hysterical laughter when I said "Kentucky".

For their part, Kentuckians generally understand that these stereotypes persist, often at the hands of East Coast residents: they typically regard such people with suspicion and hostility. I anticipated this, having myself regarded my undergraduate peers at Yale with some hesitation. Despite knowing about this undercurrent of hostility to perceived interlopers, I was still surprised

by the sudden changes in body language and tone when I introduced myself during fieldwork. Eyes narrowed, shoulders stiffened, arms crossed in front of chests. Dean, an attorney based in Louisville, jokingly referred to me as "Princeton" when I said something overly academic or wordy. Contrary to advice I had been given by senior graduate students in my program, I found that people perceived my elite education as a bad thing and a reason not to trust me.

To give one example of this, when I met Rita, a Louisville-based community organizer and advocate, she invited me to attend an open forum with a nonprofit organization she had helped found. When I showed up to the meeting, she rushed to me to say hello. As she greeted me, she asked me in hushed tones: "Before I introduce you…are you…you know, *out*?" Confused, I asked what she meant by "out".

"You know…as a Princeton student?" she whispered, looking around to see if anyone was listening. I told her that I felt it was disingenuous to represent myself as anything but a Princeton graduate student, and she gave me a look of relief before showing me around and introducing me to people. Her question illustrated that the hostility to Ivy Leaguers was so pervasive that she thought it might hinder my work: she didn't want to "out" me as a potentially untrustworthy person.

I eventually learned to temper the "Princeton" with "but I'm from Louisville," which brought with it equally swift vibe changes. People seemed more relaxed, and many of them even said – verbatim – "Oh, okay", as though my status as a fellow, if former, Kentucky resident balanced out the Ivy League mark against me: not fully trustworthy, but sufficiently "one of us". I learned to blend in in other ways too. Although my own drawl disappeared in childhood due to parents who found it unbecoming, I noticed my speech shifting to mirror the various accents of people I encountered as I traveled around the commonwealth. Outside of Louisville, I was

delighted to discover a tremendous variety of regional speech patterns and accents and came to understand Kentucky in a different way than I had when I was a child. It was, to my surprise, an incredibly diverse place, racially, culturally, geographically. Western Kentucky was Midwest-flat, while central Kentucky was rolling hills and pastures full of horses. Eastern Kentucky was ostentatiously, gut-wrenchingly, breathtakingly lush and green. Small towns were full of treasures – I still dream about a barbecue place in Morehead, a perfect mocha from a coffee shop on a drive out to Somerset.

I was even more surprised to learn that the regional differences were clear to locals, but rarely mapped neatly onto bureaucratic maps, despite having the same regional names. "Cumberland", "Two Rivers", "Bluegrass": the ways that Kentucky's primary child welfare agency divvied up the map for distributing federal child welfare dollars somehow didn't match the ways that it divvied up the distribution of Independent Living Programs for former foster youth, and both of those maps differed markedly from the regional boundaries the DMV used for licensing. The regional maps had some overlap – most of them treat the same counties as Appalachia – but overall, the boundaries between regions were quite blurry even though the differences between them were pronounced. With many more years of research, I might have been able to get a better handle on the specifics of each region; for now, noting that Kentucky was hardly coherent, geographically or culturally, is enough to set up a research context in which regional differences made it hard to identify patterns or commonalities, especially among young people who had circulated between these vastly different locales as children.

Louisville

Although this is a study *about* Kentucky, I spent most of my time in Louisville. Along the themes of multiple overlapping maps, "Louisville" itself is a fuzzily defined geographic area. The Ohio River borders the northern part of Louisville and forms a natural geographic boundary between Indiana and Kentucky; residents of southern Indiana frequently drive into Louisville for work, and vice versa. In 2002, the City of Louisville merged with its county, Jefferson County, becoming the largest "city" in the commonwealth. The city-county merger incorporated a number of Kentucky suburbs south and east of Louisville, but the entire "Louisville-Indiana metropolitan area" includes eight neighboring Kentucky counties and the Indiana cities of New Albany, Jeffersonville, and Clarksville. Due to the fluidity of people, families, work, and residence, the boundaries of this area are blurry, with different parts of Indiana and Kentucky included. This nebulous metropolitan area is frequently referred to as "Kentuckiana", or "the Louisville Metro" (Kleber 2014).

The Louisville Metro's counties-wide urban sprawl goes hand-in-hand with the city's history of residential racial segregation. Louisville's location on the Ohio River, a tributary of the Mississippi, made it a thriving center of shipping between New England and New Orleans. The city was also situated just upstream from the Falls of the Ohio, a shallow part of the river that was difficult to navigate during the dry season, often requiring cargo to be transported overland for a short distance. Shipping companies relied on Louisville navigators to get them to Cincinnati, over land or along the river, and Louisville's wealth came from moving myriad goods across the falls – everything from enslaved Africans to the cotton they were forced to produce (Kleber 2014). Before and after the Civil War, free Black people settled in Louisville, but were bound to strict residential segregation that persists today. Although a landmark

Supreme Court case, *Buchanan v. Warley* (1917), banned legal segregation in 1917, the city's long history of redlining has been well-documented in a public history project (Poe 2017). After a school desegregation order in the 1970s, many white Louisvillians moved out of the city center, and a robust Catholic and private school network cropped up in the suburbs, allowing rich, white Louisvillians to keep their children in *de facto* segregated classrooms. (C. Douglas 2005; Zhang and Ruther 2020). Since then, the overall rates of residential and educational segregation have gone down: Louisville's busing system was renowned among southern cities for effective desegregation in the 1980s and 1990s (Collins 2021; Mickelson et al. 2021).

However, this has not translated into racial equity, and there is growing evidence to suggest that, since a 2006 lawsuit, the city is undergoing a slow process of both educational resegregation and gentrification.[5] It is within this highly regulated racial geography that the Louisville Metro Police Department falsified warrants as part of an over-policing effort, before killing Breonna Taylor in February 2020 (K. Clarke 2022). The enfolding of her death into the 2020 George Floyd protests, illustrates how the violent enforcement of racial geographies continues to harm the lives of Black Louisvillians.

[5] Although Louisville's busing system was historically recognized for effectively desegregating schools after 1978 (Mickelson et al. 2021), that process was undertaken largely to meet federal funding guidelines, and without input from Black communities (C. Douglas 2005). Historically Black schools where students had thrived were suddenly flooded with white students, while Black students in those neighborhoods were bused across town to neighborhoods that were far from their homes. In a 2006 lawsuit, *Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1* (2007), the Supreme Court ruled that Louisville's busing system violated the Fourteenth Amendment, and that solely using a student's race as justification for moving them away from their neighborhood school was unconstitutional. Since then, Jefferson County Public Schools has reworked its busing plan to prioritize economic diversity in student distribution and allows for students to have first priority in their neighborhood schools. Predictably, this has resulted in a slow resegregation of the county, particularly in elementary schools (McLaren and Krauth 2021), as parents elect to send children to local schools. In a city with extensive racial residential segregation, sending children to neighborhood schools has resulted in *de facto* educational segregation, but this time without the support network of Historically Black schools in Black neighborhoods.

The rural-urban divide

When I did venture outside of Louisville, I found deep divisions between the city and the rest of the commonwealth. I remembered the mutual hostility between the city and the rest of Kentucky from my own childhood. At a statewide mock legislature program, rural and urban students alike proposed that Louisville secede from the rest of Kentucky, on the grounds that it was so distinct it should be its own state. These proposals always failed, but the fact that middle school students understood this divide is a testament to how early and how deeply that division is embedded.

Emmett, a former coworker from my days in residential care, was a representative example. Originally from Louisville's West End, a predominantly Black and low-income part of the city, he understood legislators and voters from rural counties as being hostile and racist to the needs of city dwellers, particularly Black Louisvillians. He was deeply opposed to policies that expanded policing, restricted funding for history education, and reduced health care access in the city; however, given that Louisville was only one county out of 120 in the commonwealth, Louisville representatives were often overruled by their rural counterparts in policy debates in the state house. Those who lived in rural parts of Kentucky understand Louisvillians to be elitist, snobbish, and out-of-touch with the needs of rural residents and the specifics of life in the country. Robert Stivers, the Republican President of Kentucky's Senate, drove home this impression: I watched him blustering on Capitol TV, red in the face, about how *some people* – presumably Louisville residents – ignored the needs of rural folks.

Rita, a transplant from Appalachia to Louisville, was annoyed by the rift. She was originally from Perry County in the middle of Kentucky's Appalachian region. Rita moved to Louisville after earning a doctorate and worked in various nonprofits. Frustrated at once with the

suspicion of rural people towards urbanites, of Louisvillians' dismissal of rural residents, and what she perceived as an overwrought and unnecessary division between them, she was critical of everyone who reinforced it.

Although I rarely heard about rural-urban hostility *from* young people, I note this division because it was an important context for policymaking *about* young people. Perceived differences in moral values, priorities, and culture all manifested in power struggles within the state legislature. I delve more deeply into these political power struggles in Part 1, as they inform the ways that child welfare policies take on moral dimensions that are typically derived from adult values and political priorities.

Implications of separateness on relationships of former foster youth

These separations and divisions – regional, racial, urban and rural – are important cultural contexts for aging out, because they shaped how young people understood their relationships with other people, to the city and the commonwealth, and to their notions of morality and responsibility. Although I am hesitant to make general claims about foster youth in Kentucky, I did find that my four primary interlocutors were less inclined to adopt these more dominant attitudes about people who were not like them; in some cases, they were actively critical of these dynamics. They spoke, sometimes quite eloquently, about conflicts and resolutions with friends and mentors, all of which were marked – but not determined by – the racial, regional, and geographic boundaries of Louisville and Kentucky. I found them to be skeptical of the motives and actions of others, but I rarely understood those suspicions to be the product of cultural difference.

Rather, my theory is that because older children in state custody, especially those in residential facilities, are typically housed with people who are different from them. Kentucky's state foster care agency releases monthly regional reports from the nine regions into which they have organized the commonwealth. These reports have information about the numbers of children *from* each region – how many are in care, what their foster care goals are, their ages and demographics, the kinds of placements they have – but do not specify whether children are placed *in* their regions of origin. During public meetings, however, DCBS officials have presented data that *is* broken down by regional placement.

These data suggest that for most placement types, children are placed within their home regions; the exception are congregate care settings, where children who need more intensive supervision and care sent to specialized facilities that do not exist in every region. For instance, in a virtual public forum with DCBS in November 2020, a DCBS official presented a bar graph that compared the number of children placed in and out of region based on placement type. The majority of children placed with relatives or fictive kin, DCBS-certified foster homes, and private child placing or therapeutic foster homes (both required certification that is more intense than standard foster homes) are placed within their region of origin. The majority of children placed in private residential facilities or in other kinds of facilities, such as juvenile detention, are more likely to be sent out of their home regions (81.2% and 66.2%, respectively) (Kentucky Youth Advocates 2020). Moreover, older youth – those most likely to age out of care – are typically those who end up in residential care because fewer foster homes are willing to take teenagers (Wulczyn et al. 2017; Wulczyn 2020). In short, young people who age out often have spent more time in care, which I interpret as having also spent more time spent around a large variety of people, from a wider variety of places.

Given the housing and educational resegregation of Louisville, foster care can also bring young people into contact with people across the color line. As has been noted since the 1970s, Black children are overrepresented in state child welfare systems (Billingsley and Giovannoni 1972; D. E. Roberts 2001); 18% of Kentucky's child welfare population is Black or African American, though they only make up 9.7% of the commonwealth's population (Department of Community-Based Services 2022; Census Bureau 2021). Four of my primary interlocutors – three young white women, one young Black man – described close friendships, mentoring relationships, and/or romantic relationships with those of a different race, and sometimes reflected at length on their reasons for trusting such people. Two of them who were Louisville residents were also articulate about navigating the racial geographies of Louisville – they were highly aware of where they might be welcomed or not and adapted their behaviors accordingly, which I analyze in more depth in Chapter 5. These discussions helped contextualize, for me, the ways that race shaped their relationships with mentors, friends, peers, partners, and family members. Social services involvement, whether foster care specifically or a variety of social services offered to former foster youth – offered some of them the opportunity to build relationships with people who were not like them, which I examine in Part III through mentoring.

Finally, on a more personal note, I found that former foster youth were the least likely to have any reaction to my educational background, work history, or racial background. Unlike most of the adults I met, young people seemed to care very little that I was from Louisville or lived in New England, and while curious about anthropology, they did not seem particularly impressed or suspicious of my credentials. As a Latina, I shared no ethnic or racial background

with any of them, but most often I felt like an outsider in the way that all adults were outsiders – I had to earn their trust by listening to them and engaging with them on their own terms.

Processes of Institutional Review

My project was transformed in the institutional review process, and while my questions stayed similar, the spaces in which I conducted research changed, as did the group of people I hoped to study. My analytical focus shifted from a study of adolescence and responsibility to a more complex inquiry into what responsibility meant as adolescents became legal adults. My methods shifted to focus on former foster youth, not current foster youth, and this is due in large part to legal protections for foster youth while they are in care.

I applied to graduate school with the intent of returning to my former place of employment, along with another similar institution, to do full-time fieldwork within the confines of a locked child caring institution. I had hoped to be embedded in the space and study the relationships that emerged between staff members and young people; trace the flows of money and economic support from private donors, religious organizations, insurance companies, and state budgets; and track how young people adjusted to life outside of the institution upon leaving. Studies in similar institutions have been rich explorations into the intimacies and insights generated behind closed doors, but are also understandably fraught with ethical quandaries (Hejtmanek 2015; Silver 2015).

As I began the institutional review process to do this project, I understood that the group of young people I wanted to study were some of the most vulnerable people one might choose to study in the United States. I wanted to work with young people who were system-involved, and they could meet the definitions of four separate protected classes according to federal research

guidelines: minors, people who were likely victims of abuse, people who might be considered incarcerated, and people with disabilities. According to federal research ethics, conducting research with minors requires the consent of their parents, and the assent of the child.

As I would have been working closely with the children of those whose parental rights had either been relinquished, stripped, or challenged, I thought it would be both unlikely and logistically challenging to get parental consent. There are exemptions for parental consent in federal research guidelines, specifically for "Wards" (Office for Human Research Protections 1983) and/or "neglected or abused children" (Office for Human Research Protections 1983). Because many of the young women I wanted to work with had no control over their institutionalization -- which they experienced as punishment, even if a judge hadn't confined them as a criminal sentence – they also met federal criteria for prisoners, which is defined as an **"**any individual involuntarily confined or detained in a penal institution" (Office for Human Research Protections 2018). I knew from my work experience that the institution also collected data about and sorted the adolescents in care according to their IQ and developmental disability status, which meant some of my potential interlocutors would be considered disabled, potentially limiting their ability to assent to research participation. Finally, as is true for every adolescent who ends up in a locked facility, some kind of harm, trauma, or abuse had almost certainly happened to everyone who entered the facility. These are all populations that have deserved formal legal protections in research; although I believed I had developed an experiential knowledge that would allow me to build rapport and minimize risks with them, I also understand why those protections exist.

The Cabinet

Because of the many legal and regulatory challenges of working with this specific population, the agencies I wanted to study, Princeton's IRB, and I were all agreed that letters of institutional affiliation were necessary before I could start. For their part, my former place of employment asked for advice from the Cabinet of Health and Family Services ("CHFS" or "The Cabinet"), which is the umbrella government agency that houses the Department of Community-Based Services (DCBS), which oversees and administers Kentucky's child welfare system. My workplace informed me that, upon hearing about my proposed research, the Cabinet had claimed local institutional review jurisdiction over my project. They had an ad hoc IRB to review potential human subjects research within the child welfare system, and they wanted to review my project.

I spent many hours on the phone with Bob, the Cabinet's local IRB liaison, who was very supportive and helpful. He encouraged me to submit a research proposal, which the Cabinet would review alongside local stakeholders – namely, other similar institutions who could weigh in on the institutional feasibility of my study. Bob liked the idea of my research and thought it could be a useful contribution to the more evaluative, audit-style research that was conducted in-house by Cabinet officials. Based on our email exchanges, I believe he saw me as a useful, free source of labor, who could do in-depth research on residential care at no cost to the Cabinet.

I had hoped that, in the field, the research I would do would be useful for this very purpose; to gather information that might not otherwise be available, not necessarily *on behalf* of the Cabinet or DCBS, but that might be nonetheless helpful in their efforts to improve the services they offer. Ethnographic work on residential facilities might affirm the importance of staff-client relationships, as was the case for Katie Rose Hejtmanek's work on adolescent

residential care (Hejtmanek 2015), or shed some light on the effects of the Affordable Care Act's Medicaid expansion on psychiatric services, in line with other anthropological writing about the effects of the law (J. M. Mulligan and Castañeda 2017). It could also shed light on the complicated ways that violence and care were entwined in physical restraints or the actual construction of such facilities, as I had written about previously for academic conferences. It is also possible I would be understood as a volunteer – anthropologists have long shared their resources, helped with errands and work, and otherwise contributed productive labor to the communities in which they work (S. M. Low and Merry 2010, S208). Bob took my helping impulse to its logical conclusion in his recommendation to the Cabinet: I was free labor. While I tried to balance my own research questions with the possibility of institutional co-optation, I also understood that like so many anthropologists who work in institutional settings, I needed to win them over somehow in order to conduct my planned research (Gusterson 1997; Tate 2020).

I took his advice, submitted my IRB form to the Cabinet, and waited to hear back. About two weeks after I submitted, I received an emailed letter from then-Deputy Director of the Cabinet, Elizabeth Caywood, with a resounding "no".



CABINET FOR HEALTH AND FAMILY SERVICES
DEPARTMENT FOR COMMUNITY BASED SERVICES

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May 15, 2019

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Dear Ms. Saldana:

You submitted a research request to the Cabinet for Health and Family Services' Institutional Review Board (IRB) last month. In accordance with protocol, the request, "Ethics and Practice in Child Welfare", was forwarded to my office within the Department for Community Based Services (DCBS) for programmatic review. While the IRB likely views this research as having minimal risks, DCBS must review with considerations given to other service and programmatic impacts of the request.

After careful review by DCBS staff having expertise in child welfare, residential care, and transition age youth, unresolvable concerns were identified prohibiting DCBS' approval of the research proposal. Of paramount concern is that the research could derail the treatment of the children in the residential programs, creating additional costs borne by the state and lifetime negative impacts to the child subjects and their families. Additionally, as the state begins to implement the Family First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (Pub. L. 115-123) effective October 1, 2019, residential care will be more restricted (i.e., time limited and clinically necessary per federal fund source) indicating that the children in these programs, particularly those in foster care, will have more intense needs as implementation of the Act proceeds overtime. There were additional concerns about interference in the programs' operations, confidentiality, and a lack of parental consent, particularly for those foster children whose parental rights remain intact. Rarely does DCBS oblige studies involving children in the custody of or committed to the state due to child abuse, neglect, or dependency due to an actual or perceived breach of the children's entrustment to the state.

If you have further questions, please contact me through one of the means given in the header of this letter or by email, Elizabeth.Caywood@ky.gov.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Caywood
Deputy Commissioner
Department for Community Based Services

Illustration 2. Letter from CHFS

The letter reveals a number of things. The first item of interest suggests the IRB representative – Bob – "likely" understood this to be a minimal risk study. I had made this argument in my initial applications to Princeton's and the Cabinet's IRBs: given that the young people I hoped to study were already in the custody of the state, it's possible that my presence may not have been seen as posing additional risks to children who had already experienced harm. However, in the next paragraph, "DCBS staff" and local experts thought that my presence would be disruptive to treatment and care procedures within the facilities. The potential consequences of this were, in order, nebulous "costs" to the state and unspecified "lifetime negative impacts" to the children and families who were experiencing state intervention. I was crushed, but not surprised. I took a few weeks to grieve and settle into a new reality, in which my planned project would not happen. I had to do something else – something less risky to child welfare-involved families – instead.

In the following weeks, I re-started preliminary field work in an effort to salvage what I could from my project. What I realized in the process of reworking this project was that my interest was less in the dynamics of institutions, and more about life in the aftermath of institutionalization. I thought I needed to start with the institution, but I could instead find people who had left. Since I was not allowed to have contact with young people *in* state custody, I would have to talk to young people who were not: *former* foster youth. I called Elizabeth Caywood, partially to ask if I could appeal the Cabinet's decision, and partially to see if there might be objections to speaking with former foster youth. She sounded tense on the phone, but I forged ahead and asked about speaking with former foster youths instead. She replied that the Cabinet no longer had custody of them, so they had no say. Although, she did not sound enthused, she suggested I speak with two organizations that worked directly to provide aftercare

services to former foster youth who had aged out, True Up and one additional organization. In Part III, I describe my conversations with Nikki, True Up's director; I connected with one of the supervisors of the other organization during this second round of preliminary fieldwork, at a public child welfare meeting, described below.

As part of this reworking, I attended a series of series of public meetings across the commonwealth about the implementation of the Families First Prevention Services Act (mentioned in the letter and discussed in the next section). In Somerset, I spoke with Christa, who was at the time the Director of the Division of Protection and Permanency, housed under DCBS. I introduced myself to her as "the researcher" who had submitted a request to be in residential care. She recognized my name and offered a cursory apology, echoing what I had been told in the letter; DCBS typically did not allow any external research on children in their custody. I was surprised, however, when she acknowledged it was "a good project", but that I had unfortunately gotten the timing wrong, as they were in the midst of an overhaul of their residential system.

Christa and I would meet again, months later, in her office to discuss what became my actual research: an investigation into the lives of young people who age out of Kentucky's child welfare system. This was a more formal meeting, held in her office: she had invited the person who oversaw programs for "transition-age youth", the official name given to young people who were turning 18 or 21 and leaving state custody. She regarded me with some suspicion, explaining to me that she and other Cabinet officials were used to news media, whom she understood to be quite adversarial. She said journalists accused social workers of being "baby-stealers", and typically the Cabinet received critical press (I discuss this more in Part I). I reassured her that, after my time as an employee in residential, I was of the opinion that "the

child welfare system" could hardly be expected to resolve the many social phenomena that affected system-involved families. Poverty, substance use, health coverage gaps: these were all potential reasons that DCBS might intervene in family life, but also problems that they could not possibly *solve* through that intervention. This appeared to assuage some of her concerns about my presence. I watched her shoulders relax a little as she leaned back in her chair. I explained to her that, while I had my doubts and critiques of DCBS, I did not understand my job as a scholar to be an effort to expose wrongdoing. I was – and still am – sympathetic to the challenges social workers face in DCBS and its equivalents in other states. She thanked me for saying this and offered to invite me to some of the permanency workgroup meetings, where experts and officials would be discussing policies around aging out. I was grateful, though I only made it to one of these meetings: they happened quarterly and were frequently cancelled.

From these limited encounters with Cabinet officials, I learned a great deal about how I would be positioned in the field, and how I might be able to shift that positioning. I was perceived, apparently, as suspicious not only because of my credentials – see above – but because I was attempting to enter an institutional setting, where the rules of engagement were set by a combative relationship between journalists and the Cabinet. I assume anthropologists were quite unusual to Cabinet officials – I got a lot of questions about paleontology – but they understood my research to be more akin to journalism than service assessment, and they did not want to me to do either.

Protecting the confidentiality, privacy, and parental rights of the families whom I had hoped to study would have been a logistically difficult task, for me and for the Cabinet. Fixing my scholarly gaze on DCBS was one thing but conducting field research inside of congregate care facilities would put me in direct contact with children and families affected by the Cabinet's

decisions. Even with mitigation strategies – pseudonyms, obfuscation, embargoes on fieldnotes and writing, composite characters – both IRBs rightfully pointed out the risk of public identification, shifting scrutiny from the Cabinet to individual people. Rather than wrestle with the potential risks and harms, the Cabinet's privacy default shielded them as much as it shielded the families and children in their custody.

I also understand the Cabinet's denial as a part of its institutional culture. I was told by Bob and in the letter that the Cabinet *simply did not approve* external researchers, and by default denied researchers contact with children in the custody of the state. It is possible that the Cabinet's decision was the result of agencies and stakeholders' desire to shield themselves from public scrutiny. I knew I might be perceived as an interloper, who only wanted to undermine the good work agencies thought they were doing. There is a kernel of truth in this, as I was frustrated after my own forays and experiences with these kinds of congregate care facilities.

Although DCBS had named concerns about privacy, confidentiality, and parental rights, they were also in the middle of overhauling the very facilities that I had proposed to study. It may have been fascinating to be embedded within these spaces as they wrestled with the funding and treatment changes, but understandably, neither the Cabinet nor individual child caring facilities seemed to want to juggle implementing new federal legislation – the Families First Act of 2018, discussed in Part I – with the logistics of managing a researcher. Amidst the chaos and murkiness surrounding implementation, I understood distantly that although some of the individual Cabinet officials seemed to genuinely like me – Bob, Christa – their careful planning could hardly have accommodated a researcher. The letter's vaguely defined risks to families or agencies could have been as unknowable to the Cabinet as they were to me, a possibility made all the more likely by lack of clarity in the law itself. Rather than having a person bearing

witness to the changes, missteps, and pitfalls, I can see a truism: few want to be observed as they are learning something new. I frame these various interpretations as a problem of a bureaucratic opacity, because while I got to know some of the people with decision-making power over my project, I was not privy to their discussions or rationales. I only have a few conversations and a letter.

The Families First Prevention Services Act

I had inadvertently proposed to start my study right as Kentucky's Cabinet for Health and Family Services began to implement new federal guidelines regarding the funding and acceptable forms of treatment in foster care. The Families First Prevention Services Act of 2018 (hereafter "Families First") was, according to DCBS officials, a piece of landmark legislation that had the potential to transform child welfare across the country. I want to outline some of the key provisions here, to offer some context as to why the Cabinet and child caring agency owners might have been especially hesitant to grant me permission to be in such facilities.

Families First was a bipartisan piece of federal legislation, passed in response to an "overreliance" on residential or congregate care settings. Congregate care settings are placements in which children are placed in group settings, typically run by paid professional staff members. In legislation and practice, congregate care is counterposed to "home-like" settings such as foster or adoptive homes. Congregate care settings typically have strictly regulated schedules; limited resources for recreation, health and nutrition, self-expression and development, and other comforts; and frequently, abusive, punitive, or carceral approaches to enforcing behavior (Fathallah and Sullivan 2021). In short, Goffman's "total institutions" are, in my experience, a good model for understanding congregate care. Recent research with former foster youth outlines

the significant harm that young people experience in institutional settings. Cornelius Fredericks, a Black sixteen-year-old, died in a Michigan congregate care facility in April 2020, after seven staff members restrained him, face down, for twelve minutes: he had thrown a sandwich at another young person. In Louisville, workers at the Uspiritus Brooklawn campus held down seven-year-old Ja'Ceon until he died of asphyxiation; as of December 2022, DCBS was attempting to revoke the license of the 120-year-old institution and close it for good (Yetter 2022). Efforts to tighten oversight of, reduce or eliminate entirely the use of such facilities, have ramped up in the wake of his death (Conn 2021; The Imprint 2021; Tiano 2021).

To accomplish a reduction in congregate care, Families First did two things: introduced new, stricter conditions on federal monies for state child welfare systems to constrain the use of institutional care; and expanded funding for family services to prevent removal and institutional placement. To be in compliance with the law, state child welfare officials were to survey their current child welfare resources and submit a written five-year plan that outlined the actions they would take to reduce the number of children in congregate care settings. Most of these steps involved funding or retraining service providers in specific programs or therapeutic approaches from a federally approved list of evidence-based and trauma-informed practices (Administration for Children and Families 2018). The approved list of practices and programs was subdivided into four categories: "Well Supported", "Supported", "Promising", and "Does not currently meet criteria". After producing a detailed plan and budget, state governments submitted their plans to the Department of Health and Human Services, where they would be reviewed by DHHS, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), and the Children's Bureau. States could submit programs their providers already used for approval, but the evaluation process could take years, and required significant additional documentation to illustrate program benefits.

Child welfare officials would include in their plans how they would portion their budgets, prioritizing "Well Supported" and "Supported" interventions over "Promising" or unsupported interventions. Specifically, these programs were designed to help parents improve their parenting skills, particularly relationship-building, infant care, or discipline, or help parents who were struggling with mental health or substance use issues. The prioritization of these areas of intervention illustrates how lawmakers understood the causes of child abuse and removal: the majority of child abuse cases were parents who were mentally unwell or addicts, or unaware of "correct" parenting without hurting or neglecting their children. In Part I, I discuss in greater depth the divergence between representations of child abuse in federal legislation and Kentucky's local journalists and state policymakers. Although journalists and lawmakers typically included substance use in their discussions of child abuse, they also routinely advocated for faster termination of parental rights, portrayed parents as twisted or moral failures for continued drug use, and called for greater surveillance and reporting of families.

In addition to the expansion of prevention services, state child welfare officials would also include in their plans how they intended to reduce the number of children in congregate care. The requirements for compliance were, on paper, much stricter than they had been before. Residential treatment facilities had to be qualified according to new federal standards, which meant they had to implement trauma-informed interventions. To increase oversight of such facilities, each child's case would need to be reviewed by a judge every six weeks and be either reapproved to stay in the facility, or "stepped down" to a less-restrictive level of care. Facilities would need to prevent evidence to judges to justify more restrictive placements. Pregnant and parenting teens and victims of child trafficking were exempted from this rule and could theoretically be placed in long-term facilities with less-frequent reviews. Although in principle

this was a productive way of ensuring that children in congregate care would only state in institutions provided there was a good reason to be there, in practice this requirement would require attorneys, child advocates, and notoriously-difficult-to-regulate judges to conform to federal expectations. Moreover, the sudden influx of reviews to judges, particularly in areas that did not have specialized family courts, would undoubtedly fill dockets; in an effort to clear dockets to get to actual cases, judges might cursorily fulfill their legal duty to assess and evaluate placements, functionally limiting oversight.

Once approved, state governments could implement the plan, pending approval and funding from state legislatures. Families First operated on a reimbursement model: state child welfare officials could apply for federal reimbursement for program changes and service expansion, assuming state governments would cover the up-front costs of reworking their child welfare systems. Federal child welfare money is allocated through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, and states that comply with the requirements of Families First can receive a 100% match of any funds they invest in child welfare reform.

When I formally began research in August 2019, DCBS officials had their plan approved, and were in the process of petitioning state legislators for the start-up funds to implement it. Although the states were not required to be in compliance until October 1, 2021, Kentucky's child welfare officials chose to be one of the first four states to implement that law, two full years early. According to Jessica Brown, then the Cabinet's Families First implementation official, the Cabinet decided to implement early because of the high prevalence of trauma-informed and evidence-based strategies already being used in many of its facilities. Moreover, as I discuss further in Part I, Kentucky's executive branch had made child welfare reform a policy

priority, and there was an active group of nonprofit organizations and advocates who were leading the way in discussions of implementation.

As outlined here, the shifts in the child welfare landscape at the time of my research could be seen as either monumental or subtle. Families First could functionally double state child welfare budgets, but to access the money required convincing service providers to get certified in new program and interventions, judges and legal actors to take on a completely new set of oversight responsibilities, and – a hard sell in a Republican-led legislature – massive investments in public service provision. The political work required to implement Families First was an enormous undertaking. However, according to Cabinet officials, they also didn't have very far to go to be in compliance with the law. This tension between the possibilities for transformation and the actuality of the law – moving some federal money around – was representative of the ambiguity and confusion around early implementation. For example, in the summer of 2019, the federal government had yet to release an approved list of interventions; eventually they adapted the California Clearinghouse of approved services, but many of the questions in Kentucky's public meetings about Families First implementation were a form of "What services or interventions can we actually provide?", and to which a beleaguered Jessica could only reply, "We don't know yet, but hopefully soon." In the years since my fieldwork, only sixteen states have passed state legislation and received approval on their reform plans; twelve have yet to submit a plan or pass legislation at all.

RESEARCH METHODS

Studying Foster Youth: Whose Priorities?

Studying foster youth through long-term participant observation was not a standard procedure in much child welfare research. Typically, research on former foster youth takes the form of longitudinal surveys that track specific indicators of interest to service providers that want to ensure their interventions have some kind of impact. The most famous of these longitudinal studies are the National Youth in Transition Database, funded and run by the federal Administration for Children and Families (Children's Bureau 2017); and the Midwest Study, which was conducted through Chapin Hall at the University of Chicago (M. E. Courtney et al. 2011). These studies collect data on living arrangements; use of social services; educational achievement; employment, earnings, and economic hardship; mental, physical, and sexual health; pregnancy, marriage, children and parenting; criminalization and justice involvement; and the presence of social supports. These study designs are often based in hypothesis-testing, service evaluation, and specific metrics of adult success. Although these datasets are terribly important in crafting policies, procedures, and services for former foster youth, it is often professional child welfare experts who determine the questions and issues that are important *about* young people, rather than the issues and questions that are important *to* young people. This is a running theme throughout the dissertation, the differences between what experts and what young people consider a "good life".

There are of course notable exceptions to this rule. The organization Think of Us has made efforts to research the personal goals, desires, and concerns of former foster youth. Founded by Sixto Cancel, a former foster youth turned tech magnate, this national organization and research center put out two remarkable studies, one on aging out of foster care (Cancel et al.

2020) and one on life in residential facilities (Fathallah and Sullivan 2021). Both studies offered young people space, time, and compensation for open-ended responses, individual writing, mapping exercises, and other free-form expression. The research team then coded, summarized, analyzed, and condensed their findings into reports, which have circulated among service providers and researchers who work on aging out.

Gaining Access

Across the board, qualitative and quantitative researchers alike – myself included – depend on the intercession of service providers to reach former foster youth. Without access to state records or an institutional setting, I relied on service organizations for referrals to young people. To do this, I asked providers and organizations to send my contact information and a short paragraph on my research to anyone they thought might be interested. I did not offer any form of monetary compensation, against the advice of one such service provider, who insisted that gas cards or gift cards would have been an effective way of convincing young people to talk to me. If I were to change one thing about this study, I would have offered some form of financial compensation to my interlocutors. She was correct: using this method, only one young man called, but we never managed to meet in person before I left the field. In an ironic turn of events, he later interviewed me when I was a participant in a KYA-run focus group on congregate care in April 2022 (Dawson et al. 2022). My connections to young people instead came in a more targeted fashion in which service providers or supervisors made specific suggestions and helped do the work of introducing me to individual young people. This is how I met Hayley, Beu, and Jonathan. The fourth, Allison, I knew from being a service provider myself – she had been a resident in my facility, and we had a good relationship then. She and I

reconnected during fieldwork, and she very generously agreed to be a participant in this research, on the condition that I "tell the truth".

Meeting young people through service providers did not work in reverse: when I encountered new-to-me social service organizations while accompanying young people, those organizations wanted nothing to do with me. After many afternoons of driving Beu to a youth drop-in center, Transition-Age Youth Launching Realized Dreams (TAYLRD), I spoke with the center's workers about possibly being embedded at their Louisville center. They suggested that I speak with the director of TAYLRD. He did not even ask me to submit an IRB application, simply told me that research would not be possible and turned me away.

Former foster youth are difficult to study, particularly via long-term participant observation, because many of them have no interest in participating in research after a lifetime of unreliable, untrustworthy adults; and because of the strict research regulations around them, even once they leave care. This is not true for every researcher. Thinktanks and service evaluation nonprofits are routinely hired to do assessments of services, invited into these environments at significant cost to either state governments or service providers themselves. Bob's comments about my status as free research labor attests to this phenomenon. I wonder whether I had been affiliated with a research team at the Annie E. Casey Foundation or Chapin Hall, if I might have had an easier time accessing these protected service spaces. For a lone researcher without any sort of institutional backing, I was out of luck.

That said, the four young people with whom I had consistent contact over the course of fieldwork, were exceptionally thoughtful and insightful. Moreover, based on the sample sizes and team sizes of major, well-funded qualitative studies, such as those at the Center for Lived Experiences, four subjects for a one-person research team seems consistent with the challenges I

outlined above about former foster youths' willingness to speak with researchers. I saw each of these young people at least once a month from August 2019 to February 2020. Once we made contact, they could contact me either through Facebook Messenger, phone, or email; I always met them at their invitation. Sometimes we went for coffee or meals or walks. Other times we ran errands or went to events together. When we weren't together in person, we spoke via text or messenger. Contact was not necessarily even; I could go weeks without hearing from someone, and then experience nonstop messages for a few days at a time. We rarely spoke about their time in care, but more about their social lives, parties they attended, friends and partners, their art habits, or their frustrations with family members or service bureaucracies.

While former foster youths are the primary focus of the study, I also learned a great deal from policy experts, youth and family advocates, service providers, policy makers and legislators, and my former coworkers. In January and February 2020, I spent one or two days a week shadowing Kentucky Youth Advocates, an advocacy and lobbying organization that coordinated with both service providers and legislators to align those with an interest in policy that is affecting children and families along the same policy goals. I attended all of KYA's public meetings between June and December 2019, some as part of preliminary fieldwork and some as part of the formal research project. Their job was challenging, as the political priorities of legislators differ, mirroring my earlier discussion of Kentucky's rural-urban divide and moral values. They were policy experts, who knew the ins and outs of the legislative process in Kentucky and were extraordinarily generous with their time and resources: they gave me fridge space and a table at their office to sit and take field notes, attend meetings, and chat with employees who were interested in my project.

At one of KYA's public meetings, I met Rita, who invited me to quarterly, board, and educational meetings with the organization she founded. The organization she helped run was actually association of nonprofits and community organizations that offered support services to the families of people who were incarcerated. It was through their organizing and advocacy work that I learned more about the challenges of reforming the court system in Jefferson County. More generally, my friendship with Rita was an opportunity to reflect on the relationship between Kentucky's prison system – where at least half of those incarcerated are primary family caregivers – and the welfare of children (Advocates 2019). Of the young people who appear in this study, all of them had at least one parent who had served time. Although child welfare officials spoke at length about coordinating with health care systems, they rarely mentioned incarceration or juvenile justice as parallel social institutions.

Finally, I had limited but extremely helpful contact with a handful of people in a variety of different roles. A journalist who, at the time, was the Public Relations coordinator for the Cabinet, invited me to private meetings at the Cabinet and met me for coffee to discuss foster care, including her own struggles with fertility, adoption, and the foster system. Jeff, one of the Independent Living Coordinators for Jefferson County, was an exemplary interviewee and invited me to foster youth events and parties where I had more casual conversations with young people. Finally, Hayley's coworkers at a community nonprofit volunteered for an impromptu focus group when I went to visit her at work; they kindly shared their knowledge and frustrations over the course of an afternoon. These were people who were difficult to categorize but shaped how I think about foster care and aging out.

Methodologically, participant observation might be unconventional for child welfare researchers, but I do want to note one unexpected method among anthropologists: road trips

across Kentucky were central to the formation and practice of my project. My car was in the shop twice for repairs, once after an accident and once after the muffler fell off while I stopped for gas at a truck stop halfway to the capitol. During those days, fieldwork was near impossible. My car functioned as a necessary resource that young people needed. One service provider even asked if I would be willing to be an "on-call driver", because the public transit system in Louisville was so inconsistent and poorly funded that young people were likely to be late to work or stranded somewhere without a ride. Road trips were ideal for letting conversations meander and unfold. It provided an opportunity to get to know people through their musical tastes, their mental maps, and their silences. The car ride was instrumental for me too. I took solo road trips to KYA-run public forums all over the commonwealth, sometimes spending eight hours driving over the course of a single day. I went to places I'd never been and got a sense of just how big and diverse Kentucky really is. I delve more deeply into the car-as-method in Part II.

Flattening the curve: fieldwork in the pandemic

I had arrived in Kentucky in April 2019 and spent the next several weeks going through institutional review, then reworking my project. Unfortunately, I was around eight months into fieldwork when reports of a mysterious and deadly disease began trickling in from Wuhan, China. On March 6, 2020, Kentucky confirmed its first COVID-19 case. The commonwealth immediately went into lockdown (Beshear 2020); Beu summoned me to pick her up one night when it was raining and the buses were no longer running, but otherwise I did not see any of my interlocutors between March 2020 and a return trip to Louisville in July 2021. I avoided them not only due to institutional restrictions – Princeton barred in-person research – but also because I was wary of in-person interactions. There were no tests, no way of knowing for sure if one was

infected or not, and it was safer, when possible, to simply avoid human contact. I stayed in my apartment, leaving only for groceries, and avoided my parents, much to their chagrin. I didn't want to be put at risk of catching a deadly infection or ending up on a respirator; I didn't want to put anyone else at risk either.

I stayed put for five weeks, lonely and bored and afraid. I sewed, I cooked, I did virtual dance classes with my dance teachers. I tried to keep myself entertained and distracted. I also tried to do virtual fieldwork, which was a smoother transition than I expected. The lobbyists and experts I had been shadowing adeptly transitioned to a work-from-home model and were able to host public meetings on important legislation more frequently. Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA) adjusted relatively easily to Zoom, having used the platform before the pandemic for webinars to train attendees in speaking with legislators. After a few weeks of "flattening the curve", it became clear that a resolution to the pandemic would take a long time (to say the least) and they began a series of weekly Zoom calls, each of which focused on a different theme or topic. It folded neatly into their regular calls with legislators and stakeholders in child welfare, and into the podcast they'd started several months before. Pandemic adjustments were not easy for KYA, but their workflow was tailored to people with whom they had prior established contact, and to people who often had Internet access and could often work from home.

Another organization that employed current and former foster youth as public spokespeople and mentors to young people aging out, took a different tack. Webinars and video conferencing were not a part of the repertoire of technologies they typically used to do outreach. This organization depended far more on in-person events where they could hand out gift bags and gas cards — monetary and material resources foster youth happily showed up for — members instead chose to do pandemic outreach through more youth-oriented platforms,

particularly Instagram and Google Hangouts, both of which are free to use and typically only required an email address to sign up. The tone and content of the youth-oriented events were different too: they functioned as check-ins and resource guides, more personal and comfort-oriented in contrast to the interview- and information-sharing expert- and service-provider oriented events that comprised KYA's weekly calls.

In-person interactions offered social contextualization of the things people told me: body language, silences, other people, cityscapes and traffic all became part of building rapport with my interlocutors. As we moved from in-person to technologically mediated encounters, the affordances of embodied interaction dimmed, while technology's affordances opened up other avenues and contexts of communications. I sat in virtual meetings and events with people in other parts of Kentucky without having to drive anywhere, a relief after spending so much time in the car. Chat boxes in Zoom meetings and Google Hangouts allowed for a simultaneous consumption and production of media as people reacted and responded to presentations. The one-to-one interpersonal interactions I had with young people, especially via my phone, afforded new kinds of constraints and opportunities.

I texted, messaged, and FaceTimed with young people, nearly every day. They had grown up with the Internet, and I had been introduced to it when I was young: we were used to conducting swathes of our social lives through technology, well before the pandemic. They adapted easily to video chatting and regular phone calls, but many of our interactions were text- or image-mediated. I played a cute virtual bowling game with Allison. I swapped stressed emojis with Hayley, and over the course of virtual fieldwork, got to know young people through the way they translated their ideas into text messaging and imagery. There was certainly room for

misinterpretation and misunderstanding, but the ability to edit and revise text messages allowed us both a different kind of clarity not possible when interacting in person.

Aging out in a pandemic

As I transitioned to more technology-based interactions, Hayley adapted her outreach and advocacy work with and for former foster youth. This primarily took the form of attending virtual public meetings on child welfare reform, but she also hosted a handful of virtual youth-oriented outreach events. She kindly invited me to attend several of them, including to one in which she planned to discuss Pandemic Anxiety in late March.

After introducing the topic and discussing the definitions of anxiety and how anxiety was more common for foster youth, Hayley opened the floor, asking if anyone had any comments or thoughts. A few young women spoke up about having experienced trauma, but eventually the conversation turned to the instability of being in foster care during a pandemic. Two of them chimed in that they were dealing with uncertainty in their Independent Living programs. Another mentioned that she was aging out of care soon, which was a particularly challenging form of instability during a pandemic.

Hayley continued on with her presentation, mentioning foster-youth-specific sources of pandemic anxiety. She was experiencing reductions in hours. Her job, at a recreational facility, closed down. She mentioned that her life was marked by a constant fear of being infected without knowing it. Foster youths were relatively well-educated about health, she noted, but in the age of the pandemic, uncertainties abounded about transmission and risk. Many, she said, might not know if they're doing "something wrong", and unintentionally giving COVID to someone. In the worst-case scenario, one in which young people might have needed "maximum

care", she wondered aloud if those former foster youth on state insurance or Medicaid would have enough insurance coverage to get access to the health care they needed. If not, were they going to be overlooked in favor of someone who had insurance that covered more care?

Aging out during a pandemic was a particular kind of hell. In March 2020, policymakers had yet to take action to manage the effects of the pandemic on child welfare systems. Like many, child welfare officials assumed that the danger would pass in a matter of weeks. Upon realizing it would last longer, social service systems scrambled to meet the needs of young people aging out during the pandemic. Most states implemented moratoria on aging out and the federal government would later issue a national moratorium on aging out: neither was fast enough for this young woman, and I do not know what happened to her. For those who were not allowed to age out, the federal government continued to fund placements for young people in out-of-home care. Federal funds were eventually released for former foster youth who had lost housing due to school closures, and there were also pandemic-specific funds to cover basic living costs for young people who had lost hourly employment wages; later, the pandemic checks would also support former foster youth, assuming they had stable addresses to address those checks. At least two of the young people in my study – Allison and Beu – did not.

Other foster youth were forced out of their dorms when colleges and universities closed. Because most of them had nowhere else to go, the closure of schools made them homeless, making it even more difficult for them to continue their educations if their schools had switched to online classes. This was on top of a general consensus in the group that online classes weren't preferable compared to in-person learning: they couldn't get the same level of discussion or interaction with professors when classes were online, making it harder to retain information. Many of them also depended on making good grades to continue receiving financial aid. If they

stopped making good grades, or failed out, they would lose their financial support and income, which many of them used to cover living expenses, and would also hinder them from progressing in their degree programs.

For those who were finishing their degrees or diplomas, graduations were delayed or canceled, which impacted foster youth who were preparing to graduate high school. Hayley noted that few foster youths graduate from high school, and even fewer graduate from college: commencement ceremonies are a big achievement.[6]

For young people still in state custody, many of them lost in-person resources they depended on during the pandemic. During the Google Hangout, Hayley pointed out, "Visitations, adoptions, and court dates are postponed — a lot of kids in care can't see bio[logical] family anymore and not everyone has the means to do FaceTime or Skype or Zoom with family." Even if they were able to do some kind of real-time conversation with their families of origin, they were still missing in-person contact that was really important to kids in state custody. That visitations were canceled or limited meant many kids and their parents would not get to see each other, making their end goal – reunification – more difficult.

The specific absences mandated by the child welfare system – the separation of children from families and networks of support – were inadequate for meeting the failures of health care infrastructures during a pandemic. There were no easy answers – many of the young people who had tuned into this online meeting were presumably similarly worried about the limits of their health insurance and felt acutely that they had nowhere to go *because* they were foster youth and separated from consistent reliable networks of support.

[6] Months later, I was very happy to virtually attend Hayley's online undergraduate graduate, in which she was the commencement speaker.

CONCLUSION

In the Introduction, I outlined my theoretical concerns and the primary question I ask in the dissertation: what can former foster youth offer to anthropology's understandings of responsibility? I argue that, as they move from government custody to emerging adulthood, their relationships, hobbies, creative practices, and struggles reveal the changing implicit expectations of childhood, adolescence, and adulthood.

In this Methodological section, I pose a second set of methodological questions, not to anthropology, but to public policy and social work: How does studying former foster youth through participant observation transform and challenge conventions and norms about children and child welfare? Studying former foster youth in this way is rare, though there is a wealth of qualitative research about foster youth and their care networks. These qualitative studies can capture important dimensions of dilemmas that foster youth face, though of course questions of peer relationships, family dynamics, poverty, and coming-of-age are not limited to children in the foster care system. However, the most widely funded and widely cited quantitative studies about former foster youth often rely on a "social problems" framing, determined in advance by policy experts and social scientists.

In contrast, my research works in reverse: starting with former foster youth, I attempt to discern how young people inhabit this category, how they make meaning of this status once they leave care. I, of course, had ideas about the "problems" and forms of suffering I would find. I assumed that my young interlocutors might struggle with homelessness, substance use, sexual and intimate relationships, their families: and they did. It is impossible to work with this group of young people and completely avoid discussions of traumatic or violent incidents. However, as I

argued in the Introduction, I also hope to recuperate some of the complex ways that young people wrestled with translating their traumatic pasts into moral rules for themselves and others.

I pick up these theoretical and methodological questions in anthropology, public policy, and social work because my findings illustrate that studying *this* group of young people in *this* way can offer new ways of thinking about them and with them.

PART I. MORAL LANDSCAPES

3. IN GOOD FAITH: RELIGIOUS ORIGINS OF CHILD WELFARE IN KENTUCKY

AFTER CHILD WELFARE?

A debate has emerged in the last few years about the continued existence of child welfare systems. While scholars have long noted the over-representation of Black and Native children in child welfare (D. E. Roberts 2001; Briggs 2020), calls to reform these systems have in some cases become calls to abolish them completely. In the aftermath of the uprisings of 2020, in which Black activists called for the abolition and defunding of police, public discussions about the possibility of prison and police abolition became more widespread, and public understanding of the meaning of "policing" has also shifted. Reconsidering the meaning of police and policing is not new[7], but what *is* somewhat more novel is the traction that organizations have garnered in explicitly naming child welfare systems as extensions of policing power in the United States.

Movements to eliminate state intervention in family life emerged long before 2020 but have taken on new significance in child welfare research circles. The Rise Project in New York City, an organization that works with families directly impacted by child welfare, was founded in 2005 with the goal of moving child welfare away from the state and into communities. Prominent legal scholar Dorothy Roberts has long documented how social workers disproportionately removed Black children from their families (D. E. Roberts 2001): today, some estimates suggest that one-third to over half of Black children will be involved in a CPS

[7] In his research on the governance of methamphetamine in West Virginia, William Garriott argues that the War on Drugs expanded policing power in the United States, well beyond the bounds of police departments. Through ethnographic attention to doctors, concerned citizens, families, teachers, and school officials, Garriott shows how people who are not police officers monitor, report, and stigmatize people who use or make methamphetamine. This is one example of how policing and police power are separate from uniformed law enforcement.

investigation (Edwards et al. 2021), which itself can have harmful and chilling effects between families and institutions even without removal (Fong 2020). More recently, scholars and activists have coalesced around this call for child welfare abolition in the form of the upEND Movement, a partnership between the Center for the Study of Social Policy and the Houston School of Social Work.[8] UpEND's members seek to obviate the need for state surveillance and intervention through prevention work and restorative practices. Even the language is shifting. Roberts, borrowing a term coined by researcher and activist Emma Williams, has called for a shift in language from "child welfare" to "family regulation" or "family policing" systems (E. P. Williams, n.d.; D. Roberts 2020), to emphasize the regulatory and punitive qualities of state intervention in family life.

The call for child welfare abolition has been met with criticism from long-standing researchers in children and youth services (R. Barth et al. 2020; R. P. Barth et al. 2020), who argue that eliminating the surveillance of families and removal of children will result in more child fatalities and child abuse. They argue that while the abolition movement has some good points about racial disproportionality, and the need for system reform, to eradicate the system wholesale would be damaging and dangerous for children and families. They also deny the harm of child welfare interventions of any kind, pointing to their own research that suggests that the abolitionists overstate harms of removal and surveillance. This is curious, as many of them have long careers documenting the negative outcomes of children in foster care, particularly among those who age out (Greeson, Garcia, et al. 2015; R. P. Barth 1990; 2005; Greeson, Usher, and Grinstein-Weiss 2010).

[8] The future of the University of Houston School of Social Work as a central scholarly organizing hub for abolition is currently in flux. The Dean of the School of Social Work, Alan Dettlaff, had been an outspoken advocate for abolition. He was removed from his position in December 2022.

BEFORE CHILD WELFARE?

In watching this debate unfold, I wondered what a life without a child welfare system might look like, which led me to wonder what life looked like *before* states authorized themselves to intervene in family life. Government-based systems of family regulation are relatively recent inventions. There is no single federal "child welfare system" in the U.S. The closest comparison might be the allocation of federal money for foster care, authorized through the Social Security Act, which was signed into law in 1935. The 1935 law included monetary provisions for the Children's Bureau, which was authorized in 1912, and more federal money has been added to Title IV of the Social Security Act since then. Title IV offers block grants to states, chunks of money with some general guidelines on how the money is to be used, but states can add their own stipulations and disburse it as they see fit. Section E of Title IV authorizes block grants for child welfare specifically – there are many rules, and more were added in 2018 with the Families First Prevention Services Act – but states have discretion in how they choose to use their Social Security block grants. The formal appropriation for government-authorized "child welfare" is less than a hundred years old, and people have been taking care of children here for far longer than the federal government has been paying them to do so.

On a smaller scale, there are at least fifty child welfare "systems" (more if one includes U.S. territories like Puerto Rico and Guam, both of which track and report child abuse rates and investigations), administered by state governments, some of whom depend on federal money with rules, and some of whom do not. Some state systems – such as Florida's – are almost entirely privatized (Chapin Hall 2019), with state moneys going to contractors who certify foster parents, place children in foster homes, or in congregate care settings – group homes, residential homes, psychiatric hospitals – also do the bulk of caregiving. According to interviews with my

former employers at private residential facility for adolescent girls (who were very much in favor of privatization), Florida's state system does child abuse investigations and authorizes removals, but little else.

On top of the state-based governance of child welfare, administrative maps of regions, counties, municipalities, or large urban areas further complicate the picture of "Who is in charge of child welfare?" While I was in Kentucky, I attended thirteen public policy meetings in six months. Each was facilitated by Kentucky Youth Advocates, a nonprofit nonpartisan policy advocacy organization; nine of the meetings addressed changes to federal child welfare funding, and four were to solicit policy proposal feedback from service providers, nonprofit organizations, and any other interested parties. The meetings I attended outside of Louisville had a common theme – rural and suburban counties needed more resources, and often resources which stakeholders understood to be qualitatively different than resources needed in urban areas. While my fellow attendees pointed out that different areas needed different services, what was also fascinating to watch was the tone and tenor of the resistance to proposed policies. Most often, I interpreted their articulations of "what was needed" as being distinctly punitive rather than restorative; harsher penalties for everything from drug use to baby-shaking, for everyone from grown adults who fail to report child abuse to children who commit crimes. In a conversation with Dean, a lawyer who advocated against the death penalty in Kentucky, he put it succinctly: "Punishment is all we have." This is not to say that people were acting "in bad faith" or with motivations solely towards punishment – most of those who came to these meetings seemed to genuinely want "what's best for kids", and their disagreements stemmed from different contexts about what "best" meant, and how to how to implement it.

In this chapter, I want to think through the imagined futures of child welfare through their pasts. Rather than take the position that today's systems are either fundamentally different from or the same as the networks of care institutions that existed before they were organized and government regulated, I want instead to show how ideas of "childcare" and "child protection" are picked up, reworked, and reinscribed on child welfare today.

I take this approach, inspired by Ann Stoler's work on duress, which she describes as "a pressure exerted", a "relationship of actualized and anticipated violence" (Stoler 2016, 6–8): duress is a relation of force that constrains people and possibilities. Sometimes duress is met with refusal, which is where Stoler begins her intervention into the "post" of postcolonial. The relations of force that began with empire, she argues, did not disappear when colonial powers withdrew militaries or occupying forces. Instead, she is interested in the "strange continuity" between "colonial" and "postcolonial" regimes (2016, 28). Stoler works across many government archives – Palestine, Algeria, France, South Africa, Indonesia, and others – to track how formal legal systems changed, but social relations and institutions were strategically reworked and reoriented towards ends that were similar, but perhaps not always exactly the same. She develops an analytical lens that emphasizes "processes of partial inscriptions, modified displacements, and amplified recuperations" (2016, 27), where built environments, concepts, and ideologies survived the transition to a new regime, though perhaps in edited forms. Stoler's work transformed my own understanding of change over time not as a linear, direct, causal process, but one in which threads of older ideas linger into the present, edited and reformulated but recognizably similar.

By studying the original instantiations of what child welfare would become in Kentucky, I can account for the thinning and thickening of political will for different kinds of interventions:

public or privatized care, religiously affiliated or secular care, institutional or community-based care, punitive or restorative. At the risk of being overly binary, I want to be clear that these are not simply orientations that move from one pole to another, or that everyone was simply accepted with one orientation or another. Rather, as Stoler puts it, "There is neither abrupt disappearance of the one nor the clean and clear emergence of the other" (2016, 28); these were active debates between people on different sides, with different missions, happening at particular historical junctures. Stoler's work informs my own through her emphasis on the simultaneity and the durability of forces, not specifically regarding empire, but through adjacent forms of duress: racism and poverty, specifically, which, as I will show, helped shape the configurations of religious organizations that established institutions to care for children. In this chapter, I work through a genealogy of child caring institutions in Kentucky, to better understand how much older relations of force have been similarly reconfigured and continue to reverberate in Kentucky's child welfare policy debates today.[9]

DOCUMENTING CHILD CARING INSTITUTIONS IN THE 1920S

To begin, I analyze two early reports on child-caring institutions. The first, funded by the Russell Sage Foundation, was written by a "Special Agent" of the Foundation, William H. Slingerland in 1919. Before coming to the Foundation, Slingerland had been the superintendent

[9] This analysis is not limited strictly to private childcare; most of Louisville's hospitals have been bought or sold in the last decade to or from religious organizations. Catholic Health Initiatives, a national health conglomerate founded and supported by thirteen congregations of Catholic women's religious orders, own and operate 101 service providers in 18 states. They bought Louisville's Our Lady of Peace Hospital, which is – according to their website – the largest youth behavioral services provider in the country, with more psychiatric inpatient beds than anywhere else. The other three major health care institutions in Jefferson County were established and funded by Jewish communities (Jewish Hospital), Baptists (Baptist Hospital), Episcopalians, Methodists, Presbyterians, and Evangelicals (Norton Hospital).

of a children's society for eleven years and helped run that society's children's home.[10] He joined Russell Sage in 1914 and conducted field research on child-caring institutions all over the United States; he died in 1924 (Reeves 1929, 13). His 1919 report, "Child Welfare Work in Louisville", had been part of a study commissioned by Louisville's Board of Trade and Community Council, and detailed twenty-three private organizations and two public agencies offering institutional long-term childcare and "home-finding" (a term used then interchangeably for foster placement). He also lists seven public child-caring institutions, three of which were carceral reform schools for children and four of which offered institutional care for pregnant girls and disabled children (Schools "for the Blind", "for the Deaf", and "for the Feebleminded[11]").

The second report was written by Sara A. Brown of the National Child Labor Commission. Brown was, like Slingerland, a field investigator who appears to have specialized in child labor concerns in Midwest states, based on her authored reports and role as speaker for Michigan and Iowa in the 1922 National Conference on Child Labor (National Child Labor Committee n.d.). Her report, from 1921, investigates "Child Caring Institutions in Kentucky", and augments Slingerland's work in Louisville. She documents many of the same institutions –

[10] I looked for biographical information about Slingerland, who was a prolific researcher and author during his ten-year employment at Russell Sage. Although his reports seem to be widely cited among child welfare historians, I could locate virtually no information about Slingerland himself. The only profile I could find of him is from his last report – his co-author, Margaret Reeves, notes that he died shortly after finishing his portion of a natural survey of training schools. See Reeves (1929, 13).

[11] "Feebleminded" is a eugenicist term that might include developmental, physical, or learning disabilities. While the term was popularized in the United States by eugenicist Henry H. Goddard before the Civil War (Trent 1994, 162), it became linked to high crime rates, poverty, and social vices during the eugenics movement of the early twentieth century (Trent 1994, 144–96). Kentucky Historic Institutions, a digital archive of historic sites for institutional care in the commonwealth, describes practices of sterilization and corporal punishment used on inmates of the School for the Feebleminded. In other documents from the Frances Ingram collection, doctors and social workers pay special attention to the problem of the "feebleminded", asking that they not be allowed to reproduce, so as to reduce crime rates and social vices. Annotations on the physical documents appeared to be written in Ingram's hand, commenting on the importance of reducing "the social evil", presumably referencing race-mixing. See also Kline (2001).

most were concentrated in Louisville – and a handful of others in Lexington and in other parts of the commonwealth. Like Slingerland, Brown includes two types of carceral institutions – reform and industrial schools – in the category of "public child-caring institutions", alongside the three state-run schools for disabled children, along with two public institutions, for a total of seven publicly funded state organizations for child-care. She goes on to document fifteen non- or inter-denominational organizations, and twenty-nine denominational homes, their congregations and denominations listed, and three fraternal organizations. All told, she documents a total of fifty-two child-caring agencies in 1921, the majority of which were privately owned and operated, and explicitly religiously affiliated, either tied to specific congregations or to inter- or non-denominational care.

Both reports involved a great deal of travel and documentation. The authors visited each site in person and assessed the state of the grounds and institutions. Both authors seemingly had a general list of data points they hoped to gather, along with in-depth descriptions of the institutions.

What children are in institutions, what conditions send them there, what is done for them while they stay, what happens when they leave and what effect has their training in an institution on their chances for well-rounded successful lives? -- these are the questions we seek to answer.

The findings of this study are grouped under 11 heads and are recorded in the belief that they carry their own conviction.

II. Statement of findings

I. List of institutions

III. Minimum Standards

IV. What children are in institutions and why

V. What is done for them while they stay

(1) Length of stay
(2) Personnel of the staff
(3) Health
(4) Education
(5) Fire protection

VI. What happens when they leave

(1) Through parole of release
(2) Return to own people
(3) Employment or special schools
(4) Home-finding
(5) Apprenticeship

VII. What children are without care

VIII. Need of State supervision

IX. Recommendations

X. Stories of institutions.

XI Agencies not primarily Child Caring Institutions

I. LIST OF INSTITUTIONS

When the writer asked the Secretary of the Commission for a list of

The Filson Historical Society

Illustration 3. Table of contents for Brown's report; Image courtesy of the Filson Historical Society

Child Welfare Work Defined. The scope of child welfare work, when the term is used without limitation, includes everything in connection with child life. A full study of this comprehensive field is never intended when the expression is used in a technical sense. For the purposes of this study the term child welfare work has a narrower signification, relating it definitely to philanthropic activities. This technical meaning limits its application to two related, yet measurably distinct, forms of service. These are:

1. Remedial efforts in behalf of children who are destitute, neglected, delinquent, or abnormal in mind or body, and the care and training of those deprived of natural relationships and support.
2. Preventive measures to protect normal children, and to save them from entering the dependent, delinquent, or defective classes.

Features of the Study. Among the prominent features of such a study as was asked by the Louisville people, the following are most important:

a. The number and types of the child-caring agencies and institutions operating, and the financial investment they represent.
b. The annual total current expense, and the average per capita cost of the work for the various classes of dependents.
c. The quantity and quality of the service rendered by each and all of the institutions.
d. The possible limitation or combination of institutional functions; a matter intimately related to the adequacy of existing organizations to meet present and future needs.
e. The mutual relations of these organizations, and the extent of their actual and helpful co-operation.
f. Methods and measures to check or prevent an increase in the numbers of dependent, delinquent and defective children.
g. Adequate and efficient State supervision of all public and private child-caring institutions.
h. The need for the enactment of new child welfare laws by the State Legislature.

Illustration 4. Goals of from Slingerland's report, Image courtesy of the Filson Historical Society

In the case study pages, the authors made observations about the qualities of each institution. Do they have enough fresh air, open windows? Are there fire escapes, enough space? Do the children get outdoor time, engaging, age-appropriate activities? Do they have enough money for nutritious, wholesome food? Do they employ a doctor or on-site nurses to handle medical needs? How are the children educated, and what kinds of training do they receive? Some questions are more nefarious as well – does race-mixing happen in the home? Does the institution take steps to limit interactions between "the feebleminded" and "delinquent" children, "bad" influences on the merely" dependent", or is everyone house together? The authors develop equally important context about the history of each institution. They note where institutions are, when they were founded, and by whom, as well as any notable facts about the grounds or people running them. Each institution includes counts of children, broken down by age, gender, reason for staying in the institution, and race, along with descriptions of the buildings, grounds, recreational and educational opportunities, and the friendliness of the staff members.[12] Brown and Slingerland also offer estimates of the facility costs, upkeep, funding sources, and their impressions and recommendations, ranging from "this place ought to be closed immediately" to "great work is being done here".

These reports are referenced frequently in Ingram's correspondence about Kentucky's efforts to establish a state-based child welfare oversight agency. They appear to have formed the foundation of formal research done to take account of the various child caring institution that

[12] In Part 3 of *Governing the Soul* (1999), Nikolas Rose describes the development of expert knowledge and power regarding children and the family. Rose links the implementation of compulsory schooling to the emergence of psychological and developmental assessments in Western Europe and the United States. The combination of these two phenomena made it possible for all children to be counted, assessed, and sorted into population categories, which had the effect of producing a category of child behavior that might then be regulatable (Rose 1999, 153–54). I view Slingerland and Brown's studies as part of these processes of the development of child expertise.

existed in Kentucky. These reports seem to have been the first attempts at generating evidence to compel the Kentucky General Assembly to pass laws that would establish formal rules and regulations to ensure that children were being cared for in a manner that was consistent with the aims, goals, professional expertise of people like Ingram who were advocating for child protections. As such the reports emphasize the importance of implementing "scientific" and "modern" approaches to caring for children, rather than outdated or traditional or non-scientific approaches to caring for children.

MODERNIZING CHILD CARE: ALIGNING THE LEGAL, THE SPIRITUAL, AND THE SCIENTIFIC

The presence of religiously affiliated organizations is significant in the history of Kentucky's child welfare system. Of the private institutions working at the turn of the century, the majority were founded by religious congregations. In Slingerland's report on Louisville, he opens with a description of the city: "Louisville is a city of churches" (Slingerland 1919, 1). Of the religious organizations of the city, one was Jewish, two were "nonsectarian" Christian, four were Roman Catholic, and nine were split between seven different Protestant denominations (47). Slingerland's initial observation seems to have captured the variety of congregations and socially oriented work they were doing. Some were named for saints ("St. Joseph's Orphanage" "St. Lawrence Institution for Working Boys") while others were named for the specific congregation that operated the agency ("Jewish Children's Home" "German Protestant Orphan's Home").

Slingerland's critiques of these organizations stems from two general areas. The first, he implies, is that they are not necessarily taking *poor* care of children, but rather that they are using nonscientific, non-modern methods of childcare. For instance, in his assessment of the receiving

practices of the Home of the Innocents [Protestant Episcopal], he writes that mothers sign a book upon leaving their children at the institution, "stating whether or not [the children] are for adoption…the papers being completed on the taking of the child (Slingerland 1919, 50). He condemns this practice: "If such a method is legal in the State of Kentucky, the laws greatly need revision (Slingerland 1919, 50). He "unhesitatingly" acknowledges the "altruistic character of the home people" but recommends that the Home of the Innocents works closely with other organizations to improve "case work on receptions" and "placing-out in families", add a nurse and hire medical staff, and develop "a full comprehensive system of records" (Slingerland 1919, 50). Brown is less specifically critical of most organizations – perhaps because she conducted her fieldwork three years after Slingerland conducted his in Louisville – and focused more on the necessity of establishing state oversight of all child-caring institutions in the commonwealth. She frames this need explicitly in terms of responsibility:

> …the institutions are hampered by many restrictions, such as charters, and clauses in the deeds specifying the type of child that shall be admitted – only full orphans, only fatherless girls, only orphan girls, or only orphans whose parents were members of a specified religious denomination. The home-finding societies are restricted to receiving children legally surrendered, placeable in foster homes, and sound in mind and body…Children left homeless have no friendly authority with <u>final</u> responsibility for their care, and as a result fall into the hands of whoever happens to know and care enough to see that a permanent and satisfactory home is secured for them...the Kentucky Children's Code Commission decided to undertake a study of all child-caring institutions in the state….to help the legislature determine as accurately as possible the obligations which the state owes to its dependent children…it established beyond any reasonable doubt the necessity for supervision of all child caring work by a well developed [sic] and adequately equipped state department (Brown 1921, 1–2, emphasis in original).

Brown identifies several problems: a lack of standardization, the discretion of care, the exclusion of some children from religious agencies, the long tenures of caregivers, and the absence of oversight. The heads of these organizations are accountable to no one. The solution, proposed by the Kentucky Children's Code Commission – an organization intended to develop a

body of knowledge about child-caring practices and make policy recommendations to address issues – is to develop a state-funded "department" to oversee these facilities. She continues:

> The majority of governing boards are self-perpetuating bodies, with officers serving during lifetime. Not infrequently the group is dominated by the will and personal hobbies of one individual. Everything from purchasing a new broom to admitted or discharging a child is determined by her. Directors often meet at the Home – sometimes not; in either case, the matron seldom if ever meets with them. Hers is a menial position entirely detached from the determination of policies and conduct of business. (Brown 1921, 12).

The ultimate decision-making power lies not with the people who are taking direct care of children, according to Brown, but rather according to "governing boards" or the "personal hobbies of one individual" – the matron cannot exercise her own judgment and expertise in the course of her daily work caring for children. The implication here is that the majority of people who founded such child-caring institutions – in Kentucky, religious congregations – are well-intentioned but ultimately less equipped to take *proper* care of children than people who have direct contact with young people, such as house matrons.

One of the key takeaways from the report is to bring each of the agencies they document into the purview of a not-yet-existent state-run oversight group, so as to implement "modern" child caring best practices; Slingerland describes laws about childcare as "so out of tune with twentieth century ideas and methods" (Slingerland 1919, 134), and encourages the next legislative session to adopt better laws about child welfare.

The second criticism that emerges from the reports, particularly Slingerland's, is an explicit observation about religious agencies, whose methods do not align with professional social workers' goals of ensuring that children are placed in homes, rather than kept in institutions. Slingerland – or the agencies who hired him – were especially interested in whether agencies were willing to place children in foster homes, in addition to or in lieu of housing them

in child-caring institutions. While ensuring that institutions were as "home-like" as possible, Slingerland and the Louisville social services providers also wanted to emphasize that an institution is not a home, and that children should instead be placed in homes when possible. Slingerland tried to understand how and why institutions may or may not offer home-finding services; some of them had partnerships with other institutions that focused on placement work. Others offered no placement at all, keeping the children indefinitely or returning them to their parents when they returned to the agencies. In either case, Slingerland's notes provided a starting point for social service providers who would eventually push for formal state oversight into both quality control over the quality of housing in institutions, and the quality of their home certification.

In contrast to placing agencies and public institutions, Slingerland attributes the existence of religiously founded institutions to "the seemingly needed work of some religious body" rather than "an apparent local demand" (1919, 47). For Slingerland, these religious institutions emphasized their own moral work, what he calls "denominational fidelity", often at the expense of "locality needs", presumably meaning the need for children's placement and housing. He draws a distinction between what the social services experts believe is best and what religious institutions understood as their moral work to care for children in their communities. This is especially clear in Slingerland's discussions of who is admitted to congregational child caring institutions.

Slingerland listed the requirements agencies imposed for admission or services. In the era before a federal poverty line and nondiscrimination clauses, agencies chose to accept or deny services to people for reasons of age and gender primarily, but also for level of need ("only temporary care" "entirely dependent", [Slingerland (1919, 50)]), race, "mentality" or disability

status, and religion. Some institutions, particularly the Protestant ones, only took children whose parents had been a part of their congregations. By 1919 – decades after the Civil war and the implementation of Jim Crow – all private institutions, including religious organizations, were segregated by race. His records show separate facilities run by the same religious order for both Black and White children, and his descriptions also suggest that the quality of these facilities were worse for Black children.

Brown's report echoes many of Slingerland's findings, with attention to the rest of the state in addition to Louisville. Importantly, Brown notes that "practically none of these agencies [referring specifically to religiously affiliated agencies] require court commitments, and the majority of children are received by permanent release of parent or guardian" (1921, 11). This suggests that the relationship between the court and child removal was still being established; the decision to remove children had yet to become the formal responsibility of the state, and private institutions were able to take children at the behest of their parents, without a requirement for state oversight.

Brown views the absence of state oversight as a problem. Throughout her report, she weaves in short narratives about individual case studies of people who had been involved in this nascent foster care system. Each of the stories seems to be told in order to provide an example of a particular kind of problem that a more formal organization of child caring institutions might resolve. For example, on page 11 she tells a story about a young man who had been placed in an orphanage as a child along with two siblings. He attempted to track down both of his sisters as an adult; he found one who had been placed with a private family, but who had been forced to work at a young age and had no opportunities for schooling. He was never able to find his other sister, even with the help and assistance of the agency. The author implies that the reason the agency

was unable to find this man's sister is that the institution had not kept records for the forty-six years of its existence. Implicit here is that the state, when it passed a formal rule establishing its authority to oversee these kinds of institutions, would be able to prevent these kinds of stories from happening by requiring every agency to keep records of where children were sent over a much longer period of time.

She writes "the institution and its systematic management is given first consideration, and the problem of the child is ~~deeply rooted in the background, if not~~ lost sight of" (1921, 12, strike-through in original). Because this is a physical document—a draft—there is handwriting on this version of this document; although these are the files of Frances Ingram, it is not clear who had made the edits. For the sake of creating political urgency around the establishment of formal government oversight mechanisms the report has been edited by someone with the intent of reducing ambiguity or hedging, and by framing what is happening in these institutions as focusing on the egos and individual people who run them rather than the children themselves. Brown acknowledges that she has selectively edited her findings – "Many and diverse factors contribute to the conditions on which we base our conclusions, but some we pass over because, while of importance as general institutional problems, they are only of secondary importance from the point of view of the <u>child</u> (Brown 1921, 3, emphasis in original).

Brown's report introduces another dynamic: "All child caring work is handicapped by the lack of resources of local communities. Outside of large cities there are few if any organized social agencies" (1921, 1). The majority of the agencies she documents are based in either Louisville or Lexington, with only a handful being based in a rural area.

CLOSURES, OPENINGS, AFTERLIVES

Closures of Denominational Organizations

Brown's report is a useful touchstone for tracking change over time; one hundred years after her careful documentation, I learned what happened to the agencies she listed in 1921. The remarkable finding is that I was able to locate records that confirm that 21 of the original 29 denominational organizations she listed are still operational and offering social services to abused, neglected, or impoverished children. Most of them have merged with other organizations, but agency websites preserve these histories in their "About Us" sections. They have managed to survive, in some cases: the industrialization of Louisville in the 1820s and 1830s, the Civil War, the Great Depression, two World Wars, the War on Poverty, welfare reform and mass incarceration, all with varying levels of financial, personnel, and institutional cultural support. The role of religiously founded organizations in Kentucky far predates the formalization of child welfare systems, and that they continue to operate is a testament to the flexibility of these organizations to balance institutional cultural histories with the ever-growing demands of wage hikes for employees, traumatized young people and families, and specific expectations around best practices among state oversight systems.

Of the remaining eight organizations that did not stay open, I learned that one had formally closed (Mary K. Williams Home for Orphan Girls [Episcopal]), most likely because it was a "parish house" caring for eight girls; they likely grew up and the congregation chose not to continue funding the care of children. The Reverend Norton of that congregation, however, moved to Louisville shortly after its founding, and his Louisville properties eventually became a part of one of the largest health care conglomerates in the city, Norton Healthcare.

Two of the Catholic organizations in Louisville merged shortly after Brown's report. They closed in the 1970s, after losing a lawsuit filed by former residents of the organizations, who alleged that they had been the subject of physical, emotional, and sexual abuse at the hands of the priests and nuns who ran the agencies.

Three of the denominational organizations were likely closed shortly after Brown's report, though I could not find records of their closure: the Nebo Orphan's Home [Redeemer's Army] in Greenville; the Christian Home and School [Church of Christ] in Shakertown; and the Industrial Union Mission in Harrodsburg [Pentacostal[13] Church of Christ]. One of them appeared to have been, not to mince words, a scam run by the Lathroums (who had changed their name to avoid legal issues in other parts of Kentucky), advocating on behalf of the Redeemer's Army. Brown writes:

> In the name of The Redeemer's Army, claiming to be affiliated with the Salvation Army, George and Nora received dependent children into their home; taking children with them, they began going to the county seat and nearby towns, conducting religious services on the street and soliciting money for an orphan's home…At first many were touched by the pitiful stories and gave generously Some did not approve of their exhibiting the children and "sending them to beg" as they expressed it. Desirous of knowing more about the care they received, an investigation was begun by county authorities.
>
> To their amazement 22 children and 4 adults were found living in three small rooms. Children slept four and six in a bed. Some were covered with sores, others had itch, one had a venereal disease and one was an imbecile. Nine months went by before enough information was secured and public sentiment sufficiently aroused to discourage these ignorant, misguided, and apparently self-seeking people.
>
> Early in July 1921 under pressure of adverse criticism in the county, children were returned to their relatives or placed in permanent homes by loyal officials and the Lathroums left, presumably for Chicago…

[13] In Brown's report, she spells the Industrial Union Mission as "Pentacostal", while most congregations spell it "Pentecostal". This might be a typing error on Brown's part, or possibly an accurate reflection of how the founder, Charles H. Thompson, spelled the name of his institution. A more insidious reading: Thompson was a Black Pentecostal preacher, and it is also possible that Brown purposefully dismissed spelling his denomination correctly, for reasons I describe below.

> We believe that children were received under false pretenses and that they were not properly cared for in any way. We believe that money was received under false pretense, that the children did not profit temporarily or permanently by it, and that some of it was invested in property in the personal name of the wife…
>
> The Redeemer's Army with headquarters in Chicago has never obtained an approved standing in Chicago. They are known to the subscriptions Investigating Committee of the Association of Commerce, to the Juvenile Protective Association, the Health Department, the Salvation Army and other bodies concerned with the welfare of children. From one we quote: "We have a record of this institution covering a period of over five years. Frequent investigations have been made. Complaints included such matters as filthy conditions of the nursery, lack of proper attention given to the children, questionable methods of solicitation of funds and lack of recreational opportunities for the children. After repeated visits and letters to the municipal authority the place has been licensed by the local (Chicago) Department of Health and is now under its supervision. The organization all along has impressed us primarily as a money-making matter, operating under the guise of religion. The Redeemer's Army is well known to the Salvation Army headquarters who denounce their methods and their references to the Salvation Army. (1921, 120)

What is notable about Brown's report is the extent of detail she delves into about verification – it is not enough to know that the Lathroums have little connection to the Salvation Army, but equally important context for her is that the Redeemer's Army congregation has not itself been incorporated into the Salvation Army. The Chicago Department of Health and various other social actors investigated the Redeemer's Army and found it to be a suspect organization, operating as "a money-making matter, operating under the guise of religion", denounced by the Salvation Army as acting in bad faith. Brown is clearly not opposed to the work of religiously affiliated child caring institutions: she evenly describes conditions in many other religious organizations, which makes her description here all the more damning.

A second denominational organization that very likely closed – though I could find no formal record of its closure – was the Christian Home and School of Shakertown. Brown describes Sam Pittman, a "mountain preacher" and the founder, and his home this way:

> Sam owns nothing and in the presence of the writer his parents pleaded with him to give up his plans to conduct an orphans' home, explaining that hat his sympathy for neglected children amounts to "A mania for caring for orphans," and is not accompanied by the business ability necessary to manage an institution…With simple child-like optimism Sam told of his work in the mountains; of little children in wretched condition left homeless or found wandering "like little tramps along the criks and hollers"; of the lack of facilities for the care of crippled children and his fruitless efforts to secure admission of children in already over-crowded institutions..
>
> Sam did not then and does not now realize that much more than an impulse to care for neglected children is needed to conduct an orphans' home properly. His dreams are appealing but he has no ability to carry them out. He brought to the Home 25 or 30 children from mountain counties, whom someone placed in his care. He kept no records except in his memory, and seldom secured legal custody. With few exceptions helpers who came to care for the children were incompetent, and those most capable were either dismissed or left of their own accord. There was no board of directors and no well defined policy for supporting the home. Sam spent much of his time in the state collecting funds and bringing more children to be cared for. The frame farmhouse with a capacity for about 20 children was scantily furnished, inadequately heated and a veritable firetrap. Children slept on the second floor sometimes with three to five in one bed. During the severe winter of 1918-1919 they were without sufficient bedding and clothing, partly because what they had was not kept in proper condition and partly because the supply was not adequate..
>
> With all fairness to Sam, whatever his motives may be, certain facts are indisputable and must be met openly and frankly. Doubtless he understands mountain folk, and his affection for neglected children cannot be questioned. He has never been known to abuse a child and frequently when he has had not had sufficient help to care for the children he has washed, ironed, cooked, and cared for them in large numbers. But, on the other hand, his methods cannot be too severely condemned. The kindest thing we can say of him is that he is too irresponsible and incapable to be permitted to continue his present plans for conducting a Children's Home (1921, 93-99)

Brown here is less interested in bringing this particular institution into the fold of the state; rather, she seems sympathetic to Pittman, who she seems to believe was acting in good

faith but with less skill and organization than was necessary for proper care of children. What is equally notable about the two organizations is that neither had the formal backing of a church, congregation, or other formal religious organization, despite collecting money and caring for children in the name of a religious organization. The oversight of organized religious organizations appears to have been a mechanism of accountability, a positive mark, for child caring agencies at the turn of the century, as state agents and experts were beginning to consolidate formal rules to oversee such agencies. Without it, Brown depicts lone actors who founded and ran child caring institutions as seemingly not only more likely to fail, but more likely to cause active harm to children.

She makes this exact criticism of a third agency that most likely closed, the Industrial Union Mission for Black children, and its founder, Charles H. Thompson, "a negro evangelist of the Pentacostal Church of Christ" (109). Like Pittman and the Lathroums, Thompson had similarly previously founded a number of child caring institutions, and seemingly acquired his money from places unknown to Brown. Unlike the Lathroums and Pittman, however, she notes that Thompson and his wife do require signed consent from parents before taking children; however, Brown's own inquiries suggest that some of the children in his care at the time of her study were "not known to the Juvenile Court nor to the negro Probation Officer of Lexington" (110), as Thompson had claimed. Her primary issue with Thompson, however, is a problem with the education he provided for the children. She writes:

> Without doubt, Thompson is a fanatic. He does not work in harmony with those of his own race. Under the guise of industrial education he solicits money at large, but provides no industrial training. Thus far he has no organization, no committee of church men or of citizens working with him. He is a free lance and his methods are not for the best interest of the children placed in his charge; they are deprived of all education except such as he dictates. His religious ideas are imposed upon them; the need for a well-balanced training of head, hand and heart is utterly disregarded. Doubtless he is capable of doing much for neglected and destitute negro children, but he should be held responsible to the State

> Board of Education for their education, preferably in the public school, and to some department in the state for the care of the children whom he receives. (1921, 110-111)

The racial dynamics of Brown's commentary are important to note: her primary issue is about education, and she does mention that "a good school for negro children is but a few blocks from his place" (1921, 110) to which Thompson does not send children in his care. She does not specify which of his religious practices are a problem, nor does she put into context what a "good school" is. Kentucky was, and is, deeply racially segregated, and Brown's feedback on non-denominational organizations run by Black people are similarly vague and critical. None of the religiously affiliated white-owned facilities for Black children are similarly described as fanatical. Nonetheless, her formal recommendation is the same as all other facilities: bring him into more contact with the state, not less.

I could not find information on the closure of the final two organizations of the eight denominational organizations that were shut down, but I infer that they are probably still open under different management. One of them, the Orphanage of the Good Shepherd [Episcopal] was based in Louisville and was very likely absorbed into one of the Protestant or ecumenical organizations; the Home of the Innocents [Episcopal] absorbed the Jewish Children's Home and the Protestant Episcopal Orphan's Home, and if Orphanage of the Good Shepherd likely is still open in any capacity, it is likely to be with Home of the Innocents. The last organization is the Highland Orphanage [Presbyterian Churches of the U.S.], founded in eastern Kentucky, and absorbed into the Highland Institute as part of a network of "mountain missions" in Appalachia. While I could find little information on the Highland Orphanage specifically, its founder, Edward Guerrant, was well-known for his mission work in eastern Kentucky; Mark Huddle, historian of Appalachia, describes him both as someone who received unnecessarily hostility

from those critical of Kentucky internal missionary work, and as someone who had done much to improve the lives of eastern Kentuckians (Huddle 2005). It is likely that these organizations were absorbed into more formal health care entities in eastern Kentucky, but I cannot say for sure.

Closure of Public and Inter/non-denominational agencies

Of the seven public child caring institutions open in 1921, four have closed. One, the State Institute for the Feebleminded, became a part of the Frankfort State Psychiatric Hospital, and closed shortly after serious and long histories of child abuse at the institute came to light (Gravatte et al. n.d.). The State Training School for Girls was actually closed by the time of Brown's report: according to her notes, the delinquent girls who had been sent to the first iteration of the school either ran away or rioted and burned down the facility; they were sent to other institutions caring for delinquent girls. The city and county divisions of the Louisville and Jefferson County children's home closed; the state allocated the funds for these public institutions to private institutions. The County division building was razed, and Maryhurst – a now-secular organization founded by and affiliated with the Sisterhood of the Good Shepherd – built its new campus near the old site. The Kentucky Schools for the Blind and the Deaf stayed open and remain important parts of state-funded disability education.

Of the fifteen inter- or non-denominational institutions, I was able to confirm that four remain open – the Campbell County Protestant Orphans' Home in Newport (now called Holly Hill), the Mary Kendall Home for Girls in Owensboro (absorbed into the United Methodist Homes), the Protestant Children's Home of Covington (absorbed into the Children's Homes of Northern Kentucky Behavioral Health Services), and the Stewart Home Training School (same name, now a school for disabled children in Frankfort). I found records that four had closed,

notably organizations that Brown had critiqued and asked that they be brought into a more formal state system.

Among the non- or inter-denominational agencies, staying open or closing were not the only options. Instead, some took on new lives, offering new services, as their goals and ownership changed. The Orphans' Asylum of Lexington transitioned from an agency that offered direct care like food and shelter to a 501(c)3 charitable organization, the Orphans' Society of Lexington. Their 990 tax exemption form from 2015 – the most recent I could find – lists twenty-five grant recipients, including everything youth homeless shelters to the Lexington Philharmonic Orchestra (ProPublica 2015). The Colored Orphans Industrial Home, also in Lexington, opened in 1984 and operated nearly one hundred years, closing in 1988. The home was owned and operated by a group of Black women, who saw a need to care for poor elderly women and children. The building is now the Robert H. Williams Cultural Center, with its own oral history archive of former residents of the home (Gravatte et al. n.d.). The Cleveland Orphans' Home, in Versailles, was founded in 1869 and operated until the 1950s. The original building became a hotel, the Woodford Inn, which advertises as a convenient tourist spot on the Bourbon Trail.

Others took on more carceral afterlives. The Houses of Reform – publicly funded institutions to house delinquent children – were consolidated into a single set of buildings in Lexington, the Greendale Reform School. Today, the facilities have been repurposed into the Blackburn Correctional Complex, the largest adult minimum security prison for men in the Commonwealth (Gravatte et al. n.d.). Unlike the Williams Cultural Center or the Woodford Inn, the BCC website makes no mention of its prior institutional history. Instead, I learned this from Kentucky Historic Institutions, an online archival source run by five "advocates" (as they

describe themselves) who have expertise in social work, mental health, and archival work, and who have compiled information from Kentucky archives, personal records, and public photographs about the histories of institutions in Kentucky. In a slightly different vein, the Salvation Army/Susan Speed Davis Home and Hospital for Friendless Women, which opened in 1876 and closed in 1919. The location of the Home, 512 West Kentucky Street in Louisville, is currently home to the Louisville Metro Police Department's Crimes against Children Unit (Morris 2017).

CASE STUDY IN AGENCY TRANSITIONS: MARYHURST

I have focused on the closures of these organizations in great detail in part because Brown wrote a comparatively large number of pages on each of these institutions, whereas most of the institutions she reviewed favorably – the ones which stayed open – received only a paragraph or two of assessment. I interpret the relative detail and closure as indicative of differences in institutional flexibility: denominational institutions that were able to align their missions and care practices with the practices that Brown and Slingerland recommended – *while* maintaining the funding sources of their religious congregations – were the ones that were able to stay open.

I draw this conclusion in part from my own experiences with one of Kentucky's oldest agencies, Maryhurst in Louisville. I worked for the agency between 2014-2015 as a Youth Counselor, doing direct service provision with adolescent girls, of whom some were in state custody. My first encounter with Maryhurst was through a job interview. While I was waiting in the lobby to meet with Human Resources, I noticed the art on the walls: quotes about God from a "Sister Mary Euphrasia", accompanying what appeared to be an icon of a saint. I had little time

during my interview to ask about the iconography, but it all felt familiar. It resembled the imagery I saw as a child, every Sunday at Mass, and the decorations that lined the hallways at the Catholic school I attended when I was young.

I got more of the story a few weeks later, when the agency officially hired me, and I went in for my mandatory two weeks of New Employment Orientation. The training blended practical information – setting up a company email address, learning about the medical documentation system used to bill insurance, liability for driving the agency's vans – with institutional history, agency values, and the evidence-based practices employees were expected to deploy in our daily work with the young women who lived at the agency.

The third day of training included a half-day of institutional lore about the founder, Saint Mary Euphrasia Pelletier, a French Catholic saint canonized in 1940. Born Rose Virginie Pelletier in 1796 on an island off the coast of France, she eventually lost her mother and father very young and was moved around France before taking her vows and becoming a nun in Angers. In 1835, she founded the Congregation of Our Lady of Charity of the Good Shepherd of Angers, an order of Catholic sisters devoted to serving women and children: colloquially, the Sisters of the Good Shepherd. In the 1840s, Bishop Flaget of the Diocese of Louisville requested Sisters to found a mission in Kentucky to serve orphaned and impoverished children. Mary Euphrasia sent five women to Louisville and in 1843 they founded what would eventually become Maryhurst. In the twenty-first century, the Sisters continued to run at least 150 missions in 72 countries around the world. Maryhurst was what was known as a Good Shepherd agency, though it was now led by laypeople.[14]

[14] This version of Mary Euphrasia's life comes from a daylong retreat I attended in July 2017 designed to give staff a fuller picture of her life. The training explicitly framed Rose Pelletier's childhood as a childhood of traumatic events as an explanation for her commitment to working with women and

New employees were not told the names of the Sisters who did that initial work, but *were* reminded, everywhere, of Mary Euphrasia. The cottages were all named after Mary Euphrasia and people important in her life. The cottages on the main campus[15] were named after the Bishop (Flaget); Rose Virginie's family (Pelletier); a kind schoolteacher from Rose Virginie's time at boarding school (Pauline de Lignac), and the Count who funded the original Mother House in Angers (Neuville). An additional cottage was named "des Anges" or "of the angels"; after I left the agency, it was converted into an office building. Two satellite cottages that primarily offered psychiatric care were collectively the Noirmoutier Program (the island where Mary Euphrasia was born), and are named after Rose and her childhood friend, Sophie. Two group homes are named Rosehaven – again, for Rose herself – and "Treasure Home", a phrase taken from a writing of Mary Euphrasia's that referred to the children housed in Good Shepherd homes as "treasures".

The reason new employees were told of the agency's origins was because the Sisters' values were still alive and well. The institutional history prefaced a discussion about the mission and values of Maryhurst – individual worth, reconciliation, mercy, and zeal. New employees were told that Sisters of the Good Shepherd took traditional vows of religious life according to the Rule of St. Augustine – poverty, chastity, and obedience – but that Mary Euphrasia required an additional vow, "zeal" for the work of caring for wayward women. Zeal was incorporated into the mission values at Maryhurst when I worked there; while none of us were coming Sisters, we were encouraged to do our work zealously and enthusiastically. Mercy and reconciliation have

children. Much of what is known about Mary Euphrasia comes from her own writings, the writings of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd, and a biographical account of her life (A. M. Clarke 1895).

[15] The agency has multiple locations in the Louisville Metropolitan Area, each with a different population, treatment focus, and funding source. The largest and most intensive is the main campus, which used to house Sisters on-site when they were the primary caregivers. Their old home is now an office building.

moral undertones similar to Catholic practices of confession and forgiveness, all of which ostensibly served to affirm the worth of each individual young person in care.

After institutional history and mission training, orientation transitioned to three days of crisis management training. It seems surreal, now, that training went from a history of French Catholic religious life in the nineteenth century to information about verbal de-escalation tactics, physically restraining children, and all the attendant paperwork. The second week of training included substance abuse counseling for adolescents; restorative practices principles; CPR and medical emergency training; tuberculosis tests; and shifts in the cottages. My two weeks of orientation was a combination of medico-scientific expertise about the psyche and family dynamics mixed with a call and a plea to enact moral principles set forth by French nuns.

Shifting Institutional Culture, New Financial Constraints

I returned to the agency in 2017, as part of preliminary work to test the feasibility of long-term dissertation fieldwork which did not ultimately come to fruition. That said, my former employers welcomed me to retreats, company picnics, New Employment Orientation, and a variety of staff and agency meetings, including their Mission Effectiveness summer training, during which they brought one of the Sisters of the Good Shepherd to meet the staff members. While there, I spoke with agency managers – some of whom had supervised my program when I had been an employee – about the changes the agency had made since I was an employee. Wandering around the grounds, one of the more noticeable changes had been the closure of one of the old cottages and the opening of an entirely new one.

The new building, Madeline's Cottage, replaced a run-down older cottage called Des Anges. Madeline's cottage broke ground in 2013, was finished in 2015, and began housing

clients shortly thereafter ("Madeline's Cottage Updates Archives" n.d.). Knowing the history of the agency and the special importance of Mary Euphrasia to the agency's mission and sense of self, I was surprised to learn that Madeline's Cottage was named after Madeline Abramson, a noted philanthropist in Louisville, a member of the Maryhurst Board of Trustees, and the wife of a former Mayor of Louisville, Jerry Abramson. During one of our one-on-ones, I asked one of the senior administrators, Dale, about the naming process, and he responded that the agency had "received a donation" and chose to name the cottage after her. This had happened before, with the naming of the campus gymnasium after receiving a donation from Kosair Charities. However, Madeline's Cottage was the first time that one of the *cottages* had been named for someone who was not a part of Mary Euphrasia's life. I asked Dale how the Sisters felt about the name.

"You know, the salary budget wasn't such an issue for the Sisters. They didn't have to pay for staff to come in – they took a vow of poverty, so they didn't have the operating budget the way that we need one. So they could name buildings after the people in their history. There are people in this state who love Jerry and Madeline Abramson and would put money towards that because it was named after her," he told me in response.

As the Sisters began to lose enrollment in their order, they began to hire paid staff members to help with the daily caregiving, many of them young social workers-in-training. Dale had been one of them, along with a number of the other agency leaders, who had earned degrees from a short-lived Social Work program at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary (more on SBTS below). Floor staff, who provide direct care, are paid hourly; the leadership team, who are also non-Sisters, receive an annual salary. Staff members are not required to have a religious affiliation, though many did. They have not taken vows of poverty, chastity, or obedience like

the Sisters did, though the agency has incorporated the fourth vow, zeal, into their core values. They did, however, work alongside the Sisters, until the agency transitioned to an entirely non-religious leadership in 1990 with the appointment of its first CEO, Judy Lambeth.

Dale remarked that he once mentioned to one of the Sisters that he thought it was "unfortunate" that the number of Sisters was on the decline, that there were not enough Sisters to form the majority of caregivers at the agency. Her response, according to Dale, was an unequivocal denial that it was unfortunate, but rather, an indication that the Catholic Church was no longer the authority or sole purveyor of care. For her, the shift in care work from the religious to the secular pointed to broader social changes that made laypeople more invested in each other and in the work of the Church. Importantly, in Dale's account, the Sister told him, "You're supposed to be here."

Although the Sisters have gone on to found dozens of Good Shepherd agencies to serve women and children all over the world, Maryhurst was the first Good Shepherd agency to transition to non-Catholic leadership. The agency seems to be unique in its willingness to weave the legacy of Mary Euphrasia into its institutional culture. Maryhurst, along with other Good Shepherd agencies, routinely sends long-time staff members to the Mother House in Angers. Dale shared a story from his pilgrimage to the Good Shepherd Mother House[16] in Angers, France – Maryhurst, along with other Good Shepherd agencies, routinely sent their employees to France

[16] While Maryhurst has not specifically been investigated as an institution, Australian and Irish authorities have investigated claims of forced labor, sexual assault, and other abuses at Good Shepherd institutions outside of the United States. Michel Foucault traces the genealogy of institutions that contributed to the development of care ethics centered on "the fallen" or dispossessed of French society. He specifically points to the opening of the Mettray Penal Colony in 1840 for delinquent boys as a moment that marks the culmination of the development of disciplinary regimes. The Sisters of the Good Shepherd opened their home in Louisville in 1843, three years after the opening of Mettray, temporally close to Foucault's declared turning point (Foucault 1991).

to reconnect with mission values and the history of their institution. He was shocked to meet an employee from another Good Shepherd agency who told him that it was his first time hearing about Mary Euphrasia. "That's what I worry about," he told me, "…that agencies will lose their value system."

As I outlined above, the agency worked to preserve the legacy of Mary Euphrasia, and maintained a long-standing relationship with the Sisters, but they also strove to balance these mission values with funding availability in their care practices. Along with incorporating zeal and mercy into their mission values, they also trained their floor staff in what are called restorative practices: care practices that emphasize responsibility, accountability, and repair in the wake of harm or wrongdoing (Menkel-Meadow 2007). Specifically, they prioritized the rebuilding of relationships between clients and staff members after we inflicted harm on one another. In my view, the two sets of values – care practices that incorporate notions of repairing relationships, and the religious values of mercy and enthusiasm in caring for others – were aligned with each other, though they emerged from very different sources.

Although their daily care practices might have emerged alongside religious values, Maryhurst leaders also successfully adapted their service array to changes in federal and state funding. I knew, from my own eight months of employment, that they relied on individual and corporate donors and per diems for children in state custody for a portion of their budget, as was the case for Madeline's Cottage. I also knew that Medicaid – specifically, the implementation of the Affordable Care Act in 2015 – had allowed the agency to "unbundle" mental health services. This allowed the agency to bill Medicaid and receive reimbursements for individual services – therapeutic groups, individual therapy sessions, skill-building – rather than a "bundle" of services paid at a flat rate. While I was employed, my supervisors asked my colleagues and I be

more thorough and precise in our documentation, as such documentation would become part of their Medicaid reimbursement. The names they gave buildings and their standards for paperwork were both examples of adjustments that the agency made in order to fit within the norms and expectations of quality – and therefore funded – child welfare services, even as those expectations shifted over time.

During my summer conversations with members of the leadership team, they acknowledged that funding constraints limited the types of services they could offer. The agency prioritized residential care – which had begun with the Sisters – but when it transitioned to a lay agency, led by professionally trained social workers, they began to expand their outpatient services, community-based, and other family services. As one senior member put it to me, "Our system hasn't been built around families…They say we over-rely on residential, but of course – that's the only way to get the money." Their comments from 2017 echoed the public discourse I heard during fieldwork about the rollout of the 2018 Families First Act: congregate care was ubiquitously criticized but was also the largest source of state and federal monies available to child caring agencies. The consensus, at Maryhurst and among child welfare agencies in Louisville and beyond, was that there were financial incentives in place that shaped the availability of services. The agency's investment in residential was, succinctly, the best way to access available funding, even if the services that were financially incentivized were not the ones the agency necessarily wanted to prioritize.

Case Comparison: Sunrise Children's Services

It is hard to say whether Maryhurst is unique among child caring agencies regarding the their willingness to incorporate the legacy of its religious origins into the mission and practices

of the institution. I have no ethnographic data on the institutional culture of other agencies, though I do have some twenty-first century archival and news sources that suggest the continued relevance of religion in ostensibly secular child welfare agencies.

The primary case comparison is Sunrise Children's Services, a child welfare agency owned and operated by the Southern Baptist Convention, the largest Baptist organization in the United States. Many of its ministers and religious leaders have attended the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary which is located in Louisville. I went to the Seminary's library in the summer of 2017, curious about their history and role in child caring institutions in Kentucky. I asked the resident librarian if there were records or archives about child welfare, and he handed me files on the Union Gospel Mission (which later became a substance use treatment program called Re:Center), and a discrimination lawsuit from 2000 in which Sunrise Children's Services was a defendant. The file contained news clippings and articles about the lawsuit: they had fired one of their staff members after learning she was gay. She filed a lawsuit alleging that her dismissal violated federal and state labor laws, and that because the agency received public funding and proselytized to children, also violated the Establishment Clause of the Constitution, which prohibits the use of state money for religious purposes (Pedreira et al., n.d.). A series of dismissals and appeals dragged the suit nearly to Supreme Court in 2016, though the Court declined to hear an appeal from Sunrise.

As comparison cases, Sunrise and Maryhurst offer two very different approaches to the relative secular and religious legacies of child welfare in Kentucky. Like Sunrise, Maryhurst receives public funds from the state, and like Sunrise, they also receive private donations from religious organizations. Yet, unlike Sunrise, Maryhurst has never been sued for discrimination or for violating the Establishment Clause. It is possible that their practices are not understood to be

proselytization, but institutional memory; it is far more likely that people are unaware of the religious background of Maryhurst, or that their other care practices, while informed by religious legacies, are sufficiently shielded from constitutional claims due to the fact that they are also heralded as evidence-based practices. Moreover, as I have shown, while Mary Euphrasia's memory is kept alive, the agency is also moving into a new era in its institutional history, where the Sisters have been less involved and secular heroes like the Abramsons may play a larger and larger role in the daily life of the agency. The Southern Baptist Convention, a decidedly non-secular institution, oriented its care practices and policies around homophobia, and continued to receive children from the state. While they represent two different kinds of religious affiliation, both Maryhurst and Sunrise illustrate the continued importance of religious legacies in long-standing child caring institutions in Kentucky.

CONCLUSION

To return to the questions of abolition, history, and duress that opened this chapter, I want to reflect briefly on the role of religion in Kentucky's child welfare system, before and after child caring became the purview of the state. Churches, temples, and other organized religious groups had undertaken caring for orphaned, poor, or indigent children in Kentucky, decades before the Brown and Slingerland reports documented their efforts. Early on, these organizations drew from religious communities to fund their work, and in at least one case – Maryhurst – the primary caregivers took on this responsibility without the expectation of earning a salary or a profit. Others – the Lathroums, most notably – seemed to have entered child caring work as a profitable enterprise, something loudly condemned by social workers and religious organizations alike. Then and now, people of faith understood caring for children not only as a practical solution for

addressing harm or suffering, but also a moral and divine duty to care for innocents in need of protection, one that ought to be done without expectation of financial gain. In their reports, Slingerland and Brown both emphasize the care and concern that congregations had for the children in their communities, repeatedly praising their willingness to take responsibility for young people.

The particulars of how *best* to fulfill that moral obligation, however, were the source of great debate, as was the question of *who* ought to have the authority to decide. These debates heightened as the field of social work developed and reformers like Frances Ingram began demanding state oversight of these institutions. With the advent of social work, a secular form of knowledge, the moral value of the work of religious institutions became subject to government and expert scrutiny. A love of children and a desire to protect them was no longer enough, as was the case for Sam Pittman, and if religious communities wanted to keep their child caring institutions intact, they had to find ways of translating that moral duty into a set of practices and services that would withstand state oversight. Over time, some religious organizations lost or withdrew funding, closing the doors of child-caring institutions they had founded; in other cases, religious organizations adapted their moral values to fit the burgeoning professional expectations of social work during the early twentieth century.

In all cases, questions about *which* children were deserving of quality care and by whom became similarly important. Brown's criticisms of Thompson's care for Black children, potentially rooted in anti-Black racism, illustrates the assertion of authority over the care of Black children specifically, despite the enforced segregation of other child caring institutions at the time. In the same period, however, Black women established the Colored Children's Industrial Home, responding to the racial violence of the post-Reconstruction era with communal

forms of care. Care coexisted with racism and poverty: it was *required* for communities experiencing actual and anticipated violence, in Stoler's words, to continue to endure (Stoler 2012, 8).

I argue that the institutions that survived from the 1920s found ways to fulfill both their sacred duties to children – and their congregations – and the secular expectations of "good" and "modern" care. Maryhurst's combination of French Catholic and trauma-informed care provision seems to have worked, but apparently so has Sunrise's Southern Baptist-motivated hostility towards LGBTQ communities. Kentucky is a place where both of these configurations of sacred and secular can coexist. Presumably, the 19 other surviving institutions listed in Brown's 1920 report found an even wider array of strategies for balancing these competing value systems. State oversight, federal funding schemes, economic conditions, the decline of religious orders, and the flow of private donations all shape the ways that Kentucky's child welfare institutions manage their relationships to the values of religious organizations.

Stoler's central argument is that pressures exerted on people in the past, particularly in colonial pasts, continue to reverberate into the present. What institutions *were* has implications for they can *become*. In focusing on the relationship between religious organizations and social work, I show how they each generated different understandings of the "right" ways to care for and protect children. Like the colonial administrators in Stoler's work, I observe that the relationship between religious and secular modes of care were, while not always oppositional, often tense or at odds, and importantly, reworked over time to fit new and changing circumstances. Religious organizations operated alongside – and sometimes against – social workers to generate and enforce an ethos of child protection in the commonwealth.

The duty – secular or divine – to care for children is shared by both social work and religious institutions. Child caring institutions and practices could be subject to state scrutiny and norms, but the impulse to care for children – even for people who might have inadvertently caused harm to children in their care, such as Sam Pittman – is always framed as an inherent moral good. That many institutions continued on as child caring agencies illustrates the importance of both continuity and adaptation in explaining why agencies make decisions about services and practices: institutional religious origins *can* and sometimes do inform the daily operations of child welfare in Kentucky. Religious value systems can determine who is allowed to work in child welfare, what kinds of care staff members should try to offer, and how employees and agency managers understand the value of their work.

I argue that this duty to care, and the belief in the value of that work, endures, partially reinscribed on practices that might help children heal but might also inflict further harm. LGBTQ children often experience parental rejection on account of their gender and sexuality, and have higher rates of homelessness and inpatient treatment (Dank, n.d.; n.d.; Acevedo-Polakovich et al. 2013). Queer or gender non-conforming children who are in the custody of Sunrise Children's Services are unlikely to heal from such rejection in the care of people who spent a decade in court after firing one of their gay employees. Black children have always experienced poorer quality institutional care, as per Brown's and Slingerland's reports at the turn of the century, and continue to be overrepresented in child welfare systems. As I noted in footnote 11 above, state institutions forcibly sterilized disabled people. Looking outside of Kentucky specifically, the removal of Native children and the residential school system in North America were part of a larger genocidal effort. Child-taking practices across the world – documented extensively in Laura Briggs' (2020) work on child removal – are all analogously framed as being part of a

moral duty to care for children. The partial reinscriptions and adaptations of a "moral good" inherent to child caring work applied to such a wide range of variably harmful practices, it is worth noting who, when, and how child welfare actors mobilize a language of child protection and moral duty.

Child welfare abolitionists, who understand contemporary child welfare systems as part of a continuum of punishment for failing to abide by these norms, are challenging the characterization of these systems as inherently good. Pointing to the many harms that are the direct result of family separation, abolitionists are often understood to be firmly in the morally fraught camp of being *against* child protection. They are not. They are responding to relations of force – racism, economic deprivation, violence – that began before state intervention, pressures and threats that have endured beyond the openings, closures, and afterlives of the original institutions, and which continue to shape care practices today. These are, to return to a concept I borrowed from Foucault in the Introduction, forms of legal subjection, labeling and regulation that impose assumptions upon people who must then grapple with their own subjectivities in the wake of these impositions. Abolition is a response to the legal subjection produced by child welfare.

In the next chapter, I describe how contemporary child welfare experts – pediatricians, journalists, social workers, lobbyists – discussed problems in Kentucky's child welfare system during fieldwork. Specifically, I analyze the narrative focus on child protection and the moral failings of parents, narratives that dominate public discourse at the expense of other, more complex narratives from former foster youths themselves. I take up Stoler's suggestion to see relations of force as neither ruptures from nor continuity with the past, but rather to see them as recursive, partially surviving into the present. In analyzing contemporary child welfare politics in

Kentucky, I follow these relations of force – the hierarchy of expertise, the moral failings of parents, and the "common sense" of child protection – in the ways they reappear, more than a hundred years since their religious origins.

4. "THE HIGHEST RATE OF CHILD ABUSE IN THE COUNTRY"

Since my first day of training as a youth counselor in 2014, I have been told that Kentucky's kids are in crisis. I heard about the crisis in legislative committee meetings about social services, during press conferences and media events about changes in the child welfare system, and employee trainings at private social service agencies. Social service providers and policymakers often pointed to two statistics as evidence of a crisis: Kentucky's high rates of child abuse and the rapid increase in the numbers of children the state removed from their homes of origin. This framing of child abuse was ubiquitous and nonpartisan – policymakers from both political parties, nonprofit leaders, advocates, medical professionals, legal experts, and journalists all linked these statistical observations to the language of a crisis.

As of 2022 the current child abuse rates and placements were roughly the same: the crisis language has abated somewhat, but certainly has not disappeared. Between 2014 and 2018, the number of children placed in out-of-home care (foster homes, residential facilities, group homes, psychiatric hospitals, and treatment centers), jumped from seven thousand to over ten thousand in a four-year period (Children's Bureau 2018). This was, according to my own fragmented and partial archive of monthly reports on out-of-home care numbers, a sudden and unusual increase.[17] Kentucky's Department of Community-Based Services (DCBS) administers foster care, child protective services, and the network of private and semi-private out-of-home caring institutions. During this period, then-Governor Matt Bevin and DCBS both faced tremendous

[17] DCBS collects and publishes monthly data about the numbers of children in their custody, which is where I have derived these numbers. I asked for a report that covered the last several years, but a DCBS administrator told me that the complete archive of these fact sheets is "not externally available" (email to author, June 18, 2020). This made it impossible for researchers or advocates to directly access anything but the most recent report. I have my own partial archives of these reports: in October 2019, the total number was 9761 and in October 2020 it was 9383. Between 2020 and 2022, the number of children in out of home placements declined to 8576 (Department of Community-Based Services 2022).

public scrutiny and criticism, primarily from journalists. In 2019, the number of children placed in out-of-home care dipped below ten thousand and has been consistently declining.[18]

As of 2022, Kentucky has lost its status as the state with the highest rate of substantiated child abuse in the country, a title it held during my fieldwork in 2019 (Children's Bureau 2018; Administration for Children and Families 2022).[19] According to the National Child Abuse and Neglect Data Systems (NCANDS), the voluntary federal database for child abuse reporting, no other state or territory reported a rate higher than 20 per 1,000 in 2018; that year, Kentucky's rate was 23.6 per 1,000 children. The next highest state, West Virginia, had a rate of 19.1 per 1,000 children. After combing through the archive of NCANDS annual Child Maltreatment reports, I found that Kentucky has had either the first or second-highest national rates of substantiated child abuse between 2014 and 2019. The commonwealth has also been in the top ten for highest rates of child abuse since the Children's Bureau began collecting data through the NCANDS in 1990: Kentucky is the only state that has been consistently in the top ten in every report. Despite this consistency, Kentucky also has one of the smallest variances of rates — the commonwealth's child abuse rate peaked in 1996 at 27.7 per 1000 and hit its lowest point in 2009 with a rate of 16 per 1000. As of 2020, the rate is 16.7 per 1000. The rate of child abuse has stayed relatively constant, even if the actual numbers are increasing, while the changing rates of other states seem to account for Kentucky's ranking as the worst, an apparently permanent crisis.[20]

[18] Child abuse statistics are collected yearly, but the national report of all state child welfare data is made available on a two-year delay. The most recent data available from the Administration for Children and Families is from 2020.

[19] As of 2020, Maine had the highest rate of child abuse in the country (19 per 1000), followed by Alaska (18), West Virginia (17.2), Massachusetts (16.8), and then Kentucky (16.7).

[20] In 2020, official child abuse rates declined nationally by 8.7 percent. Kelly et. al, the authors of the 2020 NCANDS report, note that many states changed reporting and investigative procedures during the

In her writing about the 2008 housing bubble, Janet Roitman (2013) observes that crisis always qualifies itself: when scholars label something a crisis, they have to discern the kind of crisis in order to properly address it. She illustrates this in the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis and the proliferation of theories about what caused the housing crash. She points to liberal economists and Marxist theorists, among many others, who argued about whether the crash was predictable, preventable, inevitable. Their theories and expertise, however, were limited to "housing" and not, as she puts it, "houses". Amidst the flurry to explain the crisis and ostensibly to prevent another, "the housing crisis" and the human cost of bankruptcy, evictions, foreclosures, and homelessness, became subsumed by "the financial crisis" and unregulated gambling, speculation, and market dynamics. Roitman points out that "the United States housing market was always, already under-collateralized" (2013, 49); the trading of derivatives pre-existed the crash. The housing market, according to Roitman, was always hurtling towards disaster, but when the bubble burst, the houses did not disappear: so why should people have been made homeless? She argues that the framing of the 2008 housing market crash as a "crisis" enabled scholarly analysis about markets, derivatives, or late-stage capitalism, but not necessarily a political challenge to the moral state of a society that accepts foreclosure, the forcible wrenching of people from their homes as a "market solution", in the first place.

early days of the novel coronavirus pandemic (Administration for Children and Families 2022, 94–96, 104–12, 190–91). They organize the 2020 data quarterly, showing that the largest decline occurred between March 2020 and September 2020, which coincides with the longest period of "lockdowns" among most states. Moreover, the authors compare quarterly data from 2019 and 2020, broken down by reporter category. Reports made by teachers and day care workers declined by the largest proportions during the early months of the pandemic, and through the summer when school would not have been in session. Kentucky's total *number* of child victims dropped by approximately four thousand in 2020, from approximately 20,000 in 2019 to approximately 16,000 in 2020. Kentucky's official child victim count declined 16.3% between 2019 and 2020.

For Roitman, scholars and social scientists were so caught off-guard by the crisis that, in their rush to weigh in, they missed the houses and the people who lived in them. Crisis, for her, is not an event or a condition of exception, but a narrative tool that social scientists use to generate new theories and knowledge about their areas of expertise. She argues that crisis narratives work as a sort of knowledge-producing "blind spot" that allows social scientists and scholars to generate new scholarship and objects of inquiry. While that might benefit researchers – it keeps scholarship and our livelihoods intact – uncritically accepting and reproducing crisis narratives limits the possibilities for political change and transformation.

Roitman cautions social scientists to be attentive to the "kinds of work the term 'crisis' is or is not doing in the construction of narrative forms" (2013, 3); when experts narrate a crisis, upon what knowledge do they draw? What assumptions remain implicit or unspoken, and how do those assumptions limit not only their analysis, but the possibility of political transformation? In this chapter, I take up Roitman's critique to analyze the framing of Kentucky's child abuse rates as an indefinite crisis. I make two arguments.

First, following Roitman, I argue that Kentucky's child abuse crisis entrenches the knowledge and power of child abuse experts: the journalists, physicians, social workers, child welfare researchers, and to a lesser extent, legislators, foster and adoptive families, kinship caregivers, and service providers. In the field, I saw each of these groups produce narratives about the causes of child abuse, and propose solutions based on those narratives. Their narratives sometimes melded together, but more often, I saw groups jostling for moral authority and political power to enact their expertise through policy decisions. In particular, I focus on narratives in which child abuse was the result of unredeemable immoral parents or the result of Kentucky's opioid epidemic. Each of these narratives assigned moral culpability for harm to

different actors. In the case of bad parents, they were both inherently morally corrupt or evil, and deserving of punishment for their cruelty. In the case of the opioid epidemic, individual parents were not necessarily morally responsible for their substance use problems – the pharmaceutical companies were – but were nonetheless responsible for addressing them as a precondition of getting their children back.

Second, continuing with Roitman, I argue that Kentucky's child abuse crisis framing produced narrative blind spots: namely, the experiences and insights of former foster youths themselves. As those directly affected by family violence, structural violence, and state intervention, former foster youths had complex moral narratives of their own. With few exceptions, they did not present their moral narratives in the form of policy proposals. They came instead from ordinary social interactions: a visit to a grandmother, a day at work. When former foster youths *did* make moral arguments in the form of policy proposals, their expertise was rarely given the same attention and power as "institutionally authorized" experts – a term I borrow from E. Summerson Carr (2010a, 19) – like child abuse physicians or lobbyists. Unless former foster youth had opinions that bolstered the solutions proposed by the institutionally authorized experts, they were largely ignored or dismissed when their experiences contradicted those narratives.

These arguments are both theoretical and political. In framing the experiences of former foster youth as a form of expert knowledge, I contribute to the anthropology of expertise by drawing a distinction between the "institutionally authorized" – those most commonly thought of as experts due to their social recognition *as* experts – and what I call the institutionally unauthorized, or those not socially recognized as experts. This theoretical insight illustrates the asymmetry of narrative and political power for child welfare experts and former foster youth

regarding policies that affect the latter. This argument is also political: in describing the ways that former foster youths are disciplined to abide by preexisting narratives, I suggest that policymakers in Kentucky miss complicated but productive nuance in their policymaking.

Crisis Narratives and the Authorization of Expertise

Writing on a slightly different set of crises, E. Summerson Carr documents how therapists, clients, staff members, and managerial boards use language in a court-ordered American addiction treatment program for women. Carr is particularly interested in metapragmatics, the "branch of linguistic practice devoted to reflexively determining what one can do and make with words in addition to what one can say with them" (2010b, 158). Carr identifies periodic crises at the program, most of which emerge from such metapragmatic contests of language use — board members, therapists, case workers, and program participants debate about the language they use. Carr observes that these conflicts take precedence over treatment: they are moments of professionals battling each other about language and practice that must be resolved before treatment can continue. Not only are there conflicts about the *uses* of language, what I hope to emphasize here by focusing on metapragmatics is a self-awareness about the performative power of language. Carr's interlocutors, like mine, demonstrate strategic thinking in their selection of language. I suggest that they actively choose between different possibilities for framing discussions of expertise and child abuse, with a recognition that some framings more effectively spur action than others.

In a notable example, the program leaders insist that their treatment should "empower" women, which sets off a debate about whether referring to women as "clients" or "consumers" of services is more empowering. As "clients", one argument goes, they are in a subordinate position of depending on the agency for services, while "consumers" willfully participate and have the option to leave and choose instead to stay. In fact, most of the women were court-ordered to be in the program: the underlying question of choice or dependency was a bit of a moot point, given that they had largely been disempowered by the power of the judicial system. Carr is pointing to the underlying contradictions of language use in addiction treatment: "Why were the clearly nonvoluntary terms of receiving Fresh Beginning services framed in the free market language of' consumerism'?" (Carr 2010b, 171), she asks.

In these moments of professional language and framing crises, Carr observes that these contests are rarely about accuracy, but far more about "the language that would evoke desired behaviors, practices, and sentiments in clients, staff, and funders alike" (2010b, 158). She is centrally concerned with how people thoughtfully learn, master, and deploy language because for her, these are battles over representation that have consequences for social work, and governance alike. By pointing to metapragmatics, Carr's bigger question about the relationship between language and power not only asks what scripts or language forms people employ, but how are those scripts subsequently heard, circulated, and made consequential?

As I see it, the central insight of Carr's work is the way she discusses the authorization of expert language. Certain types of speech are authorized only for some types of people: addicts can only be in denial about their substance use, and their talk is subsumed into this overarching frame of denial. Carr argues that therapeutic understandings of addict talk effectively subsumes their legitimate critiques of how they are treated into yet another symptom of their pathology. It

is through selectively and strategically deploying addict talk – what Carr calls "flipping the script" – that her interlocutors are able to successfully maneuver within this overarching framework that limits what they can and cannot legitimately say. Notably, they cannot necessarily override that framework – they do not have the power to do so – only introduce crises of expertise within it.

I saw versions of this kind of language restriction happening with former foster youth, though I rarely saw them successfully flip the script to induce the sorts of expert crises that Carr documents. I observed that their public speech often reproduced the language of victimhood, an effective way of bolstering public support for policy interventions and existing media frames of bad parenting and the need for reform. Rarely, however, were their comments taken as critiques of foster care itself, or the forms of institutionally authorized expert knowledge that comprise much of the public discourse around child welfare reform in Kentucky.

Carr asks questions about language and expertise within a broader public debate about welfare reform in the late 1990s under the Clinton administration, as well as within the day-to-day operations of social service provision. Tracking a group of people — in Carr's case, women in drug treatment — through their representations in policy, in public discourse, and in the clinic offers some insights into who has the power to represent, why, and some of the consequences of those representations. Like Carr, I am interested in how a group of people is represented — in my case, individuals and families involved with child welfare — primarily in public discussions about them, to understand how those discussions reflect and diverge from the experiences of those people.

In my own work, the over-arching frame was not empowerment, but child protection. The end goal of the experts was to keep children safe, to protect them from the varying kinds of

violence and harm that might come to them in the course of their early lives. Disagreements emerged between different institutionally authorized experts about *how* best implement a shared goal of safety. Like the experts in Carr's work, I observed politicians, journalists, lobbyists, service providers, and foster and adoptive families work to incorporate the critiques they made of one another into rationales for why their methods of child protection were best. Relying on meta-pragmatics as an analytical tool is productive here, because, following Carr, I examine not only what is said *about* former foster youths, but also what can be made and done with these reflexive uses of language: namely, new policies and social services.

Deborah Yetter and the "Tortured and abused" series

Arguably the single most influential piece of investigative journalism on the state of child abuse in Kentucky was a five-part series of articles published in August 2019 rather gruesomely titled, *Tortured and Abused*. The author, renowned human services reporter Deborah Yetter, of Louisville's *Courier Journal,* presents a rather bleak portrait of Kentucky's child welfare system as "the worst" and "failing young people" in every imaginable way. Yetter seems skeptical of many of the proposed federal and commonwealth efforts to reform child welfare but does endorse two specific solutions to child abuse: the expansion of family drug court and expanded reporting.

I describe the series at some length here, which was notable for a number of reasons. The *Courier Journal* seems to have prioritized the series as uniquely important, as evidenced by its distinction among other publications in terms of aesthetics and access. Unlike most of the *Journal's* articles, the *Tortured and abused* series is not behind a paywall but is freely available online at any time, which suggests the *Courier Journal* editors viewed it as important essential

public information. It is also aesthetically distinct from other online reporting — while the default formatting of the *Courier Journal* website has a white background with black font, the *Tortured and abused* series has a black background with white font. The quality and quantity of the photographs in the articles is also much higher than a standard *Courier Journal* article. Moreover, the series was the result of new and unprecedented access to the proceedings of Family Recovery Court (discussed below), the Child Fatality and Near-Fatality Review Board, and child abuse files. The *Courier Journal* sued the Cabinet for Health and Family Services to get access to these files, a court case that took seven years to resolve.

I also focus on the series here because of Yetter herself. She has since retired but, during fieldwork, was one of the most prominent and respected voices in public policy discussions about child welfare: how she framed and wrote about child abuse mattered to policy makers and advocates, however begrudgingly they engaged with it. Many of them specifically referenced this series of articles in public meetings and media events from August 2019 through February 2020. Among journalists, she was also highly respected. I met with a number of other Louisville-based journalists reporting on issues adjacent to child welfare: education, homelessness, criminal justice. When I explained my project to them, every single one recommended that I speak with Yetter, but she never responded to my emails or phone calls. I did run into her, just once, at a press conference. I mentioned that I had been trying to get in touch with her; she handed me her card and told me to email her to set up a meeting. We never did end up meeting again.

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The series is made up of five separate articles, each based on interviews, observations, and documents Yetter collated from courts, social workers, medical experts, and bureaucrats at the Cabinet for Health and Family Services. In the first article, Yetter describes her findings and

observations from the Child Fatality and Near-Fatality External Review Panel. In the second article, Yetter summarizes commonwealth and federal policy changes to improve the child welfare system. In the third and fourth articles, respectively, Yetter describes the challenges facing Kentucky's state social workers and former foster youth once they leave care. In the fifth article, Yetter describes and advocates for new programs that simultaneously regulate sobriety and coach parents who are at risk of losing their children, especially with court oversight.

Overall, the series reads as a summary of: the scope, extent, and possible causes of violence against children in Kentucky; the pitfalls and limitations of the child welfare system in its mission of protecting children; the long term consequences of the system's interventions and failures; and qualified optimism for the proliferation of hybrid programs that deal with many potential causes of child abuse simultaneously. Yetter did her homework, talking to experts in medicine, social work, Cabinet officials, some foster and adoptive families, and a few young people, in addition to analyzing the documentation made available to her.

That being said, I posit that Yetter's framing of the child abuse crisis in Kentucky largely focuses on particularly violent instances of child abuse as part of a larger effort among journalists and child welfare experts alike toward a specific end. That end is preventing child abuse through punitive and carceral means: increased surveillance and reporting of suspected abuse (Board 2019), increased prosecution for sexual abuse (Powell 2020), forcing parents in drug treatment (Stivers 2018, 1), and shortening the timeframe for the termination of parental rights (Westerfield 2020). Each of these policies was couched in language about the moral necessity and correctness of protecting children from harmful parents, but rarely did such narratives take into account the perspectives of former foster youths who had complex thoughts

and opinions about their own time in care, and relationships with their homes of origin.

Moral economy of childhood, surveillance as moral imperative

Yetter opens the series with a high-resolution photograph of flowers in bloom and an angel sculpture near a headstone. The headstone has a small oval picture frame of a towheaded four-year-old girl with a giant pink bow on her head, and the name "Aria Paris Blanton". In the text underneath the image, Yetter describes how Aria's caregiver, her mother's boyfriend, found her unconscious and rushed her to the hospital. There, pediatricians found her covered in bruises, and the child died a few days later. The subsequent investigation resulted in criminal charges for Aria's mother, Laura Blanton, and her mother's boyfriend, Robert Collins. Laura Blanton pled guilty to murder and was initially sentenced to twenty years in jail, though the charges were later changed to child endangerment.[21]

Along with Aria Blanton's injuries, Yetter describes the injuries other children whose cases came up in the CFNFERP meetings of 2018. She includes short narratives of each of the seven cases the CFNERP characterized as "torture" between 2018 and 2019, though the narratives are primarily a description of severe injuries, alongside fuzzy family photographs. In each instance, she includes the ages of children whose cases were reviewed by the review panel, which range from a few weeks to five years old. These torture cases "illustrate the brutality of child abuse in Kentucky", she writes at one point. Yetter offers readers explanations for child

[21] According to Yetter's coverage, Robert Collins faced unspecified charges in Menifee County in 2018, but after scouring the *Courier Journal*, Lexington newspapers, and news sources from both Menifee and Bath counties, I found no additional reporting on his fate. I tried calling the Menifee County Circuit Court Clerk and the County Attorney a few times, only to get a busy signal. As of November 2020, neither Blanton nor Collins appear in the Kentucky-wide inmate database. It is possible that bureaucratic oversight might have entered their names incorrectly into the system, or the system itself might be dysfunctional. It is possible that neither is serving time right now: it is possible that neither ever served time at all.

abuse – individual pathological violent tendencies, mothers who are "choosing men over their kids", and substance use.

She quotes several members of the review panel, which includes social services representatives and medical and legal experts, who fear that the problem isn't "getting any better" but is actually "getting worse". Yetter quotes Dr. Christina Howard, a CFNERP member and one of Kentucky's child abuse pediatricians, describing a "horrific" incident in which a father hit his infant child after losing a video game and was subsequently charged with murder. Another member, retired Franklin County court judge Roger Crittenden, says he "just wants to cry" after seeing "increased brutality" during his time on the board. Yetter drives this point home in a conversation with the religious leader who led the funeral service for Aria Blanton, who described the incident as "pure evil at its worst".

In framing the problem of child abuse in Kentucky this way – extraordinary instances of violence against very young, vulnerable children – Yetter and her editors at the *Courier Journal* were evoking what anthropologist Didier Fassin calls a moral economy of childhood (Fassin 2013). Building on the Marxist idea that economic underclasses morally critique the social *and* material conditions in which they live, Fassin is interested in the ways that moral sentiments – feelings, emotions, norms, values – are produced, distributed, circulated, and put to use in a variety of humanitarian endeavors (2013, 112). Fassin analyzes how AIDS activists and nongovernmental organizations strategically deployed the *idea* of childhood vulnerability and innocence "to generate widespread sympathy for their cause[s]" during the South African AIDS epidemic of the early 2000s (2013, 113). He asks, how do people generate and deploy feelings about right and wrong, in which contexts, and to what ends?

Fassin examines a "global rhetoric" of "common sense" (2013, 111) that positions children as "sinless and powerless" (2013, 112) and therefore deserving of protection. Fassin is careful to point out that his aim is "not to challenge this consensus" (2013, 113) – he agrees, children ought to be protected – but rather to understand which political and structural phenomena are overlooked when childhood innocence is the primary framing. Fassin's argument – that the narrative emphasis on harm infants and very young children – works because of this consensus. "Who could object to "saving babies"," he asks rightfully pointing out that anyone registering such an objection in South Africa – and, based on Yetter's work, also in Kentucky – would likely be vilified and condemned (Fassin 2013, 118). However, he also points out that because protecting children is understood to be a unanimous moral good, complex political and medical issues are often reduced to "simple moral choice[s]" (2013, 118). For instance, activists criticized the South African government's decision to withhold untested antiretroviral therapies from pregnant parents, seemingly ignoring the "potentially negative side effects" of new drugs in order to "save babies" (Fassin 2013, 118).

To drive this point home, the consensus around protecting children also has the inverse effect, of rendering those who might be cautious about interventions ostensibly designed to help children as interfering with a perceived moral good. Fassin puts it succinctly: "viewing infants as sinless is an effective means of ascribing sin to adults" (Fassin 2013, 119). Alongside the *Tortured and abused* series, the *Courier Journal* Editorial Board published an editorial note for increased surveillance with the headline, "If you fail to report abuse, you allow children to be beaten, tortured and killed" (Board 2019) The editorial board encourages readers to "think about" her injuries, which they go on to describe in detail, noting that people ad "several chances to intervene" to "save her life" but "they didn't." The note argues that people who fail to report

child abuse are "essentially allowing these heinous crimes against our children to continue" and also "breaking the law", and that readers should Aria Blanton's "horrific case be your guide." The article includes a short guide on identifying child abuse bruising and abuse reporting hotline numbers. The editors use personal pronouns "we", "us", and "you" to invoke a meditation on violence against a young child with an explicit call to action on the part of "bystanders". There is an effort here to invoke a potential guilt further down the road; by reading the article, readers become responsible for the gruesome deaths of children. The editorial board knows that one wants to be responsible for torture or death of innocent children, and this framing incorporates both the innocent child and the guilty adult as an attempt to compel community members to act by reporting any suspected child abuse.

Although surveillance and reporting of families is touted in the *Courier Journal* as a potential preventative measure for child abuse, it is less clear that it is an *effective* intervention. In Aria Blanton's case, Yetter notes that neighbors *had* made reports; CPS *had* been called to investigate Laura Blanton and Robert Collins. The social worker who visited found Aria in "good health", and closing the case as "unsubstantiated", three months before she died. Yetter described how Aria's grandparents had documented bruises and suspected abuse but did not make a report, though they threatened to do so if the bruising continued. Yetter does Aria's grandparents – the Greens – as "devastated", "acknowledging that they had failed to act" in police interviews, basing her reporting on those generated by the police, as the Greens did not respond to her request for an interview.

I observed a disjuncture between Yetter's subtle condemnation of people who do not report and the data about reporting in Kentucky. According to the 2018 Child Maltreatment report, 51,146 (47%) reports of child abuse were "screened out" in Kentucky or did not meet

criteria for a further CPS investigation.[22] The majority of reports (56,391 or 53%) received some form of follow-up, and 26,585 (25%) of the total reports were substantiated as abuse (Children's Bureau 2018, 12). This is typical for screening rates: nationally, around 44% of reports were screened out initially, while 56% had some form of follow-up.

In her analysis of the development of mandatory reporting laws in the 1960s and 1970s, physician and historian Mical Raz observes that these numbers have been quite consistent since the implementation of child abuse reporting hotlines: approximately half of reports required no further response (Raz 2020, 56–60). During this early phase of reporting, psychiatrist Albert Solnit described the flood of hotline reports as "overreporting", which led to "fewer services being stretched out", "increased…risk of harm to those already…at risk" and "unnecessary coercive interventions" (Raz 2020, 63). This is not to say that there are no impacts to unsubstantiated reports; reporting and a subsequent CPS call can be frightening for families who learn not to trust institutional actors like teachers and doctors (Fong 2020), who, along with law enforcement, make up some of the largest sources of child abuse reports (Administration for Children and Families 2022, 9). Increasing the number of reports can prevent harm to children, but overreporting can produce high caseloads, potentially reducing the amount of time workers can spend with families. As Raz puts it, "while mandatory reporting was seen as a morally sound intervention, it was not based on rigorous data, and there was little evidence that more reporting would lead to improved outcomes" (Raz 2020, 56).

In the *Tortured and abused* series, along with other news coverage of Kentucky's child abuse crisis, ordinary readers are enjoined to reflect on their own complicity in the extraordinary harm that comes to children. They are encouraged to imagine broken bones, skull fractures,

[22] This is slightly higher than the national rate of screening out of CPS referrals, which is 44%; 56% of CPS referrals received some follow up in 2018.

starvation, torment, all inflicted on small, angelic children. Furthermore, readers are encouraged to report their neighbors, daughters, sons, and friends, or be held responsible for the deaths of children. In a moral economy of childhood, those who fail to act to protect children are condemned: parents, grandparents, family members, and unrelated strangers. Adolescents and teenagers are not the face of child abuse; parents who may have wanted to keep their children are not considered, nor are children who might lose contact with their siblings or other close adults. Newly aged out twenty-year-olds do not fit into the imagery that Yetter presents as child abuse. None of these other actors involved in Kentucky's child welfare systems are represented as victims in the same way that Aria Blanton was. There is a collapsing of "child abuse" into a single category of infant vulnerability, one that does not capture the complexities of life before, during, or after state intervention: in short, one of Roitman's blind spots.

Yetter does address these broader contexts, but not in her opening piece. She and her editors strategically frame the problem, incorporating both a desire to protect and a responsibility to act, while leaving the short- and long-term consequences of reporting out of her central framing. Although I focus on Yetter's work here, she was by no means the only person to frame child abuse and potential policy solutions in this way. I turn now to elected officials and their efforts to prevent child abuse through prosecution after the fact, and the blind spots produced in their statutory and regulatory efforts.

The blind spot of "neglect"

In January and February 2020, I spent a day or two each week at the offices of Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA), an advocacy organization that coordinated legislative work on policies that about children. On any given day, staff members might be out of the office, visiting

nonprofit organizations, speaking with legislators, or attending committee meetings in the Capitol. Just as often, they might be hosting groups or events, meetings in the conference room or in individual offices.

In early January, they hosted a press conference about new procedures to prevent child sexual abuse in Kentucky. The press conference included a panel of medical and legal experts – the Attorney General, newly-elected Daniel Cameron; the Commonwealth Attorney's office, or the federal prosecutors who worked in Kentucky; child abuse pediatricians, and charitable and nonprofit organizations that did offered services and treatment to children and families. Each of the panelists spoke at the podium, reiterating the importance of medicine, law, and nonprofits working together to stop child sexual abuse. To that end, they had collectively decided that the best solution was to prepare a guidebook for prosecutors and law enforcement to identify abuse and gather appropriate evidence to prove it in court.

Journalists and representatives from other nonprofits attended, including Deborah Yetter, mostly asking clarifying questions about the new methods of detecting and prosecuting child sexual abuse. No one challenged any of the dominant narratives that emerged over the course of the press conference: that child sexual abuse was rampant in the commonwealth, that the proposed methods would make it easier to detect, or that better prosecution and harsher punishments would do anything to stem the tide of abuse.

After the press conference, one of the staff members, Amanda, invited me to accompany her to one of her out-of-office meetings. She noted that the meeting might not have been necessarily relevant to my research – she was correct – but that I was welcome to tag along to chat and get a better sense of her work. On the car ride back from the meeting, I expressed skepticism that additional prosecutions would, as newly elected Attorney General Daniel

Cameron put it, “end the scourge of child abuse” in Kentucky and asked what she made of the plan to prosecute more people. She sighed and said that she did agree that it was important to have effective prosecutions of child sexual abuse, and that she appreciated the commitment from the AG. She paused, then continued quietly.

“But like...99% of the abuse cases we see are neglect. Most of the time it’s just parents needing an extra hand,” she mused. “People keep bring up these incredibly sensational stories about child abuse and it’s awful, like…even thinking about that stuff makes me nauseated. It’s sick. But it’s also rare. Those are important cases but probably not the bulk of what child welfare should entail.”

Neglect refers to the willful “deprivation of necessities” and the “failure by the caregiver to provide needed, age-appropriate care although financially able to do so or offered financial or other means to do so” (Children’s Bureau 2018, 115). “Care” includes food, shelter, clothing, medical attention, supervision, and school attendance; as sociologist Tina Lee puts it, caregivers are not “expected to do everything perfectly”, but the “minimum necessary to keep a child healthy and safe” (Lee 2016b, 105). In this definition, drawn from the NCANDS 2018 Child Maltreatment report, neglect is distinct from poverty or lack of access to resources – neglect is purposeful, a choice on the part of caregivers. Lee observes that In New York City’s child welfare system, caseworkers most often investigate charges of neglect that primarily focus on children’s exposure to drugs or violence, but also notes that poverty and neglect “were often hard to separate in practice” (Lee 2016b, 106). Families can be reported for having limited access to resources (Fong 2020). Given the reliance of individual social workers to assess whether a caregiver is intentionally depriving a child of necessities, this ends up being quite a broad and encompassing definition. Although social workers understand in principle that children should

not be removed for poverty, child welfare researchers have been calling for greater attention to the slippage between hardship and purposeful deprivation (Milner and Kelly 2020; Morton and McDonald 2021).

Amanda presented a stark contrast to the stomach-churning accounts of child abuse that I encountered in the papers and during media events, instead pointing to a very different framing of the child abuse crisis in Yetter's coverage. Most of the medical experts and law enforcement officials whom Yetter quotes at length in her coverage focus on Aria Blanton as the emblematic case of child abuse, arguably because these cases are especially effective at galvanizing political will to *act.* Yet, as Amanda pointed out, Blanton's story was quite unusual according to Kentucky child abuse data. As I noted above, a little under half of reports do not meet criteria for investigation; in 2018, 53% received some form of follow up, and 25% of those were substantiated as abuse. Of those cases that were substantiated as abuse, 20,926 — 88% — were identified as "Neglect only"; nationwide, that rate is far lower with 60% of abuse substantiation being Neglect only. Of Kentucky's remaining 12%, 459 cases involved physical abuse, 468 involved sexual abuse, and 1,735 involved multiple forms of abuse. Of over 100,000 reports of child maltreatment in 2018, cases like Aria Blanton's – in which physical abuse and neglect were identified and substantiated – represented approximately 1% of Kentucky's child abuse cases.[23]

Blanton's visceral physical abuse case was also comparatively unusual among child fatalities and near-fatalities. The Child Fatality and Near-Fatality External Review Panel — the centerpiece of Yetter's reporting — reviewed 136 cases for Fiscal Year 2018, 54 fatalities and 82

[23] Nationally, only 19% of the referrals that received follow-up investigations or referrals to social services were substantiated as abuse, compared to 52% of Kentucky's cases; 81% were classified as "nonvictims" of abuse nationwide, while 48% of Kentucky's referrals were classified as "nonvictims" in 2018 (Children's Bureau 2018). This suggests that compared to aggregate U.S. data, Kentucky screens out more abuse and finds more evidence of it in the cases that warrant follow-up.

near-fatalities (Street 2019). Of these, the majority were determined to be some form of neglect, whether a form of supervisory neglect for children who drowned, ingested drugs, were injured with firearms, or were improperly restrained during a car accident. In Fiscal Year 2018, three of the 136 cases were designated torture. Although it seems that cases designated as child torture are highly unusual, Yetter treats torture and death — the most brutal and extreme instances of child abuse — as the primary problem, though they are also the rarest and most unusual.

Although she acknowledges that the majority of child abuse in Kentucky is neglect, she offers little contextualization regarding how readers might interpret the frequency of neglect amidst the comparative rarity of extreme violence against children. Her depiction of child abuse is limited to the violence of individual actors: parents, families, neighbors, teachers. Her primary call to her audience – to report families – does little to ensure that families undergoing financial hardship will be able to provide for children. Nowhere does Yetter advocate for expanded assistance to families to address child care resources, hunger, homelessness, transportation access, or health insurance, though the withdrawal of such forms of material aid have long been entwined with the regulation of families and removal of children (Briggs 2020; Raz 2020; Detlaff et al. 2020).

The absence of such context is a narrative slippage, a blurring of the boundaries between physical violence and the economic conditions in which people struggle. The violent framing of abuse is intended to motivate readers to surveil and report anyone who might be inflicting harm on children, but simultaneously produces a narrative blind spot about the more common and banal instances of neglect: buckling a seatbelt wrong or looking away while a child crawls into a pool do not even appear as a threat in Yetter's coverage, though they are more common than a "scourge" of "pure evil".

Legislating and moralizing adoptive, foster, and birth parents

One of the pieces in Yetter's series addresses "what's being done", in which she summarizes efforts to improve social worker retention, reduce caseloads, compensate kinship care (extended family members who take custody of children who would otherwise be placed in foster care) and keep children with their birth parents. Her series came amidst a few years that were a flurry of reforms, initiated by then-governor Matt Bevin. Bevin and his wife, Glenna, took on child welfare as an important cause after the state denied their request to adopt a child from the public system. The Bevins had five children already, social workers reasoned, and they did not need to adopt another child through the public system. The Bevins rejected this, adopting four additional children through private international adoptions, and set to work attempting to overhaul Kentucky's public adoption and foster care systems (Combs 2017). They created new governmental positions and appointed local Southern Baptist leaders to recruit new foster families, raise funds, volunteer, serve as mentors to foster youth, and fulfill other roles to improve child welfare systems (Yetter 2017; 2018). First Lady Glenna Bevin established the First Lady's Youth Leadership Council to incorporate the voices of young people in the reform process.[24] Governor Bevin declared an emergency in Kentucky's child welfare system in 2018, authorizing executive funding to go to private congregate care settings (Bevin and Meier 2018), a temporary measure intended to improve budgets for congregate care agencies to hire more workers during a worker shortage that year. Although Matt Bevin lost his re-election bid in 2019 – and the executive power he wielded to attempt to improve the child welfare system by

[24] FLYLC met a few times a year in Frankfort, but to my knowledge, the Leadership Council has been discontinued. This may have been due to the pandemic. Alternatively, Andy Beshear was elected governor in November 2019, and the Bevin administration transitioned out of power in January 2020.

recruiting Christian leaders and funding private agencies – he was by no means the only elected official to weigh in on child welfare policy after negative experiences with Kentucky's foster and adoptive systems.

In January 2020, I took an evening road trip with KYA to Lexington for the taping of a public access television panel on foster care reform in the commonwealth (Shaw 2020). Three Kentucky legislators, David Meade, Whitney Westerfield, and Christian McDaniel, all members of the Republican Party, described their experiences with private adoptions. Each of them had a similar perspective, one shared by all members of the panel: it is best to move children out the legal ambiguity of foster care towards permanency, being permanently in the legal custody of a family. To that end, the legislators had written and enacted a series of policies designed to move children out of the foster care system and into permanent homes. During the taping, Westerfield and Meade both spoke explicitly about their issues with fertility, and how they turned to Kentucky's public adoption system to adopt children. When the process took too long, Meade's family opted for an international adoption. Westerfield and his wife adopted a young woman's baby about a month before she gave birth, then later adopted an embryo separately that Mrs. Westerfield was able to carry herself. McDaniel and his wife fostered two young boys before adopting them after three years of negotiating with DCBS and ensuring they had contact with an additional biological brother who had been adopted by another family.

The panel moderator, Renee Shaw, asked each of the legislators about policy changes they had either helped to engineer – Meade in the House of Representatives, and Westerfield and McDaniel in the Senate. Meade and Westerfield both spoke highly of policies enacted as part of House Bill 1, an omnibus child welfare reform bill, during the 2018 legislative session that were designed to reduce the amount of time that children spent in foster care. Specifically, they both

voiced significant support for the establishment of a putative father registry, which requires men who believe themselves to potentially be the father of a specific child to register with the state when the child is born, claiming parental rights. If they do not within thirty days, and no father is listed on a birth certificate, they lose the ability to claim parental rights in the event of an adoption. Westerfield spoke explicitly about his motivation for supporting the legislation: he was worried that because of his public profile as a state senator, men might claim parental rights for his adopted daughter, Hadley, and he and his family would have to undergo a legal battle for custody.

Meade also emphasized his pride in crafting legislation to mandate substance abuse treatment for parents who gave birth to children with neonatal abstinence syndrome (NAS). NAS is a phenomenon that occurs when infants whose parents take drugs during pregnancy experience symptoms of withdrawal when they are born, and as of 2019, Kentucky is one of only six states that collects data on the occurrence of NAS (Jilani et al. 2019). Based on the 2018 legislation, parents who give birth to children with NAS are required by law to enroll in addiction treatment. If they do not, state social workers can move to terminate their parental rights. In her ethnographic research conducted in areas of Kentucky hardest hit by the opioid crisis – the most likely place for infants to be born with NAS – Lesly-Marie Buer found a dearth of substance use treatment programs (Buer 2020). Waiting times for programs could be months or years (Buer 2020, 154–65), and the legislation makes no mention of the scarcity of programs in underserved parts of the commonwealth. I discuss the relationship between substance abuse and child welfare reform in more depth below, but laws forcing birthing parents into drug treatment seemingly has the effect of swift termination of parental rights, rather than effective treatment for parents who

use drugs. As Buer puts it, "The primary client being served is the fetus or newborn, not the adult" (Buer 2020, 91).

During the taping of the show, the removal of NAS infants was portrayed as a positive endeavor. Meade emphasized that the intent behind the policy was "not meant to be cruel", but rather as a necessary intervention to protect children from birthing parents struggling with substance use. A clip shown during the broadcast included an interview and footage of a former Kentucky investigative reporter, Miranda Combs, and her newly adopted baby who had been born with NAS. Combs described reporting on the opioid epidemic, interacting with medical experts and people affected by drug use and overdoses, and how she would leave her card with neonatal intensive care units, offering to house infants who might have nowhere else to go. Eventually, she, her husband, and her kids celebrated a new addition to their family, Etta Jo. The interview was overlaid with a montage of smiling young boys cooing over their new sister, who was swaddled in a printed onesie, a pink bow on her headband. Soft, tense strings and slow piano notes were the backdrop of Combs' interview, picking up tempo as Combs described the slow improvements in the baby's health over her first few months of life. Shaw, the moderator, concluded the clip with a smile, describing the family as "doting", and asking the panel about parental leave for adoptive parents. No mention was made of Etta Jo's parents.

The public access television panel represented a convergence between media narratives and policy narratives about the failures of birth parents and the heroism of foster and adoptive parents. The sights, sounds, and general attitude towards foster and adoptive parents among journalists – Shaw and Combs – were celebration and affirmation, sentiments that took on a moral quality when juxtaposed with the inadequacy of drug-using parents or mothers who did not care for their children. Westerfield, Meade, and Bevin, all adoptive parents who went

through private channels to acquire their children, had all introduced legislation to reform the public foster and adoptive systems of Kentucky after they experienced difficulties navigating it. They did not craft policies around enabling parents to stay with their children, but rather to shorten the timelines to legally remove those children and put them in the hands of people who actively wanted them and were therefore more morally deserving of them. Repeatedly, they described their efforts as "necessary", "not cruel", and not a punishment, framings that asserted a moral goodness to the effects of these policies. Birth families were at once incapable of caring for their children, invalidating their parental rights and necessitating state intervention, and also morally bereft such that taking their children could not be seen as harsh or cruel.

Returning to Fassin's descriptions of a moral economy of child victims, "Nothing was known—and nothing seemed to be worth knowing—about…biological parents" (Fassin 2013, 116). This is not to say that these families did not love their children – they were clearly happy with their families, overjoyed with the chance to raise kids, in Westerfield's and Meade's cases, after grieving and trying for years to have biological children of their own. Rather, my intent here is to illustrate that morally ambiguous birth parents became a narrative blind spot when compared to the foster and adoptive parents whose desire for children became morally valorized in public policy and media narratives.

Of course, former foster youths had their own narratives about the morality of fostering and adoption. At the public access television taping I described above also included input from Jay Miller, the Dean of the University of Kentucky School of Social Work, a former foster youth and CPS investigator. When he stepped to the microphone to speak about his perspective on the importance of foster and adoptive families, Dean Miller described foster care as "the best thing that ever happened to me," and a "service we provide *to* kids" rather than something that social

work “does to” them. He did not delve into details about his time in care except to note that after the death of one parent and abuse at the hands of another, he was happy to have left his home and had made a career out of researching and improving social services systems in the commonwealth. I was surprised to hear a former foster youth speak so highly of the system, but as someone who was an authorized expert in his field, it follows that he would not undo the moral authority of his own work.

Hayley, like Dean Miller, was less happy to be in foster care, but still considered it a viable and positive alternative to her other options. After the death of her father, Hayley was placed with her elder brother, who was controlling and, in Hayley’s words, abusive towards her. She was bitter about the inability or unwillingness of her case workers to investigate her charges of abuse, describing abuse and neglect definitions as being inadequate to capture the suffering she experienced while living with him. Hayley asked to be placed in foster care and was eventually placed with a family that fostered teenagers exclusively. She was able to stay in her high school and participate in activities like band. She described being close to her band teacher, who eventually spoke with Hayley’s caseworker and offered to adopt her. I could understand Hayley’s efforts to escape her birth family, given her tense relationships with them, but I was surprised that Hayley turned down the adoption. She explained her decision to me as being one of a deep appreciation of a family willing to foster teenagers – they respected that, as an older foster youth, she needed a greater deal of freedom and autonomy than much younger foster children. Although she liked her band teacher, Hayley seemed to believe that she would not necessarily understand her status as a foster youth and the experiences she had in state custody. Eventually, however, her relationship with her foster family broke down, and they ended Hayley’s placement a few months before her eighteenth birthday.

Like Dean Miller, Hayley was also on her way to becoming an authorized expert: she would eventually receive a Bachelor of Social Work and enroll in a Masters' program. She was an outspoken advocate for foster care improvements, with a special focus on education access and recruiting foster parents willing to foster teenagers and older youth. She also had case management experience with an organization in Lexington that served foster youth who had recently aged out. While I doubt she would describe foster care as "the best thing that ever happened" to her, her participation in reforming the system underlies a fundamental belief in its legitimacy.

Beu shared with Dean Miller and Hayley a rejection of her birth family and an acceptance of her time in foster care, albeit more begrudgingly. I describe her relationships with her grandmothers and mother in Part II, but Beu had a deep sense of hostility towards both of her birth parents. During fieldwork, Kentucky's prisons held Beu's father, who had harmed her in ways that she never explained to me. Upon learning that he would be released and would be staying with her paternal grandmother, Beu resolved not to visit Granny anymore so as to avoid her father. I did not prompt her to recount the reasons she avoided him; she simply told me, "He shouldn't have did what he did," in the car before going stonily silent, staring out the window. According to Beu, her mother had had her arrested when they lived together after she aged out, and she had been in the custody of her mother when she was removed and placed in foster care. Beu had over fifty placements while she was in state custody, and while I never heard her speak positively about foster families or congregate care staff members, she had once described her time in care as "inevitable". Asking her about counterfactuals – whether she thought removal

was the right call, whether she wanted to stay with her family – was of no use. Her relationships with her birth family were so fraught that she could not have imagined *not* being placed in care.[25]

What I want to emphasize here is the variety of individual narratives that coexist among former foster youths who aged out of care, narratives that do not neatly align to the overwhelmingly positive stories about adoption and fostering that are ubiquitous among institutionally authorized experts. Although Dean Miller characterized foster care as being good, he said virtually nothing during either the taping or our one-on-one conversation a few weeks later about the quality of his foster families; he made no mention of adoption. For Hayley, who refused adoption and the violent care of her birth family, foster care was a temporary reprieve that did not last. Beu had little to say about foster families specifically and did not characterize her experience as either good or bad, but simply one that happened. It was safer for Hayley, and simply inevitable for Beu, to leave their homes of origin, rather than a moral good in the ways it seemed to be among journalists and policymakers.

To return to Carr's metapragmatics, I similarly show here how institutional actors "colonized" – absorbed, rather than challenged (Carr 2010b, 163) – narrative frames in their discussions and descriptions of foster care and adoptive parents. The key narrative in my case is not "empowerment" of clients, as it was for Carr, but rather the "goodness" of foster care and adoption, which depends on the narrativization of birth families as moral failures. The narrative assumption of the defectiveness of birth families did not necessarily come from foster youths themselves, though Hayley and Beu both affirmed that they disliked the ways they were treated in their homes of origin. This narrative is upheld by institutionally authorized actors like Dean

[25] I discuss Jonathan and Allison's relationships with their birth families in more depth in Chapter 5: they too had occasionally tense relationships with their families but appeared to have found their experiences in foster care uniformly bad or undesirable, and continued to have close familial ties after they aged out.

Miller, who speak from both a place of personal experience a as a former foster youth, and also from a place of institutional authority. His comparatively positive experience of foster care lends credence to the idea that child removal is the morally – and in his case, pragmatically – correct thing to do. This narrative of inadequate parents is generated from journalists, policymakers, and experts, outside of the direct experiences of former foster youths. The narrative was strategically deployed as a set of policies to remove children from parents more quickly, and also employed among news media to affirm the validity of such policies.

Part of Carr's point about metapragmatics is that "effectively and evocatively" – not "accurately" – framing one's policies or practices can produce desired outcomes, but also produce a world that allows those outcomes to be possible as legitimate answers to perceived problems (Carr 2010b, 158). More succinctly, certain kinds of talk are the "measure of…expertise" for experts (Carr 2010b, 208). Because foster youth had negative experiences with their birth families, policymakers, journalists, and experts can afford to weigh in. In fact, based on Yetter's coverage and the moral valorization of foster and adoptive parents, it is not only an opportunity for child welfare experts to enact their expertise, but a moral duty to and write news stories and implement legislation that continue to expand the reach of foster care into other policy arenas, especially substance use.

Linking substance use, incarceration, and child welfare

On a cold day in mid-December 2019, I woke up early, grabbed some coffee and a protein bar, and hauled myself and my tired car out to Manchester, Kentucky. I had been to eastern Kentucky before, but always in the summer, when everything was ostentatiously, impossibly green. My trip to the mountains was foggy this time, gray and brown and dead. I had never been to Manchester, and on my drive out, I prayed that I would get to keep cell service



Illustration 5. Muddy water near the Axis Coffee Shop, Manchester, KY. Photo by author.

long enough for my GPS to get me safely to the venue of the public policy meeting I planned to attend. Thankfully, I turned onto a gravelly road to find a big red barn that read "Axis Coffee Shop", my destination. I drove down the road a bit to find parking, past what was, according to the sign out front, a mission; a trailer; a Volunteers of America building, and a used car dealership. I parked and walked, avoiding potholes and watching the flow of the muddy creek next to the road.

Kentucky Youth Advocates (KYA), the policy advocacy organization whose meetings I had been attending for months, had been coordinating these public forums all over Kentucky, bringing together child experts and legislators, to discuss KYA's policy goals. The Manchester meeting was the fourth and final discussion of KYA's "Blueprint for Kentucky's Children", the list of approximately they would be supporting during the upcoming Kentucky General Assembly.

By the time I trekked out to Manchester in December, I had grown accustomed to the rhythm and cadence of KYA's public meetings. Armed with thoroughly researched talking points, the KYA staffers would welcome their guests, thanking them for coming out to an early meeting. Depending on where the meeting was held, local flavor would be added. For the Manchester meeting, Patricia – KYA's chief operating officer – would fondly recall her

memories of playing high school basketball in nearby Harlan County; the crowd supplied the names of local basketball heroes in response. In Kentucky, basketball is king, so her jokes and reminiscing were well-received.

After the greetings, the meeting coordinators would present talking points on a few key pieces of legislation, usually policies that would have a particularly important impact on the region where the meeting was being held. Then, they would invite a series of speakers – legislators, nonprofit CEOs, local spokespeople with lived experiences of the relevant policy issues, health care providers, teachers, foster families, grandparents, youth – to the microphone to speak about specific pieces of legislation. After speakers, people would be sorted into small groups, to raise questions or concerns about the proposed policy changes, and each meeting would conclude with a group conversation about issues that had been raised. KYA staff members would thank everyone for coming and remind us to get in touch with our local state legislators.

The Manchester meeting followed the same pattern, but noticeably felt different, warmer and busier. I entered the coffee shop and followed the signage to up a flight of stairs to a big, open but dark space, the walls lined with old pallets. It was packed, frenzied: people were everywhere. I had noticed the many cars and lack of parking outside, but I had not realized that there would be so many attendees at this meeting. Before I could move, a woman with long wavy brown hair approached me, shook my hand, smiled, and warmly welcomed me. She introduced herself as Jennifer Hancock, the CEO of the Volunteers of America Mid-State; I told her I was a researcher doing dissertation work on child welfare in Kentucky, but she quickly moved on to the next group of people coming in. No one had ever greeted me at the door like this at any of the other meetings: another difference from the rhythm to which I had grown accustomed.

Hannah, one of the staff members, saw me as I wandered around, craning my neck for a seat: she looked stressed. “We’re out of materials, and out of seats,” she muttered. “We had nineteen people RSVP and more than double that showed up.” Yikes. I looked around: there were indeed three or four people, a mix of KYA staff and people I did not recognize, frantically pulling chairs from a stack in the back of the room. I tried to locate a free chair. I found one at a table and sat. Things settled down. As usual, people gave me curious and confused looks when I pulled out my electronic typewriter. As the meeting began, I looked around: most of the previous meetings, people had worn a mix of business casual clothes, but today there were as many people in suits as there were people in fleece vests and work boots.

The day’s legislative speaker was Robert Stivers, the Republican Senator from District 25, representing Clay, Jackson, Knox, McCreary, Owsley, and Whitley counties. He was also the Senate President: his role to assign and schedule hearings and rules in his Chamber. I had never met him, only seen him at meetings and occasionally when I tuned in to Capital TV. On the Senate floor, he was intense, stern, often raising his voice for emphasis; at this meeting, he cracked jokes, smiled, and spoke warmly and at length about the work that KYA was doing to improve the lives of children in commonwealth. Whenever he spoke, he always reminded his audiences that rural Kentucky was different from more urban parts of Kentucky. Today, he elaborated this in the context of improving the court process for foster care and adoption.

“Things that are reasonable and workable in Louisville, Kentucky, may not be workable here because we don’t have the resources. Some of the stuff we’re working on here in rural areas might be easier to implement than what works in urban areas. You have to think about what works and where. I think you see a lot more, in rural areas, of parents and grandparents; I think the community and family tie is different in rural areas than it is in urban and metropolitan areas.

When you start thinking about adoption, the process and how long it takes, courts in urban areas much more stretched than rural areas."

Part of the discussion that day was about the implementation of Family Recovery Courts. By December, I had been hearing about the courts during public meetings for a few months. Family Recovery Courts are Kentucky's family drug courts – qualifying parents who face drug charges can opt for participation in Family Recovery Court in lieu of jail time. Participation typically entails mandatory substance use treatment, mandatory abstention from drug use, family counseling, supervised visitation with children, drug testing, meetings with social workers, and attendance at Narcotics or Alcoholics Anonymous meetings. Jefferson County's experimental courts received praise in news coverage – including the final article in Yetter's *Tortured and abused* series – as a more humane and holistic approach to substance use treatment in child welfare.

In her work, Yetter heartily endorses Recovery Courts: the headline of her final piece in the series reads "This court battles child abuse with praise and celebration. Kentucky needs more of them." She had been allowed to attend the proceedings of the Jefferson County Family Recovery Court on the condition that she would de-identify participants and reporting back on their work seems to have been a source of great pride for her. Yetter emphasizes the informality of the court as a positive: she describes laughter, "cheers and applause", "a beaming participant", coupled with photographs of what can only be called joy on Judge Denise Brown's face. The two Jefferson County recovery court judges, Brown and Judge Deana McDonald, both described the program as being successful. Yetter does make reference to the widespread problem of substance use in the commonwealth, and notes that much longer processes of care and encouragement seem to be effective in helping families abstain from drug use and regain custody of their

children. The tone of the article is hopeful, optimistic, a possible solution to the crisis in child abuse in Kentucky.

Although Yetter characterizes Jefferson County's Recovery Court as "the only one of its kind", I was told a different story at one of KYA's public forums. Drug courts in Kentucky are not new, but statewide oversight and funding for them is. I learned from lawyers and social workers attending a Blueprint meeting in Shepherdsville that Bullitt County, just south of Louisville, had been voluntarily running an unfunded family recovery court for over a decade. Initially they had had money to run a pilot program: when the money ran out, the judges, lawyers, and social workers simply kept going. They said that, while challenging, they found that the diversion program had been more than worth the effort. Their chief complaint was that they were overwhelmed, and one of their mental health services providers – the local juvenile detention center – had closed.[26] The people who ran the Bullitt County family recovery court found fault with the funding structures available to them, arguing that they received in insufficient amount of state funding for mental health services because of their proximity to Jefferson County. Their explanation was that, because they were so close to Louisville, public and private funding agencies assumed that Bullitt County residents could simply drive into

[26] The closest juvenile detention center to Bullitt County would have been the Lincoln Village Juvenile Detention Center, which closed in 2018. Officially, the Department of Juvenile Justice closed the center as part of a routine audit of all juvenile detention. In the preceding years, there had been enormous public pressure to investigate and close the center following the January 2016 death of sixteen-year-old Gynnya McMillan. Gynnya had been in the custody of Maryhurst and sent home to visit with her mother on a weekend home pass. After an altercation between the two, Gynnya's mother called the police, and Gynnya was detained at Lincoln Village. Staff members of the center briefly physically restrained her, ate her food when she refused, and falsified bed checks without actually checking on Gynnya for two days. When they went to arraign her on Monday, they found her dead in her cell. Following her death, activists and advocates demanded an autopsy, investigation, and closure of Lincoln Village – they got all three, but the official story was that Gynnya died of a congenital heart condition, not her treatment in the facility. The investigation into Lincoln Village did not produce homicide charges, but neglect charges, and several workers lost their jobs and spent a few months in jail. The closure of the facility, as I noted above, was officially the result of a statewide juvenile justice overhaul: according to DOJ, it had little to do with Gynnya's death at all.

Louisville to access resources concentrated in the city. Unfortunately, they observed, there were few bus routes from Bullitt County to downtown Louisville, where most services for low-income people were located: few of their clients had cars or valid licenses.

The people who ran the Bullitt County drug court also criticized the sudden expansion of funding for drug courts statewide, and the lack of media recognition they received for implementing drug court without it. Yetter notes that previous instantiations of the courts in Fayette, Jefferson, and "other counties" had been shuttered in 2010 due to budget cuts, which suggests some overlap between Bullitt County's rogue recovery program and the absence of such courts elsewhere in the commonwealth. In September of 2019, the Louisville chapter of the National Council of Jewish Women announced that they were fundraising for money to expand Jefferson County's recovery court pilot, which was based on Bullitt County's program. The Family Recovery Court programs would be expanded to three other counties: Kenton, Davies, and Stivers' home base, Clay County. The Louisville court and the three new courts would be carefully monitored and assessed over the next several years. The goal was to generate enough evidence of the efficacy of family drug courts in Kentucky with *private* funds to garner state funding for even more drug courts, a policy proposal that would require Stivers's support.

For his part, Stivers made clear his priorities. He wanted certifiable results before he would commit to anything new. "We don't want to implement policies that have no quantifiable results. There's no point in putting limited dollars into something that isn't bringing change," he said. He launched into a discussion of various taxes on tobacco products that KYA endorsed – skeptical that taxing tobacco would bring sufficient revenue into the state, Stivers noted that the General Assembly would have to have a much broader discussion about what programs they could afford to spend money on, and which ones they might under or defund. Specifically, he

mentioned a proposed bill on school safety: he saw the difficulty and costs of hiring enough school counselors to put one in every school (a KYA policy proposal), but apparently not the costs of hiring armed school resource offices be placed in every Kentucky school. As a follow-up, he mentioned that in Clay County, schools had had a hard time replacing boilers in school buildings, much less supplying mental health services. Investing in social services programs was not a budget priority unless they were overwhelmingly effective.

"We know that we have to look at this holistically, and it starts in utero for that child," he continued. "If you don't have appropriate attention at all levels of development, we're going to wind up with even more problems in our court system. That child will not be at par in urban areas, especially if the mother is dependent upon delivery. There's overcrowding in jails. There's a problem in severing the family because of drug use; we have to stop that. We know the questions, but what are the answers? How do we not encourage continued drug use without severing the family? We have pilot programs that we will look at to see if that's an appropriate method and manner – in a holistic way – to make this all work."

At the time, I did not know much about Stivers. However, years later I notice: Stivers was hedging. He had a politician's finesse, the ability to preemptively foreclose the possibility of policies that KYA had endorsed and researched – mandating police presence in schools but not counselors, discouraging drug use and keeping families together but being skeptical of family recovery courts – under the guises of "funding" and fundamental cultural differences between Jefferson and outlying counties. It is certainly true that tailoring policies to fit the specific needs and resources of each county and region is important. The smaller hedges, however, were his comments about "the community and family tie" – he seemed to be insinuating that community and family ties were stronger in rural areas than urban areas, that parents and grandparents were

more involved in the lives of children outside the city. The absence of this family tie seemed to be directly implicated in Stivers' next statement – adoption in the cities took longer than in rural areas, because there were far too many children up for adoption in the cities whose families did not or could not care for them (not that there were simply more children in cities due to higher population density).

Although I share a skepticism of the Family Recovery Courts, I suspect that Stivers and I have different underlying concerns. Stivers named his – he doubted the efficacy of family recovery courts, had not seen enough evidence that they worked, and a concern about the cost. My own concern is a moral one, following Garriott and Raikhel's review of anthropologies of "addiction", a term they attempt to denaturalize in their survey of the literature (W. Garriott and Raikhel 2015). Apart from questions of therapeutics and subjectivities, Garriott and Raikhel are especially interested in the governance of addiction. They specifically address drug courts (2015, 484–86), highlighting important work done in ethnographic sociology about drug courts. They argue that, even when participation in drug court is voluntary – as it is in Jefferson County – in practice, there are often elements of coercion involved in the choice. For some drug courts that work as an alternative to more traditional criminal court outcomes – jail, probation, mandatory treatment – the threat of incarceration and surveillance becomes part of the motivation factor for participation. In the case of family drug court, the potentially coercive message is that someone may be able to keep their children if they do participate. Policies around substance use have the effect of expanding the reach of Kentucky's carceral system, with children as a bargaining chip.

This is no small matter: Kentucky has one of the highest rates of incarceration in the United States, and the depending on estimates, either the fifth or second highest rate of parental incarceration in the United States (Kids Count Data Center 2018; Advocates 2019; Kentucky

Department of Corrections 2020). Twelve percent of Kentucky's children experience the incarceration of a parent, to detrimental effects on their health and well-being (Robison 2020). According to advocates challenging the effects of incarceration on families, judges routinely dismiss the idea that people being held on pretrial detention have any kind of familial contact or caregiver roles to play in their families.[27] Officially, no child is removed from their homes because their parent or caregiver is incarcerated – I wrote to the Cabinet to ask for data on the subject, and they reported back they did not have any because such removals did not occur. However, nearly every single former foster youth I met in the field had experienced the incarceration of a parent, none of whom, to my knowledge, had been incarcerated for child abuse. Only one of my interlocutors – Beu – expressed any sentiment along the lines of that parent "deserving" their incarceration. Although I was able to glean some information from former foster youths about their relationships with incarcerated family members, Allison had the most to say on the ways that substance use, incarceration, and foster care entwined, and I detail her experiences here.

Intergenerational substance use dynamics: Allison's story

I met Allison when she was a resident of the congregate care facility where I had worked. She was fourteen at the time, and when we reconnected during fieldwork, she had officially aged out of care after turning eighteen. In the intervening years between when I quit my job and she and I met again, she had gathered many stories to tell me. During her years working at a

[27] The families of incarcerated people deal with both the loss of income and the loss of a family member during their incarceration. Sociologist Megan Comfort calls this extension of the carceral state into the home and family life of prisoners "secondary prisonization" (Comfort 2003). Sylvia A. Harvey *(2020)* offers a detailed look into this secondary prisonization of mothers, fathers, siblings, and children in Kentucky, Florida, and Mississippi.

sandwich shop on the outskirts of Louisville, she complained about the "junkies" who shot heroin in the bathroom. I knew, from her time in state custody, that her parents had dealt with substance use issues, so I was unsurprised that she was hostile towards drug users. During the early months of fieldwork, she spoke dismissively about acquaintances who used drugs, something I took to mean that she was uninterested in using any illicit substances herself.

My perception changed during the early days of the coronavirus lockdown. Allison and I talked a lot over FaceTime in during the first few weeks. Initially our conversations were information exchanges: she would tell me about the latest news she had read about the coronavirus, I would tell her about the news I had read. We talked about symptoms to monitor – high fever, fatigue – and made contingency plans in case she or her loved ones wound up in the emergency room (Saldaña 2020). We talked about the things that worried us about the pandemic and the government's response.

After the first week of isolation, the conversation expanded beyond pandemic news and health updates. Isolation became a time of reflection for her — her boyfriend worked third shift at a truck stop, leaving her with alone time in the morning when he was asleep after finishing his shift. She woke up early and spent her mornings talking to me or reflecting on her life over the past couple of years. During one of our morning video chat sessions, she mentioned that she had quit taking pills and maintained sobriety for a few weeks. It was difficult to keep it up, she said, because every time she mentioned it to the people with whom she was quarantining — her boyfriend, a friend, and her friend's boyfriend — they minimized the importance of it. Her boyfriend did not seem to want to celebrate with her. When she told him she was proud of herself for staying off of it for a few weeks, he told her that she should not have been taking the drugs in the first place. Her friends were even less supportive.

“They were like, ‘What, you think you’re better than us because you don’t do drugs?’” she told me over the phone. “No, I don’t think I’m better than anyone, but I feel better for myself,” she had told them in response. No one in her immediate surroundings seemed impressed by a few weeks of sobriety. I offered some affirmation via FaceTime while acknowledging that what she was doing was difficult, especially since she had easy access to the substances she had been using, even during isolation. Her honesty about how disappointing it was to not receive affirmation or support or praise while trying to stay sober was an occasion for her to reflect on her own attitude towards others in their own struggles with substance use, namely her parents.

“I get it, you know? I don’t think I was very good to my dad when he was trying to get sober. I think I said the same things [to my dad that] my boyfriend said to me, that he shouldn’t have been doing drugs in the first place, that a few weeks [of sobriety] wasn’t that big of a deal,” she mused.

In addition to the newer sobriety she was struggling to maintain during the early days of the pandemic, Allison also revealed that she had ceased using a different substance almost a year earlier. After quitting two separate drug habits without treatment before she turned twenty, Allison’s views on drugs — and her parents — changed. She could relate to their experiences, their struggles. She was more sympathetic to them, a bit more forgiving. Through her own experiences of social rejection as she tried to stay sober, she gained a different understanding of her parents’ struggles with abstaining from drugs, and how pointless it could seem in the absence of love and support from others.

She rightfully pointed out that her own struggles – with drugs specifically, and in life more generally – might not have become problems had her parents managed their own substance use problems before hers developed. Earlier, before she herself had struggled with drug use, she

had found it easier to dismiss people who could not simply will themselves to stop using them. She had suffered because her parents had struggled with their own drug use, and she understandably resented people who might inflict that harm onto other people. As someone who managed to stay off drugs without treatment, it could have been easy for her to continue dismissing them, but she did not. Instead, she had developed a more complex moral relationship to drugs and drug users. Getting off of them was hard, and something to be celebrated, though she herself had not done so when her father stopped using, and no one had celebrated with her when she did. An inability to stop drug use was not necessarily a moral failure, but an extremely difficult challenge.

Despite her newfound softness towards her parents, Allison's process of transformation did not necessarily translate to having closer contact with either of them. She understood that although her parents could love her, they may not have been reliable for her when she was a child, nor could they be depended upon for certain things she needed as an adult. She still spoke with her mother to vent, and her father occasionally dropped off small amounts of cash for her when she was running low. He helped her move out of an apartment while she was living with a difficult roommate and was around to offer occasional life advice, and while they were in touch, they neither lived together nor relied on one another for much.

Her mother went off the grid at one point while I was in the field, stopped responding to texts and phone calls and Facebook messages. Allison relayed this information casually in a conversation during a car ride to the library, mentioning that she did not know where her mother was and that no one had heard from her in a few weeks. A few days later she updated me; her mother was back in Louisville and asked Allison for a ride from the hospital. She had apparently been in the city for a few days and had used drugs during that time, then ended up in the hospital.

Allison was irritated that her mother had not contacted her upon coming to the city, only reaching out when she needed something from Allison. In spite of this, Allison went to retrieve her mother and drop her off, offering her a coffee and a little cash before saying goodbye. When she relayed the story to me afterwards her voice never cracked or wavered — she sounded steady and assured about her decision to be around her mother, just for a short time and on her own terms. Fulfilling her duties as a concerned daughter without giving away too much of her own resources or time, Allison found a sort of balance in her relationship with her mother.

In Allison's story, and in other anthropological investigations into drug use across generations, it becomes clear that drugs have the potential to make and break parent-child relationships of care, but in ways that are hardly predictable. In her work on intergenerational heroin use among Hispanos in the Española Valley of northern New Mexico, Angela Garcia places the familial forms of care made *possible* by heroin use at the forefront of her analysis (Garcia 2010). She examines the relationships of two mother-daughter dyads, a two-generational approach to understanding addiction. Through the two case studies, she examines how daughters cover for their mothers at the risk of losing their own children, understanding how their addicted mothers model for them a way of being and of coping with loss and mourning: heroin was how they learned to process dispossession and deprivation. To varying degrees, the mothers tried to get their own lives on track in order to support their daughters, but the process was start-and-stop, and sometimes broke their caring relationships rather than cement them. Garcia's argument here is that heroin use was a way for mothers and daughters to bond, that it became a way of life for them, and a mechanism to express their care for each other. Garcia ponders the simultaneity of toxic and violent forms of care that emerge in relation to heroin use and the difficulty of

understanding how the women might care for one another without a shared history of substance use.

Ethnographic work on Kentucky's opioid epidemic lends credence to the idea that new forms of caring relationships between kin emerge in unexpected ways. Lesly-Marie Buer found that the only way for people with substance use problems to survive the violence that was often part of their lives – at the hands of the state or other civilians – was to rely on kinship networks (Buer 2020, 168–72). Kristina Brant's work on kinship care in eastern Kentucky similarly emphasizes the importance of grandparents and intergenerational households as a method of sharing costs and resources for families affected by substance use (Brant 2022).

In each of these examples, political structures around drug prohibition play different roles in kinship relations. Garcia attributes the centrality of heroin use in familial care relations in the Española Valley in part to the state abandonment: the lack of treatment facilities in rural areas specifically, has necessitated that families step in to take care of each other in the absence of the state. It is a paradox for Garcia: the family is both the cause and the source of care in addiction, making it both necessary but also dangerous. Like Garcia, Buer found that the long wait times for addiction treatment, housing, nutrition and cash benefits, and the absence of jobs in eastern Kentucky made survival dependent on care and love from other people. While social workers and policymakers might see substance use as inherently a hindrance to caring relationships, what these scholars emphasize is that care relations between parents and children are not only *broken* by drug use, but are in fact intimately entwined with socioeconomic conditions, particularly in rural areas where there are limited resources and devastated landscapes. To further disrupt familial relationships through child removal or heavy policing can exacerbate resource loss as often as it serves to "protect" children.

In contrast, Jason Pine interwove his own familial experiences with drug use with accounts of his fieldwork on methamphetamine cooking in Missouri (Pine 2019). Pine and his sister had been abandoned by his mother to an abusive father when they were young. In several chapters, each of which is no more than a few pages, Pine reckons with his own relationship to legal amphetamines – ADHD medications – before deciding not to risk becoming like his mother, treating his daughter and partner poorly. He describes visiting his sister ended in the hospital after an overdose, and how the siblings supported one another through the challenges of abstaining. As adults, he and his sister tried time and again to help her take on maternal relationship of care, in which she could fulfill a duty to them as a mother. Each time, he and his sister were horrified to find that their care work for their mother – their money, their efforts to get her enrolled in treatment – were often squandered on more drugs or ignored completely. In contrast to Allison, Pine and his sister were less sympathetic to their mother after their own substance use problems. Drugs interfered directly in their relationships with their parents, making it impossible for them to sustain ties with their mother.

Allison's caring relationships with her parents took the form of supporting them materially from time to time, even when she had limited resources, but also learning to limit what she could expect from them regarding material and emotional support. More importantly, what Allison's story shows is that former foster youth can develop complex understandings of parents who harmed them. Allison's slow change was not a foreseen outcome immediately upon aging out, given her hostility to drug users. Moreover, her own substance use would hardly have been considered a desirable outcome on the part of policymakers or experts, but also became grist for her to develop stronger, sustainable familial ties and garner some forms of support with her parents.

An alternative explanation

In contrast to the common policy narrative – that increases in Kentucky's child welfare population could be attributed to opioid use – I heard a very different narrative when I spoke with Max, a former DCBS administrator, during a conversation in late August 2019. In 2017, Max had been appointed by then-governor Matt Bevin to evaluate and assess the Department to make improvements to the child welfare system. At the time Max had no experience with adoption or foster care, though he and his wife later adopted two children. According to Max, Bevin appointed him because he was an "outsider" to the system and the child welfare system needed a set of fresh eyes. According to the local newspaper, Max was appointed in an act of nepotism: he was affiliated with the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and was a close personal friend of Bevin through their shared religious affiliations. After seven months, Max was publicly and unceremoniously fired, due in part to the massive public backlash against the exorbitant salary he received and his personal clashes with many of the career administrators of DCBS.

When we met, he grilled me, asking me about everything from my personal and political beliefs, explaining that he was wary of talking to people about his experience with DCBS. When I finally managed to give him satisfactory answers to everything, he asked me what I wanted to know. We talked for a few hours about his experiences at the Department and what he had been doing since he left. He asked me about my research and my experiences with the child welfare system. I mentioned that during preliminary fieldwork, I had asked service providers what they made of the sudden increase in out-of-home placements. Most of them pointed to another crisis – Kentucky's opioid epidemic – and offered little else by way of explanation.

"It can't be the opioid crisis," he sighed. "We've always had drugs. We've always had this problem." He pointed out that opioids did not suddenly magically appear in 2014 when the numbers of children in state custody increased rapidly, although he acknowledged that they were certainly a part of the problem. Instead, he suggested that the young women who make up the majority of the social work workforce, were likely to be risk-averse and take children and youth out of their homes to avoid the liability of a possible child fatality.[28]

"People are scared of getting sued, scared of being in the paper," he explained. "The concern now is that it's plateaued — they've stopped pulling kids out because of the numbers," he said with a wry smile. "If it's opioids, did they stop?"

My conversation with Max was the first time I had heard a DCBS administrator, albeit a former one, challenge the conventional crisis narrative of child abuse in Kentucky. The rate of removals, he suggested, had plateaued for reasons other than a drop in child abuse. The implication of his comment was that social workers were not only assessing the safety of a child or the possibility of reunification of a family. Instead, he suggested, social workers and DCBS were concerned about public perceptions, risk management, and media backlash.[29] For him, child abuse and child removal were connected but distinct phenomena. Public outrage about child removal seemed to be the root of the proliferation of crisis language in Kentucky. Removals slowed, but crisis narratives persisted.

[28] Interestingly, there's some evidence that Child Protective Services in the United States are increasingly relying on algorithms and actuarial science when they decide to remove a child. This has the effect of making for less discretion among social workers, but also shielding them from risk. For more on how social workers are navigating risk, see Scherz (2011).

[29] I could never verify the truth of this: I requested permission to speak with DCBS social workers but was told that would not be possible. I mentioned this to an old friend who had worked for DCBS, and she explained that they were highly encouraged not to speak to journalists, or, I suppose, researchers.

Max's narrative reframing – while perhaps strategic in its own right, given his unceremonious departure from DCBS – neatly illustrates Roitman's argument about the production of blind spots amidst the urgency of crisis. The implication of Max's words was that the opioid epidemic, itself framed as a crisis, was a convenient additional expert narrative that could be picked up and productively used to animate discussions of child welfare. The state's duty to care for children could be fulfilled as long as they were removing children from family members who used substances. At the same time, however, the concatenating crises of opioid use and child abuse effectively absolved the state of a full responsibility for preventing child abuse wholesale. While connected, the two crisis narratives were discrete entities: solving child abuse would require solving the opioid crisis, and if DCBS could not solve the opioid crisis, they could nonetheless be insulated from a critique that they might be shirking their duties to care for children.

The linkages between child abuse and substance use were everywhere, with public debates about the varying approaches to resolving both. However, as I have shown, these were nearly always couched in the desires, perceptions, and policy goals of political actors. Sometimes these paralleled the experiences of foster youths, but as in Allison's case, the narratives about children's experiences of familial drug use were rarely put at the center. Max named some of the blind spots, namely that there were myriad other contributing factors to child abuse crises in the commonwealth: culture, the moral decline of the family, the risk aversion of the Cabinet. While I am skeptical about Max's Christianity-inflected understanding of child welfare, we shared a skepticism of dominant narratives, and a desire to identify the blind spots produced by those narratives. Foster families, actual foster youths, parents who managed to sustain relationships

with their children, were rarely part of the story, and the opioid crisis was part of that narrative blind spot production.

NARRATIVES ON AGING OUT

While Yetter devotes most of her words to the failures of writing and implementing policies that protect children from abuse, she does dedicate one of the five articles in the *Tortured and abused* series to my subject here: the aftermath of aging out of Kentucky's foster care system. She includes the stories of two former foster youths, Cynthia and Christopher, both of whom aged out of extended care at 21. Based on the quotations she includes I believe she interviewed Cynthia but not Christopher. Most of the quotes she includes from Christopher were taken from his public speeches at a series of meetings to garner support for Kentucky's early implementation of the Families First Act – I know this because I attended the same meetings, and like Yetter, reproduce an amalgam of his speeches at the end of this chapter. I did not meet Cynthia and am basing my analysis here on Yetter's writing about her.

Cynthia and Christopher make an appearance in Yetter's writing as exemplars of the ways in which foster care was a solution for circumstances other than abuse. Cynthia's parents died when she was very young, and she was in the custody of her elderly grandmother, who struggled to care for her when she was 13. Cynthia was removed for neglect, and described her experience as being "removed…from my grandmother's home…just to throw me in the foster system to be neglected all over again". Christopher was similarly removed for reasons of neglect when he was much younger, at three years old: he experienced abuse at the hands of his foster families before being reunited with his birth family, only to be separated once again a few years later. He would eventually be placed with fictive kin, the bureaucratic designation for non-kin

caregivers who take custody of foster youth: he spent a good deal of time with his godfather, which I learned from our conversations at public forums.

Although their experiences with foster care were neglectful and abusive, Yetter frames both of them as resilient survivors who managed to build "good" lives for themselves upon leaving care. Both had opted for extended care, choosing to age out at 21 rather than 18. Christopher, still in extended care, was due to age out a few months after his appearance in the article and was considering college. Cynthia was a few years past aging out of extended care, and the years between turning 21 and her interview with Yetter were rough. After graduating high school, Cynthia described herself as being unprepared for college and struggling to keep up with classes. After a sexual assault, she dropped all of her classes, lost her apartment, and slept in her car for a few weeks, before meeting a family, the Quintelas, who had signed up to mentor with a Christian organization called Orphan Care Alliance. The Quintelas invited her to stay with them, as long as she needed to stay, and she was able to finish college and find some stability.

Like the infants and young children she described in her opening piece, Yetter frames them both as innocent victims of foster care who nonetheless demonstrated motivation to achieve normative milestones for responsible adults. Despite their struggles, they were both "on track" as young adults: both were educated, skillful public speakers, had drivers' licenses. They seemed to have attained a degree of respectability, gave the impression of being contributing members of society. While not children, they nonetheless fit within a moral economy of childhood I outlined above, because they were innocent young people who had not done anything wrong: they do not do drugs, they do not have children, they engaged in waged work. Yetter frames them has "doing good" – in Cynthia's words – and as thriving young adults *despite* foster care.

The recently aged out, as newly responsible for themselves and often coping with long histories of suffering and struggle, are operating with two simultaneous moral expectations: innocent victims and responsible adults. Successfully balancing these two sets of expectations makes them recognizable, in anthropologist Lauren Silver's words, as a "particular system-sanctioned identity, 'the deserving victim'" (Silver 2010, 279). In her work on American independent living programs (ILPs), Silver posits that, because welfare services like extended care and housing are not understood to be entitlements, young people must demonstrate that they deserve help. Not only does successfully balancing these two moral expectations authorize them as experts, doing so is also often a *requirement* for receiving aid. Unlike Allison's struggles with substance use (described above) or Beu's legal issues (described in Chapter 6), neither Cynthia nor Christopher could be morally responsible for their struggles: they deserved better because they had done nothing wrong. Moreover, the idea that foster youth might choose unstable or precarious work – such as Jonathan's music career, discussed in Part IV, does not appear in Yetter's narrativization of surviving foster care. In short, Yetter's narrativization has the effect of producing blind spots about ideas of a "good life" for former foster youths.

In Yetter's framing, they both toed the line of being critical of foster care and preserving expert narratives about its necessity. Christopher and Cynthia were authorized as experts in part because Yetter framed their stories as affirming extant narratives about foster care. They made use of extended care services, illustrating their willingness to use resources available to them. In addition, Cynthia's story illustrated the inadequacy of these services, and the necessity of community care in the aftermath of foster care. They put effort into their own well-being, but were stymied by external forces, not responsible for their suffering.

Notions of deservingness and responsibility change over time, as well, as former foster youth age and temporally grow further away from their time in care. As an outspoken youth advocate who, at the time of writing, was in her late twenties, Hayley noticed a decline in the local acceptability of her thoughts on care, a deauthorization of her expertise. Having been involved in advocacy since she was twenty, she was well-positioned to track the changes. In meetings and forums with various child welfare entities – foster parent recruiting and training events, panels with other former foster youths, small group meetings with state officials – Hayley's initial forays into public advocacy were met with affirmation. She was praised for her resilience and courage, but over time, she grew frustrated, feeling that people were merely paying lip service but not engaging authentically with her recommendations. This feeling worsened over time, and she began to receive feedback from her public talks that undermined her criticisms of Kentucky's foster care system. In particular, critics cited how long ago she had been in care, noting that the system had changed, and her experiences no longer applied.

In a 2022 virtual meeting with former foster youths in other states, to which she had invited me, she expressed feeling as though she had "aged out of advocacy". Although Hayley's concerns were with Kentucky, each of the former foster youths attending the virtual meeting spoke about similar experiences. The older they were, the less credence paid to their experiences of care and of aging out. They were disappointed, of course, but also exasperated: no longer young and no longer innocent, as adults they were expected to responsibly manage the structural and economic conditions without complaint.

Here I highlight, briefly, the acknowledgement of the challenges that former foster youths face once they age out within a much broader set of discussions around child welfare that tend to emphasize removal and safety. Yetter's coverage of aging out is notable for its comparatively

small presence amidst her critiques of the Cabinet, social workers, and social services. Although she covers them, I read her narrative coverage of former foster youths as reproducing blind spots. Given that both were officially removed for neglect, and that both had difficult experiences during their times in care, Yetter could have framed their stories as indicators of the inadequacy of removal to keep children safe or highlighted the harms children can experience in foster care. Neither of these would align with her larger, explicitly stated goals, however. Neither fit neatly into Yetter's push for Family Recovery Court expansion, nor do they seem to affirm the importance of surveillance and reporting as solutions to the harms that Cynthia and Christopher faced either before entering care or while they were in foster care. Her reabsorption of the stories of these two former foster youths into her own narrative framings speaks to my arguments about expertise and crisis framings in this chapter. When former foster youths are included in coverage, their stories are often used to bolster extant narratives about crisis and the pre-determined solutions, rather than as suggestions to critically reexamine the goals of experts and policymakers.

CONCLUSION

In the context of policies that shape life after care, I argue that the emphasis on very young children, extreme instances of violence, and the prioritization of surveillance and punishment obscures the lived experiences of former foster youth. It renders them irrelevant – no longer children, they are non-entities in the politics of child welfare in the commonwealth.

Roitman's argument about the production of knowledge, expertise, and blind spots begs a host of questions: who is producing the narratives, and how are they doing it, and to what end? In this chapter I took up these aspects of narrative construction in the framing of Kentucky's

"crisis" in child abuse and child welfare. I analyzed the production of expert knowledge and the deployment of that knowledge in political and moral projects of various narrative actors: journalists, Kentucky legislators, physicians and mental health professionals, and former foster youths. Each of these groups had a distinct set of moral and political projects they hoped to enact by employing similar frames of the problem of child abuse in Kentucky. They often framed the problem of child abuse as one of moral failure among families who used drugs, caused harm, or otherwise failed in their duties to their children.

Amidst my analyses of two dominant expert narratives about the causes of child abuse in Kentucky – the unredeemability of abusive parents and the centrality of drug use in the commonwealth – I wove in comments and insights from my own encounters with former foster youths on the same subjects. In some cases, their responses mapped onto the expert narratives. Beu and Hayley found their harmful families to be unredeemable and chose to forego contact with them as much as possible. In other cases, the opinions of former foster youths did not match expert narratives: Allison had a strong distaste for drug users when she was younger, but over the years came to regard them and her parents with more sympathy and empathy.

The status of former foster youths as authorized experts is constrained by normative notions of responsible adulthood, and those who cannot or do not abide by normative milestones like employment or education may not be framed as deserving of assistance, much less taken seriously as critics of the foster care system. As they age, they also report losing institutional authorization, or aging out of advocacy. The exception to this generalization is when their experiences map onto authorized expert narratives in support of extant, expert-authorized legislation and interventions.

Former foster youths, as I have shown, are hardly a monolith in their support of particular policies or interventions. Differences across race, gender, and age matter in the ways they weigh in on policies that affect them. Because of this, it might be hard to incorporate the diversity of their opinions into policy, but it just as well might demand attention to the unregulatable aspects of their lives.

INTERLUDE: CHRISTOPHER

This interlude is the first of four I include in the dissertation, narratives or stories solicited from former foster youths, with minimal or no editing on my part, in an effort to let them speak for themselves. The first comes from Christopher, the former foster youth who spoke at the Families First implementation meetings in summer 2019. I had nine transcripts from listening to him speak at nine KYA meetings about the Families First Act, and I have included here the final iteration of the talk he made. It was slightly different each time, but the narrative stayed the same, and his call to action – keep kids in their homes – never wavered.

He always dressed for those occasions: he was impossible to ignore in his colorful printed shirts and signature cobalt blue suit, a perfectly tailored mix of whimsical and bright, professional and serious. He had been asked to give a "youth's perspective" on Kentucky's child welfare system as part of the proceedings. This was no small feat – he spoke to huge audiences, sometimes driving three or four hours from his apartment in Lexington to get to each meeting.

The first few times I saw Christopher speak, he occasionally stumbled over his words, and his voice was a little shaky. In spite of this, he had crafted a compelling narrative about his own time in care. He cracked jokes and broke the tension, endearing him to his audiences. He dredged up painful memories, sharing them with the crowd and acknowledging how difficult it was to talk about his time in foster care. He had impeccable timing: he paused to let audiences laugh and was not afraid of leaving them to sit in silence after particularly poignant calls to action. He was almost always one of the last people to leave meetings, as people typically lined up to chat with him after his talks. He greeted each of them with a smile and a handshake, graciously thanking them when they inevitably heaped praise on him after he spoke.

After our initial meeting, he and I usually found each other on the way out, chatting and checking in about the event and any other notable events in our lives. He always asked how my work was going, often quoting scripture after listening to my handwringing and anxiety. He was friendly and easygoing, but he also mentioned to me once that after speaking engagements, he drove home in complete silence. No radio, no phone calls, no music. He needed to decompress, and the complete solitude of a quiet car ride was part of his public speaking process.

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CHRIS: I didn't sleep much last night. I got up last night and went to the bathroom, and there was a guy standing in there. He looked good! Then I got close...and it was me.

(Pause for laughter)

I try to start these with an ice breaker. I don't want you to cry and not experience joy too. Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Chris. I'm 21 years old. I'm a former foster youth who's been through a lot. I'm a member of the VOC and I'm grateful to them and to Murray State for supporting me.

I first went into care when I was three years old. I don't remember much, except that it was mostly good. I played sports and learned the drums. After awhile, I went back to my mother.

Those were the best, most intimate times of my childhood. I was happy and loved and provided for. My mother called me her baby, and told me I was handsome. She cared about me. I miss those times a lot.

It was unfortunate she wasn't able to provide me with everything she wanted to. She was a single black mother with three kids and three different dynamics. She went through a lot. I was happy with her but soon it went sideways.

(Pause)

When I was six, I was taken away from my mother again, and I went to live with a woman who didn't have a husband and had another youth in the home. The woman I lived with tried to manipulate me into not wanting to leave her house, tried to turn me against my mother, whispering that she was a bad mom and that she didn't really love me. For some reason God never let me fall for that trick. The other youth in the home began to abuse me. After not seeing my mom for three months, I wondered if she had died. Eventually I went to another family, and they weren't much better.

My real mom didn't put me through anything like this. She did discipline me but she never overdid it. Our family was dysfunctional, but what family isn't?

(Pause)

The next time that I went home, it was right when we went back to school after winter break. I was eight years old but I felt like second family. I saw my brother when I got back. He asked me if I was home for good, and I told him I was.

I honestly was traumatized. The system changed me and I had to grow up fast. I had one hour a week to see my mom. That adds up to four hours a month — each day I was separated I was losing part of myself. Now, I'm not as close to my family as I wish I could be. I would have loved to be with my family.

Not all stories are like mine, but my story is like mine. I was removed for neglect, not for abuse.

I'm here today on behalf of other foster youths to touch your hearts and advocate for Families First and the kids who are at risk of losing someone they love. It's not their fault. If we were punished for everything we did, none of us would be sitting here today.

I was a different person when I went in than when I can out. All the resources and money in the world can't buy back a child's innocence.

Foster care isn't a one-size fits all, but the whole time I was away the only thing I could think about was being home as fast as possible.

If you have kids - say you made a mistake and someone got whiff of it, and took away your kid — imagine someone taking away your kid not once, not twice, not three times, not four times — and how would your relationship be if your kids were taken away?

(Pause)

Preventive services for my family would have saved my life.

I appreciate everyone being here today and listening to me, but its not my voice you should be listening to.

I don't dream of a system where people know how to do what they think is right — I want a community of people who truly care about these kids and families, and social workers committed to the best thing for foster youth.

I'm different now because of my experiences.

Opportunities aren't always given. We don't always get a second chance — so get ready now. We all have a choice to pick whose side we're on.

It's not about me, but I am here as the voice of those who didn't have them, and the voice of those who are not here. It is my responsibility to press through, to help them walk through the

way that I have paved. They need to know they matter. I think all of our children deserve that assurance.

This is not at all easy for me, speaking in front of you. I don't know who cares and who doesn't care. Sharing my traumas is not just for show. I just wish people would care about kids.

Don't be scared of descriptions of their behavior on paper, their lives in black ink. It would mean more than life, it would mean more that people are standing up and speaking out to prevent abuse.

We know something needs to be done. Sometimes kids need to be removed. But we also need to ensure that there are families who love and care about them.

Kids and teenagers need stability and true and authentic sense of compassion, a home.

I recently spoke to a 19 year old. We always ask former foster kids this question -- how many placements were you in? And he said he was in 26 different homes.

He's lost himself. No one sat him down and told him they cared about him. This is for bio families who deserve to have a chance. Don't give up. You are worth more than someone's last breath -- everyone deserves better.

I want to thank Jessica for her mentorship, and I want to thank Shannon for reminding me of how special I am. I'd also like to thank Jennifer, my church, my minister, my dad and my godfather Larry for taking me under your wing.

My secret ingredient is my heart. Take away your job titles and take a few seconds to reflect on why you chose this career - I hope it wasn't for the money because the money isn't that great. Get to the roots. Remind yourself why you need to move forward with that same passion and motivation.

This is in God's hands. I've done my part. But this is your chance to change the DNA of the child welfare system.

The whole world should be your clients. You yourselves should be your clients. Love yourselves. I love you all. Thank you for listening.

You're worth something -- you're here for a reason.

PART II. MOBILITIES

A List of Things in My Center Console, April 2020

Business cards for Thomas, Young Adult Coordinator at Family Scholar House
EZ Pass, New Jersey
Two 6.5 oz cans of low-sodium V8 Juice
Business cards for Louie Connect social services connector app
Plastic spoon
Wooden rosary
Two 6.5 oz cans of Starbucks Double Shot Espresso and Cream
Dead pens
iPod USB charging cable, blue
Napkins
Two Larabars, one Blueberry Muffin flavor and one Chocolate Chip Cookie Dough flavor
iPhone USB charging cable, pink
Kroger receipts
One package of Lance peanut butter crackers
One miniature Kleenex package

I found these when I was cleaning out my car at the end of fieldwork.

I remembered buying the charging cables at a Walgreens in Paducah because I had forgotten to pack them in my field bag for the day.

I remembered buying the crackers and the Larabars and the V8 Juice the night before Children's Advocacy Day in January. I knew that Beu and I would be on the road for a long time that day and I wanted to offer her some "healthy" snacks and a serving of vegetables, assuming that she probably was not eating very many at the homeless shelter where she was living at the time. She had never tried V8 before but said she did not hate it. When she finished the first six pack, I bought another.

I remembered buying the Starbucks at Target, elated to find a four-pack of the sweetened cans, and afterwards always kept a few in my car in case I forgot to eat in the field and needed some energy to finish driving home.

I remembered visiting with Nikki and Thomas at the Riverport Family Scholar House

Campus. I had gone to pick up a bus pass for Beu and ended up chatting with the two of them for an hour or two. “If you meet with people, please pass these along!” they said, handing me business cards with Thomas’ number and the LouieConnect app, which had a special section for social services specific to former foster youth.

I did not remember where I had picked up the more mundane things: tissues, napkins, pens, cutlery, receipts. They were more of a testament to the meals I ate on the road, the scribbled notes in between meetings, grocery store runs when I got the chance.

The EZ pass I had gotten when I was commuting during graduate school; it stayed in my center console for the duration of fieldwork, as Kentucky doesn’t really have toll roads or bridges.

My mother put rosaries in all her children’s cars, just in case.

The car itself also changed over the course of fieldwork.

It had a new windshield. After an unexpected cold snap in the fall, the glass cracked eighteen inches across the driver’s side. I was grateful to have car insurance that completely covered replacing the windshield but tried not to drive it for a few days until it could be fixed.

The front bumper and headlights were new too. I’d accidentally clipped the back end of a truck one morning after dropping Beu off at a friend’s house. No injuries, thankfully, but the car was damaged and creaky and needed to spend a few days in the auto body shop while being repaired. I had a rental but was so shaken by the crash I was wary of driving it.

It had a new battery. After meeting with some old coworkers for lunch, my battery died and I was stranded outside a pub. I didn’t have jumper cables, so I called AAA and waited in the heat for someone to come install a new battery.

The muffler had been replaced as well. It detached when Beu and I stopped at my favorite

truck stop – the Love's at Exit 43 on I-64 – for gas on our way to meet with legislators. When we pulled out of the parking lot, the muffler made the most terrifying screeching sound, dragging along the concrete. We were stuck at the truck stop for an hour and a half, waiting for AAA to help me reattach it. We missed most of our meetings and the drive back to Louisville was very loud; the car spent another few days in the shop.

I do not know how many miles I put on the odometer between leaving for fieldwork and coming back. I wish I had made a note of it before leaving or tallied up the number of times I filled my gas tank or put air in my tires or replaced the oil. I knew that it had more wear and tear, mostly seamlessly integrated in the repair process but visible in the worn spots on my steering wheel and the cracks in the leather on the driver's seat.

Although I grew up in Louisville, it was not until I started thinking of it as a field site instead of my hometown that I realized how central the car is to the daily functioning of the city. Most people from Louisville would say that it is possible to get almost anywhere in the city in about twenty-five minutes by car. Unruly highways encircle the city, converging into a chaotic nest downtown known locally as "Spaghetti Junction". White flight from Louisville's West End since the 1920s has resulted in extensive urban sprawl and significant racial segregation in housing and education (Cummings and Price 1997). Mass public transit exists, but compared to Boston's T or New York's subways, Louisville's public bus system, the Transit Authority of River City (TARC), is patchy and unreliable at best. The few bus lines that run to and from the city's center to the suburbs are inconsistent and sporadic, running maybe once or twice a day on an unpredictable schedule. Although bike lanes have been added to densely populated parts of the city (and a few random spots) the absence of extensive mass public transit in Louisville makes travel by car paradoxically the simplest and most annoying way to get from one place to

another.

I bought the car after my first year of graduate school, anticipating multiple cross-country moves between campus, my home in Rhode Island, and my field site. However, I could not have anticipated how my car would itself become a site and method of fieldwork. Road trips across Kentucky were integral to how I came to know people. I carpooled with service providers and child welfare advocates to public meetings and media events across the commonwealth. We talked about work and politics, but also our coffee preferences, favorite gas station snacks, celebrity gossip. Because there were so few other options for transportation, driving with my interlocutors was both a requirement and a welcome opportunity for fieldwork.

In Part II, I analyze how owning a car in Kentucky worked as a research method with former foster youth, and how car access became implicated in young people's efforts to act responsibly. Both of the chapters in Part II deal with different aspects of "mobilities", which geographer Tim Cresswell defines as the study of movement through space, along with the social and cultural meanings of that movement (Cresswell 2006, 3–4). Studying how people get from point A to point B is not enough – studying mobilities, according to Cresswell, means studying who is moving and why, and how people understand and make sense of that movement given the particular geographical and historical circumstances. This broad definition of mobility explains why he is as interested in the global spread of ballroom dancing as he is in the automation of motor vehicle manufacturing: all types of movement, but with vastly different social and political meanings.

In Chapter 5, I argue for greater research focus on the mobilities of former foster youth – the forms of transportation they use and when, the social relationships that make some forms of transportation possible but not others, and the local knowledge that might be gleaned from

traveling alongside them. My methods – driving with young people, and to a lesser extent, walking with them – allowed me to analyze their mental maps, racial geographies, and the timing of their moves. It was through mobile research that I came to build rapport with young people and caught glimpses of their ideas of right and wrong. The ways they assigned meaning to space and developed rules or expectations about how they would be received by others who lived there all became apparent only by moving with them from one place to another.

Chapter 6 moves from the intimate to the structural: in this chapter, I investigate how young people navigated interlocking bureaucratic systems of child welfare, which could limit their ability to access transportation and identity documentation, and Kentucky's car bureaucracy. In Chapter 6, I analyze the role of car-related identity documents – specifically the driver's license and proof of insurance – in both constituting and authorizing young people's car access and mobility. I scrutinize laws that shape foster youth's access to cars in Kentucky and show how driving is both required for conventional ideas of adult success in the commonwealth, and in practice very difficult for those who age out to actually drive and fulfill this requirement.

Taken together, these two chapters make the case that transportation access ought to be a central concern of child welfare researchers; presently it is not, at least not in the United States.[30] There are two major survey-based studies of the longitudinal effects of aging out the National Youth in Transition Database, run through the federal Children's Bureau; and the Midwest Study, run through Chapin Hall, a policy think tank at the University of Chicago that develops policy recommendations for children and youth. Both have collected survey data over decades about key indicators and outcomes for former foster youth, including health insurance,

[30] Harry Ferguson takes a mobilities approach to social work, arguing that mobility is baked into welfare practice in the United Kingdom. He has written extensively on this topic, covering the history of bicycle and car use in social work (Ferguson 2008; 2009)

educational attainment, criminal justice system involvement, pregnancy, and the presence of caring adults in their lives. Neither tracks transportation nor mobility.

On the more qualitative side of aging out research, where research methods included unstructured interviewing (Greer 2020) and focus groups (Cancel et al. 2020), questions of transportation rarely emerged as key analytics or themes. Based on the qualitative and survey-based studies that do exist on aging out, child welfare researchers seemingly know very little about mobility and transportation. I was surprised to learn this: I found virtually nothing in my keyword searches for "cars" and "transportation" in *The Children and Youth Services Review*, a journal that covers nearly everything to do with social services for young people. The few times it did appear, the articles were concerned with other topics; transportation was secondary and instrumental, rather than itself a subject of concern.

This may be changing, however, as data collection about cars in the lives of former foster youths seems to be more relevant. The Center for Lived Experience, a research center founded by the nonprofit thinktank, Think of Us, put out the first data set I have seen about car access among those who have aged out. In 2021, Think of Us sponsored a national outreach campaign to survey former foster youth and their supporters to understand their unique needs during the pandemic. On the survey, they asked respondents to select those that applied from the following categories: driver's licensing, completing driver's education, purchasing a vehicle, paying for car repairs, and paying for insurance (Center for Lived Experience n.d., 3). Approximately two-thirds of respondents needed help in at least one category. Thirty percent requested help purchasing a vehicle, followed by twenty-seven percent requesting help paying for insurance, and a quarter requested help acquiring a driver's license. This may have been specific to the pandemic but may also signal a shift among social services providers to ask about transportation

access, and potentially improve post-care transit services. Equally important to note, this data emerged out of a research agenda developed by and with former foster youth – their struggles and resourcefulness regarding transportation surface when they are leading research projects about their own lives.[31]

5. MOBILITIES OF FORMER FOSTER YOUTH

During my second phase of preliminary fieldwork, I tried to salvage my research project after the Cabinet denied my request to conduct participation observation work in residential facilities (See Introductory Methods chapter). Elizabeth Caywood, the Cabinet's Deputy Director at the time, suggested I speak with Nikki, the head of True Up, to learn more about the resources and services available to former foster youth upon aging out. I wrote to Nikki, and we arranged a meeting, coffee at a shop in the Highlands.

Initially she seemed a bit skeptical and wary of me, but she seemed to brighten up when I told her that I was interested in foster youth after spending some time working for a residential facility in Louisville. Like me, Nikki had worked for some time in congregate care. She knew how rewarding it could be to watch young people in dire straits learn and grow and mature. She also knew how challenging, mean, and downright irritating they could be. She was warm and kind and generous, but also gave me the distinct impression that she had a low tolerance for nonsense. When she and I first met, we talked at length about our similar experiences on Kentucky's child welfare system. We spoke about her thoughts on possible areas of improvement in post-care services. She seemed to believe that expanded social services could be

[31] The Center for Lived Experience is emphasizing the importance of transportation access for former foster youth – in their communications about pandemic support, they specifically identified "transportation assistance", and encouraged the general public to purchase bus passes and ask local mechanics to offer those aging out free oil changes (Think of Us 2021b).

useful, but as I discuss in more depth in Part III, the primary problem was underutilization of existing services. As we ended our meeting, I asked what I could do to support her work while I was in Louisville.

She paused for a moment, and then asked, "Can you give people rides?" She explained having someone with a car who had a flexible schedule – such as a graduate student who was doing research on former foster youth – would be an immense help. I told her I would not always be available, but that I was happy to do so when I had time. She smiled and waved goodbye. The next week, she wrote to me with two last-minute requests for rides. One young person had requested a ride to a doctor's appointment, and another a ride to a job interview at six in the morning. When I apologetically told her that I could not help with either, she stopped asking.

Nikki's request was my first glimpse of what Harry Ferguson calls the liquidity of social services (Ferguson 2008) – the constant flow of people, information, money, and resources. At its core, he argues, social work is about *movement*, whether one is focusing on the movement of social workers, their clients, children, or information. Because social work is so movement-oriented, Ferguson calls for social workers to consciously reflect on what they do *as* a set of mobile practices, and to take stock of what that movement means for the people with whom they work. Transportation is never merely the transfer of a child from a foster home to a group home: instead, he suggests that social workers consider such journeys as opportunities to do therapeutic work with their young clients, to offer them comfort, understanding, treats, and information to ready them for their next stop (Ferguson 2009). Ferguson is writing against a sedentarist view of social work, in which social work and researchers who study it assume that social workers are bound to their offices. By shifting the conception of social work from static to dynamic, Ferguson hopes to issue both a political injunction towards his fellow social workers – "Don't

stay at your desk", he urges – and a call to change theories and methods in research about social work.

In response to Ferguson's call to researchers of social work – in my case, the aftermath of social work intervention – I take up both mobile methods and what can be gleaned from them in this descriptive chapter. I take the mobility practices of former foster youth around Louisville – riding the bus, walking, and of course, driving with me – as ethical practices of both reflection and freedom. Moving with former foster youth through the city became a chance for us to reflect together and share our thoughts on a whole host of topics, and also brought to the forefront the ethics of movement itself: who was allowed to move where, and why.

I suggest, furthermore, that conceptualizing mobility as a set of ethical practices, was possible with former foster youth specifically because of the ways that they learn to be mobile in and out of care. As children and teens, they are moved by case workers who make decisions about where they may or may not go. As they age out, former foster youth must navigate new conditions of mobility, with new freedoms and new constraints. Although case workers no longer determine where they might go, young people become subject to other actors and structures: race, gender, age, class. In Louisville, learning where the boundaries of acceptable behavior were especially important for young people.

I describe two mobility practices that I observed while moving with former foster youth. The first seemed to me to be a perpetual moving around. All three of the young people who lived primarily in Louisville – Jonathan, Beu, and Allison – moved residences frequently when I was in the field. From 2020 to December 2022, Allison seemed to have found a long-term residence with her boyfriend, and became more stationary, and Beu stayed in an apartment through a housing program for all of 2021. Jonathan, however, seems to have adapted his work and

creative practices to being constantly on the move. Given the highly mobile circumstances of social work, I describe my conversations with young people about their moving around as young adults, and how movement was central to their intimate relationships with others and with themselves. The second mobility practice involves the use of art, specifically hip hop and graffiti, as a way of commenting on racial boundaries in Louisville. In Part III, I describe in more depth the racial dynamics of young people and their mentors, but in this chapter, I observe how young people who spent time in foster care tended to be both aware of racial boundaries and willing to cross them.

In this chapter, I show how fieldwork brought both race and movement to the foreground of my understanding of Louisville. Moving with young people transformed what I implicitly understood when I was growing up in the city into more explicit knowledge. In each of these cases, their mobility practices – the ways they move around the city and how they conceptualize and make sense of their movement habits – reveal important dimensions of life in Louisville. The constant dwelling in mobility illustrates the centrality of movement in the city, how deeply tied to motion Louisville is. Their mobilities also reveal that although movement is essential, it is not easy, and does not engender a unified goal for the city. This chapter is part of larger efforts among anthropologists and others to do "homework", namely to question the political landscapes of where scholarly work happens, while doing work at home (Carter 2019; 2020; B. F. Williams 1995). This kind of scholarship is all the more important given the racial history of Louisville and the ways that movement regulation in the city – both in the form of gentrification and policing – have had fatal consequences for Black Louisvillians.

In constant motion

Allison

Before entering state custody, Allison lived with her paternal grandmother, an older brother, and younger sister in a suburb that had been incorporated into Jefferson County but was not formally considered to be a part of Louisville. Her mother had been living in another county for several years in an attempt to distance herself from substance use, and her father was incarcerated. I met Allison during her time in care: she arrived in the facility where I worked from one of the local psychiatric hospitals and remained there for a few months after I resigned. When we reconnected during fieldwork, she explained that, after I left, she had been sent to live with a family member against whom she had made abuse allegations. Baffled and angered by the decision her therapist and her caseworker had made to place her there, she took matters into her own hands and ran away. She was eventually caught and returned to state custody and placed in another Louisville-based residential facility. Then sixteen years old, she had spent approximately two years in state custody. Upon hearing about the death of a friend, Gynnya McMillen, from a previous placement (Dunlop and Howard 2017), she fled that facility as well. She told me later that, if Gynnya, whom she described as a polite and well-behaved sixteen-year-old Black girl, could die while in juvenile detention, then "anything could happen" to Allison too. The second time Allison ran from state custody, she managed to evade the police for nearly two years until aging out at 18. She explained that she spent a few months at the homes of friends and acquaintances but moved frequently during that time when their goodwill dried up.

We met for dinner late in August 2019, catching up on her experiences over the previous few years. After dinner, I offered to drive her home. I asked where she lived so I could take her there, and she said that it wasn't far from the Waffle House where we had eaten, and she could

give me directions. On our way to her place, she asked for updates on my life, and I filled her in on my research and what I had been doing since I had last seen her. I mentioned that I would be in town for a while, and she asked me "Where do you stay?"

The phrasing of her question was jarring for me. She had not asked me "Where is your apartment?" or "Where are you living?" These are terms of dwelling, of residence, of living in a place. In contrast, "stay" suggests to me a bounded, temporary time – there would be no building of a life where I was staying. A stay was a stopping point. Although this accurately described fieldwork – a bounded time period – her characterization of what I was doing as "staying" diverged from my understanding of my relationship to Louisville. I was hoping to integrate with the city, to actually dwell there, not merely stay there.

I asked her about it months later when I was driving her to the library. I asked her what she had meant by it, and she said that she sometimes had trouble staying in one place.

"Every six months, I feel like I gotta leave," she told me. "And I mess things up so I can go."

Allison's comments revealed a deep self-awareness about her habits, emotions, and patterns of movement. She had noticed a feeling and could name it – "I gotta leave". The urge to move was not framed in terms of want or desire, but closer to a mandate. She felt she *had* to leave, to get out of the place she was staying. She did not describe it as a matter of other people asking her to leave but rather as her own sense that her time in a place had come to an end. In fact, she suggested that in most cases, she had to invent a reason to leave. I interpreted her urge to "mess things up" as an urge to knowingly sabotage her living situation, perhaps by picking fights with her roommates or their families. She found ways to convince people to disinvite her from their homes, not out of a genuine sense of dislike but because it *felt* right.

Especially telling was the timeframe – "every six months". A move every six months is frequent, though she left clothes, toiletries, and other personal items at her grandmother's house, so she had fewer things to move. She seemed to be an expert packer, and rarely needed to go to her grandmother's home to change out her clothes or other necessities. Six months is also a timeframe that is similar to her average move while she was in care. She spent approximately two years in state custody, with at least four placements – the psychiatric hospital, two residential facilities, and a brief stay at home. Four placements over two years amounts to a move about every six months, on average. She would not only continue that pattern, finding a reason to leave every six months as a teenager on the run, but she could also notice and name this pattern.

Staying in one place seemed to be difficult for her, not because she was a poor roommate or unable to pay a share of rent or gas money for rides to work. Rather, to stay for a while before leaving again seemed to be an ingrained pattern for her. To some extent, this was also her expectation of others, at least as I interpret her question to me about where I was staying. It did not seem like something she willfully chose, although she played an active role in creating circumstances that made it possible or easier for her to leave. Instead, her desire for mobility appeared to be a habit that was not under her conscious control.

Beginning in the summer of 2020, Allison found some stability living with roommates in rented housing, a normatively "adult" way of securing legal residence. She had signed a year-long lease on a house with friends, which suggested to me a willingness to break the six-month sabotage pattern of movement. That said, she often texted or called me from far outside of Louisville. She took many vacation trips to Florida and visited other scenic parts of Kentucky like Red River Gorge. She frequently expressed a desire to travel, to see new places and

experience new things, perhaps finding a camper to renovate and live on the road. It seemed to me that her urge to stay moving has transformed into a desire to explore, rather than inflict some kind of damage onto her intimate relationships with others. Having her own place, albeit shared, seemed to offer a sense of stability in which her need to be mobile could be converted into travel rather than becoming unhoused.

Beu

Beu, originally from Hardin County, had family who lived mostly outside of the Louisville Metropolitan area, but close enough to visit regularly. She had siblings, a younger brother, who had not entered care along with Beu and instead lived with their mother. Beu's father had been a part of her life when she was young but was incarcerated during part of my time in the field. Beu had entered state custody when she was approximately nine years old and spent nine years in care before aging out when she turned 18. Although she attempted to recommit before turning 19 – at the time, the age after which she would not be allowed to recommit – she described phone calls to youth services coordinators who hung up on her or kept her on hold for hours. Eventually she gave up and moved in with her mother – I describe this relationship and its end in Chapter 6.

During fieldwork, Beu described herself as not having "stable housing" and less frequently, "homeless". Both her maternal and paternal grandmothers tried to be supportive of Beu, sending her money when they could, and in the case of Granny, allowing Beu to keep clothes and other personal items at her trailer. Apart from the few weeks during which she lived with Granny, however, neither offered her a place to stay.

Beu moved frequently in the years immediately after she aged out. According to Beu, sometime after she turned 18, she managed to find an apartment for herself, and her mother briefly moved in with her. They shared an apartment and a car for a few months, and Beu added her mother to the lease while taking her own name off of it, in exchange for Beu's car use. However, Beu and her mother had a contentious relationship, and eventually Beu was arrested for being in possession of her mother's car. According to Beu, her mother had loaned her the car to take her driver's test, then called the police claiming it had been stolen. After this incident, Beu told me that her mother kicked her out of the apartment, shortly before being evicted.

During my time in the field, she moved between shelters, the apartments of friends or acquaintances, and twice, the homes of her cousins. She lived, briefly, outside of Louisville with her boyfriend, and then with one of his family members after they broke up, before moving back to Louisville in January 2020. When she came back, she spent a few weeks living with her paternal grandmother, Granny, in a trailer in the southern part of the Louisville Metro, which ended when her grandmother agreed to take in Beu's father after he got out of jail. I learned this after driving her out to Granny's for a change of clothes and a quick visit. Upon hearing that her father would become a regular presence at Granny's, Beu announced with some sadness that she would no longer be visiting her due to not wanting to see him for reasons she never explained to me.

"He shouldn't have did what he did…" she said, ominously, before going still and quiet on our drive back to Louisville.

Of the young people I met in the field, Beu spent the most amount of time in my car. Between her court dates, detailed in Chapter 6, rides to doctors' appointments or to Granny's, shopping trips, and our regular hangouts and joyrides around the city, much of my relationship

with Beu was built through driving. She normally had control of the music through Bluetooth on her phone: I made occasional requests, but otherwise she was a happy DJ for the car. We had few overlapping music tastes, but "Act Up" by City Girls was a perennial favorite for both of us, so much so that Beu called our drives together "ratchet girl car rides". My car rides with young people were usually rife with thoughtful conversation, but Beu's chaotic music selection often made them more akin to karaoke sessions, the two of us attempting to belt notes that neither of us could hit.

Part of the reason Beu spent so much time in my car was because like Allison, she seemed to constantly be on the move. A number of drives were the result of Beu being stranded somewhere: after asking friends for a ride to the outskirts of the city, they would leave her there before going somewhere else. After one incident in which I spent an hour driving around a neighborhood looking for her, I angrily asked her whether the people she had been spending time with were actually her friends. Real friends, I insisted, would not have left her behind without a way to get back to the place she was staying. She shrunk in the passenger's seat. I was frustrated, disappointed in her choice of friends and how their decision to strand her had disrupted my day. I was also frustrated with myself – I did not *have* to go retrieve her, but I also had no idea how she would otherwise get back to the shelter. When I was unavailable, she often asked for money or for me to arrange an Uber or a Lyft for her: these requests I usually refused.

I found this start-and-stop mobility, of moving and then getting stuck, to be a pattern for Beu. She once disappeared for a few weeks, only to get in touch once she was back in Louisville to explain she had been stranded at a truck stop. There were a few occasions where I missed her summons, and I cannot say how she managed to get back from places where she had been.

Like Allison, during my time in the field Beu also moved frequently, though she moved more often than Allison did. Beu's moves happened on a six-week cycle. For a few months, she moved between the shelter and the homes of friends, and she would often call to ask if I could come and help her take bins of her stuff from one place to the next place, or back to her Granny's. I grew weary of loading and unloading my car, and as an experiment, I tried simply keeping her things in my car, turning my SUV into a storage unit. I anticipated that it would be a few weeks before she asked for help moving again, and sure enough, nearly six weeks to the day she let me know she was moving back into the shelter and asked if I could come collect her things. Eventually, I asked her to find a place for everything, and she agreed to drop off the bins at Granny's.

According to Beu, she had been a highly mobile foster youth. She said that she had had at least fifty placements over her nine years in care. She averaged a move roughly every other month for most of her formative years. I never knew if she moved quickly from place to place, or if she stayed in one place for a few months followed by a series of moves in quick succession. Like Allison, the hypermobility of her childhood seemed to have set her on a surprisingly predictable rhythm for her moves as a young adult.

The unreliability of her network of drivers and friends meant that when Beu asked me for rides in advance, she double- and triple-checked that I knew where and when to drop of her off in the days leading up to our meetings. I was a little affronted about it until I asked her once:

"Do you double-check with me because people don't always pick you up?"

"Yeah," she said, "You're like one of the only people I can really rely on."

The absence of many stable, long-lasting, social ties – kin or otherwise – had made her both highly mobile but not independent. She had little control over her own mobility, largely

dependent on the goodwill of others. In this, her repeated confirmations reflected the repetition of other people's absences: over time, she had adjusted to the possibility that others would not fulfill their agreements with her, something that she had experienced with apparently great frequency. Movement for Beu was marked by the possibility of a letdown, of failure, of developing many possible alternatives and repeated reminders that she had made an agreement with someone else. My own understanding of Beu's inability to control her own movement was part of the reason I so often agreed to drive her, even if I had other plans. I understood, distantly, how few people she had to help her.

Jonathan

I met Rita at one of the public forums on the implementation of the Families First Prevention Services Act. She noticed me scribbling in a notebook – at the time, I was using a vertical flip-up notebook, and she asked if I was a reporter. I explained to her that I was a doctoral student, interested in young people who aged out of foster care, and she excitedly began asking me questions. She invited me to a quarterly meeting for a Louisville-based family justice organization, of which she was one of the organizers.

While there, she introduced me to Jonathan, who was, at the time, a 23-year-old artist and photographer. I stayed behind at the meeting to help clean up. Rita was Jonathan's ride to and from the event, so we were chatting while stacking construction paper and divvying up leftover snacks. He asked me about my research, and I explained that I was interested in foster youth and what happened once they left care.

"I was in foster care!" he said, and we exchanged phone numbers with an agreement to meet up in a few weeks.

Although Jonathan introduced himself as a former foster youth, he and I never spoke at length about his time in care. I know little about where he was placed, why he might have been removed to state custody, or how much time he spent in care. What I do know is that he did not age out of care and had presumably been reunited with his family before turning eighteen. He nonetheless relied on social services, those offered specifically to former foster youth as well as those offered to youth more generally.

While I was in the field, he lived with his mother in southern Indiana. When asked, he described himself as being "from Kentuckiana": with family in both southern Indiana and Louisville, he spent time shuffling back and forth between the two places. He spoke easily about fond memories of Beecher Terrace and Smoketown, a housing project and neighborhood, respectively, that have mostly Black residents. From these statements, it was clear that he was extremely mobile when he was younger.

As he grew older, he continued to maintain a residence at his mother's home – he kept his things there, changes of clothes and other items – but in his late twenties, he began spending more time moving from place to place, only stopping at his mother's home to pick up fresh clothing before moving onto the next stop. He described this to me as a "grind", a constant effort towards earning money through his creative practices (discussed in Part IV). He spoke at length about stopping at the studio to record and spend time with his sound engineer friends, before going to a friend's house to screen-print his music merchandise and sleep for a few hours on her couch. Then he would go meet someone else for his music career or attend a meeting.

Of the young people I depict here, Jonathan was the most explicit about how he actually moved around, and the least car dependent. I asked him how he got around, and he said that he often walked from place to place or took public transportation – although his mother's home was

in Indiana, he could take the bus to the Indiana Waterfront and trek over the Walking Bridge to the Louisville side, and either walk, ride Louisville public transportation, Uber, or in some cases, skateboard to other parts of the city. While piecing together places to stay and how to get there seemed to me to be an extraordinary amount of logistical planning, Jonathan seemed not to mind. He described his movement from place to place as a quiet time, "me" time, time to think. Given how busy his waking hours were, Jonathan apparently found motion restful and reflective.

DWELLING IN MOBILITY

In different ways, each of these young people had become habituated to motion, to always being on the go. Although none of them used this exact language, I interpret their habits of movement as a "dwelling in mobility", a way of making home while in constant motion (Ferguson 2008, 572; Sheller 2004, 236; Sheller and Urry 2000, 745–47). Movement had become a central organizing principle of how they learned to be, to exist, to dwell. Life was lived while moving.

Mobilities scholars have argued that dwelling in mobility is a much broader cultural phenomenon, not specific to former foster youth. They argue instead that the evidence of dwelling in mobility can be found in the expansion of space where cars are the only viable method of transportation, the surge of and American cultural nostalgia for drive-in movie theaters or drive-through food, banking, and other amenities (Sheller and Urry 2000, 745). Cars have become a "home-away-home" (Sheller and Urry 2000, 746) for many, and Ferguson notes that this is perhaps especially true for social workers, who treat their cars as mobile offices and sanctuaries from the challenges of their jobs (Ferguson 2009, 287–89).

In some ways, the mobilities of former foster youth I describe here overlap with these car-oriented ways of understanding mobility. My car served as the private-in-public space that Sheller and Urry describe (2000, 746), an enclosed place for conversations, karaoke sessions, and on more than one occasion, shelter from Louisville's sudden storms. I kept snacks for Beu in my car, adapting my own dwelling in motion in anticipation of her possible needs: calories, for one, and vegetables for another. It was also, notably, a storage space for a time – instead of a home or a storage unit, I chose to store Beu's belongings in my car with the assumption that she might need to move them. Again, this was a response to observing how highly mobile Beu was while I was in the field.

In other ways, the forms of dwelling in mobility that I saw in former foster youth diverged from the generalized phenomenon observed by mobilities scholars. For one, Sheller and Urry are critical of what they see as a disciplining of people and society to the car, rendering other forms of transportation impossible (2000, 746). While Louisville's public transportation system is limited, Jonathan's resourcefulness and patience were assets in navigating the city on his own terms and transformed what could have been logistically exhausting modes of travel into a similar kind of private-in-public spaces that Sheller and Urry attribute to the car and the car alone.

In a similar vein, Ferguson is critical of social work's tendency to "render families immobile" and therefore subject to investigation and surveillance by an increasingly large and highly mobile social workforce (Ferguson 2008, 566). Drawing on Foucault's writing about disciplinary power, Ferguson argues that "…discipline fixes; it arrests or regulates movements…it dissipates compact groupings of individuals wandering about the country in unpredictable ways…" (Ferguson 2008, 566, citing Foucault 1997, 397). While former foster

youth were certainly subjected to surveillance, as young adults and as children – Allison especially, as she was on the run from state custody for several years – they also challenge Ferguson's reading of the disciplinary power of immobility. They were hardly fixed or regulated in their movements. While Beu and Allison had established temporal patterns of movement, they were hardly predictable in *where* they went or how they got there.

Most importantly, from my wanderings and travels with young people, I learned that mobility is highly relational. Movement of any kind was dependent on the relationships that young people were able to fashion with others. While all three were similar in their ability to call upon webs of support (more on this in Part III) to have a bed or a floor for the night, the qualities of these relationships produced different mobilities.

Despite their time in state custody, Allison and Jonathan maintained close family ties with their nuclear and extended families, along with chosen family members. Allison, in particular, had a very close relationship with her "brother", Rick, who was a family friend from childhood with no biological relation, but whom Allison considered kin (more on their relationship in Part III). Both have spoken at length about younger family members – for Allison, her sister, and for Jonathan, his nieces – with whom they have caretaking relationships. During fieldwork, Allison expressed a desire to "spoil" her younger sister, approximately six years younger than Allison. She bought birthday gifts and planned celebrations, hoping to give her sister parties and fun that Allison did not have when she was her sister's age. Jonathan spoke fondly of his nieces, of spending time with them and, through good-natured teasing, socializing them.

My interactions with their family members amounted to dropping both Jonathan and Allison off at grandparents' or parents' residences – neither invited me in to meet their families,

nor did their families express any real desire to meet me. Instead, I sat in the car, waiting for young people to run inside to grab a change of clothes, receiving wary looks from siblings, aunts, uncles, cousins, and neighbors. Although I was not a part of their family lives, what was clear to me from my own conversations with Allison and Jonathan, was that they would have somewhere to go, someone to call, in an emergency. For Jonathan, many of these people were family members; for Allison, they included a wide network of friends and acquaintances, fictive kin, and biological family members.

It is worth noting that both Jonathan and Allison seem to have spent very little time in state custody. Jonathan and I have never spoken at length about his foster care experiences, though he did not age out of care and must have been reunited with his family sometime before turning 18. I learned from Rita, Jonathan's mentor, that Jonathan spent a good deal of time and money to care for his mother. Allison spent approximately two years in state custody, before absconding from residential and being on the run for two years. During their late teen years, both Allison and Jonathan were in regular contact with community networks of support. While they struggled with earning an income, finding housing, or moving around, they nonetheless had a range of possible options for help.

For Beu, however, the tenuousness of her own familial and other social ties made her constant motion look different from Allison's and Jonathan's. Allison and Jonathan both framed their motivations for movement as internal. Allison attributed her constant motion to a need to leave, while Jonathan's work kept him constantly on the move. Both also expressed some pleasure in motion, Jonathan finding his own movement a time of rest and reflection while Allison sought adventure and new experiences. For Beu, her moves during fieldwork seemed to be related to the desires of other people, particularly those who were in fleeting relationships

with her. Partners, friends, acquaintances, even her family members seemed to have little investment in long-term cohabitation or reliable recreation with Beu. Her relationships broke down quickly, apparently sometimes in the span of a trip across town.

I have focused here on the most highly mobile of my interlocutors – those who lived in Louisville, or at least within the Metro area or Kentuckiana. In contrast, Hayley, who lived just south of Lexington, stayed in the same apartment for the entirety of fieldwork, and for several years after I left. Like Beu, she entered state custody when she was nine years old and had a variety of placements during her subsequent nine years in care – with her older brother, in several foster homes, and eventually in a homeless shelter with much younger children. She and Jonathan were approximately the same age during fieldwork, 24 years old, while Beu and Allison were younger at 19. She had almost no contact with her family members; her father died when she was nine. He had had sole custody of Hayley, and her mother did not take custody of her after Hayley's father died. She found her brother's home to be a hostile and violent place. Like Allison, Hayley fled state custody and aged out on the run, although she ran around two weeks before her eighteenth birthday, a much shorter time than Allison's two years. Hayley had a tumultuous period after aging out, during which she, like Beu, Allison, and Jonathan, was constantly on the move. However, she eventually managed a lease, got a dog, and started school again.

Hayley's relative residential stability differed from the frequent moves of my interlocutors. She was also the only one who had a car, and proudly sent me pictures of a new one she bought about a year after I left the field. While it is difficult to attribute her housing and educational consistency to any one aspect of her background, she was able stay in the same high school for all four years and had a small but very supportive network of teachers throughout her

late teenage years while she was in state custody. Although neither her family ties nor foster care could offer her residential consistency, she did constantly have friends, hobbies, and caring adults in her later teenage years. I saw glimpses of an impulse to move – Hayley drove a lot for her job and, like Allison, expressed a deep love of travel – but I never got the sense that she actively sought out or defaulted to constant motion. That being said, she and I never traveled together. Unlike my other interlocutors, I never got to see her in the passenger seat. I never picked her up or dropped her off anywhere, and we drove ourselves everywhere we ever met. She was relatively auto-mobile, able to move herself mostly of her own will.

In this section, I have described the ways that former foster youth made sense of their relationships to others in the process of moving. Allison found mobility to be a central facet of her life, one that could take on relative degrees of urgency and fun. Jonathan found it a time to reconnect with himself, not because he was rejecting relationships with other people but because he was carving out solitude that was necessary for him to ruminate on things he might not otherwise have gotten. Beu and I bonded during our car rides, but her rides with others often resulted in being stranded or left behind. In the next section, I move from the interpersonal relationships that shaped the mobilities of former foster youth to the ways that broader social relationships shaped their mobilities. Specifically, I analyze the ways Jonathan and Beu articulated and discussed racial difference in mobile contexts.

"We Don't Go to the Same Places"

When I first met Jonathan, he asked if I knew anything about photography, his preferred art form. I did not, and he offered to teach me on a series of "photo walks". I agreed, enthusiastically, to be a student.

In mid-October, I had arranged a meeting and a photo walk with Jonathan and a photographer friend of his, Silas. I picked him up from his workplace: at the time, a home for seniors where he was a groundskeeper. I circled around the parking lot until I saw him near the entrance, holding a skateboard and talking to two uniformed workers hanging out outside of the building. I pulled up outside and rolled my window down, waving him into my car. As he got in, he relayed his conversation with the workers. They had never seen him ride a skateboard, he explained, "but they don't even know" he said with a grin, cackling,

I grabbed my phone to set up the GPS to our destination, a camera shop near my apartment, but he stopped me. He explained it was unnecessary: he knew how to get there from where we were. I put my phone down. I mentioned that I could place the camera place in my head, that it was next to a pizza place, but I did not actually know the best way to get there. He reassured me that he knew how and began directing me to the camera store.

"Boombozz!" I shouted, suddenly remembering the name of the pizza place. He regarded me for a moment.

"We don't go to the same places," he said evenly, keeping his voice carefully neutral. We chatted as we crossed from Old Louisville, near the University of Louisville and my old high school and made our way to the boutiques and restaurants of the Highlands.

As we turned onto Eastern Parkway, I shot him a glance. "I have no idea how we ended up here," I said, a bit in awe of his ability to navigate us. We got to Murphy's Camera, and I pointed out the pizza shop — "See?!"

He laughed at me and reiterated: "We don't go to the same places!"

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This would be neither the first nor the last time that a young person would cheerfully and expertly guide me through Louisville, relying exclusively on their own knowledge of the city. Although I grew up there and had lived there briefly as a young adult, I often found myself getting lost or turned around during fieldwork. Early in fieldwork, I became acutely aware that my interlocutors and I did not experience Louisville the same way because, as Jonathan put it, we did not "go to the same places." Our different experiences of the city reflected long-entrenched patterns of movement. I wrote briefly in the methods chapter about the residential and educational segregation of Louisville, and some of the fatal consequences of this for Black residents. There are clear racial boundaries – physical and social – in Louisville, and former foster youth knew where they were.

According to Setha Low, a number of ethnographic inquiries into cities have revealed – or at least, pointed to – the construction of the city as a racially divided space, one where cultural clash and division is as much a part of the fabric of the city as political economy or the buildings themselves (S. M. Low 1996; S. Low 2018). In this section, I think of the racial segregation as a background phenomenon that, over time, became more central to how I understood the ways Beu and Jonathan moved through Louisville. Race – their own, and the history of racial divisions in Louisville – shaped their mobility practices. Because Louisville is so highly segregated, it might be expected that young people would be bound by these divisions: I certainly was. To some extent, they were as well, but apparently not nearly as strictly.

"Where the hood starts": Making implicit boundaries explicit

After a lunch with Beu in January 2020, I was driving her to the shelter where she was staying. We had been hanging out in the Highlands, and the easiest way back to the shelter was

to take Baxter Avenue to Broadway — from east to west, from the greenery of Cherokee Park to cracked pavement, the buildings on the side of the road slowly transitioning from funky old apartments, hipster bars and restaurants, to social services offices and medical clinics, local cheap eats and fast-food joints.

Beu had happily blasted pop country all the way up Baxter as we turned onto Broadway, dancing along in the passenger seat with her hand out the window. I was about to tell her to roll the window up – it was the dead of winter, and I could not understand why she had the windows down – when abruptly, in the middle of a song, the music shifted. Tekashi 6ix9ine (pronounced "Six Nine"), a recently disgraced snitch, blared from my speakers. 6ix9ine, a heavily tattooed rapper had testified against fellow gang members as part of a plea deal after being charged with racketeering. He had implicated other rappers and people in the music industry, and which had earned him the ire of the hip hop community writ large.

At a red light, I turned to look at her, eyebrow raised: "Why'd you change the music? You never interrupt a song."

She grinned. "We passed Ninth Street! We're in the hood now!"

"So we need different music? Country music isn't allowed?" I asked, amused at the soundtrack change.

"Yeah!" she laughed.

"Well," I pondered aloud as we passed 17th Street, "I'm not so sure 6ix9ine is necessarily the most welcome person right now."

She paused. "Yeah, you're probably right," she acknowledged before changing the music again.

***

As was often the case, Beu's command of my car's Bluetooth revealed much about her mood and thoughts. She had an eclectic music taste that included breakup songs, aggressive underground hip hop, a smattering of cheerful pop music that went back to the early 1990s, and occasional country songs. Without fail, asking to connect her phone to the car's speakers was her second sentence to me when I went to pick her up, after greeting me hello. Sometimes, she would offer explanations or context about a particular song: "I listened to this when I was at this facility," or "We're not together anymore, and this is my song now." Other times, she would go stony and quiet, staring out the window.

On this occasion, she used music to mark the passage of a boundary, from one side of Broadway to another, at a specific crossing-over point: Ninth Street. Beu was not the only person to flag this intersection as a marker of change, of a split in the city. Emmett, Beu's former mentor and a friend of mine, routinely derided Louisville politicians who claimed to want to improve housing and homelessness in the city, but who, in his words, "never went past Ninth Street". He scoffed at the idea that someone could profess to improve living conditions for his community – the mostly-Black residents of Louisville's West End – without passing this specific point. In a car ride, Jonathan disagreed with the significance of Ninth Street, but only by a block. He put the boundary at Eighth Street instead – possibly simply to be contrarian – but described it the same way that Beu did: "That's where the hood starts".

Moving past Ninth Street signified a division in the city, one that contained a social commentary about what was there. After Ninth Street meant poverty, housing issues, and in many of my conversations, residential areas for Black people. Jonathan had spent parts of his childhood in the West End, and both were familiar with the problems affecting the Smoketown,

Portland, Parkland, Shawnee, Park Duvalle, Russell, California, Chickasaw, and Algonquin neighborhoods of Louisville (Maginnis 2001). Beu, far less aware of the politics of Louisville's West End, nonetheless spent a large portion of her time there, as the recovery shelter[32] where she was staying while I was in the field was located there.

She was not the only person to use hip hop to draw my attention to the implicit racial boundaries of Louisville. Jonathan, himself a rapper and deeply concerned with the future of Louisville's Black community, had much to say on the subject.

Misrepresenting Louisville

"Do you still want to go to the Waterfront?" Jonathan asked, glancing over at me from the passenger seat of my car. "Because if you do, you're going in the wrong direction."

I laughed, explaining that I felt all turned around. I took a right down the next block and reversed course, heading back towards downtown from Old Louisville.

I had loved Waterfront Park as a child. Bare concrete rectangular pools of water formed a long stairway of cascading manmade waterfalls and were the closest thing to a free public pool I experienced when I was a kid. A brightly colored children's waterpark a few blocks down from the concrete water feature was an easy landmark to find — I met Jonathan and my friend Emmett there on a number of occasions, our backs to the park and looking out over the river. Swathes of the park are green areas, along with smoothed brick or gritty pebbled surfaces, open areas perfect

[32] "Recovery" here refers to recovery from substance use problems. Those who are "in recovery" are typically trying to not use a substance that has been harmful in the past. The recovery shelter where Beu was staying was a shelter specific to women who were in recovery from drug or alcohol use. The shelter had detox services, Twelve Step meetings, support groups, case management, and individual counseling. Around half of the women in the shelter were there voluntarily; around half had been sentenced by a judge to the formal recovery program while receiving housing and transitional assistance at the shelter. Beu was there voluntarily and had not been formally committed to the recovery program. She had contact with women from both programs, however, as everyone was sharing the same space.

for music festivals or pickup soccer games. The edges of the park are covered by imposing, shadowy highway overpasses. Waterfront Park is one of the northernmost points of the city, so much so that crossing the bridge puts one not only in another town but another state: Jeffersonville, Indiana. When I was young, my parents hated driving us downtown to the park, citing both a relatively long drive for Louisville and "safety concerns" I did not quite understand when I was younger. For fieldwork purposes, it was a convenient place to meet and walk, or in Jonathan's case, a good place to take photographs.

On one of our photography walks at Waterfront Park, and Jonathan insisted there was a perfect vantage point across the river. We decided to walk across the Ohio, into southern Indiana, across the Big Four Bridge. Originally a railroad bridge for the Big Four rail companies — Cleveland, Cincinnati, Chicago, and St. Louis — the bridge is now an industrial web of cement and steel and aluminum, angular and dark, and adapted for pedestrian use.[33] The day we went was unseasonably hot and sunny, beautiful but sweltering.

I rarely experienced lulls in conversation with Jonathan during our photography walks – he readily talked, offering up opinions on seemingly anything that came into his mind. I asked occasional questions, but I was largely content to follow his lead and listen. Many of our talks centered on questions of race: what it felt like, how it worked, how it shaped our relationships with others, and of course, our frustrations with it.

"There's this new dude, Jack Harlow, who's been around the city and he's misrepresenting Louisville and Black people," Jonathan started, as we spiraled up the Pedestrian Walkway, the sun beating down. As we walked, Jonathan and I discussed his objections to

[33] The original bridge had been decommissioned — "abandoned" according to the Interstate Commerce Commission — in 1969. It sat, without entrances or usage, from 1974 until 2013. According to the signs discussing the renovation of the bridge, in 1991, city officials decided to transform "85 acres of heavy industry and scrapyards" along the Louisville side of the Ohio River "into an award-winning urban park".

Harlow, a young up-and-coming white rapper from Louisville, released his first album in 2019, to fame and accolades from Billboard and Rolling Stone. Jonathan disliked him not because of his musical prowess, but because of his persona and its relationship not only to rap but to Louisville. Harlow, he explained, was not actually *from* Louisville, but rather Shelbyville, a smaller city about forty minutes east of Louisville. Although Harlow spent his adolescence and young adulthood in Louisville, Jonathan understood him to be someone who was not representative of the city.

Jonathan mentioned that Harlow had gone on an interview with Sway in the Morning, a hip hop radio morning show. Being on Sway's show is considered both a challenge and a sign of success in hip hop. Sway, himself a rapper, is known for being a tough interviewer, sometimes asking his guests to freestyle, rap over a beat they have never heard before to test their creativity and improvisational skills. Sway and his co-hosts swiftly dismiss artists who fail to improvise successfully, or who seem inauthentic or insincere. Harlow made it clear that he did not grow up poor and did not want to be perceived as pretending that he had. He told stories about his adolescence in Louisville, how he came into his rap career, and refused to speak about private conversations or illicit behavior.

The image of Louisville that emerges from Harlow's Sway interview seems to be different from Jonathan's, and Harlow's description of his own childhood and adolescence seemed different from the rappers who interviewed him. Harlow described his teen years as fun, characterized by drives around the city, listening to music, looking for girls, talking. Sway seemed surprised, responding that his own childhood was not this way. Harlow was granted a freedom to explore and wander around Louisville, a freedom to move that was shared by neither Jonathan nor Sway as young Black men.

Harlow's youthful experiences of Louisville, however, do mirror my own. Like Harlow, I spent my high school years wandering around in someone else's car, listening to music, hanging out with my friends. The places I frequented are the same places Harlow did, according to the song titles on his albums. "Eastern Parkway" (where I had soccer practice in high school), "RIVER ROAD" (the location of Waterfront Park), "Baxter Avenue" (I danced in a church basement there for years), and "21C/Delta" (a free art gallery, and expensive hotel and restaurant), were all locations I immediately recognized from a cursory perusal of Harlow's discography.

They are also places that are whiter according to the racial geography of the city. Baxter Avenue, Eastern Parkway, and 21C are all locations that are close to downtown but are not located far enough West to be in "the hood". The places that appear in Harlow's discography are all located between First and Eighth Street. River Road begins near Waterfront Park, but runs from downtown to the East End, the whiter and more affluent part of the city. Eastern Parkway is further south than River Road, and runs through the center of Louisville, from Cherokee Park to Third Street. 21C, located downtown, is on Seventh Street.

Jonathan characterized Jack Harlow as misrepresenting Louisville and misrepresenting Black people precisely because Harlow has achieved success as the definitive voice of rap in the city. Harlow's Louisville equates the affluent white parts of town as representing the entire city, which it does not. For Jonathan, Harlow's fame reproduced an image of Louisville that is far removed from his own lived experiences of the city, and especially of Black communities in the city. Moreover, because Harlow is one of the most famous musicians from Louisville – Sway described him as "putting Louisville on the map" – how he represents the city potentially shapes how the broader hip hop community sees Louisville. I did not know it at the time, but Jonathan

had been hoping to begin a rap career, which I describe in more depth in Part IV. He had skin in the game about "Louisville" and its image in rap music.

CROSSING RACIAL BOUNDARIES

I wondered why Jonathan and Beu had both turned to hip hop as a way of demarcating racial boundaries in Louisville. Although they, like most Louisville residents, understood where the boundaries were, I found it curious that music was their shared language. Despite the similar reliance on contemporary issues in hip hop, Jonathan and Beu had very different ways of speaking about racism: Beu learned it, in part from her relationship with her mentor, Emmett, while Jonathan experienced it firsthand. Their similar experiences of the West End and navigational prowess was a sharp contrast to my relative lack of knowledge. I considered my own experiences of growing up in the city. The boundaries were implicit, understood, but it was not until I was an adult that I learned to make them explicit.

My parents rarely talked about race when I was growing up. This was confusing for me. I went to private Catholic school, which boasted only a handful of Black students, two East Asian students, and four students of Mexican descent – my siblings and me – among approximately four hundred white students. My teachers were wonderful, but we were called slurs before we hit puberty. My college courses in Ethnic Studies were a breath of fresh air, offering me a vocabulary to name the social dynamics that shaped so much of my childhood: "diaspora", "microaggression", "racialization". When I returned to Louisville after finishing my degree, I was armed with a language to talk about race and politics, but that language that seemed to have been developed in places like New York or Los Angeles, places with well-studied histories of anti-racist organizing.

For these reasons, for most of my adolescence, I struggled to find a way of talking about race in Louisville – it was not taught in schools, and because Louisville's neighborhoods, homes, lives were so deeply segregated, I hardly encountered the same racial boundaries that my interlocutors did during their time in care. I thought I was the only person who felt this way, but Jonathan affirmed that he too struggled to speak with white people in Louisville about race. On a drive to the skate park, Jonathan and I had been discussing the challenges of giving people answers to questions they disliked: "I feel like, with a lot of non-black people, when you talk about race, they go into this…denial," he explained. He said that when it came to questions where the answer is race, people rarely liked the answers they got, so they tried to find other answers. People went out of their way to *avoid* talking about race, to undo the mention of it every time it emerged in conversation.

I also heard the difficulty of talking about race from non-Black people of color. On a drive to Frankfort with Anjali, a staff member of the lobbying organization, Kentucky Youth Advocates, she and I had an extended conversation about her early years in Kentucky. When she was thirteen, she and her family moved from a racially diverse neighborhood in New York to Owensboro, Kentucky, a town approximately two hours west of Louisville. She and her brother found themselves on the receiving end of Islamophobic rhetoric: they had moved immediately after September 11, 2001. She had offered up this observation about her childhood without prompting from me, but no details. I explained that I had had a similar experience in Louisville – we both laughed, a little bitterly, at the ways racist attitudes had been so early ingrained in our schoolmates when we were young.

Why was it so difficult to talk about race in a place that is so clearly organized around principles of racial segregation? In writing about the history of Black migrants in Louisville,

historian Luther Adams argues that the racial politics and geography of the city has to do with the unique place that the city has in relation to the rest of the South. For Adams, the South as a region is defined by a distinct cultural justification for racial hierarches – it is the segregationist policies of the South that constitutes the South. Although scholars have written extensively about the Great Migration of Black Southerners northward and westward – to Chicago, Detroit, Los Angeles, New York – after the collapse of Reconstruction, Adams focuses on Southern Black migrants within the South, specifically "way up north in Louisville", the title of his book. These migrants, he argues, are people who stayed in the South with an eye towards improving conditions for Black people in the south as a region, not just in Louisville. He excavates the reasons that Black migrants chose the city – there were economic reasons, namely shipping and manufacturing that were part of a burgeoning war industry in the 1930s and 1940s.

However, Adams also emphasizes that Black migrants were drawn to Louisville because of its reputation for being "freer" than other Southern cities. Louisville's free Black population during Reconstruction had developed a kind of détente with white Louisvillians. As long as Black Louisvillians stayed in the West End, white Louisvillians passed few laws mandating racial segregation. At the same time, Adams cites newspapers and oral histories with Black residents of Louisville who described the racial boundaries of the city as "invisible signs" that warned away Black people from certain parts of the city (Adams 2010, 64). Mae Street Kidd, a migrant to Louisville from Richmond, Kentucky, described it this way:

> Louisville was a southern city and we had some Jim Crow laws, but most of us blacks knew what the boundaries were and more or less we observed them. What were those boundaries? I couldn't use the main public library. I couldn't go to the first-run movie shows on Fourth Street. I had to attend the 'colored' theaters like the Lyric and the Grand. I couldn't stay or eat in the Brown Hotel. As long as we kept within those boundaries, we never had any problems. (Adams 2010, 63)

The racial hierarchy of the city was enforced, in Adams' words, by custom rather than law (Adams 2010, 75). Everyone knew where the boundaries were: what is known does not need to be taught. Although the boundaries were customary, they were violently enforced by police and white citizens with impunity (Adams 2010, 67–71). Additionally, in parts of the city that were considered racial buffer zones – parts of downtown, east of Eighth Street – the boundaries were also constantly *changing*. He writes,

> Because segregation in Louisville was more a matter of custom than law, these mental maps, like segregation itself, could shift as subtly as sand underfoot. As much as racial boundaries were based on tradition, they also rested on the authority of individual whites. It was the white bus driver, waiter or waitress, usher or ticket taker, the man or woman behind counters and registers who enforced segregation. Because of this, no African American could ever be entirely sure of how they would be treated in any business. (Adams 2010, 75)

For Adams' purposes – defining the South by its system of *legal* segregation – the comparatively low number of such laws in Louisville attests to its uniqueness among Southern cities, its strangeness as a regional hub. Louisville's reputation as a progressive city likely insulated it from the kind of media coverage that put other southern cities – Montgomery, Selma, Atlanta – at the forefront of racial violence during the Civil Rights Movement. In his Conclusion, Adams addresses the simmering volatility of race in Louisville. He contrasts the peace following the death of Martin Luther King, Jr. in 1968 with a Black uprising two months after King's death (Adams 2010, 185-189). He compares the absence of violence during Louisville's voluntary educational desegregation plan in the 1950s and the massive white protests, firebombings, and walkouts that accompanied the implementation of Louisville's busing plan in 1975 (Adams 2010, 190–95). Adams suggests that these contrasting reactions were due to the absence of a common experience of race: there was a gap between Black and white experiences of the city

Beu's and Jonathan's comments about the racial divisions of Louisville were part of a shared understanding of the boundaries and a shared way of expressing them – music – but not necessarily a shared *experience* of race. For Beu, race worked as a soundtrack, part of the way she scored her movements around Louisville. Moving from the Highlands to Old Louisville, through downtown and into the West End with me, and then to the south of the city to visit her grandmother, Beu experienced relatively free, if highly dependent, movement – she did not see any hindrances in going from one place to another. While she did not always have transportation options or stable relationships upon which to draw to get places, her movement limitations were hardly the result of race. This is not to say that her friends and family accepted her familiarity with the West End or her relationships with Black people. During one of our drives to a youth drop-in center where she spoke with caseworkers and other service providers, she mentioned that a young man she had been dating expressed fear and disapproval of Beu's time spent downtown. She dismissed it as casual racism, explaining that he did not think it was safe for her to be staying in the shelter or spending time at the drop-in center, but that was because he and his family had never spent any amount of time in these parts of the city. The barriers for her were more about the social acceptability among other white people regarding her presence as a young white woman in Black spaces. She changed her musical choices and language, but very little else about herself.

Jonathan, on the other hand, was far more explicit and cautious about his own adaptability to racially bounded parts of the city. He spoke at length about instances of working through racial divisions with his friends, commenting on the absence of shared histories with African migrants to the United States, and the ways his well-meaning white friends sometimes did not understand his experiences of policing and constraint. His relationships, it seemed,

required a lot of explanation and clarification about his actions and behavior, and while Jonathan did cross these racial boundaries to visit friends in other parts of the city, he did so with much forethought about how to do it effectively. His comments about Jack Harlow and the relative freedom with which Harlow moved about Louisville pointed to the ways that white rappers' experiences misrepresented a Black art form in a city shaped by racism. Harlow's characterization of the city glossed over the racial divisions, conspicuously ignoring the absence of freedom of movement for Black residents.

Despite their very different experiences of race and movement, both of them had close relationships with caring adults who were of different races. Beu had been, for some time, close with Emmett, a Black man who had been a caregiver for her when she was in state custody; Jonathan was close to Rita, a white woman whom he had met through a social program. Rita and Emmett both, on occasion, played the role of driver to Jonathan and Beu, respectively. Rita often hired Jonathan to do photography work for nonprofits with whom she was affiliated, and he accompanied her to a number of events and meetings in the city. Beu often asked Emmett for rides the same way she asked me for rides, and if he were available, he would take her. However, he was far more wary of driving her than Rita was of driving Jonathan, for obvious reasons. As a Black man with a young white woman in his car, Emmett would be crossing race, age, and gender lines that may be met with suspicion or violence. While Beu's mobility, as a young white woman, was constrained by her lack of access to a car, it was not similarly constrained by race: Emmett's was. In my own conversations with Emmett, it was clear that he was very aware of this, and for good reason. I am less sure that Beu was aware of the race and gender dynamics, which meant she asked him for help with less consideration of the possible consequences.

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My understanding of race and segregation in Louisville – implied but harshly enforced – was given new life in my travels with Jonathan and Beu, in ways that it was not when I was moving around the city alone. It was in mundane mobile activities – walking, driving, running errands – that they made explicit the differences in their experiences of the city. They did not always do this in ways that I expected, either. Beu's abrupt musical transitions, Jonathan's frustration with the national platform of Jack Harlow, and of course, their superb navigational prowess that far exceeded my own knowledge: to me, these all illuminated aspects of racial boundary-making and unmaking that I did not notice when I was young, nor was I equipped to discuss then. It was a small, but significant, reframing of Louisville for me, to notice how their existence in unfamiliar parts of the city influenced not only their relationships with me but with other adults.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter, I have taken a mobilities approach to analyzing the city of Louisville, employing mobile methods around the city and analysis of transportation methods and the meanings of movement for former foster youth. I described the ways young people moved around Louisville, and how motion seemed to be both a central part of how they lived. Each of them had different experiences with foster care, which may have shaped the ways they incorporated the sense of movement into their lives as young adults. I suggest that, while their experiences in care may not determine their experiences of movement as young adults, the frequency of and relationships formed by movement early on resembles how they move as adults. They dwell in mobility, make life out of movement, albeit in different ways.

I have also analyzed how two young people navigated Louisville's racial boundaries, specifically their use of hip hop culture to describe and mark racial boundaries. I read their interpretations of the city's racial geography as empirical contemporary evidence of a much longer, historical pattern of racial boundary-making in Louisville, as well as self-conscious and careful transgression of those boundaries. I suggest that former foster youth, because of their frequent movement and boundary-crossing, have unique insights into understanding race and the city. In comparing my own experiences of mobility around Louisville to theirs, I note how they were far more responsive to racial boundaries than I had been at their age and younger. Movement had been required of them in a way that it had not been for me – I did not have to live downtown the way that Beu did, nor did I have family, friends, or educational experiences in the parts of town that Jonathan did. We did not go to the same places, as Jonathan put it, but as they both showed, it was not impossible for those boundaries to be carefully and intentionally crossed. They illustrated, simultaneously, the social reality and the social construction of boundaries in Louisville.

Like Ferguson, I found that mobility – as an analytic lens and a method of inquiry – was a productive way to make a familiar place unfamiliar, to put into high relief the importance of comparing across perspectives in the city. While Ferguson focused on social work as a mobile practice, I take his framing as a starting point for greater inquiries into not only the ways former foster youth move or the meanings they assign to movement, but to the larger structural forces that shape their movement. In the next chapter, I turn to the regulation of movement, specifically the role of auto-mobility, for Beu: laws, courts, insurance, and a driver's license all played a role in her ability to move, as much as they were themselves the result of her childhood mobility.

6. BUREAUCRACY, FRUSTRATION, AND CAR CRASHES

The Tyler County court clerk would call out a dozen or so names in alphabetical order. The named people, if they were present, would line up in the aisle of the gallery behind the polished wooden divider. The bailiff, looking bored, would open the divider's door and let people line up a few feet from the bench. One at a time, the judge would call the next person forward. They would approach the judge, who would speak quietly to them about their individual cases. Some of them fiddled with wallets or driver's licenses. Some pulled sheets of paper from their back pockets, handing them over to the judge, who would scrutinize them and hand them to the clerk or return them to their owner.

When the clerk would call Beu's name, I would whisper, "Good luck" as she rose and took her turn in line. She would make it to the front of the line, approach the bench with her public defender. The clerk would pass papers to the judge, who would then look them over and, without looking at her, ask if Beu had acquired a driver's license and proof of car insurance since her last court date. Beu would answer, softly, "No," never offering an explanation or an excuse. The judge would briefly converse with the public defender and the district attorney. The public defender would speak with the clerk and the county prosecutor. Beu would stand there quietly, hands folded, before being handed a business card with her next court date and told to come back the following month.

I watched this scene play out every time I drove Beu to court over several months. She was in court because she accidentally hit another car while driving a friend from Louisville to her friend's place in Tyler County. Although Beu held a permit at the time of the accident, she was driving without a license or a licensed adult over 21 in the car, which is illegal for permit-holders in Kentucky (Kentucky Legislature 2020; Kentucky Legislature 1991). She was also driving

without insurance, which typically entails have one's license suspended for six months but can carry penalties of up to $1000 and 90 days of jail time (Kentucky Legislature 2010).

Of the young people I met in the field, Beu spent the most time in my car. At 19 years old, she had aged out of Kentucky's child welfare system about a year before she and I met during my fieldwork in Louisville. My friend and former coworker, Emmett, introduced us. She considered him a support and confidante; he had been an employee at a residential facility where she was placed as a child, and they maintained a mentoring relationship over the nine years she was in the custody of the state, and well into life after she aged out.[34] She and I got to know each other primarily because she needed a ride to traffic court. She did not have a car, a license, or insurance; I did, so I drove her.

The drive, the arrival, the queueing, the document question, Beu's answer, the request that she return, they all took on a predictable ritualistic quality, repetitive and impersonal, each time we drove out to the Tyler County courthouse. Every month, I grew more frustrated with the impasse, because I knew something Beu's public defender, the judge, and the district attorney did not: she was unlikely to be able to meet their demands. She no longer had access to the car she had been driving during the crash, or any car for that matter. The car she crashed had belonged to her mother, who reported it stolen knowing Beu was driving it that day. She was arrested, and awaited arraignment in jail on the day of her driving exam.

Losing access to the car – and the familial support that ostensibly accompanied it – meant that Beu lost access to other things too. Without a car, she would not be able to take the exam to get a license. She could purchase non-owner car insurance, but to do that she needed an income.

[34] I describe their relationship in more depth in Part III.

During my time in the field, Beu seemed motivated to find work. However, she moved between a shelter, her paternal grandmother's trailer, and the apartments of various friends during the months it took to resolve her case. She did not have stable housing, and lacked reliable transportation, making it all the more difficult for her to garner enough income to afford car insurance. In short, acquiring a license and proof of insurance might have been simpler, if Beu had the necessary resources – a supportive family, a place to live, a steady job – but after aging out, she did not.

Our drives out to Tyler County were rife with a mix of emotions. We worried about whether the judge would order that she be detained, wrung our hands about how she was supposed to make do with her limited resources. Pre-pandemic, we were annoyed that traffic court could not simply happen online and frustrated that the case seemed to be going nowhere, and that we had to continuously drive out and back with no movement. She rarely showed these emotions to the judge, the district attorney, or her public defender, however. Instead, she took a more deferential approach, polite and courteous, seemingly trying to take up as little space as possible when she made it to the front of the line.

I emphasize the emotional qualities of court to extend an increasingly common point about the nature of bureaucracy: while bound by rules and rationality, bureaucratic encounters like waiting for a driver's license or going to traffic court are emotionally charged, fraught, and ripe for analysis.[35]

[35] In her work on documentary forms from an unrecognized state, the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus, and the UK, Yael Navaro makes the case that anthropologists should analyze documents – in her case, passports and other identity documents – as affectively charged and bursting with emotions (2007). Nayanika Mathur, writing about the slowness of the Indian bureaucracy to authorize villagers to find and kill a protected big cat that has been terrorizing the countryside (Mathur 2014). Heath Cabot describes the varying social meanings of the pink card, a legal document issued by the Greek government to refugees who are seeking asylum, and how grateful, wary, or distressed refugees are by the process of acquiring one (Cabot 2012).

In this chapter, I borrow an insight from Ben Kafka's study of the development of a culture documentation in France after the Revolution, which he calls an inquiry into the "psychic life of paperwork" (Kafka 2012, 15). Kafka, a practicing psychoanalyst and cultural historian, turns Weber's ideal-type bureaucracy (Weber 1968) on its head – rather than a rational, objective machinery with rules and clear expectations, Kafka understands bureaucracy to be a shared human mythos rooted in unconscious feelings, emotions, and affects. These are mostly negative feelings of paranoia, annoyance, a dashed hope for a potential resolution. This certainly exemplified my feelings – and Beu's – about the court's inertia. "Bureaucracy", Kafka argues, is the word that people use to explain their powerlessness to achieve some form of redress – monetary compensation, recognition, justice – because of an unnavigable, opaque configuration of people, documents, technologies, and power.

In Kafka's formulation, analyzing bureaucracy is less about understanding where power lives in offices or documentation or the hands of individual bureaucrats, but is more about a sense that "rule by a piece of office furniture" (Kafka 2012, 77) – the bureau – has no real moral authority to make decisions that have such an impact on the lives of others. The rules of state agencies are built by people who may not necessarily be subject to those same rules. Because the enforcement of those rules comes from someone who did not make them, when inconvenient or harmful circumstances arise from the implementation of those rules, they seem illegitimate. This theme of ill-informed bureaucrats enforcing untimely or superfluous rules emerges over and over again in anthropologies of bureaucracy: the villagers in Mathur's work who must submit form after form for permission to kill an endangered big cat that has been terrorizing the Indian countryside (Mathur 2014), the resentment politics of those who continued to experience health insurance exclusion after the promises of the Affordable Care Act in the United States (J. M.

Mulligan and Brunson 2020), the rise of actuarialism in expanded use of algorithms in American child removal decisions (Scherz 2011). People experience a loss of control in their dealings with state offices and bureaucrats, and react with vitriol, desperation, and anguish.

This general rule, that bureaucracy is the word people use to describe their frustration with a specific kind of unequal power that is obfuscated behind rules and a desk, is the topic of this chapter about traffic court and licensing. I analyze the emotional life of car bureaucracies in Beu's case for two reasons. First, in the introduction, I described how talking about feelings talk worked in the field as a proxy for ethical reflection. The gap between what one ought to do and what one wanted to do was often a source of consternation for my interlocutors. In Beu's case, she wanted to comply with the rules of the court – she wanted to do what she was "supposed" to do. She was tired of driving out to Tyler County, and also worried and frustrated due to having an active court case. She was in limbo, and bound by the timelines and demands of others, people who did not make exceptions for her specific life circumstances. Feelings of frustration, guilt, and fear were at the very core of Beu's encounters with court officials, the Department of Motor Vehicles, the man she hit. These feelings emerged because Beu could *not* take responsibility for her actions in the eyes of the court, though she wanted to, making her time in court not simply a logistical or technical problem, but an ethical one: is it reasonable or fair to demand compliance of former foster youth when they lack the resources to be in compliance with the law?

Second, a change in Beu's feelings about the validity of having to go to court was the impetus for her to challenge the court's demands, and successfully avoid having to meet them. Her frustration was rooted in wasted time and energy in bureaucratic settings, and it was through the expression of those feelings that she successfully lobbied an ethical critique of the legitimacy

of having to come at all. By shouting down her public defender, she demanded a moral accounting from a bureaucracy: Why should she be subjected to the same rules as others, when she did not have the same resources or supports others did? Moreover, the reason that she did not have the same resources was due to state intervention in another part of her life, and the failures of family supports that were, as I will show, assumed in much of the regulations surrounding licensing for foster youth. She effectively – if inadvertently – mobilized her own emotions about her situation to elicit a moral, emotional response from the court.

By focusing on the emotions in bureaucracy, Kafka offered me an analytical method for understanding the negotiations between Beu and the people at court – emotion was required for her to successfully navigate the bureaucracy. The necessity of emotion echoes other scholarly findings about young people's encounters with bureaucracy. Transforming one's feelings into ethical critiques of bureaucrats is a key part of how young people with few resources can successfully press on bureaucrats to meet their needs. This is true in Lauren Silver's work with young women aging out of independent living programs, who tap into emotional reactions among bureaucrats – guilt, risk-aversion, respect – in order to achieve the things they need (Silver 2010).

Equally important in this chapter are the ways that the bureaucratic and affective experiences of former foster youths illustrate an important aspect of adult norms in large parts of the United States: the compulsory freedom of automobility. In her work on the American car cultures, anthropologist Catherine Lutz analyzes how cars have reshaped space in the United States, in particular the ways that highways, cities, and suburbs have coevolved with the expansion of individual car ownership in many parts of the country (C. Lutz 2014). Her point is to draw attention to the ways that Americans often have few alternatives to car ownership, given

the organization of space – markets, schools, offices, and residential areas are frequently positioned far apart from each other, and car ownership is all but compulsory in these places. While freeing individual people from the constraints of timetables and shared space on train cars or buses, the American system of automobility also introduces a subtle unfreedom in the ways it has obviated the need for other forms of transportation. Without a car, however, the limitations of automobility are amplified: being freed of car ownership did not translate to Beu being free of car bureaucracy, or to transcending the mobility limitations introduced by the organization of space in Louisville. Not only do former foster youths' experiences illustrate the particularities of aging out of care, but also offer a glimpse into the feelings and vagaries of car cultures and car bureaucracies.

THE LICENSE

On what was to be her final court date, Beu and I arrived at the courthouse at nine in the morning, the usual time slot for the county's traffic court docket. We were running a little late, both of us under-caffeinated and a bit cranky. The clerk called out the traffic court docket, but Beu's name was not on the list. We sat in the courtroom for an hour or two before double-checking her court card; she was on the afternoon docket, and Louisville was more than an hour away. Rather than drive back to the city only to immediately turn around and come back, we decided to get breakfast.

Over McDonald's coffee and hash browns, Beu explained to me that her permit had disappeared. She originally thought she had lost it, but discovered it in pieces, as though cut by scissors, in her room. By her last court date, she had been unhappily staying with her paternal grandmother for a few weeks. She speculated that her grandmother may have had something to

do with the destruction of permit. She asked if I would drive her to Sheldon County, where she had originally gotten her permit, to get a replacement. A replacement would be helpful, she suggested, a signal to the court that she was doing the best she could to comply with the court expectations. We had a few hours before the Tyler County court reconvened, so I agreed.

We arrived at the Sheldon County's Department of Motor Vehicles office. There was a line of about twenty people, so we waited and chatted about her new boyfriend and grumbled about how slowly the line was moving. When we finally made it to the front of the line, Beu told the woman behind the counter that she would like a replacement permit. The woman behind the counter looked up Beu in the computer system before explaining that she could not give her a replacement permit because it was suspended. Beu asked why her permit was suspended, and the woman told her it was because she had missed a Sheldon County court summons. Beu tried to explain to the woman that she had been homeless for a few months, and thus had no address to receive any court summons. She later wondered if the summons had been mailed to her grandmother's address, and if her grandmother had mistakenly or perhaps purposefully disposed of the court summons. She tried to get more information from the woman behind the counter, but the woman suggested she go to the Sheldon County court clerk's office to deal with it instead. Beu glared, huffed, and walked away.

"I don't want to deal with this today," she muttered before storming out of the building.

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Earning a driver's license is a rite of passage for many American adolescents, a pivotal step on a normative pathway to adulthood. While Social Security cards, birth certificates, and death certificates are arguably the most common state documents Americans receive, a driver's license is the document many Americans are likely to produce when asked for proof of

identification. In 2019, around 22.8 million people were licensed drivers (NHTSA 2019); for comparison's sake, a little over half as many – 14.3 million – people held valid U.S. passports in 2020, according to the State Department. The license authorizes and materializes drivers' rights to auto-mobility, and because driving is one of the primary ways Americans move, many people have them.

Licenses are, in theory, simple and affordable to acquire, assuming one has the correct documents, a car, and time to practice driving. With Beu as a case study, I analyze how aging out and the absence of familial support hindered her ability to get her license, access to a car, and a successful road test. While the judge, prosecutor, and public defender treated a license as an ostensibly straightforward process, Beu's circumstances made it frustratingly difficult, if not impossible, to do.

To take her licensing exam, Beu would have needed a birth certificate, proof of residence, proof of insurance, a Social Security card, and her permit. For former foster youth, keeping such documents on hand can be challenge. Many of them move frequently, and few of them are in direct possession of their own birth certificates or Social Security cards while they are in care.

Upon aging out, former foster youth are statutorily entitled to receive these documents. House Bill 158, signed into law in 2019, established a Foster Bill of Rights that includes specific provisions for teenagers. Anyone who ages out is entitled to

> Receive, free of charge when he or she is eighteen (18) years or older and preparing to exit foster care by reason of attaining the age of eighteen (18) years old, the following: (a) An official birth certificate; (b) A Social Security card; (c) Health insurance information; (d) A copy of the child's medical records; and (e) A state-issued identification (Kentucky Legislature [2019] 2019)

Although the statute guarantees a right, it does not name any specific actor responsible for providing foster youth with these documents. Acquiring this paperwork depends on young people requesting them from their social worker before they leave care, or proactive case workers or caregivers preemptively gathering those documents without being asked. There are certainly case workers who do this. Most of the young people with whom I spoke did not, however, have such proactive case workers and did not know that these documents were necessary or freely available to them before leaving care: they simply did not know enough to ask. Moreover, even in a best-case scenario, Kentucky social worker turnover and caseloads are so high that stands to reason that social workers or case managers might overlook essential documentation.

Between the ages of nine and eighteen, Beu experienced fifty separate moves ("placements") to and from foster homes, group homes, and residential facilities. She aged out in Indiana at a drug rehabilitation center; "I didn't even have a drug problem until I was sent there," she explained to me once while fiddling with the radio during one of our drives. When Beu aged out, she was not in the same state of her birth and getting ahold of her birth certificate took several weeks. She also had to replace her Social Security card, which requires a mailing address and a state-approved driver's license or identification card, neither of which Beu had. Despite the challenges, Beu managed to acquire this paperwork at some point before she and I met, as she had gotten a permit.

However, she did not have a *license*, though not for lack of trying. According to Beu, before we met, she had scheduled a driver's road test to get her license but was unable to keep the appointment. Beu, who had been living with her mother in an apartment for a brief time before we met, had asked to borrow her mother's car to take the road test. Her mother agreed,

but only if Beu add her mother's name to the apartment lease and took her own name off of the lease. Beu did so and took her mother's car on the day of the road test. Her mother reported the car stolen, and Beu was arrested, awaiting arraignment rather than getting a driver's license. Of course, once Beu was released, her relationship with her mother deteriorated. As she had no legal entitlement to the apartment, she had nowhere to stay, nor did she have a car. At one point during our trips to court, she told her public defender this story, but was encouraged to simply schedule another road test soon.

She drifted between the homes of friends and homeless shelters. For a time after the falling out with her mother, she held onto her documents. Some of her belongings then disappeared in the shuffle between shelters and apartments, including her essential identification papers. When Beu and I asked social service providers about how to go about replacing these documents, we were told to consult a new website for former foster youth: the website told us to contact the same regional service providers who sent us there in the first place. I laughed at the absurdity of the situation when I checked the website, but I was not necessarily surprised.

She had held onto her permit for some time, but as detailed in the vignette above, it too disappeared, and she needed a new one. By her last day in court, Beu had been staying with her grandmother for a few weeks: she moved out shortly after. From what I gather, their cohabitation was not ideal. On our car ride out to court, Beu complained about the early curfew her grandmother had implemented. At the time, Beu was working the second shift at a fast-food restaurant downtown. She liked the job, the pay, and her coworkers, but she did not leave work until after eleven o'clock and an early curfew seemed unreasonable.

Beu's grandmother cared deeply about her, as evidenced by her affectionate, "Where have you been? I've been so worried," every time Beu and I showed up to grab a change of

clothes. She tried to help Beu with money, handing her cash when she had some to spare, or a full plate of Thanksgiving leftovers. However, Beu's grandmother was in relatively poor health and went to bed early. Beu's late return woke her grandmother, who was unable to go back to sleep. Beu was also suspicious of her grandmother; the clothes she stored at her grandmother's routinely went missing. I was never able to confirm with Beu whether her grandmother had destroyed her driving permit, or understand why she would, but given the circumstances, it is possible that their contentious, temporary living arrangement might have led her grandmother to slicing up Beu's primary form of identification and exacerbating her legal troubles.[36]

Although essential documents were guaranteed by Kentucky's statutes, the actual acquisition, safekeeping, and replacement of these documents was difficult for Beu once she aged out. Her mother and grandmother provided, for a time, key resources – a place to stay, a car, food, emotional support – but their relationships with Beu were also unstable and those resources became unavailable. Although I gleaned these facts and insights from my own travels with Beu, her public defender had no similar knowledge about the challenges Beu faced in acquiring a license. As a result, neither did the prosecutor nor the judge, and the counter-factual – that perhaps her case might have been resolved sooner had Beu spoken up earlier – is impossible to know or prove.

Perhaps Beu's quiet acceptance of the terms of the court speaks to her acceptance her own responsibility – she understood herself to be a responsible actor, one who ought to have

[36] Dr. Tali Mendelberg and Dr. Frederick Wherry offered helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this chapter, encouraging me to not take Beu at face value. I never did get perspective or input from Beu's grandmother. She and I met once or twice, very briefly, while I was driving Beu to and from her grandmother's house. I do not know how their relationship worked in practice, and Beu and I were never at her grandmother's for long enough to strike up a rapport or even an extended conversation. In any case, the important takeaway from this is that regardless of their actual living situation, Beu's descriptions suggested she was not always on good terms with her grandmother.

been driving with a license, and therefore in the wrong. Perhaps she saw no need to challenge the court's demands, no mitigating factors in her own culpability. Rather than question *why* the judge demanded these things of her – a moral question about the applicability of the law – Beu seemed to be more focused on simply meeting their demands. It was not until, after months of trying to find enough stability and car access to seek a license, that Beu mounted a defense of herself as incapable of taking responsibility in the way the court asked. Because she was so focused on being deferential and acquiescing, it was not until her last day in court that we discussed the legitimacy of what they were asking her to do.

PROOF OF INSURANCE

I turn now from the license to the other request of the court – proof of insurance. I did not know whether the challenges Beu faced in trying to acquire a license were similar to the challenges she faced in acquiring proof of insurance. This is in part due to the complete absence of discussion between us concerning insurance. I do not know if she had pursued proof of insurance during those months to and from court, nor did I know if she knew *how* to find and purchase insurance. Instead, here I focus less on the barriers to insurance in Beu's specific case and more on the structural barriers to finding insurance that exist for former foster youth.

Although newer cars are safer than older cars, Lutz and Fernandez note that "a significant percentage of all cars manufactured will eventually kill or seriously maim someone" (2010:180). According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, car crashes were the leading cause of death for young people ages 6, 9, and 18-21 in 2019; on average, 99 people died per day from car crashes in 2019, and 7507 people were injured (NHTSA 2019).3 Since their introduction to the United States, car crashes have killed more people than "all U.S. wars

combined" and injure at least two million people per year, many of whom are permanently disabled (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2012; C. Lutz and Fernandez 2010, 181). In spite of the numerous safety innovations that have been developed, the rates of car deaths and injuries in the United States appears to have been relatively stable over the last century.

To help mitigate – or at least pay for – car damages, many states have individual automobile insurance mandates. In Kentucky, insurance is a prerequisite for a license and without it, as Beu's case illustrates, can open drivers up to fines and potentially jail time. There has been limited anthropological research on car insurance specifically, but inquiries into life and health insurance have raised important questions about responsibility and valuation of human life (Bähre 2011; Mulder 2020; J. Mulligan 2016). Bähre highlights the sometimes-contentious forms of solidarity that emerge from the purchase of commercial life insurance in South Africa, while Mulder investigates how Black New Orleans residents rely on life insurance payments for funerals, reaffirming the dignity and value of human life in the aftermath of violent deaths. In these cases, insurance operates in the realm of social relations, configuring how people understand the value of human life. In health insurance studies, scholars have highlighted how insurance pricing and policies guarantee neither care nor even equal access to coverage (Mulligan and Castañeda 2017). In each of these examples, insurance works as a way to shift the terms of responsibility for injury from one party to another, from families or individuals to another larger collective entity: the corporation, the general population, the health care system.

The legal mandate for car insurance in the U.S. distinguishes it from optional life or health insurance. Life and health insurance are often understood as forms of social solidarity, where the choice to purchase can help alleviate the costs of death or injury for others. Because car insurance is a legal *mandate*, in theory the risks of car crashes are distributed across the entire

population, rather than those who can afford it or choose to purchase it in an effort to ameliorate the financial burden on kin, as in Mulder's work on funerals. When insurance is purchased by choice, the decision to buy it emerges from a sense of obligation or a concern about bearing all the cost of injury or damage: when insurance is *required* by law, those who cannot afford it but must nonetheless participate in the American system of automobility are not necessarily opting into a form of social solidarity. The choice is compulsory, and the consequences can be expensive.

Car insurance mandates emerged from a broader configuration of how judges and regulators chose to manage the car risk since their emergence in the U.S. S.L. Jain (2004) illustrates this in their research on cars and product liability law. Reviewing civil court cases from the 1920s and 1950s, nearly all involving children who had been injured by cars, they observe that the judges who adjudicated these early cases understood the car to be merely a tool, not an inherently dangerous instrument like guns or dynamite. The legal precedent of these cases established that rather than the car itself or manufacturers, drivers were to be held legally liable for deaths and injuries. Jain argues that in these cases, a "common sense" (2004:64) about responsibility for car- related injury emerged; of course, the driver is at fault. Kentucky's first licensing policy, passed in 1942, established that drivers without a license and parents of any minor who crashed were considered negligent, and therefore responsible for any damages in tort suits (Kentucky Legislature 1942).

Looking beyond case law, Carol MacLennan (1988) analyzes the regulatory debates over seatbelts and airbags. She observes that from the 1920s to the 1960s, car manufacturers had successfully positioned themselves as responsible corporate actors and individual drivers as

careless and negligent. In the mid-twentieth century, however, doctors and public health experts – with financial support from the insurance industry – conducted research on safer automobile design to reduce the damage of crashes. They advocated for policies that would shift the burden of responsibility for car safety onto manufacturers, implicitly arguing that perfect driving was neither possible nor a viable public health measure. For a brief time, regulating *cars* – not drivers – became a prevention intervention, until the automotive industry successfully mobilized for deregulation during the Reagan administration in the early 1980s. Reagan pushed the Office of Budget and Management to subject all regulations to cost-benefit analyses: for regulations to continue, the economic benefits had to outweigh the costs.

Because manufacturers bore the financial costs of safety innovations, while the public bore the cost of car crashes. It was difficult to financialize the social value of fewer car accidents, and the cost-benefit analysis seemingly tilted the scales in favor of industry, consolidating both the political power of car manufacturers and the privatization of car risks. Kentucky passed its first insurance mandate in 1975 (Legislative Research Commission 1975), well after statutorily establishing that drivers were responsible for crashes.

These debates about who ought to be held legally responsible for the damages of crashes illustrate the centrality of responsibility in American automobility. Judges and legislators have worked against and alongside other actors – insurance adjusters, public health officials, car manufacturers, parents, and families of those injured in crashes – to build a cultural norm around the idea that individuals can and ought to be held responsible for the risks of driving and car ownership, even when they have no other way of moving around.

In their study of former foster youth's driving and car access, Think of Us (2021a) found that former foster youth had difficulties accessing insurance, even more so than they had

accessing a license. As part of their pandemic outreach, researchers surveyed former foster youth about their car needs, asking whether they needed assistance with one or more of the following car-related tasks: buying a car, getting a license, purchasing insurance, paying for repairs, and completing driver's education. Of these, finding insurance, buying a car, and getting a license were the top three most-requested needs nationally. In Kentucky, 30.5% of survey respondents requested assistance with purchasing a vehicle, and 29.08% requested aid with purchasing car insurance. In contrast, only 14.18% requested assistance with acquiring a driver's license. Although the survey was recent and almost certainly did not cover the entirety of car-related need in the commonwealth, former foster youth requested help with purchasing cars and insurance in almost equal proportions, a need that seemingly far exceeded their need for a license.

Foster youth have two options for insurance: their foster parents can add them to their insurance policies, or they may self-insure. To assist foster youth who self-insure, Kentucky legislators offer reimbursements for driver's education and insurance policies (Storm and Higdon [1942] 2021). Young people are the most expensive to insure, as they are seen as riskier drivers. Their insurance premiums might be cost-prohibitive for former foster youth with low or no income. Until they turn twenty-one, foster youth can request reimbursements for driver's education courses by itemizing and invoicing proof of payment to their regional independent living specialists, who receive the checks and disburse them to foster youth. This, presumably, has the dual effect of making them safer drivers, and of potentially lowering their insurance premiums. Kentucky statutes also offer reimbursements to foster families, to encourage them to add foster youth to family insurance plans. When funds are available, the Cabinet can reimburse "whole or in part" a caregiver who has added a foster youth to their insurance plans and may also

request reimbursement of up to $1000 of their annual deductible (Storm and Higdon [1942] 2021; “KY RISE - Youth Benefits” n.d.).

All young people must, by law, depend on older people to help them at every phase in the licensing process. Whether through their caseworkers or their foster families, foster youth – like all young people – must rely on older caring adults to authorize and fund their insurance policies in order to drive. The difference, however, is that foster youth who age out rarely do so from the custody of foster homes. For young women like Hayley, Allison, and Beu, all of whom aged out from congregate care settings, there would likely have been no staff members or foster parents willing to take on the responsibility of teaching them to drive, much less of adding them to any facility or personal insurance policies. While these caring adults are acknowledged in statutes and provisions that enable young people – including foster youth – to drive, it is nonetheless difficult to pinpoint who specifically bears the responsibility for ensuring that young people are given ample time and resources to build this essential skill. The mere existence of regulations that lay out procedures for foster youth suggests to me a recognition of an underlying presumption in insurance and licensing policies that young people have caring adults in their lives to do this important work. In Beu’s case and in more general findings about former foster youth’s ability to access insurance, the implication of familial support that is built into legislation helps contextualize why it is difficult for foster youth who age out specifically to get insurance.

Foster youth are the statutory exemption to the normative pathways that young people learn to drive because they do not have reliable access to the presumed familial supports that exist for non-foster youth. At the time, neither I nor Beu knew that foster youth specifically had been identified as needing additional support. In fact, in the course of drafting this chapter between 2020 and 2022, the specific procedures regarding children in state custody have

changed at least twice (Storm and Higdon [1942] 2021). The changes suggest to me a recognition among policymakers both the importance of automobility in becoming an adult, but also the need to codify resources into regulations. Beu may have benefitted from these laws, had they existed during her time in care or perhaps even during the course of her court case. They established that foster care and aging out *were* legitimate reasons someone might not have been able to acquire a license or proof of insurance. Fortunately, Beu was able to resolve her case without relying directly on aging out of foster care as a reason not to punish her, though I suggest that she did so indirectly.

A RESOLUTION

After it became clear that Beu would not get a permit or a license anytime soon, we still had a few hours before Beu's court time. We drove back to Tyler County and camped out in the courthouse lobby. Beu ran into someone she knew from the shelter, anxiously whispering to me that it was someone she had been trying to avoid. He, too, had an appointment at court that day, though he eventually sauntered away. The lobby was quiet, a few people milling around. I was sending emails while Beu was scrolling through social media feeds. She briefly looked up, flinched, then pointedly looked back down at her phone. Without looking up, she quietly said, "I think that's the guy I hit."

An older man with sparse white hair and a cane shuffled over to the benches where Beu was sitting. She shifted her body so her back was to him, trying to avoid his gaze. He sat down on the bench opposite hers, watched her for a moment, and asked, "Excuse me. Are you the young lady who hit me?" Caught, she turned back towards him.

"Uh…yeah, that's me," she said.

He launched into a rather one-sided conversation, talking about how he wasn't mad at her but that he had been injured in the accident and had to spend hundreds on fixing his car right after he had poured over a thousand dollars into getting it fixed before. He maintained he wasn't mad at her, though. He described the damage to him and his car in detail and I watched Beu get smaller, physically turning back around to face away from him so he was talking to her back, her shoulders hunched, and very, very quiet. He continued for ten or fifteen minutes before someone else at the courthouse summoned him to tell him that he was done, and he left after saying goodbye.

The public defender found Beu a few minutes later and explained that the judge wanted to resolve the case *today*, and that she was trying to get the DA to cut her a deal. It was hard, she explained, because he really didn't want to drop the charges against Beu.

"Have you gotten your license yet?" she asked.

Beu went off. She asked her public defender how she was supposed to get a license given that her permit was currently suspended or pay restitution without an income.

"I'm homeless. I only recently got stable housing. I don't have a job, or a car. My permit is suspended, SHE," — gesturing towards me — "is my only form of transportation here! I literally cannot do any of the things y'all want me to do!"

It was the first time that I had ever seen Beu advocate for herself. She spoke loudly and quickly, in stark contrast to her more usual soft, deferential, single-word answers to her lawyer and other bureaucrats. The public defender noticed too — she seemed taken aback by Beu's outburst. She stammered, "Let me go try to explain that to the prosecutor," and scurried away. Beu and I sat back down in the lobby, and I told her that the defender looked shook. She gave me a small but triumphant smile and went back to her phone.

The public defender came back around half an hour later and said in a rush that the prosecutor was willing to drop the charges to driving without a license and driving without insurance, and that those charges carried a recommendation of jail time. Fortunately, she explained, he was not recommending jail time, just a fine, which he was also willing to prorate from $1000 to nothing, on the condition that Beu not drive until she got a license. Beu responded that she wasn't allowed to drive anyway. The lawyer also explained that she would have to pay court costs and asked, tentatively, if the deal was okay. Beu said yes immediately; the defender ran off to get the plea printed and took Beu into one of the side rooms at court to sign everything.

The lawyer said that the prosecutor never prorated fines, but that she had explained Beu's situation to him and he had decided that this was the best option. She warned Beu to really stick to the plea deal because it would have serious consequences if she did not. We went back into the court room. This time, when the judge called Beu's name, the public defender explained the arrangement and five minutes later, she was out.

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Beu resolved her case through a specific confluence of factors: the length of her case and the apparent irritation of the judge; the inaction of the man she hit; her outburst at her public defender; and the willingness of the prosecutor to amend her punishment. All of these factors were a type of emotional work that called into question the applicability and feasibility of the court's demands. Had any of these not been a part of her last day in court, perhaps she would not have gotten so generous a plea deal. I want to emphasize here the power of emotion in bureaucracy. For everyone, though perhaps especially former foster youth, learning how to both deploy one's own emotions and to elicit emotions in others is arguably the most essential skill in being able to resolve the sort of bureaucratic quagmire in which Beu found herself.

Other scholars who work with young people navigating social services have made this point, always drawing on their observations and experiences accompanying young people to bureaucratic offices. Lauren Silver, in her work on American independent living programs, demonstrates this phenomenon in her analysis of Nyisha, a young mother, and her negotiations with a public housing authority (Silver 2010). Silver describes how Nyisha was able to navigate border zones, or spaces where different narrative constructions come to shape how people perceive one another, through the establishment of common ground and intimacies between bureaucrats and young people. At the beginning of Silver's piece, Nyisha, two days away from aging out of an Independent Living Program at 21, was on the cusp of homelessness with her young son. However, Nyisha's family – much like Beu's – had not been reliable caregivers during her early years. Nyisha's mother had taken out money in Nyisha's name, money that she still owed to the public housing authority that had to be paid back before Nyisha could receive a housing assignment.

In their first encounter with the housing authority, the supervisor – a well-dressed authoritative Black woman – did not initially want to grant Nyisha and Silver an audience. Silver postulates that the woman did not see Nyisha as deserving of special treatment and viewed her as undeserving of help. Silver, a middle class white woman, and Nyisha, a young black woman, had "expressions" that, in Silver's words "must have been particularly desperate" (2010, 283), because the administrator agreed to see them behind the counter and away from the prying eyes of the rest of the housing authority's clients. There, Silver describes how Nyisha was able to find camaraderie and intimacy with the administrator. She was able to successfully position herself as a deserving client, by contrasting herself with the frivolous, "'ignorant' welfare mother" stereotype (Silver 2010, 287). In a second, solo encounter with the housing authority, Nyisha

requested a reassignment after seeing the poor quality of the apartment she had been assigned. Having internalized a narrative of entitlement – of believing that she deserved better – Nyisha mobilized her own trauma as a victim of sexual assault in her dealings with the white man at the housing authority in charge of housing assignments (Silver 2010, 290–92).

In Beu's dealings with bureaucrats – the woman at the Sheldon County courthouse and her public defender – she had limited success. At the courthouse, the woman refused to help Beu disentangle the court summons that she had missed. Beu's homelessness and lack of address did not render her a sympathetic figure deserving of help. If anything, the woman turned colder and less willing to bend any rules for Beu after hearing that she had not received a court summons. It is possible that the woman viewed Beu as undeserving of help because she had been homeless, but it is also possible that she did not believe Beu's story. Beu had been quite calm and straightforward in her explanation of why she had not been able to receive the summons. Unlike Nyisha or Silver, she did not "look desperate", and her request for help did not translate into the necessary assistance for her to replace her permit, or even to determine where the court summons had been sent.

With her public defender, Beu also did not employ the same strategies that Nyisha did in her encounters with the public housing authority. While Nyisha employed narratives of shared identity and intimacy with the administrator, and then narratives of victimhood with the housing assignment man. In contrast, Beu emphasized the chasm of difference between herself and the middle-class white woman who was responsible for making sure that she was safely ushered through the court system in Tyler County. She was homeless, poor, and without a car, and she had been for months, whether her public defender had acknowledged or understood it during that time.

Moreover, while the emotions that Nyisha elicited were likely fear, discomfort, and camaraderie, Beu's primary emotion in her final encounter with her public defender was *anger*. I do not know which emotions her public defender was experiencing during Beu's outburst. From the look on her face, I would guess shock and fear. She had been snapped out of her calm and professional disposition. Suddenly, Beu's situation seemed more urgent and complex. Beu *could not* comply with the court's request, and her public defender's efforts thus far had been unsatisfactory. She would have to instead find a different tactic, and she did. Beu's outburst apparently made such an impression on her public defender that she immediately went to negotiate with the district attorney, talking him down from pursuing charges and punishments that would ultimately be impossible for someone to meet in Beu's circumstances.

REFUSING RESPONSIBILITY

While Silver analyzes Nyisha's performance in terms of identity, I analyze Beu's emotion work as an effort towards a moral accounting, of forcing her public defender, the prosecutor, and the judge to reckon with their demands of her life circumstances. Her outburst laid bare incommensurability between her willingness to be in compliance with the law and her actual ability to do so. Yelling, rather than deference or quiet acceptance, was a disruption to the normal, everyday routine of bureaucracy: she threw a wrench in the cogs of the machinery. Business could not continue as normal or as usual, because there was no way for Beu to be in compliance, and therefore the expectations of the court were absurd and untenable. That it took six months for this to happen, suggests to me that the people at court were habituated to seeing people immediately comply or willfully ignore the court's demands. After all, licenses are

common and useful, and barring exceptional circumstances – such as being in foster care – many Kentuckians have them.

I do not know whether Beu had intended to shout down her public defender in that moment. Nyisha was lucky to have Silver along for her service negotiations, and it is clear from Silver's practitioner experience and Nyisha's careful study that young people navigating service bureaucracies do need some form of guidance and teaching. I was not a case manager, nor was I particularly effective as a navigator of courts or the licensing offices.

What I was able to do, however, was express my own frustration with driving out to Tyler County every month, and my own incredulity at the absurdity of the court's demands. Knowing that I was outraged on her behalf, Beu walked into her last afternoon in court with a shared rage. Up until that point she had accepted the terms of compliance of the court had laid out for her. She wanted to try to get her permit, and then get her license, she wanted to pay restitution. She wanted to do right by the man she had hit. She wanted to be a responsible adult and being a responsible adult to her meant doing what the court asked her to do. She was abiding by a shared narrative of responsibility, and the way that it had to look, what she had to do in order to be perceived as responsible. But her last day, she challenged those terms, because she could not meet them.

By challenging the legitimacy of the court, Beu wrote a very different kind of narrative than Nyisha did in her dealings with the public housing authority, which kept the moral legitimacy of the housing authority intact. Unlike Nyisha, Beu did not believe in the fundamental generosity of the court, but rather a reluctance or an impossible compliance with an institution. She presented a different idea of fairness – punishment was deserved if she had the resources and support to comply, but given that she did not, the court could not punish her for noncompliance.

Silver praises Nyisha for successfully negotiating the terms of her public housing assignment, but she is also critical of the requirement that Nyisha perform all of her vulnerabilities and traumas for in order to seem like a deserving public service recipient. Like Nyisha, Beu also put her vulnerabilities forward in order to justify her request for an exemption to the court's assigning responsibility to her: she was homeless, she was on her own, she had no money and no job. She reproduced a trope of irresponsibility but recast the responsibility for that deprivation onto someone else. It is also worth noting that, at no point, did Beu mention her status as a former foster youth, or her tumultuous relationships with her family, as responsible for her life circumstances. Instead, she simply named a dynamic in which she would not be able to be responsible in the way the court was asking her to. Performing and acknowledging one's vulnerabilities, while productive, was also *strategically* deployed, in the service of making someone else feel guilty for demanding impossible things. It worked.

CONCLUSION

In analyzing Beu's case, I have turned not only to the original text of laws about driving documentation, but the ways that the various state actors – the judge, the prosecutor, the public defender – interpreted the validity of those laws given Beu's life circumstances. Normatively, the law suggests that older adults would be responsible for teaching Beu to drive safely, of getting her a license, and of insuring her. In the case of foster youth who age out, the presumption of support from older adults is not a given. Parents and family members were not legally responsible for Beu during the normative period in which she would likely have acquired a license: she was in placements, where her caregivers were likely preoccupied with other tasks, and Beu's eventual independence was someone else's problem. When she aged out, her family

did not suddenly take on a responsibility to teach her to drive. In fact, based on Beu's accounts, her family actively hindered her from becoming a safe and responsible driver.

Although at every turn, Beu's attempts to be auto-mobile were outside of the law, she seemed to want to take responsibility for her actions and abide by the rules of the court. She felt guilty about the harm she had caused during the crash; she wanted a license; she wanted to pay her restitution. Despite the difficulties, her consistency in never missing a court date suggested to me that, although she had not done been, legally, a responsible driver, she nonetheless hoped to be a responsible driver in the future and in the eyes of the court. To that end, she tried to find a housing and a job, although she struggled to keep either.

Paradoxically, it was through pointing out that her irresponsibility was, in many respects, the result of the actions of others, that she was able to exercise some power and control in bureaucracy. She challenged her public defender, and indirectly, the prosecutor and the judge, to account for the terms of her responsibility given that she did not have the ability to meet them.

In analyzing the ways that Beu made efforts to take responsibility for her legal situation in spite of her difficult circumstances, I observe that she did what she could to hold up her end of the bargain. However, American judges have long taken a non-interference approach when it comes to mobility: rather than making mobility a positive freedom – a freedom *to* move – they have instead characterized it as a negative one – a freedom *from* state restriction on movement. This has had the effect of privatizing responsibility for the dangers of car-based mobility, both for individual people and especially for those young people who cannot depend on others for mobility support. The distinction is crucial, because without access to means of mobility, it is difficult for citizens to fulfill other obligations or act responsibly.

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Beu and I walked out of the courthouse, both of us a bit surprised about the abrupt end to the monotony and repetition of driving back and forth to court.

"I'm so happy for you that you got this taken care of," I told her.

"Me too. I'm glad they didn't just decide to lock me up," she said with a nervous laugh.

As we got in the car, she asked for the Bluetooth and put on the same Rod Wave song she had had on repeat all day. I rolled my eyes: "You get one more play of this song and then I'm putting a moratorium on it. You have to play something else." She grinned at me and turned the volume up. She rolled down the window, shimmying and dancing in the passenger seat, and sang out the window as we pulled out of the parking lot.

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"Should we give them all cars?" Hannah asked me, weeks later, at the office of the children's advocacy organization where she worked. She had offered me a corner of her office and to hang out and write field notes. We had been chatting over lunch, and I was taken aback by her question. Well-informed about child welfare legislation in Kentucky, Hannah understood what might be politically possible in Kentucky's state legislature. She could, in theory, make policy recommendations that might eventually make their way into law, and she wanted my input.

She went on, musing about the idea while picking at a salad with a fork. "It wouldn't be that expensive. Not that many kids age out every year; they" — the legislature, presumably — "definitely have the money. You could probably find secondhand cars for them that are affordable," she said. She floated the idea of a subsidized or price-controlled insurance policy

specifically for former foster youth, and reinvigorating policy efforts to make sure that they all had cars and licenses by the time they left care.

I continue to mull over the possible tactics to address some of the problems that arose as I followed Beu through court and the DMV. There are myriad potential ways that policymakers and social services providers can address the material gaps that bureaucracy produces, each requiring different levels of investment and revealing different priorities in governance. My conversation with Hannah illustrates one possible policy approach: skip the bureaucracy altogether and simply hand cars and insurance over to young people as they leave care. Offering them the resource without having them jump through hoops seems like it would lessen the requirement that young people become effective bureaucrats themselves, takes one more thing off their list of things to think about during their transition out of care.

On the other hand, Beu's case also led me to a much broader structural and cultural wondering about American car culture, and the ways that individual people are compelled to bear the responsibilities and manage the risks of driving. The American car system works because private actors bear the financial costs and risks of driving in order to maintain their mobility. Because the car insurance system is both mandatory and priced by perceived amount of risk, legally, responsibility for car and road use has been devolved to individual people and for-profit companies. When people have car access – or they are presumed to have car access – legislators have little incentive to expand public transportation and restrict car ownership. The freedom that cars offer is conditioned on bearing an enormous amount of responsibility for managing the dangers and warrants further investigation and study.

Notably, in November 2021, more than a year after the conclusion of her own court case, Beu found a non-car solution to transportation issues: a motorized scooter. She and her then-

boyfriend had purchased a cheap scooter and, as she excitedly told me via text, “It’s only $4 to fill up on gas!” They were able to take the scooter to a grocery store nearby, and never needed to get much further for daily essentials. Half-joking, I asked her a version of the question Amanda had posed to me: “Should we give everyone who ages out a scooter?” She considered it and said that she thought it could be a good idea. I followed up, joking that she should be in charge of transportation policy.

“No thanks, lol,” she replied, “I don’t want the responsibility.”

INTERLUDE: BEU

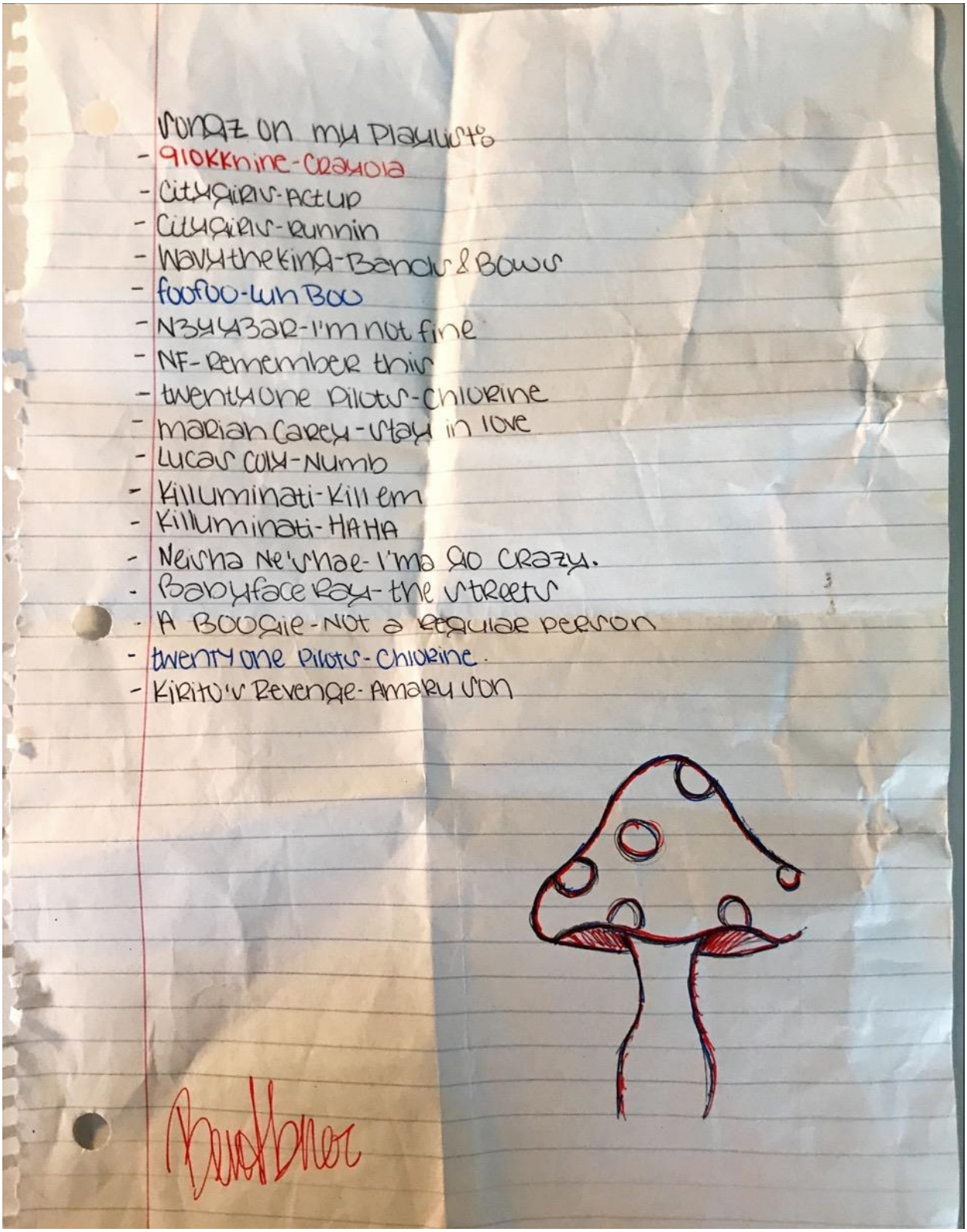

Illustration 6. One of Beu's car playlists. Photo by author.

PART III. WEBS OF SUPPORT

At the beginning of Part II, I wrote briefly about Nikki, the Director of True Up, an organization that provided social services for former foster youth in Louisville. During our initial meeting, she gave me much to consider about regarding the various organizations and challenges facing young people who age out, and the service providers who try to meet their needs as they puzzle through their transitions to adulthood. She noted that a growing number of nonprofit and community organizations in Louisville offered varying kinds of services to former foster youth: mentoring programs, housing for LGBTQ+ youth, independent living programs. "Everyone has a slice," she explained. She maintained that even when there are conflicts between organizations about the specifics of how *best* to support former foster youth, that the ultimate goal was the same: "Different views are okay, as long as the end goal doesn't change." She seemed knowledgeable about the state-affiliated public agencies and independent private organizations that offered resources to former foster youth.

I was impressed, by both her knowledge and also the apparently large and diverse array of possible avenues for young people to access support services. I told her that I was surprised – I had expected to find the opposite, a lack of opportunities and resources. She paused before commenting on the availability of services compared to their actual usage.

"On paper, it looks like they have everything," she said, but only if they assume that they are *worthy* of help. She continued, positing that young people derive a sense of worthiness from their support networks, and they cannot do it in the absence of others.

I sat back and pondered the implications of Nikki's statement. She had made an observation – former foster youth did not make full use of the available services – which she explained through a generalization about their feelings of unworthiness. Like Silver, Nikki

characterized former foster youth as people who had bought into the idea that "services must be earned through demonstrations of responsibility and success" (Silver 279), rather than given as a matter of principle or obligation. Deservingness was not necessarily a given for either former foster youth or service providers.

Moreover, Silver's ethnographic work offers empirical evidence for Nikki's claim, that young people who navigate social services must internalize a narrative of deservingness in order to successfully navigate services, and most importantly, that self-advocacy is a skill that must be modeled and *taught*. She states this explicitly: "an entitlement narrative could be taught and practiced" to "create openings for identity negotiation" (Silver 2010, 285–86), which allowed the young woman, Nyisha, to acquire publicly subsidized housing for herself and her young child. Young people who internalize this idea of deservingness and entitlement, are most often the ones probably who succeed in life according to program priorities.

Nikki drew from a deep well of experience, one borne of years of working directly with young people and service organizations, and she seemingly had spent a lot of time reflecting on best practices in her work. However, I was also skeptical of her attribution of service underutilization to feelings of deservingness. In my own dealings with former foster youth, I most often found that young people often did not *know* about the resources available to them. In Beu's case, she knew about resources available, but had to contend with long wait times and providers hanging up on her or putting her on hold when she called. She was also generally deferential and polite, and rarely pushed back on such treatment, until she felt empowered or enraged enough to do so, as I outlined in the previous chapter. I also found that former foster youths do not necessarily share goals with service providers or mentors – they can and do have different priorities. My interpretations came from a different kind of encounter with former foster

youth than Nikki's experiences. I was not a service provider. I could inform young people about services they might be able to access, particularly health insurance, and brainstorm with young people about how to make use of opportunities. Initially, I rarely *felt* directly responsible for them; as a researcher, rather than a mentor, I could focus my attention on *how* they made decisions rather than the outcomes or consequences of those choices.

Nikki's statement encapsulated the complicated ways that caring adults enter and influence the lives of former foster youth, both within the context of social services programs, and outside of them. Her understanding of service usage and self-worth, and the ways this explanation converged and diverged from my own experiences with former foster youths, presents a productive tension I explore in this chapter: What is the role of caring adults in guiding foster youths through their transitions to adulthood? What do they teach former foster youths, and what do young people learn? What expectations do caring adults have of young people, and how do young people internalize, challenge, or refuse these expectations? All of my young interlocutors described caring adults who encourage them to believe in themselves, made them feel worthy and deserving, and supported them emotionally during periods of hardship, in and out of care. In some cases, I met these individuals; in some cases, I became one of them.

Specifically, Nikki mentioned an organization, Web Weavers Louisville, that took a network approach to life after care for former foster youth: a "web" of support the organization attempted to cultivate with and on behalf of young people who used their services. A web of support consists of people connected to young people across different developmental domains (Varga and Zaff 2018): school, family, etc. Each person brings their particular form and style of support to young people. They might help young people navigate social services, offer friendly advice about relationships and conflict, or material resources like housing or money. Those

individuals who are especially reliable become “anchors” in the web, and each of them is similarly supported by their own networks of supporters.

Rather than a single person doing all of the support work for a single young person, Nikki explained, a better approach might be for young people to have a person who played a role in each aspect of their lives. She said that young people needed not one, but five caring adults to support them, and each of those adults needed their own web of support as well. One person was not enough, nor were five people, but a web of twenty-five people was necessary to support one young person into adulthood. Nikki’s characterization of webs of support diverges from the article from which is drawn: Varga and Zaff do not mention a number.

As she spoke, I considered my own “web of support” – who were my five people? My parents came to mind immediately, as did my partner and two close friends from college. Each of them plays a different role in my life. Sometimes those roles overlap – I vent to everyone, for example, and seek advice from each of them. However, I have never called my college friends to ask them what to do after a car accident, for instance, and instead my first call is to my partner (he knows a lot about cars), then to my father (with whom I share a car insurance plan). The roles each of them has played in my life has also changed. My friend Heidi began as “classmate”, then “cohort-mate” when we won the same undergraduate research fellowship, terms that are relatively emotionally and socially distant from the intimacy we’d grow into. Now, she is “friend” and “sister”, terms of companionship, joy, and kin. My parents transformed from providers and caregivers into trusted advisors, and they reminded me over and over growing up that they were my parents, not my friends. The people who are in my trusted core of support have grown and changed in the time I have known them, and our relationships have changed too. The specific myriad roles they play in my life – roommate, friend, classmate, parent, caregiver,

partner – also have specific contours, functions, and histories. We work out what each of those things mean, and what we mean to each other; they are not static relationships, and we absorb and grow around new situations and experiences.

These are the people I would call in an emergency, and not necessarily because any of them could come and show up to help me in person. I have lived hundreds of miles away from parents for well over a decade, only able to see them after a minimum of four hours of air travel, sixteen hours by car, or multiple days by public transportation. I have also not lived in the same city as Heidi and Camille in years. They are people I would call because I trust them to calm me down, to have some sage wisdom or a joke to distract me; I call them for the stability they represent in my life, borne of years of giving them my problems to hold onto and getting theirs in return, of celebrating wins and mourning losses, of puzzling through political questions and moral conundrums together.

Perhaps this seems obvious – that relationships have different functions and effects that change over time – but until my conversation with Nikki, I had not understood my relationships as a web, nor did I fully realize the flexibility with which people approach their relationships. I took the presence of such relationships for granted; after all, they have been there for most of my adult life. Nikki pointing out the *absence* of such supports for former foster youth reframed my own understanding of the diversity of roles people play in my life.

The webs of support model also mattered in the case of interpersonal conflict between caring adults and former foster youths, and here I focus largely on conflict. Most often, among mentoring scholars, conflict is understood as the beginning of an end to relationships between former foster youth and caring adults. In qualitative studies of mentoring, researchers who speak directly with mentees find that when young people feel they cannot trust their mentor, they

disengage and refuse any sort of supportive or intimate contact (Spencer 2006). Well intentioned mentors can attempt to reestablish trust and concern with their mentees, but in most cases, conflict remains unresolved. A web of support can offer a variety of emotional, financial, or other forms of support for young people and caring adults alike, allowing them to sustain themselves and one another through periods of conflict. Conversely, the absence of a widespread network of support can make conflict harder, or even impossible, to resolve. I examine both possibilities here: in Jonathan's case, he and Rita were able to work out their differences with the support of a much broader network of indirect support. In Beu's case, however, she and Emmett struggled to effectively resolve their conflicts amidst structural issues – race, gender, and other structural violence – in the absence of such a broad network of supportive and caring adults. The cordoning off of conflict to particular aspects of Beu's network made it difficult for adults who cared for Beu to support one another and reaffirmed the importance of having a multitude and variety of caring roles for aiding former foster youths.

Nikki's framing also changed how I saw my own fieldwork endeavor. I met her when I was still in the planning stage of my project. When I began meeting people and asking if they wanted to participate in my study, I started looking and listening for any mention of other adults who might be part of any given young person's web of support. In three cases, I met an adult who was a part of a young person's web of support first, who then introduced me to a young person they knew: Jonathan, Beu, and Hayley. When I met young people, I let them lead the way in conversations. I occasionally posed direct questions to my younger interlocutors, but in most cases I made observations about our surroundings or mentioned puzzles that had emerged during my fieldwork. I would wait for them to respond, just to see where they might take me. Sometimes they spoke about the adults who introduced us, and sometimes they mentioned other

people: older siblings or cousins, aunts, uncles, grandparents, parents, old friends, new friends, caseworkers, and service providers. If someone came up repeatedly, I would ask about whether that person might be interested in meeting. Most of the time, young people responded no, that person would probably not want to talk to me. Sometimes, however, they did, and I would ask for an introduction. This was how I came to spend time with Silas, who was a friend and artist mentor to Jonathan, and how I ran a very stressful impromptu focus group with Hayley's coworkers.

Later in Part III, I describe how I met some of these supportive adults and speculate about some of their possible motivations for arranging for me to meet the young people to whom they introduced me. I say "speculate" because I never asked why they decided to introduce me to young people in their orbits. Those who introduced me to Jonathan and Hayley suggested I meet them after learning about my research project. They seemed to think I would find Jonathan and Hayley thoughtful and enthusiastic interlocutors (I did), young people who would be eager to talk and therefore helpful for my research (they were). Emmett introduced me to Beu, most likely from a pragmatic standpoint: she needed a ride, and he borrowed my phone to contact her because his phone was not working. We were old friends, I was around at the time she needed help, and he trusted me. In each case, their decision to involve me in the lives of young people reflects personal knowledge, only possible by some form of prior relationship. These supportive adults knew Jonathan, Hayley, and Beu well enough – and they knew me well enough – to think of our meeting as a good idea.

Whether I met people through young people or supportive adults, I tried to work out what their relationships were like to each other, and over time, what *my* relationships with all parties could or should look like. Like the many roles that people in my web of support play for me, I

found that my interlocutors drafted me into a variety of roles, both while I was physically in Kentucky during my fieldwork period, and afterwards, as in-person field relationships shifted into more disembodied, text-mediated relationships when I left during the pandemic.

At least, they attempted to do so: I often refused roles I had been asked to play. Initially, I shrugged off any attempt to position me as a professional expert of any kind – I am not a lawyer, nor a case worker, although Beu tried to introduce me to others in this role. I thought that passing myself off in these roles would run me into a slew of problems with professional associations that formally certify these kinds of roles; I was, I thought, simply a researcher. In other circumstances, it was harder for me to shake off the roles I was asked to play; was I a mentor, as Beu explained she thought of me? Was I, by virtue of my prior experience working with young people, an expert in children and adolescence, a sort of fount of wisdom for adults who were entangled with young people? Was I a navigator, someone who could help young people move through social services bureaucracies? Was I an agent of the state, sent to monitor or keep an eye on young people who had left state custody? Was I an exploitative Ivy League East Coast type, sent to make a career off these people in Kentucky? Although I was deeply uncomfortable with these shifting roles, which put me in a position of power that made fieldwork complicated, it's hard for me to be mad at people who were asking me for input while they working through hard questions, weird late-night thoughts, anxieties, insecurities and emergencies.

The fluidity of my role(s) in the field was challenging to manage at an interpersonal level, and even harder to work through as I reflected on how to write about it in my encounters with the people who appear in the next two chapters. That fluidity of role was, however, a useful thing to consider as a research methods question. In taking stock of what kinds of roles I was being asked

to play, I was given flashes of insight into what people needed or wanted: from me, from each other, and from an oft-referred-to-but-rarely-explained "system" of social services.

CHAPTER 7. PRIORITIZING EDUCATION

RITA AND JONATHAN

Beginning in the summer of 2019, when I was revamping my dissertation research design, and all the way through the spring of 2021, long after I had returned to Rhode Island due to the pandemic, Rita and I found a way to talk in real time at least once a month. When I was still in Louisville, we would meet for coffee. When I moved away, we would set up monthly phone calls to check in and catch up. Through fieldwork, the pandemic, and during the write-up process, she became a trusted confidante, sounding board, thoughtful reader of my writing, and dear friend.

Around September, our meetings had fallen into a comfortingly familiar pattern. We would set a time a few days in advance: the morning of, one or both of us would text the other, "I'm sorry, I'm running a few minutes late!" One of us would arrive in the shop, the other would show up, and we'd order our drinks. We almost always sat at the same table, right in the middle of the middle of the café, one of us facing the window. I can't recall ever meeting on a cloudy day, so the blinding morning sun was always in someone's eyes. We would take out notebooks and pens, drink our coffee, check in about our weeks.

Rita would always ask me about how my research was going, what I was doing that week. After hearing my research updates, she would suggest things to read and people to speak with, always curbing her suggestions with a gentle, "Only if you have time…". She was understanding about the time limits of fieldwork, and always had a few words of encouragement for me. Rita, a Louisville transplant from eastern Kentucky, was a self-described "recovering academic" with a doctorate in women's studies. Her dissertation had been on Kentuckians in the movement for the abolition of slavery during the eighteenth century. She had taught for a while

in a handful of colleges and universities in Kentucky before moving to Louisville. She was involved with feminist organizing in academic settings in Kentucky for a long time. Her mother got sick, however, and Rita left academia to take care of her. She began working for nonprofit organizations in Perry County, and then later helped found the nonprofit network she ran while I was in the field. It was through her nonprofit work that she had met Jonathan, and through her policy engagements that I met her.

Rita and I shared a set of frustrations about balancing advocacy work, direct service provision, and thoughtful reflection about both. Her academic background prompted her to try to get at patterns and theories, which did not always make sense with her friends and colleagues in the nonprofit world, who focused on meeting the more immediate needs of the people to whom they provided services: food, shelter, health care, jail support, court fees, bail. Nor did her theorizing resonate with the ever-pragmatic, strategically minded lobbyists and policy advocates with whom she worked closely. She was always talking about wanting to see "the big picture". She worried that her efforts to improve jail conditions for incarcerated people and their families was merely "tinkering" with the prison system instead of contributing towards her larger goal of prison abolition. Talking about research with me, I think, helped her to exercise her academic reflexes for abstraction and theorizing about what she was doing. Our talks certainly helped me think through what I was doing in the field.

Over time, Jonathan became an increasingly frequent topic during our conversations. I told her that I was grateful she had introduced us, and eventually began to ask her more actively about her relationship with Jonathan: "How did you meet?" She explained that they had met several years after she had been asked to help found a nonprofit organization that did art activities with families affected by incarceration. With a solid foundation of activities and

knowledge, the organization took the activities they developed and started trying them in other places where children had been affected by the incarceration of their family members. They ended up at another nonprofit organization that partnered with communities to give young people work and educational opportunities. Jonathan came and did the proscribed art activities for a bit, but then started doing his own art, long after everyone else at the organization had left the art table alone.

"It was really good!" she recalled, sipping her latte, noting that other volunteers and artists were similarly impressed. From there, she began to get to know him a little more and started looking out for him and making connections for him when she could. She introduced him to Silas, her neighbor, who was also an artist and photographer.

At one of our coffee meetings, she told me that she was concerned about Jonathan. He would be turning 23 soon and aging out of the organization, becoming ineligible for their support services or employment. The stipend money he earned through his work would disappear, and although he had an outside job, it was a seasonal position as a gardener, and it might not last much longer. She asked me if Jonathan had spoken to me about his various mentors, as he had been involved in a variety of social services organizations apart from the one where he had met Rita. I smiled and said that he had, and he had told me he appreciated all of them for supporting him. Rita raised her eyebrows and got quiet, before skeptically murmuring that one of Jonathan's mentors, "played favorites". She spoke highly, however, of Jonathan's other mentor, Mr. Will, an older Black man who could be tough on Jonathan, but for whom Jonathan had expressed a great deal of trust and respect.

As she spoke, she considered what it meant for Jonathan to have good mentors. Of the two, she was distrustful of one, both for his favoritism and because Rita saw him as over

overbearing and paternalistic. Jonathan's mentor often made decisions on behalf of the young people she mentored, rather than allowing them to make choices for themselves. Perhaps, if Rita had agreed with this mentor's assessments, she might have had a different opinion, but Rita understood him as making ill-informed decisions for young people. On the other hand, Rita described Mr. Will as someone who listened to young people and helped them clarify what decisions were available, and how to make the best of their options.

Given that Jonathan was aging out of his nonprofit job, and her considerations of how other mentors in Jonathan's web of support might advise him, Rita was conflicted about guiding him to this next phase of his life. She said, slowly, that she was unsure what her role was with Jonathan, but that she sometimes wished that he would make better choices. She specifically mentioned wanting to help him get into college, but that he had not expressed interest in going to college. There had been times where he had simply not followed through on tasks or meetings or events. When she asked him about it, he had told her that leaving things unfinished was one of his ways of getting out of things that he did not want to do after he promised that he would do them.

I told her that I sometimes found myself annoyed with young people and often disagreed with decisions they made. I was frustrated that they were not making different choices, I explained to her, but I also was trying to be cognizant that my choices could not be their choices because I had not lived their lives. What might appear to be a "bad choice" to me might be the best choice available to them. She pondered this and said that her goal was to offer him more options, and that in her experience, people with college degrees had more options available to

them in life. She wanted him to try to get him into Berea College[37], but that he had not shown much interest in even applying. She said that she had taken Jonathan to visit Berea, and that she talked to the admissions officer who was there. Jonathan had liked the grounds, she said, but had not been interested in talking to the admissions officer.

She caught herself when she was talking about Jonathan. She was hesitant, halting, her speech full of pauses. He had changed in the time that she had known him: she tried to help him, but she was unsure of what her role was supposed to be. She haltingly told me that she did not always agree with his choices but also that he had to make his own decisions and she could not make them for him.

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Rita was asking me to help her work through an ethical conundrum that emerged out of a deep sense of concern for Jonathan: What role should she play in his life? Specifically, hers was a definitional concern. Clarifying her role in his life could spell out her responsibilities, duties, and obligations to him. Rita seemed conflicted, torn between her own sensibilities, Jonathan's, and those of his other mentors.

As she spoke, Rita made comparisons between the other caring adults in Jonathan's life, with whom she was in contact, Mr. Will and his other mentor. In opining on their interactions with Jonathan, Rita was delineating what she believed their responsibilities were to him, and the

[37] Berea College is a small, private liberal arts college in Berea, Kentucky. Founded by abolitionist John G. Fee in 1855, it was the first coeducational and racially integrated institution of higher education in the South. They do not charge tuition and are funded by private donations and a large endowment; no student pays tuition, fees, or room and board. Berea has a mandatory work-study program; every admitted student is required to work in an on-campus job. It was also the academic home of noted Black Feminist theorist, bell hooks. For Jonathan, it would have been a good option for a liberal arts education because it was rigorous and free, without the complexity of applying for financial aid or filing a FAFSA.

ways they failed or fulfilled those responsibilities. Implicitly, she was also considering what her responsibility was for Jonathan.

Rita expressed some doubts about one of Jonathan's mentors, worrying that he was withholding crucial advice or resources from Jonathan that he might have given to others. Jonathan had never complained about this mentor to me, nor did I meet him: I have little firsthand knowledge about their relationship. At stake for Rita, however, was a concern about the fairness of this mentor's help.

Rita expressed a secondary concern, which was the preservation of young people's autonomy and ability to make decisions on their own. Rita seemed to be concerned that this mentor was not helping Jonathan to become a thoughtful decision maker and was depriving him of the opportunity to make choices on his own. I did not learn which, if any, decisions he had made on Jonathan's behalf, or what his motivations were for any such decisions. However, Rita's skepticism of this mentor mirrored Rita's own concerns about her own suggestions to get Jonathan into college.

On the other hand, Rita seemed to be in contact with Mr. Will, whose judgment and experiences she and Jonathan valued greatly. As a white woman, Rita understood the limits of her ability to relate to Jonathan's experiences as a young Black man. Like Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) argue, she could express care and concern, but he could not necessarily identify with her in the way that Mr. Will could. Her understanding of Mr. Will's and Jonathan's relationship stemmed from a principle I observed in her other political work: she prioritized listening to those who had been directly affected by systems of oppression. She deferred to the judgment of others who were closer to the issues about which she cared and organized. I did not learn whether Mr. Will had ever expressed an opinion about Jonathan's education: he and I never

met, and he died a few months after I left the field. In an interview with Jonathan in 2022, however, he suggested to me that he might have ended up in college had Mr. Will still been alive. Even if he had not, however, he still felt that Mr. Will would have been proud of him.

As a teacher and academic, Rita's goal – getting Jonathan into college – makes sense. She valued it enough for herself to pursue an advanced degree, and she correctly pointed out that people who earn a bachelor's degree tend to make more money over the course of their lifetimes.[38] Former foster youth, in particular, attend and finish college at lower rates than their peers who were not in foster care (M. E. Courtney et al. 2011). She wanted to give him more options to do a greater variety of work. However, the options that a college degree would make possible might include more office-centered work, while Jonathan was someone who spent all his time creating – with his hands, in the studio, on the street. Climbing an educational ladder and engaging in conventional forms of waged work were not options for Jonathan, not for a lack of ability, but because he simply did not want to do them.

Given his reluctance, Rita seemed to be wondering whether her goal – getting Jonathan into college – was a fulfillment of an obligation to provide resources for him or an imposition of her own desires and opinions onto him. It seemed to me that Rita hoped to avoid repeating what she saw as an overdetermination of Jonathan's life but was also unsure of how to grapple with the fact that she and Jonathan disagreed about what was best for him.

The difference between Rita and Jonathan's other mentors was that Mr. Will and his other mentor were what youth mentoring researchers Johanna Greeson and Natasha Bowen call "programmatic mentors", or people who consciously take on the role through mentoring or social

[38] I base this claim on a study conducted by Pew, which relied on census data and self-reported survey questions on the perceptions of potential earnings and actual income. The data is also quite old, published in 2014. See Taylor et al. (2014).

services programs (Greeson and Bowen 2008, 1179). Rita was closer to what they called a "natural mentor", or "naturally occurring important adults in a youth's environment" (Greeson and Bowen 2008, 1179).[39] While the phrase "naturally occurring" hardly describes Rita's appearance in Jonathan's life, the concept of a natural mentor – a non-kin caring adult who takes an active role in a young person's life, outside of a program – is a helpful shorthand for Rita's relationship with Jonathan. Greeson and Bowen further distinguish natural from programmatic mentors on the quality and duration of the relationships: programmatic mentoring tends to be shorter, while natural mentoring relationships endure for long periods of time. Young people tend to find their natural mentors more trustworthy, authentic, and reliable than programmatic mentors (Greeson, Thompson, Ali, et al. 2015).

Both Mr. Will and Jonathan's other mentor, whom Jonathan had met through his participation in social services, had voluntarily signed on to mentor him as part of their work with that program. The terms of their relationship were set by the program itself. They were both charged with ensuring that Jonathan was receiving support and that they were pushing him to meet the goals of the program. Rita had similarly met Jonathan through his participation in a

[39] Distinguishing between these different kinds of mentoring relationships allows Greeson to comment specifically on their differing efficacies. She notes that outcomes for mentoring programs are mixed, and do not always produce desired researchers' and experts' desired outcomes (Avery 2011). She suggests that mentoring programs might be made more efficacious – meaning that they produce more of the researchers' desired results – if social services programs focused more attention on young people's natural mentors, who are already known entities in their lives, rather than introducing them to strangers through mentoring programs (Greeson, Usher, and Grinstein-Weiss 2010; Greeson 2013; Greeson, Thompson, Evans-Chase, et al. 2015; Greeson and Thompson 2017). As a researcher, Greeson's primary goal seems to be developing a youth mentoring program that can be scaled and adapted by child welfare systems, one that incorporates natural mentors into the fold of child welfare oversight. In her studies, young people consistently identify "authenticity" and "confidentiality" as key aspects of their relationships with natural mentors (Greeson, Usher, and Grinstein-Weiss 2010; Greeson and Bowen 2008; Greeson 2013). Ironically, these qualities are the most likely to be disrupted by training natural mentors to implement the goals and procedures of formal oversight, transforming natural mentors into programmatic ones.

social services program, but her primary role in that program was not as a mentor, and her role in Jonathan's life far exceeded the program's goals. There were no protocols or procedures or guidelines for her to follow: she was having to figure out what they were as she continued to try to be a support for Jonathan.

Her decisions were instead based on her own instincts, motivations, and beliefs about a good life. They were also rooted in a personal and political ethos that emphasized prioritizing the voices of the directly impacted, and in distributing knowledge and resources equitably. In much of her work, these ethical values – respect for the autonomy of others, deference to others' experiences, and ensuring equal access to opportunity – rarely contradicted one another. In Jonathan's resistance to going to college, however, she realized that these could be in conflict with each other, and she was unsure about how to proceed.

Instead, she turned to others – me, Silas, and later, to Dean, a Louisville-based lawyer and friend of hers – to build a web of support around Jonathan. She regularly consulted with Mr. Will and Jonathan himself, but she turned to us to try to work out her own feelings of frustration and moral conflict before making decisions about what actions she ought to take.

JONATHAN AND SILAS

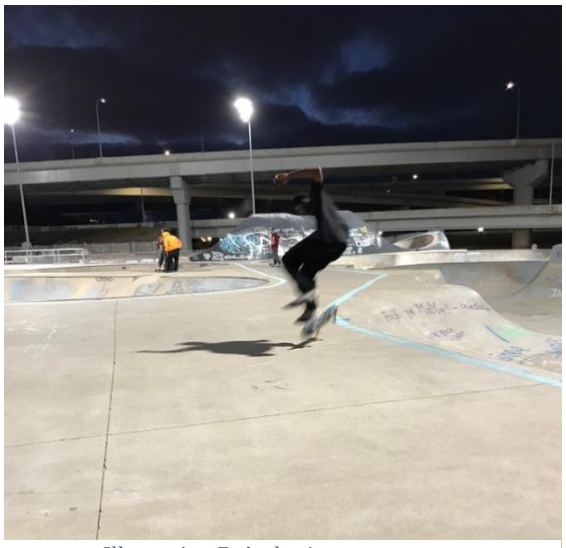

Illustration 7. Author's attempt to capture skateboarder in motion.

Jonathan had invited me to another photo walk, this time with Silas, Rita's neighbor and a fellow photographer. Jonathan explained to me that he and Silas had taken photos at the skate park together before. It was a challenge to capture people in motion, and therefore good practice for aspiring photographers. I was happy to be invited along. Silas took a few photos of me and Jonathan, and the two of them took turns trying a variety of skateboard tricks. The three of us kept up a running conversation, meandering between photography talk – shot composition, exposure times, the pros and cons of different cameras – and a variety of explicitly ethical conversations about right and wrong, and political conversations about the urgency of environmental catastrophe and police brutality. After a while, we moved closer to the center of the park. Jonathan had seen a friend of his and went off on his own to take a few photos of him doing some skateboard stunts, while I struck up a conversation with Silas.

"How often do you all get to come and do photography together?" I asked.

"Yeah well, I haven't known him that long, I think I met him just a few weeks ago, at that meeting," Silas started, "You were there too, right?"

"Yeah, I was!" I said, remembering seeing Silas there with his wife and child.

"Right. Well, he's fun to hang out with, and he also does photography — not that I needed him to do photography to spend time with him, but it's definitely a plus that we have something to do together," Silas continued.

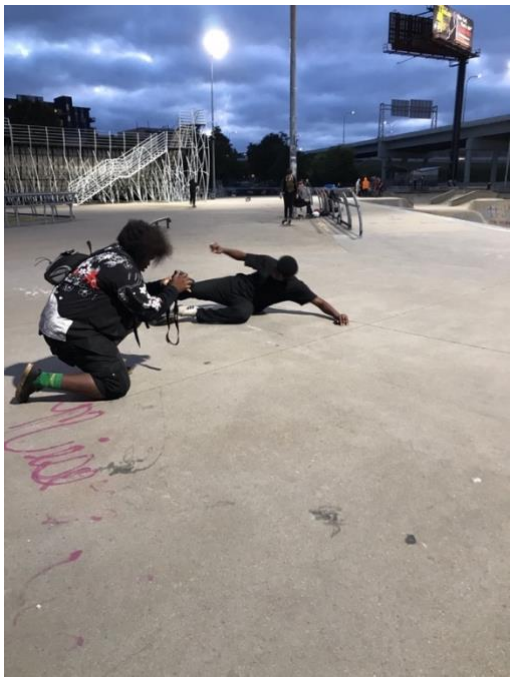

Illustration 8. Jonathan taking photos at the skate park.

Jonathan returned to chat with us, asking more photography questions and weighing in on the relative creativity of photography and rap music as art.

"Do you ever think about writing your thoughts down?" Silas asked, grinning.

"Yeah, but I have too many!" Jonathan said, and all three of us cackled. He went on.

"People like hearing what I have to say all the time, but I filter out my thoughts," he explained.

"Do you work out what you're trying to say while saying it?" Silas asked.

Jonathan was quiet for a minute, then said, "I have thousands of thoughts and I have to work it out as I'm saying it, but I usually try to pick two and go with those." As the sun went down, the light faded: after some technical conversation about low-light photography, we called it a day and headed home.

The week after I went to the skate park with Jonathan and Silas, I was sitting at a coffee shop on Frankfort Avenue. I was slogging through my own chicken scratch, typing up field notes and nursing a latte when Silas walked in. He did not see me at first, but I gave him a little wave

as he was leaving, giving him an option to simply wave back and leave if he had somewhere else to be. Instead, he came over to chat.

He asked how I was doing, and we made small talk for a few minutes before he brought up Jonathan. He said he had had a great time hanging out with the two of us at the skate park the week before. I thanked him for letting me tag along and said I had had a good time and wanted to go again. He said that would be fun, then hesitated and lowered his voice. He kept the smile on his face as he began telling me about his recent interactions with Jonathan. He and Rita had been working really hard to try to get Jonathan into college.

He said that things had ratcheted up recently because they realized the deadline for applications was soon. They signed him up for the ACT and were trying to prepare him to take it. I got the impression that they were having issues with this process, that either Jonathan did not know what to do or was hesitant or reluctant to do it. I asked when Jonathan was taking the ACT, and Silas said soon, fewer than two weeks away. He said that he was worried, because Jonathan had testing issues but that there was no evidence for it in the form of documentation and they were worried that he was not going to get the necessary extra time. I remembered that, from when Jonathan and I first met, he understood himself to be an excellent test-taker but only with the right amount of time. He described retaking a test over and over again during a class at a social services organization, learning the material through repetition, before finally passing. “I’m smart,” he had told me then, “it just takes me a little bit longer”.

We chatted more, Silas telling me that he and Rita had been trying to get Jonathan to take some practice tests, but that he was dragging his feet on them. Silas expressed some worry that Jonathan would not actually show up for the ACT, in part because he could not take time off of

work. I grimaced, sucking my breath in through a clenched jaw: so did he. He looked off to the side for a moment.

"Well, we'll see I guess," I told him. I mentioned the debate team I had coached in college, and the standardized test preparation I'd done with my former students. He told me to reach out to Rita to see what else I could do: "We need all the help we can get." He finished our conversation, mentioning that he worked nearby and that he should probably be getting back. We said our goodbyes and off he went.

Field notes, October 22; four days until the ACT

Silas messaged me today on instagram, asking about whether I recommended a graphing calculator for the ACT. I told him that I thought they were useful if you knew the math and knew how to use the calculator to actually get it done, and he sent me a link to a cheap, $20 graphing calculator on amazon and asked if I thought it was a good one. He thanked me for the advice, but I dont know if he ended up buying it.

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Based on the one time the three of us spent time together, I got the sense that Jonathan and Silas genuinely enjoyed each other's company. Silas asked thoughtful questions, and earnestly listened to Jonathan's responses. Jonathan, well-attuned to the attitudes and reception of his words, understood Silas to be a helpful interlocutor with regards to art and photography, and a good listener. The ebb and flow of our conversation over several hours, only winding down with the sun, suggested to me that there was an ease to their relationship, despite the two of them not having known each other long.

Although it is hard to characterize Silas' role in Jonathan's life as a mentoring relationship, it had some of the qualities of mentorship identified by youth mentoring scholars. Silas was nonjudgmental and authentic with Jonathan – he listened to Jonathan's thoughts and opinions, encouraged him to share more and even perhaps to write them down. He was getting to know Jonathan through a shared interest, doing the work of engaging with him on an activity that was important to both of them but was considerably lower stakes than the career and educational counseling that Rita was attempting. A lack of judgment, authenticity, and engaging with young people's interests and hobbies are among the qualities of successful youth mentoring relationships studied by Rhodes et. al. (2006), Munson et. al. (2010) and Best and Blakeslee (2020). Building rapport with young people – especially considering relationships that cross racial lines – is crucial.

However, based on our conversation in the coffee shop the week after we went to the skate park together, I wondered to what extent Silas had consciously taken on a different sort of responsibility towards Jonathan, one that involved guiding him towards particular goals or outcomes. He had been trying to find ways to prepare Jonathan for the ACT, and like Rita, understood that Jonathan was reluctant and hesitant to engage with this goal. He did not comment on whether Jonathan *wanted* to go to college or do the work of applying to school, but rather seemed focused on eliminating or reducing the barriers Jonathan cited: getting time off of work, feeling unprepared, needing test-taking accommodations. Silas did not seem to be involved in pushing Jonathan to apply to college, but rather on resolving some of these potential problems to make it an easier decision for Jonathan to make.

Silas had become involved in Rita's process of working through an ethical conundrum about Jonathan's educational opportunities, and his relationship with Jonathan changed in the

process. Silas shifted from a more passive, listener role into a more actively influential role. I did not fully understand his motivation for doing so – we only met a few times. I saw him as someone who, like Rita, was likely to defer to others' expertise and experience. Perhaps he saw Rita encouraging Jonathan to go to college, and agreed with her reasoning, and followed suit. It is possible, though unlikely, that he had insights into Jonathan's preferences and wants that Rita did not have and was acting accordingly. Perhaps, simply, he saw college as a nebulous "right thing" and wanted to ensure that Jonathan had the opportunity to go if he wanted to go. As I noted in the introduction, it could be hard to discern motivations and ethical imperatives from my interlocutors, but what was clear to me was Silas' hope to offer Jonathan opportunities, even if he did not decide to take them. Their shared interest in photography, his earnestness in listening to Jonathan's thoughts, his willingness to do work on his own time to help and seek guidance from others: these characteristics all indicated to me that Silas cared about Jonathan, and that motivation may have been enough.

"He's not my kid."

Late in October, a few days before Jonathan was scheduled to take the ACT, Rita and I had another meeting. She asked a few questions about how I was doing, and how research was going. I updated her, and then asked how she was doing. She was frustrated: she was struggling to find consensus with other local organizers and service providers, and she was frustrated with Jonathan. She flitted from topic to topic, as though she could not decide which of these frustrations was most pressing. After a brief distraction from some of the other coffee shop patron, she was quiet for a moment.

"You know, dealing with Jonathan, I never had kids — he's not my kid, I definitely don't get that confused."

I nodded, but didn't say anything, wondering if she would say more. She switched topics again, inviting me to Silas' art show on Friday, before returning to Jonathan. I mentioned that I had run into Silas the week prior and that he had been trying to sign up Jonathan for the ACT, and I offered to help with test preparation and applications. She thanked me and reiterated that she was frustrated. As part of her crusade to get Jonathan into Berea, she had set up a meeting with the Berea admissions officer who handled "nontraditional students", namely students who were not entering their first year of college immediately after high school. He had driven to Louisville to meet with her and Jonathan, which she appreciated – it was a long drive.

Despite the efforts she and the admissions officer had made to meet with Jonathan, he was unenthusiastic. Her voice rising, Rita told me she was appalled that he had yawned in the admissions officer's face during the meeting and slouched in his chair for the duration. He had told her beforehand that he did not want to go, and he did not think he was going to learn anything. Rita said she was impressed with admissions officer for being a "straight shooter", who told Jonathan outright that if he applied and were to be accepted, they needed a guarantee that he would not drop out of college. She said she felt that Jonathan did not seem worried about impressing him, and she threw up her hands in frustration. When they left, she said that Jonathan told her that he had not learned anything new from their conversation. "I wanted to call bullshit on that," she said; *she* had learned a lot in the meeting, more about college admissions and Berea than she anticipated. To her, there was no way Jonathan could have sat through that meeting and known any of it. She told me she did not understand what he was doing, whether he was "just

afraid of rejection", making his nonparticipation in college a self-fulfilling prophecy, or if he had trauma around school, or if was something else entirely.

She described how Silas had tried really hard to get Jonathan ready for the ACT and for college applications. During the meeting, she learned that although regular admissions applications were due in November, nontraditional students had an earlier deadline at the end of October. They had less than two weeks to get an application in. Rita told me that Silas had taken three hours the previous week, to spend his lunch break and more working with Jonathan and Rita to try to put together an application.

Some of her anger spent, now that she had spoken it aloud, Rita slumped in her own chair, defeated. She told me she was pretty sure he would not show up for the ACT on Saturday, for a whole host of reasons. He had just taken a new job, at a factory and might have to work. He did not want to take the test. She said she knew he was worried about his mother's apartment and wanted to have some money to keep her afloat. To do that, he needed to be working. But also, she said she thought he simply might not show up because he did not want to.

She wondered aloud whether she had pushed him too hard to get to college. She said she "knew" that he wanted to go, and once she and Silas teamed up, they had really been pushing hard for Jonathan to apply. I wondered how she knew that he wanted to go to college, or perhaps specifically to Berea: she did not elaborate. She weighed if she should be pushing him towards school, and she expressed some guilt about whether or not she had pushed Silas into taking responsibility for Jonathan. She said that she had not intended for him to take this active of a role in Jonathan's life, that she really had put them in touch so that Jonathan could have a photography friend, and that she worried that she had unintentionally forced Silas into doing this. I gently reminded her that Silas was an adult and that his relationship with Jonathan, her

relationship with Jonathan, and her relationship with Silas were all part of a trial-and-error process. Eventually, I told her, Silas and Rita and Jonathan would find a way of figuring out what responsibilities they had to each other, and which ones they did not. She said she planned to text Jonathan tomorrow and ask him how it was going, but that he had not been replying to her texts for a couple of days.

"He's not your kid," I told her, reminding her of her earlier words. She paused and repeated, "He's not my kid," but the pause after she said that made it feel like there was an unspoken "but" that I might never hear. I told her that I could understand how frustrating it must be, to not be sure of why someone she cared about did not have the same goals and aspirations for himself that she had for him, and she nodded.

She thanked me for letting her ramble about Jonathan, for helping her "get it off her chest". "Not because you can do anything," she told me, but because the question of "What do I do?" had been weighing on her.

"But Jonathan is going to do what he's going to do," she said, "and I don't ultimately have any control over it."

DEFINING "GOOD" MENTORSHIP

In each of these moments with Rita and Silas – parts of Jonathan's web of support – the central question in the weeks leading up to the ACT was: What should I be doing in my relationship with Jonathan? For me, the answer was straightforward. As a researcher, I did not understand my primary objective to be offering him guidance or advice, to be pushing him towards any particular educational or employment experience. I was there to observe, take notes, ask questions, and listen. I interpreted Jonathan's invitations to spend time with him and Silas as

invitations to write about parts of his life that were important to him: photography, Louisville, skateboarding, his thoughts on the world. I discuss in more depth how I understood my own relationship with Jonathan at the start of Part IV, but during this time, I felt little pressure to encourage Jonathan to do anything.

Not kin, but…

In contrast, Rita was clearly struggling with defining her relationship with Jonathan. Her reminders to herself that Jonathan was not her child were important because they suggested to me that she understood herself to be acting *like* a parent – fulfilling what was often a parental role in pushing a young person towards college – but was not actually a parental figure. Jonathan respected and valued her presence in his life, but he did not describe either her or Silas in familial or kin-like terms. There was a shared understanding between everyone involved that they were not kin, but what they were instead was unclear.

Like Rita and Silas, anthropologists and social work researchers have asked a similar question regarding mentoring relationships: should they be kin or kin-like, or should they be distinct from kinship altogether? The general consensus seems to be that non-parent kin-like relationships produce the best outcomes, for young people generally and for foster youth specifically. Anthropologists Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) studied informal mentoring relationships between adults and Mexican American adolescents in San Diego. They found that, of the seventy-five young people they surveyed, older siblings and extended family members each comprised more than a third of informal mentors, while a combination of friends of the family, community members, or no one made up the other third (Stanton-Salazar 2003, 235). In their interviews young people – notably not foster youth – described their informal mentors using

the language of kin: "loving and generous parent" figures, "second mom", "surrogate father" (Stanton-Salazar 2003, 242). Although these kin terms imply a set of expectations concerning around material and emotional support, these forms of care typically came from people who were not their parents, nor were they programmatic mentors. Rather, the informal mentors Salazar-Stanton and Spina described were friends' parents, community members like coaches or priests, or older siblings and extended family. All of them shared a conscious, active decision to take on temporary responsibility for socializing and supporting young people. Spina and Stanton-Salazar argue that it is this absence of "institutional commitments, normative obligations, and accountability" (2003, 243), that allows caring adults to be altruistic and adaptable in their dealings with young people.

Social work scholars have also done a number of studies on former foster youth and their natural mentors. Jones (2013) found that former foster youth specifically had "more resilience"[40] when they were close to non-parent family members: siblings, cousins, aunts, uncles, stepfathers, and grandparents. Likewise, young people who were involved in community organizations or who had a sense of purpose were likely to have better outcomes. Former foster youth who had parental contact after leaving foster care tended to have worse outcomes. Jones theorizes that a self-selection process might explain these associations: former foster youths who are already more self-sufficient are more likely to try to live independently, while those who were less self-sufficient would return to their families (Jones 2013, 239-240). Like Stanton-Salazar and Spina

[40] Jones defines resilience by a composite score of outcomes – it has little to do with attitude, endurance, behavior, or beliefs. She employs a Resilience Score (RS) to measure the degrees to which young people were employed or pursuing education, living on their own, self-sufficient, had support networks, were married and raising children, or had become "contributing member[s] of a larger community" (Jones 2013, 230). In this case, the definition and measure of resilience were not necessarily tied to young people's desire or inner worlds, but a mathematical calculation based on outcomes predetermined by researchers.

(2003), Jones finds that both non-parents and non-kin relationships that offer supports *like* parents without *being* parents can be helpful for former foster youth. Greeson and Bowen (2008), who conducted open-ended interviews with young women of color in foster care, found that foster youths preferred people who were not their parents and who were older as natural mentors. The young women in their study described feeling supported by non-kin and non-parental figures, and experiencing "trust, love, and caring" in the "parent-child like relationships" offered by natural mentors (Greeson and Bowen 2008, 1186).

Rita's status as not-a-parent was a double-edged sword. It was stressful and disorienting for her, not to know how to define their relationship. The absence of specific roles meant she had little clarity on specific responsibilities to Jonathan, which put her in the position of having to rely on her own ethical principles and judgment in her dealings with him. However, the literature on mentoring seems to suggest that parent-like non-parents who take a genuine vested interest in young people can play a tremendous role in supporting their transitions to adulthood. Rita and Jonathan's other mentors – Mr. Will, and to a lesser extent, Silas – all played different roles in his growth during his time working with social services organizations. Jonathan's mentor and Mr. Will were bound by institutional norms to encourage Jonathan towards particular employment pathways, but Silas and Rita could support Jonathan's interest in photography, art, and his life outside of work. Not being a parent or a programmatic mentor meant that they were accountable to no one except Jonathan. It is precisely because they were not by bound institutional norms that they could meet Jonathan where he was. *Because* Rita was not his parent, her parent-like actions could be seen as helpful and supportive.

Measuring success: Former foster youth and education

Jonathan, while generally appreciative of her role in his life, did not actually see Rita's insistence on college as helpful or supportive, however. He avoided her in the days leading up to the ACT, a self-admitted strategy of his to get out of things he did not want to do. Jonathan's responses were, at every turn, an attempt to avoid both open conflict with Rita and get out of an undesirable task. Rita, coming from an academic background, did not fully understand why Jonathan did not want to go to college, and it seemed he did not share with her his rationale. I interpreted Rita's frustration as stemming not only from the avoidance, but also because she did not have access to his thoughts or emotions: it was the not knowing that was a source of consternation.

Although many child welfare researchers investigate and prioritize educational outcomes for former foster youth, in practice, I found that service providers and advocates to be split in their opinions on whether and how to support former foster youth in higher education. During fieldwork, Hayley worked for an organization that offered case management services to former foster youth outside of Lexington. She invited me to meet her at work one afternoon, and her supervisor and coworkers sat down for an impromptu focus group with me. It was a welcome opportunity to learn from service providers whose primary job was to offer social services to sometimes uncooperative former foster youth. A junior in college at the time, Hayley described many of her clients as being unmotivated for education. As a former foster youth who had struggled with college initially, Hayley had some sympathy for the challenges her peers faced in school. However, she believed that education was important, and wrote legislation to ensure that former foster youth had greater flexibility in pursuing college degrees and even graduate school, if they so chose.

Although Hayley's coworkers deferred to her greater experience and expertise in this arena, they also expressed a skepticism that college was for everyone. They opposed mandating college education for former foster youth on the grounds that, for those who aged out, they had likely not received education that prepared them for college. For those who aged out of residential care or had multiple placements in their last few years in state custody, they may not even have received a high school diploma or a GED. Hayley's coworkers explained that when many former foster youths attended college for the first time, especially if they attended full-time at the start, they often failed out. Former foster youths received tuition waivers from the government as part of their post-care benefits, but they might not have enough money to cover housing, transportation to classes, books, and groceries – managing all of these things simultaneously could be an enormous burden, making college education impractical. Hayley's coworkers described the educational waiver as well-intentioned, but without a strong education background and with long trauma histories that were common among former foster youth, convincing them to stay enrolled was a challenge.

What Hayley and her coworkers described – generally low educational attainment by former foster youth – was reflected in national and regional statistics. In the Midwest Study, a longitudinal survey of former foster youth at ages 17-18, 19, 21, 23-24, and 25-26, researchers found that approximately 40% of their respondents had earned a high school diploma or a GED, and 31.7% had completed at least one year of college without earning a degree (M. E. Courtney et al. 2011, 20). Just over four percent had completed a two-year college degree, and 2.5% had earned a four-year college degree (M. E. Courtney et al. 2011, 20). The National Youth in Transition database, a similar national longitudinal survey of former foster youth found that, by age 21, 69% of their respondents had earned a high school diploma or GED, while 7% had

earned a vocational certificate, associate degree, bachelor's degree, or higher (Children's Bureau 2019, 4).

Given these low numbers, it is understandable why researchers who study mentoring among former foster youth would evaluate the success of programs based on their educational attainment. The establishment of supportive relationships between young people and caring adults is not itself the objective of many mentoring programs, at least not those that receive funding. Specifically, programmatic mentors have been critiqued for having little long-term benefit to young people, according to statistical analyses (Ahrens et al. 2008; Avery 2011; Greeson and Bowen 2008). This critique of programmatic mentors stems from the instrumentality of mentoring programs in producing specific outcomes. Programs are "good" if children and adolescents emerge from their mentoring relationships with higher paying jobs, more motivation for education, better grades, or improved behaviors at school (Greeson, Usher, and Grinstein-Weiss 2010). Conversely, mentoring programs are "ineffective" if there is no statistical difference between those who do not enroll in mentoring programs and those who do. Of course, this outcome-oriented way of assessing the benefits of mentoring positions the relationship between young people and older caring adults as a means to an end, predetermined by funding streams that are investing in the production of specific outcomes. Although Rita was a natural mentor for Jonathan, she did not ultimately persuade him to attend college: according to this way of measuring success, Rita's support was not necessarily an "effective" intervention.

However, a different method of measuring success might be the establishment of a caring relationship itself – I suggest that assessment through outcomes is a reductive way of understanding why these kinds of relationships become valuable to young people and to adults, and glosses over the important ways that people come to take responsibility for one another. In

fact, when I was an employee in residential care, I was trained to take an entirely different approach to my relationships with the young women in my care. Building trust, having fun, and otherwise providing a reliable and caring relationship with young women was *the point*.

My training involved a program called Risking Connection™, the point of which was to model healthy relationships for young people, and then build those relationships with them. According to my trainers, this program was chosen because it emphasized the wariness foster youth might experience when confronted with emotional connections with adults. Additionally, the name of the program highlighted the risks that adults took in building emotional connections with young people – they might lie, manipulate, insult, or physically harm us, because those were the things that might have kept them safe from adults who had harmed *them*. In the residential facility where I worked, learning to trust one another was the treatment goal – eventually, it was expected that the partnership built between staff members and young people would have a palliative effect, that young people would find emotional healing and stability if they felt supported.

There is a distinction between the ways these programs are assessed as "effective" or not. In evaluating trauma-informed care models like Risking Connection™, recipients of services are asked about improvements in their relationships with care providers; in evaluating more programmatic mentoring programs, the assessments are less about the quality of the relationship and more the accomplishments of young people. The difference is crucial, because it reveals two different orientations towards the importance of caring relationships in service provision – one that emphasizes the existence of supportive relationships in and of themselves, and one that emphasizes the utility of such relationships for programmatic goals.

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Rita and I met after Jonathan's scheduled date for the ACT, and she was overjoyed: Jonathan *had* shown up to take the test. Although he took the exam, the two of them ultimately decided not to go through with the application to college. She seemed to have made her peace with his decision not to go to college, and while I do not know if they ever spoke at length about how to resolve this conflict, she remained an important source of support for him in the years afterwards. In Part IV, I describe Rita's efforts to mobilize Jonathan's web of support for another endeavor: his music career. Out of her depth in guiding him towards productive engagements with Louisville's music scene, she turned to others who knew more about this to offer him the support that she could.

It is difficult for mentors to do what Rita did: accept that Jonathan would make decisions with which she disagreed and continue on to support him in the ways that he needed rather than the ways she wanted. The difficulty was clear in our conversations, in which she expressed her frustration and concern. Youth mentoring research suggests that, when conflicts emerge in mentoring relationships, mentors often lose the trust of their mentees, and rebuilding that trust can be a long and difficult journey (Moyer 2014; Spencer 2006). On the other hand, when mentors are able to successfully recover from a conflict, relationships can be strengthened, allowing young people to practice conflict resolution and repair (T. Rhodes, Bernays, and Houmoller 2010; Samuels 2009).

While I was, indirectly, part of Jonathan's web of support, I saw myself as more directly involved in supporting Rita through her internal conflict about what was best for him. In Zaff and Vargas' model of webs of support, they make an important point about interconnection between people who do support work: it is *helpful* for a young person's web of caring adults to be in touch with one another, not just with a specific young person (Varga and Zaff 2018, 2).

Rita drew extensively on her own webs of support for advice and comfort as she worked through her own misgivings and anxieties about her decisions, and she deferred to the expertise of others. The web of support was not only around Jonathan: it was around Rita too. In this way, I suggest that webs of support not only offer sustaining support to young people, but to their mentors as well, as long as mentors can make productive use of their own support networks.

In the next chapter, I describe Beu's and Emmett's mentoring relationship. Like Rita and Jonathan, Emmett and Beu experienced disagreement and conflict about her decisions and her future. However, in contrast to Rita's ability to draw on extensive support networks for herself, Emmett had fewer people to ask for help as he wrestled with Beu's decision-making. In the absence of an effective web of support, Emmett and Beu did not manage to repair their relationship in the long-term, providing further evidence of the importance – and difficulty – of maintaining interpersonal connections between young people and adults, but also between adults in their support networks.

CHAPTER 8. RACE, GENDER, AND FALLING IN LOVE

OLD FRIENDS

Early during my fieldwork, I had been helping Emmett move into a new living arrangement, a little house he shared with two other people and a very cute black and white cat. After a few hours of lifting and heaving, sweaty and a little sore, we finished moving him in. Emmett checked his phone and swore.

“What's up?" I asked. He explained that he had heard from one of the former foster youths he mentored that she needed a ride. He messed with his phone for a few minutes and swore again then asked if I could do him a favor. He said that his phone had died after he had just ordered a Lyft to take her from one place to a job interview across town. He asked me if I would be able to send her a message over Facebook chat to let her know when her Lyft ride was going to arrive. I messaged her over Facebook chat, mentioned that I was an old friend of Emmett’s, and let her know that her ride was on the way. She was grateful.

The next day she messaged me and asked how she might go about getting in touch with him, because she needed a ride to court the next day. I told her that I would be happy to pass the message along. Emmett explained to me that he wouldn't be able to take her because he had some car problems. He was also concerned about driving a young white woman out to Tyler County, which is a slightly more rural area than Louisville. As a Black activist, he was understandably concerned for his safety, both in and outside of the city. He thought he might be considered suspicious if he crossed county lines with a young white woman in his car, and I agreed. I, on the other hand, being non-black and a woman, might arouse less suspicion. After a moment, I asked if he wanted me to offer her a ride. Surprised, he shrugged and told me it was

fine. I wrote her back and offered to drive her. She started typing a response then stopped. After a few more seconds she wrote back again.

“Well, you’re Emmett’s friend and I trust him so I guess I can trust you." She gave me directions to the shelter where she was staying, and we set a time for me to pick her up the following morning for court.

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My friendship with Emmett grew out of our working relationship in residential care. Residential linked the three of us; Emmett and I as workers, Beu as a "client", a recipient of the institutional services and structures employees tried to build for her. I do not know how they were able to keep up their relationship over so many years. Suffice it to say when she and I met, she and Emmett had built a long-standing relationship. They checked up on each other every few weeks, and she relied on him for advice, guidance, and occasional rides to and from social services offices, doctor’s appointments, and work.

The relationship between Emmett and me was one that was not quite as long standing but had similarly developed over several years. By the time he introduced me to Beu, Emmett and I had been friends for five years. I was someone he felt comfortable calling and ask him for help moving into a new place, someone he could trust to show up and help. After I quit my job at Maryhurst, he and I lost touch for a couple of months, but I reached out to him when I was working in a classroom in Chelsea, Massachusetts. I had asked him about behavior problems I was seeing with my sixth graders and asked for advice about how to manage them in a classroom setting. He and I had some really great conversations when I was working there, and after my first year of graduate school I told him that I had been thinking about doing a project in Louisville about child welfare. At the time, he had been planning to launch his own private

residential facility, a group home for boys. He asked me for help in renovating the house he had bought. I learned to paint and patch drywall and spent several days helping him prepare the place he was hoping to turn into his own business. I asked him, once he got it off the ground, if I could come and do a few months of field research there: he had seemed excited at the prospect.

Long before I ever showed up for fieldwork and Emmett had been a resource for me, someone I went to for guidance and mentorship, and someone whose judgment I generally trusted when it came to matters of dealing with young people. I learned so much from Emmett when we worked together and so much from him well beyond the very short amount of time that we knew each other as coworkers. They had always treated him as a resource, somebody who could provide insight into things I might have missed or filled in gaps of knowledge that I lacked.

In some ways, Emmett was a mentor to me, though I have never used that word to describe him or our relationship. For a time while we were coworkers, he was a shift supervisor, a position that is more of a tone setting or directing position for each shift, be he shared the daily work that we all had to do as Youth Counselors. Being a shift supervisor did not come with additional income, additional formalized responsibilities, or more power than anyone else who worked a shift. Although I generally tried to defer to him as an authority figure, I think we had a good working relationship that was one mostly of equals and a willingness to hold each other accountable when we saw the other person making odd or bad judgment calls.

In later conversations Emmett and I had about our time together at the agency, I joked that I was far too young to have taken on the responsibilities that I did. I confessed that I had felt overwhelmed by the small six-year age gap between me, 22 at the time, and the 16- and 17-year-old young women who were in my care. I reminisced about being the first person to swap out of

physically restraining the young women who were in our facility: multi-person restraints were a regular part of the job. Laughing, I told him it was because I did not have the endurance to restrain teenage girls for long periods of time, as I was physically the smallest and the weakest member of the team. He seemed surprised and told me that being small was not the reason he wanted me elsewhere, but rather because I was most capable of running the rest of the day on my own. My coworkers routinely left me caring for eight girls to free up everyone else working to restrain the ninth person. I was touched. At moments when I had felt incompetent and overwhelmed, Emmett understood me to be someone who shared a sense of commitment to good work and compassion for the young people in our care, so much so that he, years later, thought it was important to tell me that he trusted me in an emergency.

I was surprised, upon my return to the agency where I used to work during a period of preliminary fieldwork, to find that many of my former coworkers actually understood our relationship to be more ambiguous. I was chatting with a former coworker during a staff retreat during my first summer of preliminary fieldwork. I mentioned that I was visiting with Emmett, who by then had also left Maryhurst: my former coworker clicked her teeth and said, "Really? He used to bully you." I did not understand this description of our relationship; I never felt like he was bullying me only drawing attention to moments where I might grow as a staff worker, instances where I thought being called out was probably justified. Her comment was illuminating more so for his dynamic with our coworkers than it was for how I understand my relationship with him. I think other people understood his mode of communication to be straightforward to the point of maybe being abrasive or unkind, but I always interpreted his — admittedly sometimes intense — feedback as opportunities for professional growth.

I offer all this as context because I think it is important background for how and why I was helping Emmett and he did not see a problem with me offering to drive a 19-year-old former foster youth who I had never met to and from another county, a task which he himself felt wary of doing. He called me for help: I answered and showed up. He asked me for help in communicating with someone: I agreed, and I did it. When I needed guidance on how to build better relationships with young people in my classroom, I called him. In my early days of preliminary work for my graduate research, I could rely on him for wisdom, honest feedback, and thoughtfulness about honing my research questions.

Emmett and I met often, every few weeks, when I was in Louisville for fieldwork. We mostly talked about work: his work, my work, and the ongoing mentoring relationships he had with a whole slew of young people. He had worked for a variety of child welfare facilities and a psychiatric hospital between 2011 and 2018, and many of the young people he cared for as children were young adults who sometimes reached out to him for help or advice. Beu was only one of the many young people with whom Emmett kept in touch from his years in residential. He also experienced some extraordinarily difficult events. The group home he planned never materialized. He had filed for a child caring license, purchased a house with the help of his sister, did renovations. Then bureaucratic problems with zoning laws cropped up. He experienced health problems, his sister pulled her support, and the two of them stopped contacting one another. His nonprofit board, a requirement for the group home, stopped returning his calls. It seemed that everything that could go wrong had gone wrong, and he was reeling from how quickly his dream had dissipated.

Emmett tried to support Beu as best as he could, and I tried to support both of them while also keeping them at an appropriately professional distance. It was not an easy line to walk. I

cared deeply for them both. I wanted them both to be okay despite the structural violence and interpersonal struggles they were experiencing.

EMMETT AND BEU

In mid-October, I went to pick Beu up. She had asked for a ride to her grandmother's house to grab some clothes. After her usual, "Can I have the Bluetooth?", she paused, grinned, then blurted out, "So I have a boyfriend."

"Oh?" I quirked an eyebrow, asking her for more detail.

"Yeah," she launched into an explanation of how he was an old friend of her brother's They had reconnected online and had been spending time together. I was unsure what to make of it at the time, so I listened. She was excited to be dating someone new. She told me about how happy she was, how this boy made her feel, how she wanted to be with him. By then, I had adjusted to the swiftness with which her friendships and relationships emerged and then fizzled. I was hopeful – though not optimistic – that maybe her excitement would translate to a long-term relationship where she would feel safe and loved and supported.

Within a week or two of Beu excitedly telling me about her new boyfriend, Emmett texted me with a warning. He told me that I should be "extremely cautious" around Beu from now, because it was likely that she was going to go "through an ugly phase due to manipulation from her boyfriend." I asked him what made him think that something terrible was about to happen, and he responded with screenshots of their conversation earlier that day. She let him know she had gotten enrolled in Medicaid and needed some new glasses, then asked him for a ride to the eye doctor. He had offered her some praise in return for navigating the abysmally opaque Medicaid enrollment process, and then asked what time she would like to go to the eye

doctor. She did not respond for a while. She then wrote back that not only was she unable to go, but also that she "couldn't hang out with him" anymore. He asked why, and she responded that her boyfriend "felt some type of way" about it, meaning that he was unhappy about Emmett being involved in Beu's life.

Emmett responded that he did not buy it, but that it was fine. She asked for some clarification, and he observed that she seemed to value "intimate male attention" more than anything else. He told her – sarcastically – to go ahead, be great, do her thing. He called her for a few minutes, followed by a message that her boyfriend was racist, and that she had the choice of whom she included in her inner circle. "There's no excuse," he told her.

This was not the first time that the question of Beu's loyalties had emerged, specifically regarding her friends' and family's racism. I had been conscripted to do many of the things Emmett had done for Beu – give her rides to her grandmother's house, or to social services offices – after Beu's family members had used racial slurs when talking about Emmett. The tasks I had been asked to do in my relationship with her were directly related to the threats of racial violence that prevented Emmett from doing them. As a woman, and probably because I am not Black, I was less suspicious. I am also small, and not physically imposing, and generally tried to be bright and cheerful. These qualities and ways of interacting with others gave me access to Beu and her social world in ways that were impossible, stressful, or dangerous for Emmett.

In the past, Beu had stood up for Emmett, something they both corroborated in my conversations with them. She had taken her grandmother to task for dismissing Emmett, explaining that Emmett had taken care of her while her own family left her in a facility. He's family, she had insisted, and for a time, it seemed that no one had said anything to her. During one car ride, where I dropped her off at a friend's house, she mentioned that her friend was Black

and that her family had been racist about her many relationships with Black people. They did not understand, she explained, that because of her time in state care she had been raised by Black staff workers. Although she was white, she had grown up around Black people, and had grown and changed because of this. She gave the example specifically of using the N-word, and noted that she had stopped using it because Emmett had asked her to stop using it. Her new boyfriend had apparently tried to persuade her to cut off contact with Emmett before, but as I understood it, she had insisted that Emmett was her friend and mentor, not a threat to her relationship. She put up a boundary in Emmett's defense: she did not want to hear anymore from her partner.

As Emmett relayed what happened with Beu, I wondered what had changed. His response was presumably a quote from her – probably from their phone call: "I told my boyfriend that my mentor was taking me to get glasses and he said, "Just remember I can hang out with girls too since you can hang out with your mentor.'"

"Girl bye. I don't do that shit," Emmett retorted. Reading between the lines, it seems that Beu's boyfriend had implied to her that she and Emmett had a romantic or sexual relationship, and that for Beu to spend time with Emmett was tantamount to cheating on him. Beu's boyfriend framed his own reaction in kind: if Beu were to spend time with Emmett, he was going to cheat on her, or at least give the appearance of doing so. Unwilling to risk it, Beu decided to cancel not only her appointment to get an essential resource – glasses – but chose to cut off contact with Emmett entirely.

My own response was unambiguous: "That's...bullshit what the fuck." Emmett was my friend, and someone who I understood would go to great lengths help young people, usually at great personal cost to himself. In the many years I had known him, I had never once suspected him of harboring anything resembling romantic or sexual feelings towards any of the young

people he mentored. He was protective of them. Although he was angry, frustrated, and hurt, Emmett immediately tried to contextualize her behavior and decisions. He launched into a developmental psychology explanation for her choice to cut him off; he understood her as someone who had not gotten support and meaningful care when she was young, and who had been introduced early to sex. Our relationships early in life are the foundation for our other relationships, he suggested – without stable, nurturing relationships early in life, and introduced to sex too early, the first pleasurable relationships are seemingly the most important ones. Because sex feels good, the relationships that involve sex – and not necessarily the ones that nurture someone without sex – are the ones that people tend to foreground. On top of that, the intimacy of a romantic partnership coupled with satisfying bodily chemicals feels "like a drug" (his words) and so people are more likely to seek out those relationships at the expense of others. He laughed off his own theory, following up nearly a paragraph of text with "or something like that". I responded with my own theory, that she was looking for "stability and loyalty". Based on my own conversations with her, I offered an interpretation that she thought "loyalty" was more important than anything. Emmett replied that she had been lacking loyalty all her life, and that she had not had any solid relationships. Loyalty meant intimate partnerships, not friendships or mentorships, he offered.

In my conversations with her, she had insisted that she was a good girlfriend, a good partner, because she was loyal to people beyond their class or social status. She had once told me that she did not care if her partners had money, and that all the men she had ever dated were broke, in jail, or homeless. I relayed this to Emmett, noting that I found this a bit alarming, but she had seemed proud of herself, that she was not bound by social expectations of things that young people ought to want. Emmett responded that it was an "interesting" deduction but didn't

offer any further commentary, instead pivoting to a condemnation of "toxic masculinity and patriarchy". He continued that racism would be done before toxic masculinity. I threw out an affirmation, that ideas of gender preceded ideas of race; "Always on point, lol," he wrote back.

A few weeks after my text message exchange with Emmett, Beu messaged me.

Beu: Thank u for everything. I'm moving to lockwood[41] I'm gonna miss u
EB: You're moving to lockwood?
EB: When?
Beu: Right now
EB: Jesus
Beu: I'm drunk
EB: Well it's not that far. I can come visit.
Beu: You better im GUNNA miss our ratchet girl music sessions
EB: We'll make it happen lmao

I received her messages over Thanksgiving, and with Emmett's warning a few weeks before, I was worried. I saw no evidence of reflection or forethought about this decision, though perhaps she had been considering it for longer than I knew. Her messages did not inspire much confidence in this possibility. She was making a quick, seemingly impulsive decision to move away from Louisville with someone she had been dating for a short time. She was, by her own admission, not sober, which made me wary. By then, I had grown accustomed to her frequent moves (see Part II) but her prior moves were typically because she had overstayed her welcome somewhere. I had not known her to move for a romantic relationship, and Emmett – who knew Beu far better than I did – believed that she would be going through a period of manipulation from her boyfriend.

Despite my impending sense of dread, I tried to keep the conversation light. I had just watched Rita try to convince Jonathan to do something he did not want to do: he became avoidant, and she became frustrated. I had watched Beu willingly end contact with Emmett, a

[41] A town in south-central Kentucky, around an hour and a half by car from Louisville.

caring adult mentor, to be with this young man, and I doubted that she was staying in touch with her friends or family members. I did not want her to be left without any caring adults, so I tried to appear interested and supportive while internally feeling worried for her.

Our conversation continued via text, but about a week after she had moved, she wrote to me with a request.

Beu: Hey, Emmett blocked me and I can't message him. Could you give him a message for me?
EB: Depends on the message
Beu: [Attachment 1: Photo of Emmett and Beu]
Beu: Just tell him I miss him and thank you for being here for me.
EB: I'll let him know. When is this photo from?
Beu: A while back.

Emmett had apparently blocked her phone number and blocked her on social media, and she was not able to get in touch with him. She had asked me to pass along a message to him; out of respect for him not wanting to hear from her, I tried to put some vague conditions on it. At the time I thought a photograph of the two of them together was fairly innocuous, so I agreed. I felt that she had chosen incorrectly, that she was in the wrong to choose a man who threatened to emotionally wound her because she was close to someone who had cared for her when she was a child. I felt bad for Emmett, who had been feeling abandoned, ignored, and wholly uncared for by his own family and the activist communities of which he was a part. I did not feel, however, that I could similarly stop talking to her. Although I thought she had made a serious of potentially harmful choices, I did not want her to feel alone or not have someone to talk to, so I stayed in touch with her, even while she was away from Louisville. I do not know if Emmett ever understood this to be a betrayal of my friendship with him; he and I almost never spoke about her.

Apart from missing her mentor – one of the few constant presences in her life – her updates from Lockwood seemed to be good – she felt that she was "getting her life together", finding a sense of stability.

EB: How are you doing?
Beu: I'm good. Been applying for jobs and trying to get my life together.
EB: I'm really glad to hear that! Planning to visit anytime soon?
Beu: Maybe. I'm trying to be there the first week of January.

By Christmas, however, the veneer had fallen away.

Beu: Currently single and been crying for days away from everyone. Im staying in Kent with my cousin for now away from him. Haven't really slept or ate just been crying.
EB: Oh honey I'm so sorry
EB: What happened?
Beu: Idk.

She would not explain to me what happened between her and her boyfriend, only that she had left Lockwood and wanted to be away from him. In January, she made her way back to Louisville and invited me to spend the day with her. She wanted some help running errands and seemed excited to focus on her own well-being for a while. I was relieved, that she was away from him, that she was seeking out my company and rebuilding her web of support.

Beu: I just wanted to hang out and catch up cuz it's been a while. Lol and that's fine. Sounds good
EB: I know
EB: I miss you
EB: I know it's not great being back in Louisville but I'm...actually happy you're back tbh
Beu: Me too lol
Beu: I applied to 23 jobs today. Changed the address of I can get my insurance card. Called the DMV. Turns out I can't get my license until November 2021 bcuz of the liability of not providing insurance. Also called about my voucher to and I'm on the list for it. Long waiting list but I am on it. I got allot done today. I'm proud of myself
EB: WAIT
EB: you did so much more than I did today

EB: I’m proud of you too 😭

Beu: I really can't believe I did that😭 I'm so used to just doing nothing. And I managed to eat lunch with my friends from the shelter too 😊

EB: How does it feel?
EB: How are your friends????

Beu: They are good. And idk what to do with myself EB. I'm feeling myself too much 😂
Beu: what time are we hanging out tomorrow?
EB: I’m free from like noon to 4.
EB: So anytime in there
EB: Wanna get lunch?
EB: I’ll buy
Beu: Yeah sounds good. I hope u know once I get a job I'm gonna treat u to lunch too

EB: I’m looking forward to that 🙂
EB: I’m happy you’re back

I had not seen Beu in two months when I went to pick her up from the public library downtown. It was sunny and bright, warm for January, and she came bounding down the stone steps of the Central Branch. As per usual, she hopped in the car, connected her phone to the Bluetooth and picked a song before settling into the passenger seat. She refused to make a decision about our lunch destination, but I remembered from a previous conversation from months ago that she liked eel sushi. I suggested an Asian fusion place I frequented with my friends in high school, and off we went.

We pulled out of the library lot and onto the street. She began filling me in on what had happened since the last time I saw her. Life in Lockwood had not been what she imagined. Her boyfriend’s family had been all right, but her boyfriend had not treated her well at all. She was lonely and did not know anyone. She was not working and mostly stayed in the house.

Eventually, it seemed, she had decided to leave and that in and of itself had been hard and still lonely.

She had returned to an all-women's recovery shelter downtown where she had been staying off and on for about seven months. She had once described the shelter to me as institutional life for adults – arguments, accusations of theft, couplings and breakups were all part of the environment. Her cohabitants at the shelter often picked fights with one another over what she described as "petty" things, and for the most part she tried to keep her head down. The shelter worked for her in that it offered her a place to stay, and a tenuous form of social support, or at least, protection. People generally treated her well because she was so young. Nearly all of them were older than she was, in their 30s and 40s, and she understood them as women who did what they could to not involve her in their own drama and infighting in the shelter. The shelter barred people from being inside between the hours of 8:00 am and 4:00 pm, so the residents looked out for her during their daily treks to bus stops and job sites and social services offices. They had apparently also advocated for her with the shelter staff. Normally there was a cap on the number of days people could stay in the shelter, which Beu had exceeded the last time she was in Louisville. I had assumed that returning was not an option, but she explained to me that her friends who were completing court-ordered substance use treatment had somehow found a spot for her.

She told me that the people at the shelter were happy to have her back. She had been telling them about her time away from Louisville, and seemingly, they were helping her understand her relationship in a different lens. One of the women, she explained to me, told her to look up the definition of "gaslight".

“That’s what they told me — ‘That’s what he is, Beu, a gaslight’”, she said. “And he was. He gaslit me.”

I was quiet for a moment before very slowly and tentatively telling her that I had been extremely worried for her when she just up and left. It was a red flag for me, I told her, that he was isolating her, taking her away from her friends and support networks, including and especially Emmett. They had stopped speaking since she started dating this young man, who did not like her talking to other men. She had tried to explain that Emmett was her mentor, a friend, and essential source of support since their first meeting, but her partner heard none of it. For his part, Emmett, a Black man, was worried about how his mentoring relationship with Beu, a young white woman, might be perceived by any authorities if Beu’s partner were to involve the law: he stopped communicating with her on social media for his own safety. On top of that, he was hurt that Beu hadn’t done more to stand up to her boyfriend on his behalf, which I pointed out. She glanced at me before looking out the window.

“Yeahhhhhh, he didn’t like Emmett. He didn’t even like me talking to you, because you knew Emmett,” she told me. I grimaced, then rolled my eyes. “I know,” she said sheepishly. I thought about pressing on, explaining to her that the fact that he had such an aversion to Beu’s friends and support network was probably a sign he wanted control and not a partnership, but watching her face, I assumed she understood. I let it go.

I told her I was happy she was back in Louisville and let the conversation drift back to the things she was excited about, applying for jobs, getting insurance, and re-applying for housing. She said she had a job interview the next day, for a temporary position at catering company. Many of the shelter residents had worked there or were working there, so she felt like she had a good chance at getting hired. If she did not, she had a backup plan. She planned on signing up for

an internship and job training program at a career services program for young adults, run through the public school system. The job, the internship, and the job training program were all paying $11 an hour, so she had equally well-paying options no matter what she decided. She was hesitant on job training because it conflicted with her twelve-step meetings, but it was a good way to sit and listen and get money. I reminded her that in order to get paid she needed to show up. She said she knew that. We talked a little more about her twenty-three job applications, and how the people at the shelter had told her they were happy she was getting her life together. As we arrived at the restaurant, she reiterated what she told me over our text conversation: "EB I'm just feeling myself too much!"

"You should! You should feel like that all the time!" I wanted her to remember this feeling, and I wanted to celebrate her apparent movement towards stability.

We went inside and we looked at the menu. She looked a bit overwhelmed, and the waiter and I explained as much of the menu as we could. When I suggested that we get a couple of sushi rolls and share them, and she looked relieved. I showed her where on the menu the sushi rolls were, and we weighed our options. She gravitated towards the bacon roll, and I insisted on one with vegetables.

We chatted as we ate, and I mentioned that Emmett and I had had dinner together the previous weekend. Her mouth dropped: "It was YOU!" she accused, indignant. I asked her what I had done, and she explained that she had reached out to Emmett and asked if they could hang out that same day. He told her no, he was visiting with a friend; "It was you, you were the friend!" I told her I thought it was strange that he had not told her that I was the friend; she agreed. At any rate, they had reconnected and had scheduled a time for the two of them to hang out later in the week. In the meantime, she was staying busy: she began listing off the errands she

wanted to run that day. She wanted to get some cash, buy a new phone, shop for an interview outfit, and if we had time, maybe get ice cream? I laughed, teasing her about her sweet tooth, and told her I thought we could fit everything in before she had to return to the shelter to sign in and I had to head to a meeting.

We finished lunch, catching up and talking about food and music, and drove to Walmart to pick up cash her maternal grandmother had left for her.[42] As we headed to Walmart, we continued our conversation from the car ride earlier, about the isolation and alienation she experienced in the relationship that had recently ended. Her friends at the shelter had been wary of him early in the relationship: "All my friends told me he was bad news. My friends were right. I have wise friends," she reflected, thinking back to their initial reaction.

I told her that her friends had very likely made some terrible decisions in their lives, and that may have been part of the reason why they were cautious about her relationship. That was the case with me, anyway: I thought about my own questionable choices in romantic relationships when I was 20. I told her as much, that I had accepted poor treatment at the hands of men when I was her age, and that was why I worried hers was a bad situation. Curious, I thought for a moment before asking, "Would it have done any good for me to say that to you? Would you have listened?"

She didn't hesitate. "No. I probably would have said 'I'll talk to him about it' and then never talked to him about it." She paused for a moment, then continued. "He was just worried about me and Emmett, but it ain't even like that with me and Emmett. I've known him [Emmett] since I was 9," she explained.

[42] I did not realize it at the time, but Walmart is now in financial services; some Walmart MoneyCenters function like banks, offering domestic and international wire transfers, debit and credit cards, layaway plans, and checks and check cashing, and a virtual Walmart Pay application similar to Apple Pay.

We meandered around Walmart for a few minutes before heading out to buy her a phone. I picked up our conversation from before and told her that I was happy her friends had been supportive and wanted her back. I told her, haltingly, that I knew being in a homeless shelter maybe was not her ideal living situation, but that whenever anything went wrong in the last few months, she ended up going back to the shelter. "I think it's good, actually, to have a place to go when things go wrong," I suggested.

She thought about it for moment. "It's the only place that's made me feel safe, for real."

I was not prepared for the flood of relief in my chest that she found a place that had made her feel safe.

"I figured. You kept going back when you needed it."

"It's a good program," she agreed.

BEU'S WEBS OF SUPPORT

Although Beu had a web of support, it worked much differently than Jonathan's did. While Beu had at least one long-running mentoring relationship with Emmett, she tested the viability of that relationship and others by choosing short-lived romances over relationships her friends and mentors. While certainly not a causal or deterministic argument, I suggest that the webs of support framework I learned from Nikki, who had adapted it from Varga and Zaff (2018), provides insights into how and why Beu's web of support worked the way it did.

Conflict resolution

As I argued with Rita and Jonathan's relationship, mentors who adapt and further the goals of young people they mentor tend to have longer, more supportive relationships, even if

they do not implement programmatic or researcher goals like attaining educational credentials or maintaining waged work. What was important for Rita and Jonathan – and arguably for mentors who prioritize the relationship with their mentees rather than their life outcomes – was the establishment of shared goals, trust, common interests, and a willingness on Rita's part to admit when she did not know something. She built bridges with others, between Jonathan and other people who might have more knowledge, experience, or expertise, and could help guide him to achieving things he wanted to do. Although he may have had closer relationships with other mentors, like Mr. Will, he valued and trusted Rita's intentions, and therefore strove to keep his relationship with her intact.

In contrast, Beu's primary web of support consisted largely of what sociologists call "weak ties" (Granovetter 1973; Desmond 2012; Varga and Zaff 2018), or relationships of shorter durations and less frequent contact. These short durations and the fading in and out of Beu's relationships meant that she had little time or occasion to build trust and rapport with her friends from the shelter or with me. We shared few common interests, though in Part IV I describe a trip to the Louisville Public Library's Makerspace, and therefore had little overlapping and low-stakes opportunities to spend time together the way that Jonathan and Silas did. Unlike Jonathan's relationships with his webs of support, Beu seemed to have no interest in seeking advice from her mentor, her friends, or her family. Although dependent on the goodwill of her shelter friends and to a lesser extent, me, Beu did not necessarily trust us or our advice to her, at least not regarding her romantic relationships. It was not until after this romance had ended that she was willing to seek or accept advice, re-establish disrupted social connections with her web of support.

Because she had inconsistent contact with her web of support, disruptions to her relationships – like moving away or falling out of contact – made it harder to do what Jonathan and Rita did, which was repair their relationship after a conflict. Beu's conflict with Emmett was not merely a disagreement about her choices. Beu had hurt him in a moment when he was already hurting, and it was not because he had done anything wrong. Rather, she had chosen a romantic relationship with a white man who had deliberately called into question Emmett's integrity as a caregiving adult and had made openly racist comments. Beu did not see it as a personal affront to Emmett, just a matter of doing what she had to do to preserve her relationship, but it was a blow to their relationship. He took his time in rebuilding his relationship with her when she returned to Louisville. She reached out to him before she tried to reach out to me, and understandably so: he had long been a source of comfort and support for her, and in the aftermath of her failed destructive romance and her decision to stop contacting Emmett, I suppose she wanted to make amends. I was surprised he had decided to speak with her, much less meet with her, albeit on his own time and schedule rather than hers. He had apparently chosen to come have dinner at my house rather than spend time with her. She was indignant at his decision, despite having made a similar and far more lasting and hurtful choice months before.

The social networks of mentors

Varga and Zaff proposed the webs of support model to move beyond mentor-mentee dyads and instead they urge researchers to analyze each of the people involved in a young person's web as part of their own distinct social ecologies. In order for webs of support to work, they argue, people must be able to access their own supports: family members, friends, mentors,

colleagues, others who can sustain them in their caring for others. As I noted above, Beu was only one of Emmett's mentees, and while he found it valuable and important to mentor young people, I also knew doing so took up time and energy. Moreover, although he found political and moral value in his activism, he was not supported by his comrades, nor could he turn to his family for comfort or rest. He had undergone so many upheavals in his own personal life that he had limited supports himself: he was stretched thin. Given Emmett's own lack of support, being patient, nonjudgmental, understanding, or forgiving of Beu was a tall order, and he understandably withdrew his support. In short, the webs of support framework put into high relief that it is harder for people to sustain others when they have limited options to sustain themselves.

In addition to viewing support people within their own social networks, Varga and Zaff also argue that webs of support work optimally when people within the webs have contact with one another. Open communication between, for example, schoolteachers, coaches, and parents, allows for people to discuss, strategize, and otherwise coordinate their care of a young person who is struggling. The people in Beu's web of support did not have contact with one another – neither I nor Emmett met her friends from the shelter, and while Emmett and I talked regularly, we did not often discuss Beu. We did not support one another or ask one another for advice when Beu began dating this young man or when she left for Lockwood. When Emmett did offer me advice, he advised me to be wary of her and this young man: he encouraged less connection, not more.

While the caring adults in Beu's life did not know one another, we had all independently disapproved of the young man that she was dating. We dealt with our skepticism in different ways. Emmett stopped speaking to her for his own safety and well-being. Her shelter friends

seem to have subtly discouraged the relationship without necessarily being directly confrontational. I did not offer opinions and maintained a careful neutrality when she asked for my thoughts. Although she had limited contact with her family, the young man who accompanied her to Lockwood was a family friend: they would likely have approved of him. Beu, as a result, received conflicting messages – or no messages – from each of the people in her web of support. Small wonder, then, that she instead relied on her own desires and judgment to make her decisions, prioritizing romantic loyalty as her primary virtue.

Different ethical priorities

Although we agreed in our wariness of this young man that Beu was dating, Emmett and I also had very different ethical approaches to our relationship with Beu. Early in fieldwork, I explained to him that, as a researcher, I did not feel responsible for Beu or comfortable imposing my own views on her. I believed that I was respecting her autonomy: he believed that my unwillingness to take on more responsibility for her was suspicious. In prioritizing her and freedom to make her own choices, I had inadvertently given him the impression that I did not care about her or her well-being.

Further evidence of Emmett's wariness in my continuing a relationship with Beu came when she returned to Louisville. She and I both found it strange that he did not tell her he was spending time with me. He knew I was in contact with her, but he seemed to be unaware that we had grown close. In one notable example, he mentioned trying to connect Beu with a friend of his, so that she would have a positive female role model[43] in her life. I was surprised that he

[43] Stanton-Salazar and Spina (2003) define role models as people whose lives offer aspiration and inspiration to others. Role models have achieved some measure of success in a field, and young people can learn from their actions, habits, attitudes, and behaviors about how to succeed. Importantly, role

believed she had no role models who were women. I defensively asked whether I counted as a positive role model. He responded that he had not realized I was interested in playing such a role in her life.

Emmett seemed primarily concerned with Beu's stability and well-being, even at the expense of her autonomy and her personal and romantic relationships. He encouraged her to limit contact with her family and to limit contact with men, pointing out that they were distracting her from her self-development. I often agreed with his conclusions, but I also understood that Beu would not listen to me: she did, after all, tell me explicitly that she would ignore any advice or opinions. Emmett, on the other hand, either believed that Beu would listen to him, or simply understood his duty to her as honesty, regardless of her response. Although Emmett had knowledge and wisdom and familiarity with Beu's life, she did not always accept that he knew more than she did about how to conduct her affairs.

Emmett's approach to his relationship with Beu was borne of a wealth of experience in mentoring young people, and he was even working towards starting a youth mentoring business when I was in the field. Based on his many years of experience, careful study, and reflection on mentoring, Emmett considered himself an expert, someone who was intimately familiar with behavior and thought patterns, responses, and interventions. He had consulted with schools,

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models must be sufficiently similar to a young person they intend to inspire. They must share a demographic characteristic, life experience, interest, or background so that young people can identify with a potential role model. If they are too different, young people might simply ignore a role model on the grounds that they can never be like them. On the other hand, a role model who is too similar to a young person may inspire no confidence, offer them nothing to work towards. In describing role models, researchers tend to emphasize a balance of identification – over-identification can erode productive boundaries, while under-identification between young people and role models can drive a wedge of misunderstanding between them. I shared almost no characteristics with Beu – apart from occasional shared musical tastes and a love of crafting, we had very little in common. Perhaps, according to this definition, Emmett was correct in assuming I was not a role model for Beu.

helping teachers understand their students better so they could adjust their reactions and consequence systems for misbehavior. As I noted above, I also a great deal about behavior management and youth development from Emmett. His advice was enormously helpful when I worked in congregate care, and again later when I implemented some of his suggestions in my own classroom. Unlike Emmett, however, I did not and do not consider myself to be an expert in youth development or mentoring. While we shared a commitment to understanding young people on their own terms, and a hope for Beu's happiness and health, he was far more willing to weigh in directly on her life than I was.

EPILOGUE

After her disastrous relationship over Christmas, Beu tried again in late February, early March of 2020. She had landed a job at a fast-food restaurant, had stayed at the shelter while waiting to come off the waiting list for housing, and seemed to be happier, more stable. She asked me for a ride home from work one night, early in March 2020, just as rumors of a mysterious new illness were starting to pick up. It was raining, a veritable downpour. I did not want her to get sick standing in the rain at 11:00 pm, so I picked her up. The rain had stopped by the time I made it downtown, but I was already out of my house, the first time I'd left all week. I made her sit in the back rather than her usual spot in the front passenger seat.

"Are you serious? EB," she glared out me from outside the car. "Come on," she complained, but I was adamant.

"Back seat, and I'm going to open the windows."

She scoffed, then laughed at me, then reluctantly opened the back door and climbed in. I was nervous about being in close proximity to her, not knowing where she'd been in the past few

weeks since the last time I had seen her. I did not know if she was sick, or asymptomatic; the absence of certainty about someone else's COVID-19 status had begun to shape our interactions.

Although I was scared, Beu was not convinced of the threat. As I began listing all the news I had been reading, about entire Chinese cities shut down and hospitals overflowing in Italy, Beu began telling me about a respiratory infection that had been passed around the homeless shelter in November, before she left for Lockwood.

"Yeah, I was sick for like a week, I couldn't get out of bed," she recalled. I remembered that she had been sick, and apparently so had many of the women at the shelter. While there is no way to confirm or deny the presence of the coronavirus in Louisville before March 6, 2020 – the date of the official first documented case in Kentucky – her understanding of infection, risk, and potential harm was shaped by the reality of sharing communal spaces, like shelters. She had already gotten sick while living there, whereas I was hunkered down in my apartment in the Highlands, bored and alone with my thoughts and news feeds.

We came to a train track, and while we waited for a train to pass, she told me about her new boyfriend, a young man she had met through her twelve-step meetings. He was currently on house arrest, and although she seemed to be happy with him overall, she also wanted to vent about their most recent conflict. He had asked her to run away from the shelter: he was feeling cooped up and frustrated and said that he just wanted to be with her. She explained how she gently tried to talk him out of it. She asked him where they would go, and he said that his dad "had some property" somewhere. She asked him what he was going to do about his ankle monitor, and he said he would simply cut it off. She followed up, asking him what would happen after that, and he told her he did not know.

"He wasn't thinking about the consequences," she told me. "I told him 'You haven't thought this through.'" I agreed with her; from what she was telling me, I was also sure he had not thought it through. I turned around to look at her in the backseat.

"Did he think this was what you wanted to hear?" I asked.

"I don't know!" she said, a frustrated note in her voice. She continued, explaining that she had been doing well, and that while she was flattered by his attention, he was ignoring the fact that she was doing well and did not want to do anything to disrupt that process. She reminded him that she was going to get an apartment soon through social services – she had, at this point, been on a waiting list for an apartment for eight months – and that instead of him violating his parole and getting taken back to jail, when his time was completed, he could join her at her place.

"Yeah. You're not looking for a promise of a house in the country," I noted.

"No, I'm not. That's not stable. We'd be waiting for the cops to come, and I don't even know where that property is. I've had enough of that."

"You're looking for stability, I think."

"Yeah, I'm looking for stability."

***

In this chapter, I examined what specifically caring adults expected of Beu romantic relationships. Although we did not know each other, the general consensus among all of us was a doubt about the longevity and benefit of her romantic relationships. We assumed that being involved with young men would throw off her pursuits of stability in housing, income, and emotional well-being. Although we generally agreed that her romances seemed troubled and counter-productive, each part of Beu's web of support handled their doubts in different ways.

Her friends at the shelter and Emmett advised her to put off pursuing the young man who asked her to move to Lockwood; I asked her to keep in touch and tried not to opine on her relationship. The different approaches had different consequences. During her time in Lockwood, Beu stayed in touch with me but not with Emmett or her friends at the shelter. However, when she returned to Louisville, she sought out their advice and wisdom – not mine – after her tumultuous breakup. It is likely that, despite the conflicts between her and Emmett, she trusted him more to be honest and authentic with her because he had not hesitated to give her his opinion, though she may not have liked or appreciated it at the time. After suffering through the difficult breakup, Beu pursued life changes that were approved by her adult mentors and networks of support. She sought out a job and housing on her own, insistent that she was going to be more self-sufficient. She did this for a time, enforcing boundaries and being thoughtful about her decisions with the young man who wanted to run away with her, eventually breaking things off with him as well.

Afterwards, Beu began dating another a young man, who had been a supportive friend when she was recovering from her breakup with her boyfriend in Lockwood. After almost a year of dating, they decided to have a child. I was skeptical of this decision. At that time, neither of them had a place to live, nor steady incomes. After speaking to friends and colleagues, I decided to have it out with her, and be honest with her about my feelings on the subject. I told her I thought she was making a terrible decision, asking where she planned to raise a baby while she was living in a tent. In response, she angrily told me, “I just want someone to believe in me.” I fired back that that was not a good enough reason to have a child. We fought for a while, and then stopped speaking for a few weeks. Having said what I needed to say, I made my peace with her choice and did my best to support her through her pregnancy, answering her questions and celebrating each milestone with her. Eventually, she came off of a housing waitlist and found an

apartment. The door did not lock, and everything was a pale brown, but she was surviving and looking forward to having her child. She delivered a healthy baby girl in December 2021; I went to meet her new infant two weeks later, with Christmas cookies and a few newborn onesies my mother sent along as a gift.

Beu seemed happy, which is why I was surprised to hear her sobbing on the phone when she called me around midnight a few weeks after that. Punctuated by shouts and arguments with her baby's father, she asked me to find her an Uber and a place to stay – I did not know where to send her, and she told me she would figure it out before hanging up. She told me she ended up staying with a friend that night, but that she wanted to try to make it work with the father of her child. A week later, she phoned me from jail, telling me he had called the police on her, and she was awaiting arraignment. After I scrambled to try to get her out of jail, she asked me to call her baby's father and tell him she was sorry, and that she hoped he would take her back. When I refused, she told me I had done nothing to help support her family before the jail call cut us off. She did not call me again until her release. After she got out, she apologized, but I asked her not to contact me for a while; she apologized again. By this point, Emmett had completely cut her off – they had not been in contact for several months, and he had no interest in rekindling any kind of relationship with her. I told him that I had been exhausted by her decisions, and he told me he was sorry and could empathize. At the time of this writing, she and I have not spoken since.

It is possible for mentoring relationships to have "good endings": after all, when I worked in congregate care, I was expected to build caring relationships with then say goodbye to every one of the young women in my care. In the mentoring literature, long-duration mentoring relationships are understood to be the most effective ones, but there is also room for mentees to

end relationships that they have outgrown and no longer need. When they have successfully transitioned to independence and adulthood, they might turn to their mentors on occasion, but are largely capable of being thoughtful decision-makers on their own. My relationship with Beu was in a holding pattern while I was writing this chapter. Like Emmett, I was emotionally no longer equipped to advise or support her, and I knew no one else in her web of support upon whom I could rely. While I have my own sources of support – my five people – the broader relational web of which Beu was a part was temporary, ephemeral, and breaking down even as she tried to rebuild it. The crucial word here is "web". More than one person is necessary to help former foster youth age out and make thoughtful decisions, and while I could draw on my own webs, I could not build a web for her.

INTERLUDE: HAYLEY[44]

I entered the foster care system at the age of 9, after my father, my sole caregiver, passed due to lung cancer. Unfortunately, my mother struggled with substance abuse and unhealthy relationship for most of my life and also had other children in the system, so I was unable to be transferred into her care. However, I did enter into another relative placement. But it turned out not to be a good home for me.

After years of abuse and neglect, I finally spoke up for myself. At the age of 16, I experienced living in a homeless shelter during my junior year of high school and soon after, I had my first foster family placement. While it was far from perfect, individuals were open enough to let me into their home and provide care at a vital time in my life. Unfortunately, I was taken from their home after 10 months, losing the only individuals who I ever considered as family. I was placed outside of my hometown with another family who was not accepting of my identity. And then shortly after, placed into an independent living program at the age of 17, at the start of my senior year of high school.

Living on my own, without the proper supports for most of my childhood, I had to learn how to navigate life and grow up very quickly. I finished my high school studies halfway through my senior year, turning 18 in January as well, and chose not to extend my commitment to the Commonwealth and aged out of the foster care system. This left me having to support myself without assistance, which was even harder.

However, I worked a variety of jobs and graduated in May of 2015 from high school. Which only 55% of foster Youth achieve. I went to college right out of high school but lacking

[44] I offered Hayley the opportunity to contribute some of her own writing, in her own voice, to my dissertation. She took me up on it, sending me an edited version of one of her public advocacy speeches. I have removed identifiable information from the piece, but otherwise left it unedited.

the self-discipline and supports that I should have learned had I had proper care during my childhood, coupled with studying a major I did not find much interest in, I failed out of my first two semesters of college. After realizing that I needed some time to find myself, develop my identity, and get stable, I decided to take a break from my higher education journey and worked a variety of jobs in order to support myself and try to find my purpose in this world.

During this time as a young adult, my trauma started to unfold before me in the form of mental illness. I struggled with anxiety, eating disorders and depression throughout my early adulthood years. I finally had enough of dealing with jobs that provided me with no purpose or respect while also struggling to better myself mentally and financially. In 2017, I decided to go back to college. This time, I made sure I was going to finish.

I did a lot of self-reflection before choosing my major. I came to find that during my time in foster care, I was constantly 'put in my place' and my opinions and my self-advocacy was ignored. I also noticed as a young adult, how much I struggled because I lacked supports, and because of situations I had experienced as a child that were out of my control. I knew that I wanted to help populations that struggled just like I had, due to circumstances outside of their control. I landed right among the major of social work.

When I first started studying, I thought of working in schools, where I was first helped by a social worker. I wanted absolutely nothing to do with the child welfare system because of my past. However, through my journey finishing my associate degree, fate fell upon my shoulders.

I had a professor who worked for a community resource center that had programs for individuals who aged out of foster care. One of the programs I learned about allowed foster youth and former foster youth in Kentucky to obtain paid internships in a field of their desire for

10 weeks, and if accepted, they may extend up to 9 months (FUN FACT: I actually served my internship and first social work practicum at the agency with my former professor!).

As I was filling out my application, someone came to my side and told me they thought I looked like someone who had a story to tell. To this day, I still do not know why this individual singled me out among the other people there that day. Again, fate fell upon my shoulders.

Being someone who always felt like no one listened to my voice as a child, I was intrigued and more than willing to share my story. The former director of the homeless shelter I had stayed in during my teenage years had given me a few opportunities to do similar work, telling my story to different audiences. Having a bit of experience with public speaking at this point, I applied for an advocacy position, only to learn that not only was it a paid advocacy position but had so many fun opportunities and learning opportunities for professional and personal growth.

Advocacy allowed me the opportunity to have a voice at the table with other individuals who held decision-making power within the realm of child welfare. I learned so much about myself, my coworkers who I have been able to make lasting relationships with, and the child welfare system in AND out of Kentucky. I have had so many opportunities to advocate for changes in policies, pass legislation, oppose legislation, advocate on a national level, and inspire the individuals who are touched by the system whether that be social workers, other workers within child welfare, community partners, foster parents, or other children in foster care. All of this I have achieved while finishing my bachelor's degree during a pandemic in December of 2020, something that less than 5% of foster youth and alumni achieve. I served my last practicum at a wonderful alternative school in Georgetown, KY and was hired as a Case Coordinator pre-graduation for a private foster care agency in Lexington.

I am blessed for the opportunities I have been given, and truthfully, I deserved them all. One of the things missing however, was the permanency I never received. As a child in the system who faced abuse and neglect, and removal of different homes, I lacked having family or permanent connections in life. Though I have been shown a side of humanity that seems cruel, the need for familial love has always been important for me. Unfortunately, the system was not able to provide that for me, which is one of the many reasons why I struggled so much as a young adult.

My resilience and determination have yet to fail me though. I continue to tell my story not for myself or sympathy, but to help inspire others, and change the lives and the system for the individuals who follow behind me. All of the children in foster care deserve someone who is willing to step up and be vulnerable for them.

The system could not provide me with permanency, but it can offer me support that I need as a young adult who aged out of foster care and for many others in similar places as myself. Though monetary value and other assistance programs could never replace the love and support we deserved as children and young adults, it can certainly help us on our journeys to becoming self-sufficient adults. That is why it is so imperative that we implement the funds allotted to KY from federal legislation HR 7947 in order to support foster youth and families who have been directly impacted by the pandemic. Each day that we wait is another day that a youth struggles with food insecurity, homelessness, financial insecurity, mental health, and other issues. Please sign our petition to have Governor Andy Beshear sign the executive order to allow Department for Community Based Services to implement the new regulations and keep Kentucky in compliance with them.

PART IV. MAKING A LIFE AFTER CARE

THE WATERFRONT

My first photo walk with Jonathan was in late September. I picked him up at his workplace, a retirement home in Old Louisville, where he worked as a groundskeeper. I pulled into the parking lot, took a lap or two in the parking lot, and spotted him near the building. I pulled up and he got in the car.

"How are you doing?" I asked.

"I genuinely don't know," he replied, voice and body language almost entirely unreadable.

"That's an honest answer," I shrugged, trying to play it cool. I thought I'd asked an innocuous question. He tried again — "I don't…I don't even know." I left the question for the time being and asked instead about where we were going for our photo walk. He perked up a bit.

"I usually take people to the Waterfront. That's like my beginner-level walk."

"There are beginner-level walks?" I asked.

"Yeah," he said. "I spend a lot of time at the Waterfront and there's usually good stuff to shoot there."

As we drove towards downtown, Jonathan began telling me about Silas, a fellow photographer, who had previously accompanied Jonathan on his own photo walks. Rita, the organizer who had introduced Jonathan and me, had also introduced Jonathan to Silas; Silas was an artist, and one of her friends and neighbors. She thought that Jonathan and Silas might get along, given their shared interest in art and photography: she was right. Jonathan told me that he liked working with Silas because he shot things that Jonathan wouldn't shoot, and Jonathan shot

things Silas wouldn't shoot. He turned to me. "I want to see your eye. That's the fun of doing photo walks with other people – seeing what people can see."

As we wandered, I asked him about the photography part of our trip to the Waterfront.

"What do you like to take pictures of? Are you into nature or landscapes or urban spaces or people?" I asked. He told me he liked to do a mix of both, as we walked towards a small dock further down from the little inlet near the water park. "I'm somewhere in between," he said. We arrived at an open space near a dock for small boats, beneath a now-closed restaurant that appeared to have once been a Tex-Mex place, all orange and yellow and turquoise paint on the outside.



Illustration 9. Photo walk with Jonathan, Waterfront Park. Photo by author.

He looked at his phone briefly before opening his arms and announcing, "All right. Take some pictures." I hesitated, a bit nervous.

"Are you going to teach me, or just wait for me to start snapping?" I asked.

"I want to see what you're going to take pictures of," he said, with what I read as smugness. I looked around and found a railing down the stairs and walked away from him to try to get a better angle. "I like this handrail," I told him. I took a few pictures and he noted that most of it was buildings. I told him I liked architecture and urban spaces, stuff with graffiti and looking a little worn down. He laughed and said, "Oh I gotta take you to the hood." I told him I was game and that maybe that could be the destination of our next walk.



Illustration 10. Photo walk with Jonathan, Waterfront Park. Photo by author.

He pointed out what appeared to be a tag[45] and some graffiti on the wall that said "812", and asked, "Why didn't you get that?" "I don't like that graffiti," I joked, "It's not cute enough." The tag appeared to say "scun". He said it was probably someone from Indiana, because the 812

[45] "Tag" refers to the unique signature of a particular graffiti artist.

next to it was the area code for Jeffersonville. As we puzzled through the tag and the graffiti, I asked if he knew the artist; “Scun? Is that a name? What does it mean?”

“It sounds retarded but whatever floats his boat,” he shrugged, then pulled his phone out and took a few shots. I asked what he did with his photography — did he get paid for it? He said he sometimes did, he’s done a few photo shoots for people, some were paid, and some were for free. “Everybody’s got a camera these days,” he muttered, then explained that he had done a photo shoot recently for his brother and his brother’s friend: “They were like ‘aw yea I fucks with that.’” As he took more pictures, he moved closer and closer to the water; I followed him and tried to set up my own shots.





Illustration 11. Photo walk with Jonathan, Waterfront Park. Photo by author.

I sat down on the pier to try to take a photograph of the poles sticking out of the water (pictured on the right). He watched me, and after a few moments of companionable silence, he suddenly asked me a question about what I did with my free time.

"So what do YOU do?" he tried to ask casually, but it was so abrupt and so far removed from anything we'd been talking about before – fights and photography and interracial friendships – it seemed out of place, either completely random or something he couldn't figure out how to ask any other way.

"I'm a graduate student. I follow former foster youth around and write about it. This is what I do," I responded with a grin.

"No but like, what do you do when you aren't doing this?"

I had a moment of panic: *what DO I do when I'm not doing this? No one's asked me about my non-work activities in such a long time*. Although Jonathan had asked and said things to me that threw me a bit off-balance, so far I had been able to respond with my own experiences. When he talked about fighting, I talked about my restraint training. When we talked about photography, I talked about my own lack of experience. He had seemed so eager to talk when we met, and I was more than happy to sit and listen and absorb the things he had to say.

I wasn't sure what, specifically, he had been looking for, but I thought back one of my earliest efforts to deal with the loneliness of fieldwork: the social dance classes I'd enrolled in at the dance studio down the street from my apartment.

"I've been dancing a lot, actually, since I've been here," I said, slowly. He cocked his head and raised an eyebrow.

"Tell me about you being a dancer, because that's the first I've heard of it!" he went back to taking photographs, still listening, but I got the sense he was shooting me sideways glances

periodically. I explained that I used to dance a long time ago, when I was in college, and had tried to keep it up when I moved back to Louisville after finishing undergrad. The swing dance scene felt creepy and predatory: men had tried to kiss me without my consent, they'd tried to drag me out to the floor once or twice, and the men who ran the dance scene did nothing when I complained, so I quit. He was quiet, though I could have sworn I heard a muttered "Dang" from somewhere in my periphery.

"But I'm happier now with the new dance community I'm a part of," I finished. He asked me what styles of dance I knew, and I listed them – tango, bachata, kizomba, swing, blues, but never salsa – and he looked both surprised and a little impressed. He didn't say much other than, "Huh." It felt a little like the balance was back – he had surprised me, and I had gotten to surprise him in return. We sat on the dock for a bit and then noticed some white people watching us at the other end of the dock near the boats; we decided to move along to a new location.

Reciprocity in research

After my photography walk with Jonathan, I began rethinking my research methods in two important ways. First, I recalibrated my idea of what was "fair" in my field interactions. Jonathan had wanted to get to know me – not my work or my research, but me. His near-indignance that I hadn't been more forthcoming about my hobbies and downtime suggested that he was asking me to give an account of myself as a person. I was surprised – more on that in a moment – but it was completely fair to ask me to share about myself. I did not know it at the time, but I now think of this conversation as one about research ethics.

Although I rarely asked direct questions about their personal lives, I hoped that young people would offer me information about their friends, families, work, free time, and so on.

However, Jonathan's insistence that I account for myself forced me to reckon with the fundamental information imbalance of my expectations of former foster youth: asking questions and being a good listener were not enough. If I wanted to know about them, it would stand to reason that they would also like to know about me. I moved from a passive recipient of information to a more active purveyor of it, not by actively soliciting answers to asking more questions, but by offering young people more information about my personal life. The effects were immediate. Once I began telling Beu stories and gossip from my dance classes and events, she began specifically requesting them: "Do you have more dance videos?" "You look so happy when you dance," she told me once, following up with, "I've been thinking about it for weeks, this exact conversation, because I didn't know how to ask…but I want to see." And after our walk and conversation, Jonathan seemed to trust me a bit more too.

Revising my idea of consent

I did my best to enact a professional researcher persona in my field interactions. To me, this meant revealing very little of myself, so that my interlocutors would not confuse my questions or interest in their personal lives for friendship. I suspect this is residual anxiety about institutional notions of consent. During the institutional review process for an earlier version involving adolescents who were under 18 and still in state custody, Princeton's institutional review board was understandably concerned about consent. Board members were worried that I would be exerting undue influence or somehow coercing people into talking to me or revealing personal information to me: children, after all, cannot consent to research participation and therefore I would have had to take great pains to ensure I was asserting or abusing authority so often associated with adults. What I know from my own experiences working with young people

is that they hardly ever open up to adults they do not trust, and their trust can be hard to earn. I have rarely wondered where I stood with most of the young people I have encountered in professional settings: they are clear when they like me and clearer when they do not. Although my worries about consent became less institutionally fraught once I changed the focus of my project to young legal adults who *had* been in care, I still strove to make it clear to everyone that I was a researcher first.

I knew, distantly, that consent in ethnographic research is an ongoing process, I thought that if I maintained a friendly but firmly professional identity in the field, I could avoid wondering whether or not people understood that I was *doing research* during our conversations. If I presented myself as a researcher, and only a researcher, stripped of personal feelings and information, then people could opt out of research conversations with me. I worried constantly about whether people — especially young people — understood that I was taking notes on the things they said and that I was planning to write about them. I flag this explicitly in my ethnographic renderings, the moments where I awkwardly pulled out my notebook or phone to jot down notes in the middle of a conversation or referred to our conversations as "research". I played up my own status as "awkward researcher" in the field, trying to fashion myself into only a student and nothing more.

Many of the adults I worked with — Rita, Silas, the lobbyists and journalists I encountered early in my fieldwork — went along with this, for a time. Some of the lobbyists actually had experience with ethnographic research: one of them had done an ethnographic study of another's classroom for his doctoral dissertation, which he happily pulled out and showed me one day. Rita, a self-described recovering academic, asked me about how research was going, but eventually our conversations moved beyond the frame of her incarceration work and my

focus on child welfare policies. The lobbyists I studied revealed small pieces of their preferences, personal lives, worries on car rides and hallway chats at the office.

I allowed these shifts, welcomed them as part of the fieldwork process, but only after this encounter with Jonathan. His direct question – "What do YOU do?" – was a wrecking ball to the idea that I could or should maintain a strictly distant professional persona, at least in his presence. He wasn't simply curious, but almost indignant that I hadn't been more forthcoming about it: "This is the first I'm hearing of it," he said to me, as though I had been withholding crucial information. I felt like he was testing me, seeing whether I could be trusted to reciprocate the things he offered me: stories, insights, opinions, the personal tidbits he told me he normally kept to himself for fear of being misheard or misunderstood. I had thought that being a good listener, of accepting and responding in kind, was the right way to elicit his thoughts, and for a time it was. But being a good listener was not enough, and the real reciprocity he was after put us on more equal footing.

He was the first person I met in the field who challenged the boundary I had set up between "work" and "not work". In asking me about my art habits and practices, he was pointing out an imbalance in our relationship; he was telling me about his personal life, his feelings, his inner world, but I was not giving him anything equivalent in return. He saw that there was a person underneath the researcherly persona, maybe an artist or a poet or a dancer.

MAKING ART A MATTER OF CONCERN

The second way that Jonathan caused me to rethink my methods, beyond sharing more about myself, was to redirect my focus and research questions. His attention to my artistic

practices was a signal for me to pay attention to the artistic practices of my interlocutors. When I began this project, I hoped to "follow the lead" of young people, to notice the things they found important. I had intended for this to be a response to interview- and survey-based studies of former foster youth. These qualitative methods reveal important information, particularly the longitudinal studies that track outcomes years after young people leave care. However, these study designs are often based in hypothesis-testing, service evaluation, and specific metrics of adult success. Although these study designs — and the data they collect — are terribly important in crafting policies, procedures, and services for former foster youth, it is often professional child welfare *experts* who determine the questions and issues that are important *about* young people, rather than the issues and questions that are important *to* young people.

There are of course notable exceptions to this rule. The organization Think of Us has made efforts to research the personal goals, desires, and concerns of former foster youth. Founded by Sixto Cancel, a former foster youth turned tech magnate, this national organization and research center put out two remarkable studies, one on aging out of foster care (Cancel et al. 2020) and one on life in residential facilities (Fathallah and Sullivan 2021). Both studies offered young people space, time, and compensation for open-ended responses, individual writing, mapping exercises, and other free-form expression. The research team then coded, summarized, analyzed, and condensed their findings into reports, which have circulated among service providers and researchers who work on aging out. Moreover, Think of Us was also instrumental during the pandemic: they ran an outreach campaign and representatives of the organization advocated for former foster youth-specific pandemic relief, including a national moratorium on aging out from summer 2020 through November 2021. In 2022, they opened The Center for Lived Experience, which will conduct research with everyone involved with child welfare: foster

families, children, families of origin, social workers, policymakers, and others. I interpret the apparent influence of Think of Us in shaping policies and research agendas as a sign that researchers are slowly moving towards more collaborative forms of research with former foster youth, and also signals how research and advocacy can productively complement one another.

In anthropology, configuring research methods around the interests of young people has produced extraordinary analysis about the importance of creative expression in times of crisis or emergency. In Aimee Cox's work on Black girls in a homeless shelter in Detroit — not former foster youth, but similarly teenagers and young adults who were displaced from their homes of origin — she combines her own experience as a professional dancer with young women "creatively laboring" in the shelter (Cox 2015, 191). After observing them analyzing lyrics, dancing in front of a mirror, and writing poetry, Cox describes how she found funding to hire five young women as peer educators at the shelter. Offering dance education and operational support, Cox otherwise let the girls lead what became the Move Experiment, a movement and writing workshop for the singular purpose of "feeling good". The Move Experiment ran for three months as a creative expression workshop, before becoming more of an outreach program and losing the artistic practices from which it originated.

Afterward the end of the Move Experiment, however, Cox describes the method of "embodied translation" (Cox 2015, 215-235) that emerged in a follow-up creative expression experiment, BlackLight. Cox outlines how shelter residents and other young women who participated in shelter activities collaborated and experimented together. Starting with their own poetry, young women took turns reading and performing spoken word together, then finding movements to match the emotions that surfaced from the verbal performance. The iteration of feeling from paper, sound, body, then back again offered a space for participants to make

meaning out of their daily experiences, to refine them according to the artistic practices that worked to capture their feeling, and to do so while sharing the experience with other girls. BlackLight moved from the various indoor venues Cox was able to locate — youth centers, the shelter common area, studios — into the streets of Detroit, where girls took up public space through performance.

As a performance dancer, Cox is interested in the ways bodies moving through space transform the terms of engagement with that space — as a social dancer, I am less interested in the transformation of space than how careful listening and improvisation can produce meaningful connections with others. Moreover, unlike Cox, I did not take a similarly systematic, iterative approach to noticing how young people experimented with creative expression. In my own fieldwork, it was largely because of Jonathan that I paid attention to art at all. After our conversation, where it became clear to me that art was important to *him*, I tried to reorient my own anthropological gaze towards the creative and expressive practices of my young interlocutors, though not without hesitation.

ART? IN THIS ECONOMY?

In an effort to bridge the rural-urban divide between Louisville and the rest of Kentucky (see Methods chapter), Rita and the organization she ran had coordinated a four-part Learning Exchange with an education nonprofit in Berea. The Exchange ran from September 2019 through April 2020, and consisted of four two-day workshops, alternating between Louisville and Berea. The purpose of the Learning Exchange was to learn more about how organizations in two very different locations were tackling key issues in justice reform, particularly regarding issues of children and family.

Not everyone involved with Rita's organization had full access to each part of the exchange: the organizers wanted to keep the group small so that they could get to know each other and learn in a more intimate setting. As a result, Rita had asked only five or six of her colleagues to participate in the workshops. I attended the public meetings during the first meeting of the Exchange, held in Louisville, in September. However, after many coffee meetings, casual chats, and phone calls with Rita, she invited me to travel with the group to Berea for the December session.

The workshop facilitator, Hasan, introduced himself during the initial September meeting as a "Hope Dealer", an artist, and the former Commissioner of Kentucky's Department of Juvenile Justice. He was a writer and performer: over the course of the exchange, we watched him perform his one-man historical show about York, the enslaved man who was likely compelled to go on the Lewis and Clark expedition.

As the exchange facilitator, Hasan had clear ideas about how to integrate art and advocacy work, which I saw in action over the course of the exchange. In one of the workshops, he joked that he often wrestled with the assumption that art and advocacy were separate spheres when he moved between different groups of people. Other artists often asked him if he did "justice stuff", but because he had been the Juvenile Justice Commissioner, they also thought of him as "the system" or as "the man". He laughed, "And with the system [as the Juvenile Justice Commissioner], they asked 'Did you do art?'" without recognizing that he was still an artist. Art and advocacy work were entwined, simultaneous: he understood himself to be operating in between systems and acknowledged that people didn't always trust him or his methods because they didn't believe that someone could do both at the same time. For him, there was no need to sequence or separate these from each other.

The first Berea workshop – the second in the series – was especially focused on learning about and drawing on a variety of artistic practices. I had never been to Berea, a small college town in a regionally murky area of Kentucky that might be considered Appalachia to Kentucky urbanites, but probably not to other Appalachians. It was artsy and kitschy; I wandered through the shops and chatted with people making metal sculptures in the lobby of the hotel where we were staying. I passed the bell hooks Center, which close to the hotel where I was staying.

Berea was a two-hour drive from Louisville, so I had plenty of time to chat with my ride, Dean, on the way there. Dean was from eastern Kentucky and had moved to Louisville after earning his law degree. An attorney with in a two-person private practice, he and his law partner exclusively took cases dealing with police and correctional officer misconduct. I never got the full story of how he became involved with Rita's organization, but nearly everyone involved had a similar trajectory: we had met Rita at an event somewhere, got to talking, and she managed to get us to show up to a meeting. His advocacy work with the organization consisted of drafting legal guidance and interfacing with Jefferson County judges, specifically with the goal of persuading judges to take family and caregiving responsibilities into account when deciding whether to release people who were awaiting trial. It was difficult work. According to the judicial reform team, many of the judges simply did not believe that the people in their courtrooms had families or children, despite the fact that Kentucky has the highest rate of parental incarceration in the United States. Approximately one in twelve of Kentucky's children experienced parental incarceration during the period I was doing fieldwork (Advocates 2019). The majority of people incarcerated in Kentucky's women's prisons had children. In spite of this, Dean and his colleagues had trouble convincing the judges that "criminals" and "parents" or "caregivers" were all the same people, and the work took its toll on them.

The first Berea workshop opened with a collaborative group project – sitting with others at our tables, we constructed crowns out of fabric scraps, cardboard, plastic children's toys. We were instructed to think about what represented power for us: was it held in community? Each other? Individual power? Crowns themselves already represented sovereignty, a kind of formalized power – the core question of the activity was not to make art but to reflect on how we educators, scholars, lawyers, public officials, and organizers understand what power looks like and where it is held. We didn't have precious gemstones or gold: it was an exercise in abstraction, collaboration, and reflection on the symbols of power.

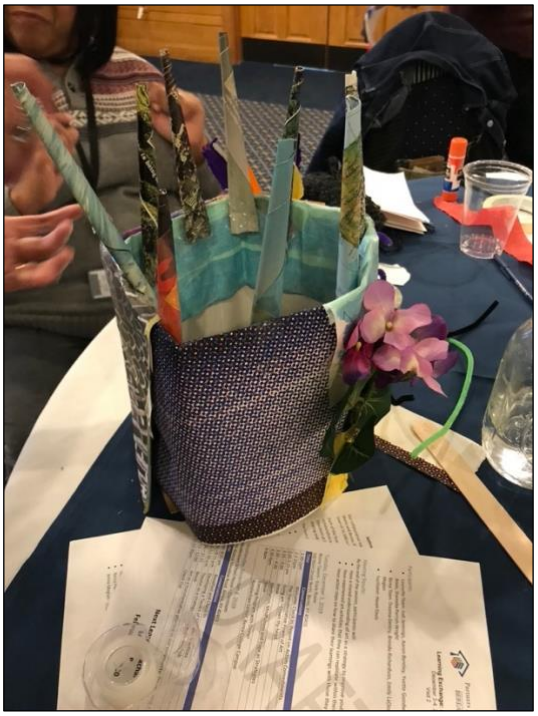

Illustration 12. Crown symbolizing power, in collaboration with other participants, Berea, KY. Photo by author.

We would continue on this track for the two days we were in Berea, wrestling concepts like power and community in everyday materials and practices. We tried yoga, meditation, painting, and watch musical performances, spoken word, storytelling, plays, and did a lot of guided journaling, notebooks and instructions provided by Hasan. People yelled, confronted their own histories of trauma, and confronted each other. Between meals and the shared anxiety of trying something new in front of people one doesn't know very well, I was surprised by everyone's apparent willingness to share. It was cathartic, intense, and intimate.

As part of the closing reflection, Hasan asked us to reflect on how we might incorporate art into the various kinds of work we did. He insisted to us, "We are not doing art just to do art."

By this, he meant that art activities always contained some kind of transformative potential – making art with each other was meant to bind us to one another, help us rediscover our purpose and refine our own political projects and the means to achieve them. It was also, I think, meant to allow the workshop attendees and those we would eventually the mental and creative space to reflect on our own hurts and anxieties.

For some of the participants, adding art was easier said than done. Some of us were educators and coaches, people who worked directly with young people to improve their educational outcomes and wellbeing; incorporating a ten-minute meditative art exercise to a daily warmup at the beginning of a class may not have been easy but was certainly feasible. Dean, however, struggled to come up with a reasonable way to add art or meditation to his own work: as an attorney working directly with incarcerated people, he thought it might be strange to ask his clients to spend their precious legal advice visits on art activities.

On the drive back, Dean and I mused on some of the topics that had surfaced in the group conversation: addiction, our wariness of the word "dependency", the various meanings of the term "Appalachia", the structure of Kentucky's court systems. As we re-entered Louisville, he got quiet, then asked me, "So I want your opinion on something."

"All right."

"So is like…everything we did this weekend…well not a weekend but in the last day…Do you think it's all…kind of bullshit?"

I paused for a long time and thought about it. Although I had found camaraderie, friendship, and catharsis through the workshops, I also was skeptical of their capacity to transform the material circumstances of the young people with whom I worked, and the incarcerated adults

whom Dean served. I decided to play the devil's advocate, and defend art's transformative qualities, experimentally, to see if I could talk myself into believing in them.

"Yes and no." I launched into a long rant about how miserable it can be to work on "this stuff" — child welfare for me, police and prison misconduct for him. I rambled about how important it was to find ways to imagine life after mass incarceration, or life after capitalism, or life after childhood trauma — what does it look like? That's where art is important for me, I told him, because art is imaginative, and we need imagination to look beyond the awful circumstances in which we work.

"I wish I could write down what you said, about imagination," he told me, after a beat. He paused again, before continuing. He explained that he was asking in part because he was skeptical of people who see "doing art in jails AS the work" — many of the artists we had met through the workshops were people who worked directly with incarcerated people, often doing art activities with them.

"But I don't know, maybe it is…You know…I value the arts. I'm a musician," he began, but went on to explain that at some point he decided he wanted to do something that felt "more important". He guessed that was when he decided to go to law school. He continued on, wondering whether his work was important enough, in part because tackling individual cases was not shifting the attitudes of punitive judges, nor was it changing laws to limit pretrial incarceration, nor was it lowering incidences of police or correctional officer violence. His work, while deeply important for his individual clients, was not at a structural level, a Band-Aid on a gunshot wound. I pointed out that there was no way that we would ever get to see the imagined world we wanted, whether that looked like post-capitalism or post-racial, and that we needed

some way of keeping that dream intact to keep doing the grunt work. Instead of responding, he asked me which exit to take, and I told him Grinstead. He took the turn, then continued.

He told me a story about a recent visit with one of his clients. The first five minutes of their visit were about the case, giving her updates and asking her questions, but then afterwards they talked and joked and hung out. I pointed out how important that was, like, to reaffirm the humanity of the people living within an inhumane system. "You are all she has," I told him, "and it shouldn't be like that," but it was and it was important that he not undercut the very real significance of their relationship because he felt like it wasn't enough in the grand scheme of things. He went on, acknowledging that that was true, but also that it still didn't quite feel adequate.

The rest of the car ride was quiet, with me offering occasional platitudes and Dean lost in thought. We pulled up outside of my apartment. He thanked me for the conversation over the past few days, helped me get my things out of the car, and waved goodbye.

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Dean and I were wrestling with the same question after our trip to Berea: surely there was something "more important" than art to do with and for people involved with state systems? For him, doing music as a career was mutually exclusive with the possibility of doing something "more important", like being a lawyer. It seems he understood it to be an impossible choice. In other conversations, I learned that he had been encouraged (or pressured) by family and friends from eastern Kentucky to do something useful for society. Many of them understood law as useful and significant, while implicitly positioning music as a potential waste of his time and talent. Unlike Hasan, who had been able to do justice-oriented work through and alongside

artistic production, Dean had chosen a singular career and stuck with it, and understandably: it took up a lot of time and could be emotionally draining.

Despite my optimistic words, I shared Dean's ambivalence about the limitations of art's transformative powers. In the literatures that inform this project — sociology, youth services — child welfare is most often studied as a "social problem" to be solved through better governance, a phenomenon thoroughly critiqued in anthropological literatures about biopower and governmentality, many of which rely on Foucault's later work. I was not immune to this way of thinking about state power. I also arrived in the field with the expectation that I would be studying homelessness and deprivation. In some cases, particularly with Beu, I saw firsthand how challenging it could be for some former foster youth to have a safe place to sleep or a warm meal to eat. To sidestep the real material challenges facing former foster youth would be a falsehood. Before this project, like many of those working with and studying people involved with social services, I thought of this project as being a story of institutional failure. What could be done in the aftermath of child welfare intervention to make the lives of former foster youth more livable? Art was hardly on my radar as a potential material resource, even with Jonathan's encouragement: I was thinking more along the lines of cash transfers, housing, transportation.

I do not mean to place Dean and Hasan on opposite ends of a spectrum – they are friends, they share a mutual respect, a deep love of the arts, and an incredible commitment to structural changes to Kentucky's carceral systems. However, the differing ways they spoke about integrating art and advocacy neatly capture my own concerns about doing art – instead of other, more important things – in Kentucky. Art is significant and emotionally healing, but my inner materialist understands that simply doing art will not, on its own, shift the political climate I outlined in the first part of this dissertation, or build roads or public transit systems like I outlined

in the second part. Art won't necessarily change the material circumstances of the lives of former foster youth.

This question about how to set priorities in time and funding emerges in Cox's work as well. She describes how staff members were skeptical of the Move Experiment, characterizing it as a waste of time given the shelter's limited resources, or reminding the girls who ran the workshop that, although they were being paid and working, an arts program was not a "real job" (Cox 2015, 205). Because the Move Experiment was not explicitly, directly geared towards the key material goals of the shelter — job training, housing, income, educational achievement, health education — the importance of movement and expression for their own sake seemed superfluous, quite literally extracurricular. Even before imitating the Move Experiment, Cox had moments of doubt about the power of art to transform. She tells the story of Poetess, one of the young women in the shelter, who applied to college without telling anyone on the staff of the shelter. Upon realizing that the forms Poetess had submitted were incomplete and, in some cases, handwritten, Cox writes explicitly that she was both "inspired by Poetess's commitment to developing her art and her ability to identify an educational institution in line with her goals" and "annoyed with her refusal to move toward what I felt, at the time, to be the reality she faced (Cox 2015, 110). When Poetess, convinced she would be getting into college despite the incomplete application, began skipping work or ignoring program guidelines, Cox had it out with her.

> I let her have it in a way that I have never spoken to a girl before or since. Poetess slammed her bedroom door and screamed at me from the other side, "You just hatin' but you gonna see when I get my acceptance letter." I felt out of order and defeated. I had never before felt the need to raise my voice to one of the residents...(Cox 2015, 110)

Believing that Poetess would not be exempt from the ways that educational institutions exclude young Black women, Cox thought of Poetess's college application as a failed endeavor. Equally important for an ethnographer and as an administrator responsible for Poetess' material

needs, she describes feeling “powerless” and “self-sabotaging” in the face of systemic barriers facing Black women who want to pursue higher education (2015, 110). She was, however, mistaken: the unconventional application Poetess submitted had been received with great fanfare by a professor who personally ensured that Poetess had a future at the school, along with a full scholarship (2015, 112).

As the director of the shelter at the time, Cox understood why her coworkers were skeptical, irritated, and otherwise desperate to convince girls to take fewer risks with their livelihoods. She herself snapped under the pressure of trying to convince Poetess to take what Cox understood to be the right path: following the rules, making sensible decisions. She understood that many of the young women at the shelter were managing crisis after crisis, that being a Black girl in deindustrializing Detroit was rife with dangers and scarcity. On the other hand, Cox also theorizes Black girlhood — with all of its expressivity, creation, and contradiction — as an example of how everyone might respond to emergencies. She writes,

> Black girls suggest that we take up the challenge posed to all of us by M. Jacqui Alexander to think of ourselves as “refugees of a world on fire” (2005, 264). This is an acknowledgment of the dynamics of social processes and the potential held in our capacity to embrace, rather than fight against, our inevitable and perpetual displacement. We should, in fact, allow ourselves—like the young women at Fresh Start—to use our displacement as a starting point for regeneration and the creation of new lifeworlds and spaces that affirm our collective humanity.”

Cox flags an important point here, that many if not all of us, are likely to be displaced from our spaces of privilege, whether through changing economic circumstances, job loss, climate change, or the gradual disability that can come with aging. Displacement, of course, follows social patterns of inequality and oppression. Cox writes about homeless Black girls, young women who are especially displaced even within displaced families in deindustrializing Detroit. Yet, the residents of the Fresh Start shelter and the Move Experiment and BlackLight

participants also create and transform spaces, often through grappling with their exclusion from job training programs, public housing, schools, or their own family homes. Rather than sidestepping the reality of "a world on fire", Cox encourages her readers to take this frightening reality as a given and a source of solidarity and regeneration. The creation of new lifeworlds and the affirmation of our collective humanity — these are the possibilities that Cox identifies in moving, dancing, experimenting, writing poetry, making art.

Having been removed and moved at the behest of the state, former foster youth especially share this quality of displacement with the young women at the Fresh Start shelter. Like Poetess, they too were subject to "haters" understandings of what constituted a good life – the safe, the sensible, the least risky options. In most cases, they tried these options and found them to be lacking. Despite my own doubts – and those of Dean, Cox and her coworkers – in the stories that follow, I try to describe the ways former foster youth work creatively labored, embracing their displacement and frustrations, and what these creative practices allowed them to do for themselves.

ART AS A COMMENTARY ON WORK

All of this brings me to the central question underlying this chapter: What, given the very real and often challenging material, social, and political circumstances of life after state care, does art afford for former foster youth and the adults in their orbits? In this chapter, I take up these questions about the relationship between work and subsistence, by focusing on the creative practices of young people. Here I use the terms "art" and "creative practices" liberally and interchangeably. The actual activities I detail here include more conventional artistic practices of the sort that scholars of art and art worlds tend to analyze: music production, painting, photography (Becker 2008). I also use "art" to describe activities that are less frequently thought

of as artistic, such as hairstyling and makeup, plastic and metal button-making, and simple fabric manipulation. These activities can be the basis for the sort of high-society creations that skilled practitioners would likely call art – haute couture fashion, visual effects in movies, installation pieces – but here they are done by amateurs and novices, making them seemingly "less worthy of respect" in art worlds (Becker 2008, 16). I analyze these novice activities less for the creative or artistic prowess, but rather because my interlocutors understood them to be "like art", or because like Becker's art worlds theory, they belong to a collection of social activities that produce the works we often consider to be "art". Art, for Becker, isn't merely the result of a lone creative genius: symphony orchestras, for instance, are made up of raw materials and instrument manufacturers, music teachers, sheet music producers, ticket salespeople, composers, musicians, audiences, advertisers, and the like. While novices or amateurs in art worlds at large, the young people here participate in the same conventions and practices of those far more skilled or famous. In this sense, of participating in the same techniques, learning habits, and using art to similar ends as "real artists", I take young people as part of a broader art community, and what they do as art.

My analysis here takes two approaches. In some places, I focus on the formal dimensions of art: color, layout, content, medium, meaning. I take this approach with Allison, because her artistic production was a direct commentary on the legitimacy of certain kinds of labor and the illegitimacy or challenges of other kinds of labor. In analyzing the formal dimensions of her art, I can shed light on her critique of the way that she was expected to adapt to ideas of waged work, and her reflections on what counts as good work or work worth doing. I also take this approach with Jonathan's music, as my experience of his creative output speaks to one of the roles that art played in his life: processing hurt.

The second approach focuses on the circumstances of artistic production, particularly as they compare to other kinds of labor. I take this approach with Hayley, Beu, and Jonathan. In looking at Hayley's explicit conversations about her artistic production, broadly construed, I am able to look at and situate her understanding of valuable work through direct conversations with her about the kinds of creative practices that she was implementing while in lockdown. These conversations and commentaries reveal strategic thinking about how to adapt to changing work circumstances, particularly under extreme conditions like a pandemic, but also through ongoing conversation with her I reflect on what I understand to be her feelings about her work.

On a more abstract level, looking at this array of material what I notice is the ways young people comment and make decisions about what *feels* valuable to them, in and outside of formal labor. In this chapter I hope to show how their reflections on work that emerged over the course of our interactions, whether I was observing artistic production that they were doing on their own or doing art activities with them, I saw a moral system develop about how money making and wage labor might be subordinated to other kinds of priorities: identity, belonging, self-satisfaction, service to others, or freedom from timetables and low pay. It is through the production of arts and the act of creation, that I learned more about their understanding of the moral value of work in the context of other kinds of values.

This chapter intervenes in the very same debates that Cox found in her own work at the homeless shelter. In a world where young people who leave foster care are bound by the rules and structures and expectations of social services, all of which have a moral claim about legitimate kinds of work, how do they understand their own priorities in contrast to the priorities of the formal institutional programs that are offered to them? And paying attention to what young people are doing, in their free time, and how they talk about it, questions about their

relationship to the workforce and their priorities as people — not strictly as workers or responsible adults — start to emerge.

CHAPTER 9. FINDING VALUE – WORK, ART, AND PLEASURE

THE LOCKDOWN LOOKS

Hayley: Ive been doing lots of makeup lately and its been on point 👌
EB: POST 👏 THAT 👏 SHIT 👏
Hayley: Lol
Hayley: Let me show you
Hayley: [Image 1]
Hayley: [Image 2]
Hayley: These are the most recent ones i did. One of them wasnt that good but oh well😂 live and learn
EB: UM I LOVE THESE.
EB: the first and last are my favorites

Over the first few weeks of Kentucky's 2020 COVID lockdown, Hayley and I had frequent exchanges like this. She'd share her most recent makeup, and I would cheer her on, genuinely excited and curious about her forays into beauty. These exchanges became a part of our regular conversations via text message, absorbed into the ebb and flow of conversation about the pandemic and, eventually, her transition to virtual advocacy work and schooling. Makeup and after some time, hair styling, were facets of her life that she chose to share with me over the early days of the pandemic, when we were both stuck at home, bored, and a little scared.

In this section, I reflect on Hayley's beautification practices, and situate them within a larger discussion of work, pleasure, and self-making. I analyze the formal aesthetic dimensions of her lockdown looks — the colors, motifs, and visual languages upon which she draws in her creations – and how she talked about her artistic process. I situate her makeup practices within a larger feminist discussion about beauty culture and choice. Based on our conversations about makeup and hairstyling, I argue that Hayley's pandemic experiments were a practice of pleasure,

rooted in whimsy and play, technical mastery and craftsmanship, and the freedom of self-making made possible by makeup and hairstyling. I describe how Hayley considered a possible career change into the beauty industry. Taken in concert with other conversations about work and education, I observe that Hayley considered "service to others", supporting them in "feeling good", as an important component of work that she valued and found important. In deciding to stay with social work for the time being, she chose to make use of her credentials and experience at a structural level, but with an understanding of the more bodily needs of her clients, and herself.

PLAY, PLEASURE, AND CRAFTSMANSHIP

Creative inspiration

Hayley, like many children of the 1990s, was not immune to the nostalgia marketing of Disney. We had several conversations about the wave of live-action reboots of the so-called Golden Age of Disney during our first meetings. In her makeup experiments, she would iterate on these new-old films, drawing creative inspiration from them in a new format.

> Hayley: Ive been highly impressed with myself lately lol
> EB: For the makeup looks?? :)
> Hayley:Yes
> EB: They're amazing
> Hayley: Im calling this one "frozen"
> Hayley: [Image 1]
> EB: Oh wait yes
> EB: A Disney princess line of looks
> Hayley: Oh ideas!! Ill have to do the little mermaid next
> Hayley: Or.. mulan😌
> Hayley: Its settled. Your brilliant idea will become my task!
> Hayley: Im definitely gonna do something lilo and stitch inspired
> EB: I always liked the brown princesses
> EB: Pocahontas!!
> Hayley: I have a look prepared for pocahontas lol
> EB:YES
> Hayley: Im tackling this over the next weeks lol

EB:👌
Hayley: In the end, i will put a collage together of all the looks
EB: YESSS

The original look that set off the exchange included an immaculately blended gradient of magenta, starting at the lashes and blended upwards and fading out underneath the bone of her eye. She had added a swipe of glittery gold shadow, shaping it to match the line of her ever-present black liquid liner wings. There was no obvious reference to the animated Disney film *Frozen*, where the color palette was wintery whites and blues. The connection to Disney that I made was solely through the naming of her art, but she took it and ran with it.

Her project resulted in a series of photographed makeup looks, referencing these films through the use of bold colors and motifs from the movies. The *Mulan* makeup relied on deep red and smoky blacks, a bluish-black streak from the outer corner of her eye, narrowing as it moved inward. She paired the black wings with a silver glitter eyeshadow streak along her lashes. Underneath her eye, she had painted a thin streak of red along the lower lash line. She sent it to me with no context; I applauded the effort, and she explained her creative process.

Hayley: This is for mulan. I had different ideas, at first i considered matching the makeup they gave her for the matchmaker, or matching her regular clothes, but in the end i mainly went off the live action movie which the poster is red
EB: I was wondering whose it was
EB: I love it tho it looks great

Although I had not correctly guessed the inspiration, she had an idea that she iterated, drawing on shapes and colors from her source material. She would continue in this vein, giving me some insights into the color palette she had chosen for a particular set of eye makeup. A deep rose shadow, coupled with turquoise and gold eyeliner for Rapunzel, sheer and ocean blue shadows with white liner and a small flower at the corner of her eye on her upper cheek bone for Lilo and Stitch. Every single one had a perfectly painted sharp winged eyeliner, whether black, glittery, metallic, or some other color. I never did get a full collage of the series, but the few she

did send along were creative reinterpretations of other art forms that she loved, or at least offered her a chance to flex her creative and technical muscles.

Makeup and power

Despite the whimsy and cheering that accompanied Hayley's makeup experiments, makeup — "beauty work" in general — is not always fun and games. Feminists have roundly and rightfully critiqued the compulsory femininity of the "fashion-beauty complex" (Bartky 1990, 39). Beauty can be and often is a method of gendered oppression, whether through the implicit or explicit enforcement of hair, makeup, clothing, or body type standards. Beauty standards are unevenly taken up and enforced, the expectations differing for women across age (Coleman and Figueroa 2010), race (Craig 2006), citizenship or migration status (Liebelt n.d.) and class lines (Gimlin 2002; Edmonds 2007; Jarrín 2017). Moreover, beauty standards are never stable; they change, seasonally it seems, making "beauty" an impossible standard, an inevitable failure (Bartky 1990; Cahill 2003). It is precisely the impossibility of successfully achieving fickle, constantly changing beauty standards while simultaneously being held to them that is the basis of many feminist critiques of everything from hair salons to fashion magazines to aerobics classes. Attempting to embody beauty standards takes up women's time and energy, an apparent zero-sum game in which women can simultaneously never get ahead of the trends and face negative consequences for noncompliance.

The answer to this broad characterization of beauty standards as oppressive has been an observation that, despite the enforcement of gender norms, women — and other genders — might nonetheless take pleasure in beautification. Cahill's analysis of her own family's process of beautification before a wedding illustrates the decision-making and debates that go into beauty choices, and the sources of these decisions (Cahill 2003).The key element here is choice; women

can meaningfully choose to participate in beauty culture, enjoy it, and not feel oppressed by doing so. In an attempt to recuperate the joys of self-styling and adornment, feminist theorists have also attempted to delineate the conditions in which beautification might be considered a form of freedom and self-expression.

Mendoza-Denton's delightful, in-depth discussion of the particulars of chola makeup among gang-affiliated girls in Los Angeles points to the refusal of white beauty norms through the production of oppositional beauty norms. Over and over again, she found that affiliates of the Norteña (northern) and Sureña (southern) gangs would wear their hair, lipstick, monochrome clothes, and above all, eyeliner, in specific styles that would mark that as part of one group or another. She found that young women often associated eyeliner specifically with masculine power: they described how wearing "long and hard" eyeliner made them feel "more macha", "ready to fight", "like another person", "tough", and "brave" (Mendoza-Denton 1996, 55–57). They understood power to stem from "inscrutability and [a] threatening demeanor", that allowed them to go where they wanted, purge their neighborhoods of other groups, and in particular, enforce an ethnic identity counterposed to those of a "Euro-American matrix" (1996, 58). They refused dieting and embraced muscles and heft as indicators of their own power to inflict violence on others, crafting social hierarchies around the "unfeminine and threatening" (1996, 60). Mendoza-Denton argues that, while the hegemonic beauty standards of thinness or skirt-wearing or more "natural" makeup continue to exert an influence on young women as they get older, as teenagers they were happy to belong to the group through refusal of this paradigm. It would be impossible to deny the pervasiveness of beauty and beautification in the ways women regulate themselves and each other, but Mendoza-Denton's analysis points to the possibility of

using beautification techniques towards a kind of social power that is actively hostile to the specific kinds of compulsory femininity critiqued by feminist theorists like Bartky.

I suggest that makeup's use as a form of social control can be distinguished from its more playful, expressive, or empowering uses if one pays attention to the idea of "naturalness". "Naturalness" in beauty can be understood less as an inherent quality of untouched, unaltered appearances but is rather the result of "painstaking construction" (Gimlin 2002, 42). Gimlin focuses her analysis of "naturalness" on hairstyling. Many of the women in the hair salon she studied embrace hair styling as part of a middle-class lifestyle, but also hope to conceal the effort of their styling. The goal, she argues, is to look as though one simply woke up flawless (in the words of Beyoncé), to hide the effort and production of their own beauty rituals. A more recent example can be found in the prevalence of "no-makeup" makeup looks on Instagram. Contrary to their name, no-makeup aesthetics typically involve layers of light makeup, eyebrow wax, mascara, often highlighter and blush, lip gloss, and touch-ups throughout the day. In short, this kind of makeup serves to enhance particular features but in an effortless way, as though one were not overly concerned about appearances. In the hair salon, Gimlin characterizes the clients as simultaneously abiding by the aesthetic expectations of middle-class femininity, while simultaneously resisting the more involved hair styling suggestions from their hairstylists. The tension between the stylists and their clients illustrates what Gimlin describes as a middle-class sensibility of caring about one's appearance, but not overly so, lest one be considered superficial and therefore lower class.

In Hayley's case, the makeup she did — and how she felt about it — seemed less aligned with chasing an always-impossible hegemonic beauty standard, nor to make it appear effortless. The wings, the bright colors, the added decoration: these are hardly attempts to "look natural" or

unfussy. There is no illusion of her makeup being anything less than a performance, and no effort to conceal the time or care that went into her makeup. Moreover, she explicitly pointed to how she was proud of herself and felt good while wearing it. Even in the most damning of critiques of makeup, feminist theorists point acknowledge that the fun of self-adornment can be counterposed to the patriarchal enforcement of gender norms through makeup. Bartky writes,

> As part of our practice, we must create a new witness, a collective significant Other, integrated into the self but nourished and strength- ened from without, from a revolutionary feminist community. This collective Other, while not requiring body display, will not make it taboo either; it will allow and even encourage fantasy and play in self-ornamentation. Our ideas of the beautiful will have to be expanded and so altered that we will perceive ourselves and one another very differently than we do now. (43)

Fantasy, play, self-ornamentation: these can be part of what Bartky calls a revolutionary aesthetic of the body (Bartky 1990, 43). She encourages both inventiveness and expansion of beauty standards, with the assumption that efforts towards beauty will be the exclusive purview of choice, rather than compulsory. It is possible. I argue that Hayley's playful artistic creations fit within this category of play. Makeup isn't always fun and games, but that does not preclude it from being fun, particularly in the kinds of colorful, whimsical, film-inspired aesthetics she chose for her lockdown looks.

Inst-aesthetics

That said, the makeup Hayley sent me mirrored a very particular aesthetic that gained popularity on the social media application Instagram. The application started as a photography application that allowed users to replicate vintage photography by adding filters that, for example, made photographs appear sepia-toned or washed out like an instant Polaroid. Since then, the application has added video features, and supports largely visual social media

ecosystems and economies. Cosmetics and personal styling photography and videography are important parts of both.[46]

Based on my own many hours of watching videos that demonstrate how to achieve looks similar to Hayley's, I notice that they're made up of four characteristics. First, the makeup look was done on a completely smoothed blank face, usually achieved by copious amounts of heavy foundation and concealer. Atop this would sit shades of brown that were typically used to mimic shadow on the face, or lighter shimmery shades (highlighter) that were used to "highlight" other parts of the facial structure, producing a contoured luck that gave the illusion of rearranging or altering the underlying bone structure. The second aspect of this make up look emphasized highly blended lip color, which was often accompanied by gloss on top. The third aspect of this make up look included meticulously arched brows, filled in with light pen strokes to mimic hair or powder in places where there might have been less dense hair. The fourth and final component of this make up look was invariably heavily blended, bright eyeshadow that exceeded the eyelid and moved into the upper part of the eye socket towards the brow bone. Typically, there was also a black swipe of liquid eyeliner, brought to a point at the corners of the eye, and false eyelashes. Sometimes the black liquid liner would be accompanied by or replaced by brighter colors of liquid liner.

The videos that guided viewers through how to reproduce similar make up looks or typically sped up, the subject of the video staring into the camera, as though it were a mirror in which they could apply their makeup. Behind the scenes, shooting these videos typically involves a setup of a ring light, which offers even white light over the face, often with the effect

[46] For a more in-depth history of the development of Instagram's aesthetics, see Leaver, et. al. (2020)

of smoothing out skin, as well as mirrors placed as a reflective guide to help apply make up just behind the camera (Abidin 2016a; Tolentino 2019). They are typically also accompanied by music, and especially successful makeup artist will dance or add animations and transitions as they move through the different phases of the makeup application process. Often times, at the end of the video, in order to fully capture the detail of the eye make up in particular, camera close-ups of eyes moving back-and-forth, with a slow blank to show the weight and movement of the false eyelashes. It's possible for makeup artist to simply post the final make up looks, but this genre of video was particularly popular around this time in Internet history, possibly in part because it demonstrated the effort, and skill, and time necessary to create elaborate make up looks. It also illustrated the expertise of the artists or video producers, who needed steady hands (or many takes) in order to achieve an apparently flawless look on camera on the “first try".

This set of aesthetic and video phenomena on social media collectively produced an archetype of a person — most often a woman but occasionally men who were affiliated or owned makeup brands — colloquially referred to as "the Insta baddie". “Bad” in this case with not a moral judgment, but rather a descriptor, borrowed from African American Vernacular English, for someone who is bad ass, accomplished, a force, and so on. Because of the proliferation of these videos on Instagram, the specific style of make-up became associated with people who produced and posted Instagram content. An important feature of these videos was the way that makeup brands and skin care brands got in on especially popular make-up artists; the subjects of the videos would often hold up to the camera the labels of the products that they were using on their faces, essentially providing free advertising to the make-up companies that they were using. Importantly this free advertising wasn't always free, and companies placed their products in the hands of what would eventually become Instagram celebrities (“influencers”), many of whom

receive rewards as part of the deals they started with the company. Abidin and Thomspon (2012) argue that in spite of the commerce made possible by influencers, even when they did make money, they were often underpaid. These dynamics appear for all kinds of products sold by influencers on Instagram, whether weight loss teas, nutritional supplements, clothing brands, diet pills, or anything else.

Hayley — as well as many foster youths, even those who were institutionalized — grew up with social media accounts. It was in this beauty and economic ecosystem that the so-called digital natives were subjected to beauty standards, particularly as brands and social media companies raked in profits from the monetization of fame and the curious socialites that emerge online. Like Hayley, I am also "on Instagram", though with a great deal of ambivalence towards the platform. Sharing a visual social media culture gave me some useful context about the kinds of aesthetics from Hayley might be drawing, and some of the commercial interventions to which she was subjected.

> EB: are you using mostly drugstore brands or are you one of those insta baddies that spends hundreds of dollars on makeup
> Hayley: I used a walmart palette, called crystal iced. Walmart brushes, elf liquid eyeliner, covergirl mascare and regular eyeliner, sephora CC cream, i💔revolution bronzer, elf concealer, milani highlight and LA girl matte lip gloss
> Hayley: The first one is what im wearing rn
> EB: the sephora CC cream is probably DOPE
> Hayley: It has good coverage
> EB: theres a whole market out there
> EB: i never successfully got the liquid liner wings just right. im jealous of yours
> Hayley: I started practicing
> EB: hell yeah. i was better at it when i was in college and wearing wings every day

The brands that Hayley was using were indeed primarily drugstore or retail brands, with the exception of a single Sephora product, which typically signals a more costly and improved product. While not one to normally dwell on the specific materials she used to create her makeup looks, that she chose affordable brands for her creations matters here. They suggest both a

frugality in her choices and a more casual approach to makeup — although later she would float the possibility of doing makeup professionally, she was still in an exploration phase. My question about the amount of money she spent was borne of a genuine curiosity, as someone who has spent extraordinary amounts of money on makeup. Although drug store brands are more affordable, makeup is not cheap, particularly if she had, as she put it, "a lot of it". Finally on this point about brands, Hayley's choices also illustrate that she had not followed the many recommendations of influencers who earn money from makeup brands.

That said, her makeup also reflected beauty norms of online makeup culture, which suggests that although her particular expressive arts were her own and for fun, she was not immune to the influences of influencers. Instagram is so heavily saturated with this specific aesthetic; it would be nearly impossible to escape it or come up with something new and original. The play emerges less from the array of techniques and more from the specific color combinations that one might put together. The Instagram aesthetic provides a template, which can itself generate a great deal of creativity. In fact, business anthropologist Brian Moeran argues that creativity exists "on the edge" of this "box" – the constraints of genre, norm, convention, money, material (Moeran 2016, 14). Variations on form are the root of creativity: it emerges in the experimentation with the boundaries of those boxes. For Moeran, these experiments-with-established-form constitute creativity. Iterating from other creative forms can be a productive source of inspiration, melding two sets of conventions together, which is precisely what Hayley was doing in her makeup experiments.

Craftsmanship

Although makeup and hairstyling are rarely considered a fine art in the same vein as museum paintings or sculpture, Hayley considered what she was doing in the language of simile: it was *like* fine arts even if it wasn't exactly the same.

> Hayley: I was always oncthe[sic] gifted list for art in school. Specifically painting, ive always been good at it since i was a child, and did a lot of paintings in art club too. Funny how things come full circle, because makeup is painting, using brushes and colored palettes, using a face as a canvas.

The analogy captured an explanation as to why she was experimenting with makeup. For her, painting her face was a logical extension of an early love of painting other things. She compared the necessary materials for doing make up to those of a fine art: pigment, canvas, brushes. For her, it was a full circle of return to an old talent, one that had earned her accolades and praise when she was younger. Perhaps, as an adult, she could pick up where she had left off as a child, return to art but in a different format.

Apart from the creativity of building off the Instagram template, Hayley also clearly derived pleasure from the technical virtuosity required to *apply* makeup. To blend pigment upwards from the eyelid into the crease of the eye requires a special notice of subtleties and variation and gradient, as well as a steady hand to handle make up brushes, and choose the correct make up brush for application. It also requires an extraordinary amount of patience, to add layer upon layer of powder or cream in order to slowly build up pigment over a longer period of time. Additionally, the skill required to make a meet line in black to achieve the sharp winged look is incredibly difficult to achieve, much less to make them equal on both sides for both eyes. Often one eye will be perfectly painted and, in an effort to make the other eye similar, the person applying the makeup will extend the wing of one eye, then the other, until the wings

are bigger and bigger. Hayley's makeup also included the use of adding water or liquid to powdered eyeshadow to mimic liquid liner, a process that I have done with limited success: it seems like wizardry to me now.

> Hayley: Well technically it was "liquid eyeshadow" that one didnt come from a dry palette of eyeshadow like yesterday. But i used it for liner because it looks better that way
> EB: It looks GREAT

Bending materials for purposes for which they weren't originally intended is a mark of mastery; it's the invention of new techniques and the locus of creativity. What is it about technical skill that produces pleasure? The mastery of the "techniques and materials", the "skills and tools of beautification" can occur independently of the endorsement of any particular beauty standard, hegemonic or otherwise (Cahill 2003, 59). Cahill, in writing about the pleasures of getting ready, suggests that this virtuosity mirrors a capacity for creation, variety, and transformation: these qualities of creative energy overlap with artistic qualities. Importantly, she never mentions that makeup must be used to create something beautiful or aesthetically pleasing. I infer that makeup can be used to emulate the odd, the grotesque, the weird, and still be considered art. Hayley did not attempt to emulate the strange, but she did challenge both the conventions of naturalness and to some extent, of Instagram, towards an aesthetic end that was mostly her own.

This sort of virtuosity can feel rare in an age of mass production, perhaps especially so in the context of youth consumption habits. The proliferation of "fast fashion hauls" — bulk purchasing and on-camera trying on of clothes made of cheap materials and constructed by underpaid garment workers — has hyper-charged the speed of the trend cycle (Abidin 2016b). Fast fashion is not without its criticisms, however. The rise of so-called "slow fashion"

Instagrammers points to the search for long-lasting, high-quality clothing that outlives or ignores trends altogether. These can be hand-crafted, home-sewn garments, or purchased from "ethical" garment shops. While the slow fashion movement cannot be separated from discussions about class, size and race inclusivity, and the paradox of consumption as a critique of consumption, the idea of slowness speaks to a social craving for quality and timelessness.[47]

Producing something of quality for the sake of it is how Richard Sennett has defined "craftsmanship" (Sennett 2009). Craftsmen, he argues, are people who seek perfection — sometimes to their detriment — in the things they create. It is a commitment to "doing things right", for the satisfaction of a job well done. Hayley found satisfaction in this as a child. She was proud of her technical skills as an artist when she was younger, and the desire to return to that satisfaction as an adult emerged when she described how proud she was of her makeup skills. It is this commitment to craftsmanship, the satisfaction of a desire to get things right, that Hayley celebrated in her own makeup looks. I suggest it is also partially one of the reasons that she considered doing it professionally — craftsmen, after all, might not prioritize money, but they do need it and earn it through their craft.

BEAUTY AND WORK

Hayley lost hours at her jobs, as COVID restrictions kept her from traveling to in-person events and closed the gym where she worked part-time at the front desk. For a time, she had been working three jobs, the third of which was a part-time gig at a local nonprofit organization that offered aftercare services to former foster youth. It was at this organization that she introduced

[47] As of September 2022, doctoral candidate Jimil Ataman is a year into research on the slow fashion community of Instagram.

me to her coworkers for an impromptu focus group.[48] She had been interning there for the spring semester of 2020, and as the semester wound down so did her internship. As she was paid hourly, losing hours meant losing income, and she needed to pay her rent, buy groceries: she needed to survive.

As we waited for the pandemic restrictions to end, she floated the possibility of a career change.

Hayley: So ive been into makeup lately
EB:🧐
Hayley: And ive always been good at makeup and hair. Like extremely good. So i think im gonna enroll in beauty school after my bachelors degree
Hayley: Maybe dual enroll because my masters is online anyways
EB: your masters is online? 🧐
Hayley: Yep
EB: are you already enrolled?
EB: or rather you have a plan for that?
Hayley: No i have to apply lol
EB: wack
EB: i think that sounds awesome tbh
EB: i wish i could do hair

Until these pandemic conversations, I hadn't been aware either of Hayley's technical skill, enjoyment of makeup, or thoughts of beauty school. Maybe I should have been: she had paired pink and camouflage for our first meeting, and I don't think I ever saw her without manicured and polished nails. Nonetheless, the move from doing makeup for herself to doing beautification for others brought new career possibilities that would allow her to exercise her creativity and flex her skills for money, something important given the increasing financial precarity she experienced early in the pandemic.

I mentioned to Hayley that I had planned to write about art and the importance of doing or making something that wasn't necessarily available for money. Frivolity and fun were my

[48] See chapter 3.

earliest interpretations of the reasons young people in this study gravitated towards art activities. "Feeling good", I reasoned, was the *point*. Her response might have been the result of my suggestion:

> EB i think for a long time i was sort of dismissive of artistic endeavors too, like they were just taking away from productive time
> EB: but i really think that for foster youth especially, you need something that is entirely unproductive in capitalism but feeds your soul.
> EB: ive often wondered what it would mean to require artistic expression opportunities as an essential service for kids in the foster system, just based on what y'all say about art and music. not dance so much, which is my art of choice, but just…doing something with your hands that produces something beautiful, not necessarily something USEFUL
> EB: all of which is to say, im really really excited for your makeup artist future
> EB: you deserve to feel beautiful and skilled, and to help other people feel that way too
> Hayley: Thats what i love about it
> Hayley: You get to make other people feel good about themselves
> Hayley: Have you heard of on the move art studio!
> Hayley: ?*[49]
> EB: no what dis
> Hayley: I interned with their agency and they are a non profit that partners with places in the community to provide free art services to children
> EB: wow this…makes me so happy tbh
> Hayley: It was a great experience
> EB: what was your job there?
> Hayley: One of their big things is to have an adult present for kids who normally dont have one present in their lives so they mainly work with low income communities. So i was just there interacting with the kids, teaching them art, helping them with their projects, helping them in an environment free to express themselves
> EB: when did you intern there?
> Hayley: Jan 2018-may 2018
> EB: how was it?
> Hayley: Awkward at first because i didnt think id he good with kids. But overall it was fun and educational, self fulfilling
> EB: how old were the kids?
> Hayley: Elementary or middle school age, sometimes high school in DJJ

In some ways, my interpretation was correct — I have spent much of this section exploring the ways that doing makeup was a source of pleasure for Hayley during lockdown,

[49] Although I am excerpting our conversations from text messages, I am not editing the conventions or idiosyncrisies of the messages. Here, the asterisk indicates a correction of a mistake – she meant to type a question mark but accidentally sent an exclamation mark instead.

trying to pinpoint the sources of this enjoyment. For her part, Hayley immediately agreed with this interpretation of a career in beauty or other artistic endeavors: “Thats what i love about it”, she said, “You get to make other people feel good about themselves”. This was an important enough component of doing art that she immediately referenced other moments in her life where this quality of helping others to feel good was important. Drawing on a past internship experience where she taught and did art with children, she characterized this as a “great experience”, “fun”, “educational”, and “self fulfilling”. While she certainly enjoyed doing art and makeup for herself, it was fulfilling to also extend that freedom to “express themselves” to other people, especially children who don’t have adults present in their lives. She was, notably, not paid for this work. However, Hayley’s curiosity about turning this un-productivity into something economically productive suggested that pleasure and fun belong can and do belong in the workplace as well.

A profession

For Hayley, it seemed to boil down to one thing: being a professional beauty worker would allow her to help other people to feel good, and get paid in the process. Presumably, this was drawn from her own experiences of looking good and therefore feeling good.

> Hayley: Yeah i have worn makeup for about 9 days straight now which is a record because i never wear it
> EB: no?
> EB: are you wearing it now because you have the time to get it right?
> Hayley: No. Im wearing it because i have a bunch of it and it never gets used plus its fun and pretty and i feel better when i wear it lol. Plus why not show the talent off and if i plan to go to beauty school i should practice

The time spent beautifying herself was time spent practicing a skill, indulging in play, and adding something “fun and pretty” into the world out of materials she had lying around. It

was an exercise, as well, in pride in her own work, but what stands out here is also that she wanted to "feel better" and wearing makeup allowed her to do that.

As a professional stylist or makeup artist, Hayley could share her technical mastery and creativity with others. While she never framed a possible beauty career in terms of a calling or a vocation — as was common among hairstylists in Gimlin's salon ethnography — she nonetheless imbued it with a moral status. Allowing others to feel better or good was an important service, and apart from transforming their clients' hair, Gimlin notes that stylists also needed to forge "emotional ties" with clients (2002, 37). This emotional work is part of the job, and indeed might be considered part of the draw of the work. One of Gimlin's interlocutors goes so far as to compare her job to therapy, on the grounds that it serves some of the same needs that therapists do (2002, 35).

Foster Youth, Choice, and Feeling Good

I would also argue that Hayley's status as a former foster youth adds an additional layer of importance to the kind of importance she assigned to "feeling good". Perhaps because young people are assumed to be impressionable and impulsive, they've been the subject of marketing campaigns: consumer and subcultures unsurprisingly are important components of youth studies scholarship (Nisbett 2007; Scheld 2007; Eckert 1989). What young people buy and how they consume everything from media to clothing to make up to food has implications for the ways that their identities are shaped and formed. In some cases, the identification with particular kinds of subcultures are socially enforced or generated, as in the earlier example of girl gangs (Mendoza-Denton 2014). Mary Bucholtz's work on white kids illustrates the variety of cliques and subcultures present at a high school, and how they describe the ways their language, dress,

habits, and behaviors reflect and constitute who they are as people (Bucholtz 2010). Some have gone so far as to define changes in consumption habits as indicators of new developmental stages. Anthropologist and clinician Rebecca Lester describes treating a young woman, Carly, for an eating disorder (Lester 2011). She is delighted when Carly comes in for a session wearing black fingernail polish. Giddy with rebellion, Carly describes experiencing a desire for something other than her usual preppy, sorority girl pastels, and her mother's reaction to seeing the black fingernail polish: "When I talked to my mom on the phone that night, I told her about it and she FREAKED! "Carly!" she said. "What's gotten into you?!?"' In this clinical space, Lester characterizes black fingernail polish as a sign of Carly's independence from her enmeshment with her mother, and therefore an important clinical and developmental milestone.

Consumption and use of cosmetics, self-styling, fashion: these are important forms of experimentation, that, for many children in the foster system, were hardly ever choices. As children many of the young people in foster care had little authority or independence to choose their own clothes. Shopping trips would be at the discretion of foster homes or group home employees. Fundraisers crop up from organizations that request donations of old suitcases, duffel bags, backpacks, and luggage: most of the time, kids end up shoving their clothes and belongings in trash bags as they move from place to place.

In my own work experience, clothes, makeup, hair, and control over one's outward appearances were incredibly important for young women in preserving any sense of self while in state custody. The donation bags of secondhand clothes we received in the were torn apart in a matter of minutes. Floating the possibility of "earning" a trip to the mall or to Walmart on the condition of "good" behavior often resulted in less chaotic shifts. The theft — or suspected theft — of clothing from the laundry room was possibly the biggest source of conflict in the facility.

One set of visiting foster parents commented about how happy they were to see a young woman come into our facility: they "hated" seeing her in her previous placement, a psychiatric hospital, because the dress code was hospital gowns. Imagine, they said to me, forcing a teenage girl into a hospital gown! They seemed relieved that she was able to wear her own clothes with us, though of course there were still tight modesty restrictions: no visible stomachs, no bare shoulders, no cleavage.

Hayley's freedom to play and experiment — with hair, nail polish, eye makeup, clothing — are as much acts of pleasure as they are of self-making. It is no wonder then, that she wished to extend this freedom, creation, and pleasure to others. She never specified any particular clientele, but I would argue that a commitment to allowing others to feel better formed a key part of why she chose social work, and similarly undergirded her consideration of beauty work as a possible career.

Tired of Social Work

Two years after the makeup looks, in the summer of 2022, Hayley was burned out, exhausted and fed up with her job. For her burnout and feeling a total loss of motivation to go to work, to do extra work, to take on new projects, or to patiently support the people whom she was supervising. The exhaustion was also accompanied by a set of negative emotions as well. She was frustrated and irritable at work. Although she valued the work that she was doing, and thought it was important to continue speaking on behalf of herself and other foster youth, she was finding a very deep frustration with the way her advocacy work was being received.

On a local scale, she expressed that she often felt that the young people she was in supervising were apparently less motivated to get their work done or take on new projects,

leaving her with the lion's share of work and speaking engagements. She wanted to be helpful, to mentor, and support the young people at her organizations, but found that her employees and mentees weren't always responsive. On a much larger scale, she was wrestling with a very deep sense of frustration with feelings that she was not being heard in the policy arena. She was a part of a community of former foster youth who were doing child welfare reform advocacy work across the United States who felt that, as they aged, they were also "aging out" of *advocacy*. Hayley described it as feeling as though her story had an "expiration date", after which her experiences were understood within the child welfare expert community to have little weight or validity anymore. As I pointed out in Part I, and as Hayley continued to reiterate to me, young people who leave foster care are often called upon to describe or discuss their experiences, but often to bolster the specific goals and needs of institutions or organizations that comprise child welfare systems.

Finally, I suspect that Hayley was frustrated by the pacing of her work. She was efficient and organized, and a self-described workaholic for many years. I got the impression from her descriptions of her work that she moved swiftly when she wanted something done. Anecdotally, she floated the idea of planning a conference and then proceeded to leave me ten minutes of voice messages in our text conversation that covered a theoretical budget, funders, and workshop schedule. Her competence and speed were a contrast to the glacial pace of the legislative process and the institutional inertia of the foster care system in Kentucky. I think she had little patience for the slowness of bureaucracy and policymaking: not from naïveté or lack of experience, but simply because planning seemed to come naturally to her.

Given her work history and her frustrations with her employment over the pandemic years, her comments about the appeal of working in a more hands-on, material job points to the

need for something beyond strictly cerebral work. Her advocacy work did produce material change for foster youth, but over a much longer period of time with results that are a little more dispersed: simply, it may have been harder to notice the transformation.

When Hayley spoke about making others feel good, it was not necessarily a deviation from the kinds of advocacy and advisory work that she had been doing. In both career pathways, she was reaching for the ability to allow people the freedom to experiment with their identities, as emblematized and how they dress or how they appear, with the hope that feeling good the end result in both cases. And the fact that she was also doing these kinds of experiments on herself is an indication of a real belief in that freedom to play.

In contrast to the slowness and the isolation of her advocacy and schoolwork, a haircut or dye job are immediate transformations of a person, with immediate results. Apart from processing time for bleach or dye, there's no delay between action and result; her competence, skill, and creativity might be rewarded in faster and more intimately than the faceless foster youth who will eventually benefit from her policy work.

What this also tells me is that the question of pay or compensation wasn't necessarily a motivating factor in her toying with the idea of switching careers. That question never emerged: whether she could have made more money as a hairstylist or as an advocate and consultant. As of August 2022, her hairstyling career never really emerged – though she mentioned via text that she offered volunteer hairstyling services to people affected by recent climate disasters in Kentucky – and she continued to work in the policy arena and finish a master's degree in Social Work.

In this section, I have highlighted the pleasure Hayley took in experimenting with makeup over the early part in the pandemic, and set our conversations about a possible career

change amidst a larger discussion of the economic pressures associated with the pandemic and within her own work experience. I have shown that she did not consider freedom, play, and feeling good — all possible functions of art and creative expression — as bound strictly to leisure time. Rather, they can be a motivation for work that feels meaningful and satisfying for young people, particularly important for young people who spent time in foster care.

THE MAKERSPACE

Rita offered me a ride to a meeting she had scheduled for the evening. She picked me up and we drove out to Okolona. Rita was befuddled by the unfamiliar geography: she explained she didn't know where we were going and was following the GPS. I reassured her as we passed Jefferson Mall that this was the part of town where I had grown up, and I could confirm she was going the right way.

The location of the meeting was at one of the new branches of the Louisville Public Library, the South Central Regional Branch. The light was fading as we hopped out of Rita's car, but it wasn't too dark to see the outside of the building. The outside appeared to be stainless steel, shiny and metallic. From where we stood in the parking lot, the building looked like a rectangle with a sharp, zooming ramp attached to the top, spiking at one end of the building. The windows were tall and despite the heavy materials, everything looked surprisingly airy.

After a beat, I said to Rita, "It looks like a spaceship."

"It DOES," she grinned at me. "This is brand new."

I asked her if this really was where the meeting was being held. She explained that one of the Board members was the artist-in-residence at the library and had offered the studio as a meeting room for the Board. It was free and a nice spot, so the Board agreed to meet there.

The meeting itself was uneventful, and Rita and I were the last two to leave. She hesitated then asked if I wanted to stay and look around. I nodded and we took a slow walk around the library. It was all high ceilings and open spaces, lined with books, computers, printers, seating, and a brightly colored children's area. We meandered towards the edge of the library and saw a sign that said "Maker Space". Intrigued, we looked into the space — it was full of various kinds of machines and a sign that reminded people they needed permission to use the space.

A woman in glasses and a sweater noticed us looking and offered to show us around. We filled out a form that registered us as having gone through the Makerspace Orientation, meaning we now had permission to use the equipment. She gave us a full tour of the Makerspace, explaining to us each of the different machines, how they worked, and showing us some of the sample projects she had on hand. Rita and I ooh'ed and aah'ed at the possibilities. After about an hour of getting to know a little about everything, Rita and I realized that we had hit library closing time, so we headed out.

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The Louisville Public Library has two Makerspaces, one at the Northeast Regional Branch and one at the South Central Regional Branch. Both branches are new. Construction of the South Central Regional Branch finished in 2017, and the Northeast Regional Branch was completed in 2019. They are architecturally remarkable, both having eco-friendly certifications, high ceilings with sharp angles, and extraordinary aesthetic layouts. I spent quite a bit of time at the Northeast Regional Branch, drafting grant applications and catching up on field notes. It was spacious, quiet, and free, in contrast to the hourly drinks I felt obliged to purchase at the coffee shops near my apartment. I loved the Fern Creek Branch as a child, but it felt a little run-down to me even back then.

The Makerspaces at the libraries are free and open to the public, provided that individual community members sign up for an hour-long orientation during open hours. Someone is always on staff to help with the machines. Both spaces have 3D printers, laser cutters, sewing machines, block cutters, laminators, button makers, and closets full of useable materials on-site, though of course, people are welcome and encouraged to bring their own. Rita and I had both been impressed by the variety of equipment — neither of us had any idea that the public library had acquired this level of technological advancement. The ability to learn and apply material knowledge was an exciting prospect; Rita and I daydreamed about the next big inventor, and applauded the efforts to make sure that everyone had access to resources for making.

Makerspaces, most often associated with technological innovation, have been cropping up as part of participatory design initiatives. Many are equipped with complex machinery like three-dimensional printers or laser cutters, equipment that is expensive to purchase for individual use but can potentially offer resources to many if it were made free to use. Private makerspaces might be built by universities who want to offer their students the ability to create or innovate with small-scale fabrication; having the space open to anyone who wants to use it allows people to work in teams or on individual projects on tinkering, experiments, or prototyping.

I wanted to offer Beu and Allison, two of my young interlocutors, the opportunity to learn to sew and repair their own clothes. They were excited to learn, but as I will show, makerspaces are unpredictable. Neither of them ended up being particularly enamored with the sewing machines the way I am, but found other exciting machinery they wanted to investigate. Initially, I interpreted the crafting and making we did in the makerspace as indicative of a need for “extra”curricular activity, of producing in the absence of a profit motive; simply, I thought they needed some fun. I stand by this, but also hope to show that the Makerspace produced more

than fun and frivolity. Beu, like Hayley earlier in this chapter, found a sense of pride and skill in the Makerspace that points to the importance not only of doing art, but of doing art with others. Allison found in her artistic practice a literal conversation piece: her art worked as part of a broader practice of provoking political conversations, and in this case, a commentary on work. Innovations indeed.

CRAFTING WITH BEU

On many of our car rides, Beu made fun of my fashion sense, most often my shoes. I wore sandals in the summer and heavy boots in the winter: "Don't you have any normal shoes?" she would laugh. I usually played along, pretending to be affronted. I was surprised the day she complimented me. I don't remember what I was wearing, but it was handmade, which I mentioned to Beu. She seemed shocked — indignant, even — when I mentioned offhandedly that I made my own clothes. "You….can SEW?" she had asked, outraged, as though I had been keeping it from her.

Long before our sojourn to the makerspace, I knew that she had an interest in crafts. We had stopped by a craft shop one afternoon so I could pick up some notebooks for field notes, and she and I wound up wandering around the store for an hour or so. She pointed out the wall of yarn, explaining that she had loved crocheting and knitting at some point her life. As we wandered, she skittered between conversation topics. She'd pick up some wood or a set of paints and discuss her frustration at being on a waitlist for housing. She'd pick up a notebook, and mumble to herself about trying journaling again. On the way to the craft store, she had discussed being ready to "get her life together", seemingly motivated to seek out peace and stability. The specifics emerged as we wandered and interacted with different materials, at once a return to an

earlier love of handicrafts and a wondering about how to bring back more reflective practices into her life as she transitioned into a less chaotic mode of living. Craft material seemed to root her in specifics, to move her energy towards self-transformation into a direction where she might be able to make or build something.

Along with our many Beu-initiated conversations about my clothes, my dance community — and her outright disbelief when I mentioned that I had been sewing my own clothes — I assumed that she might want to try her hand at crafts again. To that end, I invited her to the Makerspace with me. I offered to teach her to use a sewing machine, which she eagerly accepted. I also distantly wanted to prepare her for my eventual exit from the field. As discussed in Part III, and to some extent in Part II, caring adults can support young people by informing them of available resources, helping them navigate any bureaucracies, and helping them build the confidence they need to eventually manage things on their own. The Makerspace is free to use, but using it requires some prior knowledge of the available machines and what one can make using them.

Using the Makerspace on her own would also require a bit of boldness. As I mentioned in Part II, Beu was not especially confident in her dealings with perceived authority figures. In court, this translated to being deferential to her public defender (at least, until she was not), but it also permeated in other parts of her life. I watched her on several occasions refuse to try something new – more than once she asked me to order food for her at McDonald's, quietly handing me cash to pay for coffee or hash browns, a meek hesitation before approaching a cashier at Target or Walmart. She did not like to do things she wasn't comfortable with, and while she was willing to grit her teeth and speak to strangers, she would happily rely on others to do her asking for her. Knowing these things about Beu, I had a hunch that she might not

deliberately make her way to the Makerspace on her own, and that going with a friend might be easier.

We arrived at the library and made our way to the makerspace. I spoke with the woman in charge of the shop for the day and explained that Beu and I would like to do the makerspace orientation tour, if she had time. She cheerfully agreed and spent the next hour walking us through the layout of the space, explaining briefly each of the machines and where to find supplies to use with them. Beu was captivated by the circular knitting machine; the library employee explained that it was a gift from a donor, but that they hadn't managed to make it work so far. She was also intrigued by the laser cutter, asking questions about negative space and carefully examining the sample wood cuts.

Eventually the tour came to an end, and I beckoned Beu to the sewing machine. I grabbed a scrap of fabric from the free fabric drawer and sat down in front of the machine. I showed her how to thread the machine: attach a spool of thread on the spindle on the top, and take the thread between the index finger and thumb. Pull it to the hook, wrap it from right to left around the metal piece on top of the machine. Pull it down through the plastic gap to the u-shaped catch, then back up again from where it came from, then down again, wrap it behind the needle and then thread it.

I demonstrated for Beu and told her to watch carefully because she was going to try it next. She giggled nervously, then watched my hands. I went slowly, explaining as I went, and then pulled the thread out and did it again.

I scooted out of the seat directly in front of the sewing machine to let Beu take over. I handed her the thread and said, "Your turn." She laughed nervously again then said, "Okay". I pointed out where to start, then showed her where there were tiny printed arrows on the machine

that indicated the direction of the thread. She tentatively pulled the thread into the correct spots, threaded the needle, and looked at me expectantly.

"You did it!" I gave her a high five. She grinned. "Okay now pull it out and do it again."

"What!?" she asked, outraged.

I explained that someday she might want to do this on her own without me, and it would be good to practice while I was still here. She begrudgingly unthreaded the machine, regained her composure, and with more confident focus, started again. I stood up and folded my hands, this time staying quiet and not giving her any instruction. She talked to herself attempting on her own: "Okay so it goes here…then here….then here?" she looked up at me. I shrugged: it wasn't quite right, but I wanted to let her troubleshoot it herself. She glared at me, then went back to the machine. She studied the arrows for a moment, then noticed her mistake and corrected it. She successfully threaded the needle, paused, and said with a bit of surprise in her voice, "I did it."

This time it was my turn to grin: "You did! Good job! One more time."

She rolled her eyes. "Fine." It went faster on the third try; there was a more practiced quality to her movements this time. I decided to move on, and had her repeat the process with the bottom thread on the bobbin.

"Okay next you're going to learn how to actually use the machine. Switch me seats." We swapped again. I pointed out different parts of the machine and explained what they did, and how to use them. I dropped the presser foot (which keeps fabric pushed against the gears that feed fabric through the machine) and twisted the knob on the side of the machine that controls the needle. I explained where to find the handles and knobs, and that to start sewing it is good practice to lower the needle into the fabric. I showed her where the reverse button was and

pointed out the pedal under the table, then gave her a quick demonstration of sewing a straight line onto a scrap of fabric.

"Got it? Your turn." We traded again and I walked her through the process of lowering the presser foot, the needle, and stitching. She jumped when the machine started whirring, but eventually adjusted to the sound. She hunched over the arm of the sewing machine, a hand on each side of the fabric scrap, carefully and slowly guiding it under the needle. She looked completely focused. I took a step back and she didn't notice. Eventually she'd made a line from one edge of the fabric to the other. I commended her: she asked what we were doing next.

I folded over the fabric, showed her that for most sewing projects, seams were hidden by sewing everything inside out. I folded the fabric, a rectangle, in half and showed her where to sew. She stitched the seam and pondered the fabric for a beat. I made a move to intervene and explain where to stitch the next seam, but she waved me away, muttering something about letting her figure it out. She sewed the other side to make a a small pocket. Mumbling to herself, eventually realized she needed to flip it inside out, then did, and squealed.

"AH! Look what I made! I made a bag!" she said excitedly. I checked my phone, keeping an eye on the time. It was close to four, and she needed to be back at the shelter soon. I quietly let her know we needed to head out soon, and she gathered up her scraps as we cleaned up the sewing table together. As we left, she was happily telling me she couldn't wait to tell her friends at the shelter about having made a bag.

Nonintervention: a pedagogy

Much of the time I spent with Beu was spent watching her struggle: with courts, with housing, with her mentors, with her family and friends and boyfriends. Our day at the

makerspace was also a day of watching her struggle, albeit with a new skill that would have little long-term effect on the material conditions of her life. The odds that sewing would become a career or moneymaking endeavor, or even a part-time hobby, were very low. She was still staying the shelter at the time, saving her money for food and an apartment: fabric is expensive, and the shelter was far from both Makerspaces. The stakes for her material and economic well-being were negligible.

In most cases, I tried not to intervene in her life unless she directly asked me for advice or for help. Beu told me that she did not like to ask for help unless she truly needed it. This was a learned response to difficulties: Beu's attempts to ask for help from adults often resulted in limited, conditional, counterproductive, or generally unhelpful help. She, like many foster youth, experienced "distrust of the foster care system" (Johnson and Menna 2017, 97) . She had applied for foster youth-specific benefits and social services and attempted to re-commit to state care after she had aged out. She was unable to re-commit, however, and complained that when she called, people had left her on hold or hung up on her. She, like many young people who age out, had found the social services bureaucracy difficult to navigate. Although teaching her to sew was a kind of intervention in her creative and crafty life, I understood my pedagogical approach to be similarly hands-off.

I drew on my experiences as a former teacher in deciding to allow Beu to struggle through her own uncertain movements and memory. During my teacher training, I was taught to introduce a new skill with four levels of support. First was to demonstrate ("I do") the skill so students can observe and see how a skill is done correctly. The next step was to practice the skill together ("We do"), offering guidance and explanation along the way. The third step was to let students practice the skill with supervision ("You do"), then to let them practice without

supervision. Attempting the same skill with four different levels of teacher guidance seemed to work well enough for my sixth-grade students learning fractions and decimals. Threading a sewing machine is muscle memory, tactile, and — I believe — simpler than math. Learning to thread a sewing machine requires tracing the general pattern of how thread winds its way through the machine, and then simply doing it over and over again.

I have seen this method of teaching — I do, We do, You do — referred to as a "gradual release of responsibility" in educational theory (Fisher and Frey 2008), and is a key component of Common Core mathematics teaching. Perhaps this is unsurprising: I was hired to do remedial Common Core math instruction as part of a nonprofit initiative to address low test scores at a low-income school in Massachusetts. Supposedly, this method provides a learning structure ("scaffolding", in educational parlance) that enables students to make connections across different domains of mathematics. The gradual release of responsibility allows students to build confidence before trying a skill on their own. It is worth noting here how the gradual release of responsibility fits into Common Core math as a whole. This initial method is supposed to give students mastery over a particular skill — multiplication and division, for example. At the same time, Common Core instruction also calls for students to reflect on the relationship between multiplication and division, and to make more conscious decisions about which to use in any given situation. Making active decisions about which mathematical concepts are best to use requires an ease with the actual skills involved: mastery of the basics is the bare minimum before a learner can start making choices about which skills to use and when.[50]

[50] This is, at best, an idealized understanding of what Common Core "was supposed to be", according to my various trainers. In its actual implementation, Common Core has been roundly critiqued by a number of parties, who reject the emphasis on translating mathematical concepts from the abstract to the concrete. Math teachers have not consistently adopted the reflective and decision-making aspects of the Common Core curriculum, which is very different from the rote memorization of mathematical concepts prior to

It is that rote memorization of a basic set of skills — threading, working the machine, sewing a straight seam — that I was trying to teach Beu: not anything akin to reflection or decision-making about fabric type, thread tension, or pattern design. There is one way to thread a sewing machine. "Creatively" threading a sewing machine will not work. From that base of knowledge people can create everything from quilts to leather car seats, but everyone who sews, amateur or professional, has to learn this first before they can do anything else.

In an ideal world, this method of teaching would only need to happen once before muscle memory would take over, guiding a learner's hands. I know, however, from my own teaching experience and my own experiences of learning to sew, that it does not. Learning a new skill, whether threading a sewing machine or mastering a dance step, takes time and repetition. Distantly, I understood that although she successfully threaded the machine on her own, one time would not be enough to have her stick the landing. I had her repeat the task on her own. She was noticeably unhappy about this.

Beu's response is likely familiar one to anyone who has tried to teach a new skill to someone else. Her glare and huffiness reflected a frustration with the reminder that she was a novice and not yet a master. I was reminding her that she was not yet *good* at this skill, even if she had absorbed the basics of it. In trying it by herself without my help, she had to reckon with her own inexperience. In refusing to help her — in letting her struggle a bit more — I was trying to allow her the space to make connections on her own. She trusted me to step in if she needed me to; I trusted her enough that she could do it without me.

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the implementation of Common Core. It is, admittedly, a far cry from my own adolescent math instruction, and I had to relearn how to add and subtract fractions with a variety of new tools. For their part, my students didn't know any difference: they did not like any kind of math, apparently.

It is not easy to embrace failure as a method of learning, but the experience of panic, then focus, and then troubleshooting has been essential for my own sewing practice and my teaching practice. It is almost never the case that humans get something right on the first try. In fact, there is some evidence from experimental educational studies that suggests that getting things right on the first try actually saps motivation and effort. Students who start with easy tasks and receive praise as a reward were found to have less motivation to try more difficult problems. Students who did not receive praise or rewards struggled through harder problems over time (Mueller and Dweck 1998). There are, of course, also instances where the reverse is true. Problems that are too difficult from the beginning — either because the tasks are complicated, or they receive insufficient instruction — are frustrating, and seemingly impossible. It may be easier to simply give up.

Beu had certainly struggled enough in her life, and there was a part of me that felt some guilt for making her struggle through more. The guilt dissipated, however, watching her light up upon successfully accomplishing a task on her own. The joy she experienced in discovery was different from the kinds of creative pleasures I discussed in Hayley's makeup experiments, or as I discuss later, from Allison's political debates with others. Instead, I argue that the joy of making emerged in part because she found a confidence in herself as she struggled through a new challenge. That willingness to sit in her own frustration and confusion, however, was not a foregone conclusion, In the next section, I discuss the importance of social support in Beu's willingness to forge ahead through challenging circumstances.

Beu, work, and trust

Beu's acquisition of a new skill — threading a sewing machine, learning to work it — was made possible because we had established some trust over the months we spent driving around together. Although she was annoyed with me that I wasn't making this new skill easy for her, she also trusted that I was not trying to embarrass or control her but give her a working knowledge of something so that she could experiment and try something new. If she didn't know me as well as she did by the time we made it to the LFPL makerspace, she might not have listened as closely, or tried to do the tasks on her own.

This is not to knock my own teaching skills, but rather an acknowledgement of the challenges that go into the very real discomfort most learners experience when they encounter something new. My residual sixth grade-teacher tone spilled over into my relationship with Beu: my teaching coach had called it "warm strict" or "warm firm", a no-nonsense attitude that was focused on giving clear, short commands that brooked little argument. It only worked once I earned the trust of my students, however; my authority was never absolute nor instantaneous, as I learned when I tried substitute teaching at other schools in other classrooms. The connection that pre-existed our day in the Makerspace allowed both of us enough of a mutual trust and respect for learning to happen, and the lesson itself made for a feeling of shared accomplishment; me as a teacher and instructor, and her as a novice sewist.

The moment that stands out to me now from our sewing adventure, however, was the shift that happened between learning to thread the machine and learning to sew a seam. Her reticence to try it on her own, the panicked look she gave me when I told her it was "her turn" to thread the machine, suggested to me a fear of being set adrift — perhaps abandoned? — because

she didn't know if she could do it. I did, but the important part of teaching is that the person who is learning something has to believe in themselves enough to take the leap.

When she paused and tried to work out how to sew the rest of the "bag" together, I tried to step in and offer her some instruction. We had skipped "I do" and "We do" for this step — I had not demonstrated sewing a seam for her, but instead given her the instructions for where to sew. We had skipped straight to "You do", and my job was to give her the instructions she needed to get to the next step. Unlike her initial reaction — a visible fear of trying things on her own — she waved me away and asked me to let her figure it out.

The change was small but noticeable. It also prompted me, here, to think differently about her approaches to work. After a few months of knowing one another, I noticed that while Beu was motivated to get a job and earn money, she rarely kept jobs for very long. This, of course can be attributed in part to the challenges of holding a steady job while homeless. She was staying in a shelter downtown and relied on the buses or walking to get to work. She had to carry her things to and from any job fair, career center, or actual job site. These are not the qualities of a "good employee" for many waged workplaces, where constant availability, access to transportation, and leaving most of one's belongings "at home" were implicit expectations.

Her variable willingness to weather challenging circumstances at work became clear to me over the many months I spent in the field. She got in the car one day in October, excited about the prospect of a job training program she could attend that would hopefully turn into a job. She explained that she could get paid simply for attending the program, and additionally knew that a lot of her friends from the shelter were applying for catering jobs at a nearby job fair. She was excited about the prospect of joining them and earning some money. What was seemingly most important to her, however, was the fact that she would not be alone in the

process. She described how her friends were all walking from the shelter to the job fair together, and that she would have company on her jobs.

We hung out the following week, however, and I asked how the job was going. She deflated a bit and explained that it hadn't worked out. The catering company wanted a pool of potential hires to be available at any time; "being hired" meant that one would be put in the labor pool, called upon at a moment's notice to work an event. She would technically have a job, but no set hours or schedule, and the potential of working evenings. Because the shelter where she was staying -- like most shelters -- refused admittance once full, it was necessary for her to be back at the shelter when it opened to wait in line. The 4PM shelter deadline shaped many of our interactions during the months she was living there: she scheduled appointments for the mornings, and we started heading back from wherever we were around 3PM. The catering gig was not a viable solution if she wanted to stay somewhere other than the street. Beu's other housing options were limited. Her family tended to live far from entry level job sites; even if she had wanted to stay with them, the transportation to downtown would have been difficult if not impossible.

Eventually, after the dissolution of her relationship (described in Part III), Beu did get a waged job at a fast-food restaurant in downtown Louisville. She tried staying at her grandmother’s home for a while. However, as I mentioned in Part II, her grandmother tried to put her on a curfew, making her evening shifts an issue. Beu eventually tried moving in with a friend, which seemed to give her a non-shelter option that allowed her to work. Eventually, things fell through with the friend, and Beu moved back into the shelter. Although the rules that governed the shelter would normally prohibit her from coming back late at night, she somehow

swung a deal with the shelter administrators to let her in after 4:00 PM, perhaps because she was at the time holding down a steady, conventional job.

During the months that she worked at the restaurant, I occasionally picked her up from work to give her a ride back to the shelter, and she would regale me with tales of her coworkers. She seemed intrigued by her colleagues, but more importantly, she seemed fond of them, and entertained by them. I think she felt supported and friendly with the people at work, which, more than anything else, seemed to be a motivation for her to stay, even though it paid very little and she had limited housing and transit options. It was not convenient to where she lived, but the job gave her a social life and a social world that offered her a glimpse of what I saw in the Makerspace: a belief that she could make it with the support of others around her.

I highlight this because it reflected an important component of learning, skill acquisition, and above all, the fortitude to persevere through new or difficult circumstances. Beu's confidence and motivation to work through challenges seemed to be a direct result of the people who were supporting her through those challenges. The catering gig was not a desirable job, not only because of the lack of control, but because of the way that her support system -- her shelter friends -- would not be guaranteed to accompany her through any individual job or event. She might have to face jobs or events alone, and that was simply not an option for her. She had framed the refusal of the catering job in terms of disrespect, explaining to me that she felt disrespected by the lack of hours, that no one could control her schedule or tell her what to do. There was a truth to this, but after our day in the makerspace, I suspect that she perceived that she would be missing a social support network at work had she taken the job, and wanted something else from her work life.

The old adage that beggars cannot be choosers comes to mind, countered by Beu's refusal to work in waged jobs that offered her no certainty or social support. Her confidence in her own ability to weather new and trying circumstances seems to be related to the people who are tied to those circumstances, and whether she might be able to have an interesting or fun conversation with them on the job. She was no stranger to hard work, but she didn't want to do it alone. She could not tolerate managing newness or difficulty by herself. My time with Beu in the makerspace revealed not a preference about the kinds of jobs that were desirable or even tolerable, but rather a set of social components of work that rendered tasks and job types viable or not.

DEFINING "REAL WORK"

In late February, I made the same offer to Allison that I made to Beu: “Want to learn to use a sewing machine? I can teach you.” I also mentioned that that I thought the Makerspaces might be a cool place to hang out. She agreed, so we made plans to spend some time there. I picked her up, and she tucked a tote bag in my backseat.

“What’s in there?” I asked.

She explained that she’d brought some clothes she wanted to alter or repair. I was glad; would have something to work on.

We had made plans to drive to the South Central Makerspace, the one I had visited with Rita. Like Rita and me, Allison was impressed with the library. Allison had had spent her early years, before entering state custody at 14, closer to Fairdale, a neighborhood that had been incorporated into the Louisville Metropolitan Area when the city merged with Jefferson County. The South Central Branch was also much closer to the places she had lived since aging out; I thought she would be more likely to go without me if it was closer to parts of town with which

she was familiar. I knew she liked libraries, liked reading: she pointed out the Fairdale Library branch once when we drove by it, mentioning that she had loved going there as a child. The new South Central Branch was much bigger, grander than the Fairdale Branch, and she was awed by the sweeping silver lines as we pulled into the parking lot.

She grabbed her bag out of the back seat, and we headed inside. She looked up, around, marveling at the space, but when we got to the Makerspace, the door was closed and the lights were off. We looked inside, mystified, wondering if we had gotten the days or hours wrong: we had. One of the women at the Information Desk told us that we could come back a different day for the Makerspace orientation. After a beat, and a saddened apology from me, Allison and I decided to make the trek across town to the Northeast Regional Branch, which housed the other Makerspace, which was actually open for the next few hours (we double-checked online to make sure). We hopped back in the car for another thirty minutes through lunchtime traffic, the air chilly and the skies overcast.

Allison and I wasted no time walking into the Makerspace. It was empty, so the woman who was monitoring the space for the day offered to give us the tour and orientation. This would be my third time going through the orientation, but I didn't mind. There was certainly something more to learn, but more importantly, it would give me a chance to see what was interesting for Allison. After taking Beu and noticing how she was less intrigued by the sewing machine than the creative potentials of the laser cutter, I wondered what would strike Allison as interesting or useful. I did not have to wait long.

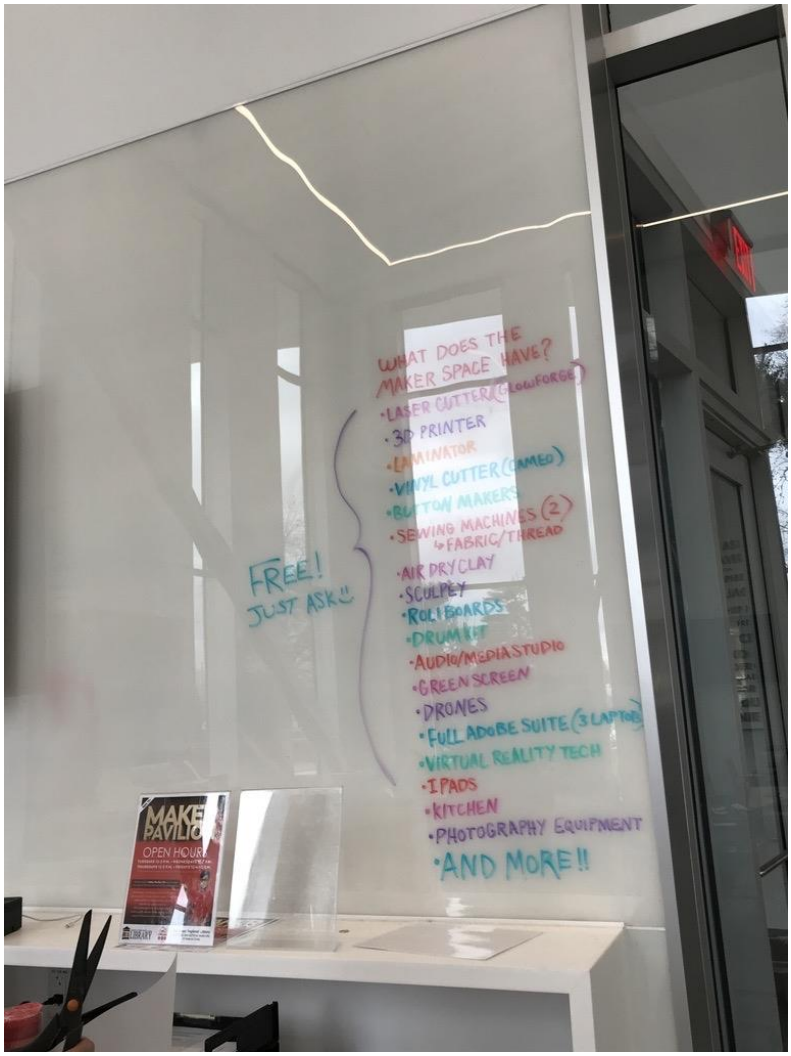

Illustration 13. List of available equipment from the Louisville Public Library Makerspaces. Photo by author.

After her tour, she made a beeline for the button makers. She began experimenting with the device and the materials the Makerspace had on hand. She accidentally placed the plastic film on the wrong side, and called the Makerspace employee over to help her adjust the metal backing, paper, and plastic to fit in the right order. “Ohhh,” she said, upon realizing her initial mistake. She tried the lever to press the button together; one hand was not enough, she learned, and figured out how to use her body weight to move the handle down. After a few tries, she had

refined her technique, and was ready to enact a button-making agenda that she did not immediately reveal to me.



Illustration 14. Allison working with the button-maker. Photo by author.

She then asked for a laptop to make a design on the computer, and hunted down a few graphic graphics: line-art of scantily-clad women clustered around a pole. She added some text, then asked for help with printing. Without batting an eye, the Makerspace employee helped her

figure out how to print to one of the color printers, then helped her adjust the size to fit onto a button. She printed her design, cut out the paper, and pressed her button:



Illustration 15. Allison's button, Photo by author.

Between the tour and orientation and Allison's happy experimentation with the button maker, we had spent most of the afternoon not learning to sew. She received a text on her phone, summoning her somewhere else, so we cleaned up, gathered her things, and left the Makerspace.

We hit mid-afternoon traffic on our ride back across town. School had just let out, and eastbound 264 was a parking lot: we were at a standstill right by the Highlands. Without being prompted, she began explaining her button to me. We chatted about some of her friends who had been doing varying kinds of sex work; most of them were doing online-only camera work, and they seemed to both be making quite a bit of money with flexible schedules they set themselves. Their successes had changed her opinions about sex work, making it seem less like a last resort and more like a viable option for a living wage. Her proclamation — that sex work was "real" work — emerged from a shift in her understanding about what kind of work allowed someone to not only survive, but apparently live a life they enjoyed.

Waged work

Allison's own forays into hourly work in the formal labor market had been mixed, to say the least. After she absconded from a residential facility at 16, she had gotten by, largely through taking jobs at fast food restaurants whose hiring managers did not look too closely at her age or life circumstances. The jobs did not last long, in large part due to inconsistent scheduling and transportation issues. Like many former foster youths, she did not have a license or a car, and depended on a network of friends, relatives, or acquaintances to drive her to work. Although she was resourceful, it was difficult to stay consistent and show up on time, especially if she was to pick up a shift or working an inconsistent schedule. She was also homeless during her late teenage years; her mother lived far from Louisville and avoided seeing her children while

struggling to stop taking drugs. Allison's father had been incarcerated for many of her formative years and was in halfway houses upon his release shortly after she left state care. They shared a living space for a few months, but eventually they found their shared apartment tense and unlivable. Allison stayed on friends' couches, moving from place to place, trying to hold down hourly jobs and not argue with her coworkers who, she reported to me, routinely did cocaine in the bathroom. At the time, Allison had little patience for drug users: her parents' experiences with substance abuse made her wholly unsympathetic to the "junkies" that shot heroin in the bathroom of one of the restaurants where she worked.

As a 17-year-old, and then an 18-year-old, Allison ended up taking on inordinate shares of the work for the pay she received as an hourly worker. She briefly toyed with the idea of seeking a promotion to manager, given how much extra work she was doing anyway, and several of coworkers encouraged her to do so.

During fieldwork, Allison briefly worked the night shift for a few months at a Walmart. Miserable from the fluorescent light and frequently annoyed with dehumanizing customers, she eventually quit. I do not know what she was doing for money when she and I saw each other the day we went to the Makerspace; she was happy to explain her political and moral position that "sex work was real work" but I never learned if she herself had taken the next step into actually finding income through sex work. Nonetheless, knowing her work history, I take the button and our subsequent conversation as an insight into how she understood the legitimacy — the moral status — of different kinds of work.

Like any other job

Beyond the actual making of the button — which seemed to delight her — Allison's use of the Makerspace was decidedly moral and political. Her decision to craft an explicitly political message about the legitimacy of sex work reflected the unexpected affordances of the Makerspace, but also reflected the contradictions of the labor market she had aged into upon exiting state care. The formal labor market had certainly afforded her something — survival money, some structure. It also provided her with the opportunity to discover and refine some new skills. A job at a Pizza Hut had given her the confidence and discernment to handle money with ease. She had also bragged once to me about the speed and efficiency she had mastered in churning out pizza orders; she knew how to coordinate with (or work around) coworkers, whom she variably respected (or disrespected). She once explained to me that excelling at Pizza Hat had prompted her to consider getting an associate degree in accounting; "I'm good at math!" she had explained. The accounting degree didn't materialize by the time I left the field, but her recognition of herself as someone who could master a set of technical, mathematical skills was important, nonetheless.

She had also learned that it was difficult to maintain the freedom that she wanted while being held to time schedules of the formal labor market. She wanted vacations, trips to Florida, time off, and either had to negotiate or quit jobs where her supervisors refused to grant that time. No amount of fulfillment or camaraderie was enough to override low-wage work and uncertain schedules — perhaps that freedom seemed more reachable through sex work.

Yet Allison was also deft in her understanding of what a wider public considered legitimate forms of work. She understood that many people hold the inverse of her statement to

be true, that sex work is not a type of real work, or any type of work at all, and her pin was an effort to counteract the stigma of sex work by reaffirming its legitimacy.

The graphics she chose for her button — a dominatrix with pasties, people on leashes or undressing in front of a computer or leaning against a stripper pole, bent over — were not an attempt to sanitize sex work, or represent it as anything other than explicit. However, they hint at the material conditions of production: she explained to me in the car how she was learning from her friends about the toys, accessories, cameras, computers, lighting, other technology, clothing, branding, virtual social interaction, and the amount of time that goes into doing camera work.

Her text, all black except for "real", which was in pink, was an insistence on the mundaneness of the lurid images. The variety of possibilities of sex work emphasized that it was a valid option, a choice, against the ever-present representation of sex work as inherently coercive. To describe it as "work" is to hold sex work up against her dehumanizing minimum wage experiences at Walmart or Pizza Hut and to understand that, although sex work operates outside of formal employment, and with all of the stigma attached to it, it nonetheless offers something equal to or perhaps better than other forms of formal economic activity.

Allison's insistence on the legitimacy of sex work hardly appears as an acceptable scenario for many child welfare workers who hope that young people aging out will engage in waged work. My conversations with service providers at Louisville's Family Scholar House, a housing program that offered young parents and former foster youth education support, job training, apartments, food and necessities, and a bit of community, gave more of an insight into the kinds of work they were happy to authorize and support. I was there to pick up a bus pass for Beu, and Thomas, one of the youth coordinators, mentioned that Beu's housing application had come across his desk; he asked me if I thought Beu would be interested in nursing or becoming a

medical technician. I deferred answering: I did not know. Family Scholar House had job placement deals with medical companies, offering jobs that required long hours and minimal training, but with decent incomes.

Although it is difficult to count the number of former foster youth engaged in varying kinds of sex work, I heard secondhand from a handful of people that it was not an uncommon practice for former foster youth. Early in preliminary fieldwork, an acquaintance whose husband worked for DCBS suggested I start hanging out at strip clubs. She knew of a Christian organization that did outreach at strip clubs in an effort to push them into other forms of work; she told me that many of the women employed at the clubs were former foster youth. I was never able to verify this, so I could not say for sure. Beu also occasionally complained about some of her friends from state custody asking her to try in-person sex work, which she adamantly refused. Studies from the Urban Institute highlight the role of survival sex among homeless youth, especially those who are LGBTQ+ and living away from their families (2015; Dank, n.d.; n.d.; n.d.). The varying levels of coercion and necessity present here are a far cry from the apparently "optional" camera work that Allison was describing among her own friends and acquaintances. Allison's impressions of sex work diverged greatly from those emerging from scholarly and religious projects on the subject, but they were also very different from Beu's. While I have emphasized Allison's and Beu's opinions here, the range of thoughts and opinions reflects the complicated social and economic pressures that shape decisions around the kinds of sex work young people do.

For her part, Allison understood the possibilities of sex work as offering a potentially good life, not one shaped by mere survival, one with more flexibility than the inconsistent schedules, cruel managers, dramatic coworkers. What was important is that even if her past

caseworkers, family, friends, or child welfare workers disliked the idea, she considered it an option with real benefits, as well as potential risks, just like any other job.

Art as politics

Moving from a discussion of the content of Allison's art, I focus here on the work that Allison's art did for her. Art fulfilled an old an important function: it helped her consolidate and articulate a political position. Wearing the button — and she insisted she would — would likely work as a literal conversation piece, something to spark important and meaningful conversations about work and stigma, sex and pleasure, choice and coercion. The production of a wearable piece of political expression was both a pretext for our conversation — our talk would not have taken place if not for art-making — and a way of practicing how to start and have that conversation with others.

Allison was interested in how I thought about political and moral questions, how I made decisions about when to engage with people about difficult topics. She would sometimes call me, asking for my thoughts on a recent exchange she might have had with someone about abortions, elections, foster care, and eventually, the pandemic. For my part, I tried to answer honestly: there were some discussions I would not have, arguments I would not entertain. There were also different strategies and tactics I might use for different people, giving young people especially the benefit of the doubt. On occasion, I also solicited her opinion on a topic about which I felt unsure. She and I had a long conversation about safe injection sites – as the daughter of parents whose lives had been deeply affected by drug use, I thought she would have thoughtful opinions about the ways children specifically might be affected by harm reduction policies. She was initially opposed to safe injection sites, seeing them as encouraging drug use. However, months

afterwards, she told me she had had a number of productive conversations with family and friends, and done some personal research on the topic, and felt less opposed to them than she had been. She and I did not always agree on everything, but it was always clear that we were asking questions and answering in good faith.

Allison liked talking to people. She liked to take controversial positions and ask questions, often on social media but also in person. She toed the line between provocateur and genuine engagement with others. What she sought in the creation of a button was an *audience*; her art, while a material object, was also a political performance. It was simultaneously stylized, visual, and textual, but her purpose in producing an object was to start a conversation with an imagined future person or persons. Her art needed an audience.

Although reflection is often thought of as a solitary practice, I read Allison as seeking out opportunities to reflect with others. She had taken the time to reflect on her own, to develop a set of opinions, do her own research, and draw on her own experiences of work. I understand these to reflective practices done in solitude, practices to which she would return after going out into the world to talk to others. It was in her interactions and conversations with others that she honed her opinions, considered new aspects of them she might not have considered before. Her art was an individual reflective piece, produced without any real input from me, but also an object that would in turn generate new reflection opportunities for her.

During our time in the Makerspace, I had expected that Allison would perhaps learn a bit about sewing, find a new hobby: instead, she remade the space into a place where she could pursue and expand one of her own political positions. For her, art became an ethical practice because the art she made became an opportunity for shared interaction and conversation with others. Through discussing her pin – with friends, family, strangers – she could reflect on the

relative validity of different kinds of work. I also interpret the explicitness of the pin as a move to not only reflect or express her own opinions, but to influence and persuade people.

A Music Career

In May 2021, over a year after I left Louisville, Rita sent an email to Silas, Dean, and me with the subject line: "Introducing the powerful new music of Jonathan!" She had attached two audio clips, songs from Jonathan's forthcoming album. In the body of the email, she explained that she was writing to us to share his exciting news, but also to ask for some help. She had been impressed with his music and wanted our opinions on it, but she also wanted to know if the three of us knew music promoters or others who might be able to circulate his music in the city. She also wanted to know if we had any fundraising ideas – at the time, Jonathan needed money for more studio time and production costs to finish the album.

I was surprised – until that point, I knew Jonathan primarily as a visual artist, focusing on photography, painting, and drawing. I had not realized that he was invested in other creative endeavors. I opened the first of the two clips, expecting to hear low-quality, fuzzily mixed audio, and perhaps some hip hop – otherwise, I was unsure of what to expect regarding genre, style, or sound. The first song, "Paint it Black", opened with a simple bass line, clear melodic singing and harmonies, and a familiar set of trap beats. The next song, "Numb", had a slow, sad guitar arpeggio paired with soft vocalizations, then launched into a melancholy hook. Both were competently mixed and well produced – Rita described them as "remarkable" and "crowd ready" in her email, an assessment with which I wholeheartedly agreed.

At first listen, both songs sounded wistful and nostalgic, aching and mournful. My initial impression was solidified upon closer attention to the opening lyrics:

You hate me for no reason
Paint me black like coal
They can't stop the bleeding
Love me when I go
You say you're not leaving
Lies as white as snow
They say life is fleeting
Only this I know ("Paint it Black")

I aint never had too much
I aint never had real love
Used to think I had you but
Used to think I had you but
It was just a phase ("Numb")

Rita had noted the album was about "exploring his experiences with love over the past few years": the pain in the sounds and words left me feeling sad that he apparently had a tumultuous love life. Unlike my conversations with the young women of this study, who called me for advice (see Part III), Jonathan and I had never discussed his romantic relationships. Feeling left behind, unloved, and confused about a messy breakup: these all made for powerful music, powerful art.

In this section, I consider the trajectory of Jonathan's music career between my first introduction to it – May 2021 – until October 2022, when I interviewed him about the evolution of his artistic work. I suggest that his musical career played three roles for him. First, his creative output allowed him to find his voice. Stylistically, Jonathan had developed his own sound with the influence of other artists, but still wanted his music to "sound like" him. Outside of music, he had also changed. In my earliest conversations with him, Jonathan explained repeatedly that he was wary of others and not always vulnerable or open with them – through his music, he had found ways of being vulnerable about his emotions, and working in production teams, he learned to be honest and open with friends and fellow artists. Second, following his strong opinions

about the rules and ethics of hip hop as a community, Jonathan found a sense of purpose in building his own creative community in Louisville. He spoke happily about taking on a mentoring role with sound engineers, Instagram models, and others, and about hosting community events for local artists. Like Hayley, Jonathan found in artistic production a way of working with and for others. Third, while he admitted that his creative enterprises did not "always pay the bills", he was happy and satisfied in his creative life and could not imagine going back to waged work, long-term. The freedom that his music career afforded him illustrates a strong contrast to the types of work emphasized by social services organizations, such as StructDay, which encouraged young people to go into construction jobs or advocacy work.

Finding his voice

Jonathan had been working on music before we met, but it had been largely experiments. As he told it, musician friends assumed he had just been a rapper, but upon learning that he could sing, they encouraged him to pursue music more seriously. Since 2020, he had been working on developing his own sound and style. In 2021, his creative experimentation met a fruitful source of inspiration – processing a breakup – and he began working on an album based on this concept.

I am no expert on hip hop, but elements of Jonathan's musical style sounded familiar to me based on my own limited knowledge of the form. I mentioned this to him during our interview: "This reminds me almost of Lil Peep," I offered. He laughed and denied having ever listened to Lil Peep, a white musician who died in 2017 and helped popularize a hybrid genre that mixed emo music with rap. He acknowledged, that others had compared him to Peep, and that, like Peep, he had drawn inspiration from emo music, along with a variety of other rappers: Biggie Smalls, Tech N9ne, Cassidy, Lupe Fiasco, the Wu Tang Clan. He did not limit himself by

era, citing a love of old school rap and the boom-bap sounds of the 1990s and early 2000s, nor by region, referring to West Coast, New York, and Midwest rap as influential. These references I understood, and they helped me understand how to place him with regards to other musical stylings, and why his music sounded simultaneously new but familiar to me.

Despite knowing some about how Jonathan's musical tastes emerged, he was resistant to the characterization of his style is anything other than his own. "It's just me being me," he said. He went on, explaining that people try to find a way to make what's new make sense to them: comparison became a useful tool to contextualize him, but could never, he insisted, fully encapsulate his sound or style. He assured me that however much his music "sounded like" other artists or styles, it came from a creative sensibility that was all his own. "Independent invention?" I asked, and he chuckled and said, "Something like that."

Jonathan's signature style emerged almost accidentally. While experimenting in the studio, he floated the idea of incorporating singing into his work. "I didn't know you could sing," I told him. He said that a lot of people had been surprised by this. People had known he could rap, but far fewer of them knew anything about his singing abilities. He had been working with a sound engineer friend on "Paint it Black", one of the songs that Rita had sent in her first email. He described this friend as being fast and competent, the speed of production giving him little time to get lost in his thoughts – it was "serendipitous" that Jonathan had been encouraged to incorporate singing. In the beginning, he had not known his own power or range, and neither had his friend. They were both surprised by his energy and skill in the studio. He described this process as becoming "a whole different person" – he had shocked everyone and himself.

The surprises kept coming. After the album went up on Spotify and he began promoting it, he looked at his analytics. People were listening in India, in Italy, and of course, in Louisville.

He began hearing back from listeners, who told him that his music had helped them, and he realized that his music meant something to others as well. In the process of writing the album, he worked through the "heavy atmosphere" and "negative emotions" that he experienced in the wake of his breakup and found a way to release them. "You can't get rid of things without confronting them," he told me, and the album had been his way of doing this.

Along with the new emotional and musical connections, Jonathan told me story after story of standing up for himself, and he seemed far more self-assured that he had been when we first met in the field. He told me about managing ageism among older musicians and younger upcoming fellow artists. Many new rappers were skeptical that, well into his twenties, Jonathan could have a successful career, often pointing to the dearth of successful rappers who were over thirty on top hip hop charts. Jonathan dismissed these doubts, pointing out numerous examples of older artists – Lil Wayne, Tech N9ne – whom he respected, while also noting the ways he had not been taken seriously when he was younger. He was far less avoidant, addressing conflicts and disagreements frankly and honestly. Through the positive reception of vulnerability in his music, Jonathan had seemingly developed a greater confidence in his own voice, in and outside of the studio.

"a community of like-minded artists"

In her initial email to me, Dean, and Silas, Rita had described the music community as cruel, which was why she came to us first. As supporters of Jonathan's art, she hoped that we might have helpful insights into helping him generate more attention for his music, without the subtle gatekeeping that he initially experienced. Silas, whom I discussed in Part III, had played a mentoring role with Jonathan on his photography. Dean had purchased art from Jonathan in the

past, and I, of course, was writing about him. When he first began seriously seeking a career in music, Jonathan asked Rita for help, and because she was out of her depth, she turned to us. I have never had an experience with professional music-making and was similarly unhelpful. Dean and Silas, however, were both connected with local arts scenes. They immediately responded to Rita's email thread with suggestions and advice. Jonathan implemented some of their suggestions – finding a promoter and finding a network of other artists –and decided against implementing others, like seeking playtime on college radio.

Music, as Becker (2008) and Moeran (2016) argue, is a necessarily social endeavor . Composing, playing, editing, recording, engineering are all tasks that, with few exceptions, are done by a team of people rather than a single one. As Rita pointed out in her email to us, musical communities could also be challenging to enter and navigate, and in many cases, new musicians must depend on networks and prior social relations to excel. Jonathan described feeling out of place at young entrepreneurial events in Louisville, which he attended in the hopes of gleaning some knowledge about how to build a sustainable music business. Sometimes the only Black man, he would earnestly talk to other musical or artistic types with promises of collaboration and networking, only to reach out afterwards and never hear back.

Over time, however, he found his footing and finished the album, played smaller shows in Louisville, earning a small loyal following in the city. He continued to seek out collaborations with other musicians and artists and began to receive collaboration requests in kind, sometimes with disastrous results. He described at length the near dozen features he had been invited to do for other rappers and hip hop artists. Upon sending his verses to his collaborators, they disappeared; in his subsequent emails, they claimed to have lost his audio. His theory, he said with a chuckle, was that they invited him because he had some local clout, but they did not wish

to be outperformed on their own tracks. I could hear his shrug over the phone. He did not like this outcome, but he had also accepted that not everyone had his best interests in mind, and he could not get bogged down in worrying about them. He had other pressing matters to address.

As discussed in Part II, Jonathan had a strong reaction to the popularity of Jack Harlow, and what he saw as interlopers breaking the rules of being a part of the hip hop community. In his own artistic community in Louisville, Jonathan had similar principles and values, a set of moral rules that guided his engagements and collaborations with other artists. One might expect that, due to his earlier rejections and dismissals, that he might have become bitter or resentful of others, but he maintained a generosity in his dealings with fellow aspiring artists. In fact, it was precisely *because* he had struggled so much that he wanted to smooth the pathway for others to practice their arts.

Because he had such a difficult entry into music and art worlds, Jonathan had learned a great deal about how to navigate opaque social interactions and resource deprivation. He proudly explained that, in addition to making his own music and merchandise, he had also begun mentoring other, younger artists. He spoke at length about a good friend of his, a sound engineer, whom Jonathan would not allow to work on his music. He explained to his friend that, while Jonathan respected him and wanted him to succeed, he did not view this friend as being serious or invested in making music. “His heart wasn’t in it,” Jonathan said to me. For him, music production required not only technical skill and creative inspiration, but “heart” – a serious commitment to his craft. This last quality was missing in his friend, and something that Jonathan asked of his sound engineers and anyone with whom he collaborated.

Collaboration and support seemed to be at the core of his music career, and I asked explicitly about his goals: he said he wanted to build “a community of like-minded artists”. By

this he meant people who wanted to help one another, collaborate across media, styles, genres, and platforms, to produce more in-depth creative experiments. He described an event he had organized in Louisville in October 2022, to which he had invited any and all Louisville-based artists to share some aspect of their work. Musicians and live performers came, along with visual artists and craftspeople. It was a small, he said, but successful artistic networking event for young artists, and he hoped to organize more of them.

Like Hayley, Jonathan not only wanted a space to be expressive and artistic but treated his creative practices as an opportunity to serve and commune with others. He saw himself as a skilled and competent musician, but also as a person who could demonstrate reciprocity and kindness in his artistic community. The content of his music could inspire others and help them process their feelings, but the social context of making and producing his art was an opportunity for ethics.

While he had not laid out in detail any ethical principles explicitly, his disappointment with other hip hop artists and local entrepreneurs who made promises then disappeared suggests to me, first and foremost, an ethos of mutuality and respect. This would require not taking on more commitments than possible and showing up to engage in good faith with potential collaborators. Second, he rejected gatekeeping: knowledge, connections, and support should be free. His eagerness to mentor new and aspiring musicians, and especially his pride in his dealings with his sound engineer friend, suggests to me a commitment to offering people the resources they needed to succeed. This knowledge sharing was coupled with a third principle, which was quality and craftsmanship: good art required hard work, effort, and as he put it, “heart”. Matthew Crawford calls this “soul craft” (Crawford 2009): he argues that the work that one puts into one’s creative and craft endeavors requires not only knowledge and discipline, but a deeply felt,

embodied wellspring of joy in the act of discovery and creation. It was fine to enjoy the money and the fame, but Jonathan wanted to spend his time in community with others who shared his love of art.

The pull of freedom

The impetus for my interview with Jonathan was the question that animates Part IV of this dissertation: What was the relationship between his art and his livelihood? I had wondered what he was doing to survive. Was he doing waged work, relegating his creative endeavors to his free time, or was he working full time as an artist? Was he making enough money for food, for rent, for transportation? In our interview, asked a few versions of the question, and he picked up my meaning immediately: "Does this pay the bills? Not all the time, no," he said with a laugh. However, he insisted to me, that he had moved past wondering if it would work and kept finding affirmation that it *could* and *was* working for him.

He told me at length about his various new pursuits. Apart from writing and producing his own music, merchandise, and photography, he had also been exploring the possibility of a collaboration with local street wear fashion brands, starting with a line of hats. He had also begun coaching Instagram models, songwriting for others, building a recording studio with his friend the sound engineer, and doing flash art or buttons at events. He did not frame these as goals, but rather as emergent possibilities that piqued his interest. Rather than constrain himself to a timeline, he allowed them grow organically. There was a time, he told me, that he thought of organizing his life around five-year plans. He had been in survival mode then, but since he had found a bit of economic stability with his many "hustles", he had found some time to reflect, and

he did not want to abide by the rules of conventional businesses or work. He wanted his freedom, something he could not find in normative forms of labor.

"Work sucks," he said bluntly, laughing into the phone. In part, his opposition stemmed from the types of work he had been doing. Warehouse work and groundskeeping – the jobs he had when I was in the field – both took an enormous toll on the body. He described the wear and tear, the soreness and stiffness and numbness of being on his feet all day. Another aspect of work was the workplace hierarchy and having little control over it. "What I realized is that I hate being fired," he said. He had lost jobs before, partially due to the seasonal nature of some of his work, but also because of, as he put it, "made up bullshit". The job had to come to an end eventually, and although he understood this intellectually, he still disliked the lack of power over his employment and feelings of inadequacy that stemmed from being fired. In contrast, he laughed, "you can't get fired from yourself!"

He had explained his views on the decision to choose one over another with a metaphor. He described feeling like he was in the middle, holding onto two ropes and surrounded by water. One of the ropes was shorter, tying him to a rock. The rock, he said, represented waged work and financial stability: the expected, the normative, the "should". The other rope led off into the water; it was longer, but he did not know where it would lead. This, to him, represented the uncertainty of his creative pursuits. The ambiguity and extra work it might involve did not override the pull of those creative dreams.

"If you let go of the rock of financial stability, you get lost in the ocean," he mused, but one could not chase both dreams. One had to instead let go and keep pulling oneself along the creative rope, following it wherever it led. It was a poetic way of describing two opposing impulses – a "pull" towards certainty and stability and a "pull" towards an ocean of possibility, a

choice between safety and freedom. Although he described the beginnings of his music career as serendipitous, in his reflections with me he seemed assured of his choice of freedom over safety. Jonathan had always had the work ethic to excel. In Part III, I relayed how he described himself as being smart, but perhaps taking longer than others. While he was groundskeeping, he described himself as "a machine", working until he hurt. What he apparently did not have was an interest in the options that were offered to him. In the intervening years since I left the field, he seemed to have refined some of the skills necessary to continue pulling himself along his creative rope: flexibility, adaptability, a discerning eye to cultural trends, and a commitment to quality. His prioritization of these values allowed him to preserve his autonomy, exempting him from the vagaries of seasonal firings and numb feet in steel-toed boots.

I wondered whether his constant push would eventually take a toll on him, but before I could ask, he had already answered my question about the longevity of his hustling. He described how, during his groundskeeping time, he had learned to work the full length of his shift but also eventually to recognize when he could leave tasks to get done the next day. The work, he said, would still be there tomorrow. It did not make sense to "constantly destroy" himself for work that would eventually get done regardless. While in his creative life, he was busy and moving and working constantly, he did not describe his many hustles as exceeding his capacity for work. Although he did not want to return to waged work, some of the lessons he learned about limits and boundaries while working in more conventional jobs did help him find a balance that, at the time of our interview, felt okay.

Jonathan organized his life without urgency. He did not rush himself or his decisions, but he was far from indecisive. I had asked him about his goals for the future, what he thought of as "success" or "making it". He rejected this question outright. He did not see goals as productive

because goals implied an end. He compared himself to a businessman – businessmen, he said, never wanted their business to *end*. They wanted it to continue into perpetuity, to keep going. This was what he wanted from his artistic life, indefinite creation.

Moreover, although he did not wish to return to manual labor, Jonathan did not necessarily see the choice between the two as a permanent state of affairs, and said he was willing to occasionally supplement his creative income with temporary jobs. "What people never realize," he explained, "is that the first rope will always be there. But that goes for the same for the second one, too." Far from being foreclosed, he saw the safety of convention as something that would always be available to him. He could go back to the rock if he needed and come back to creative pursuits after that if necessary. Although he acknowledged that he was on a specific path at the moment, he had reserved the right to always change his mind. That said, he did not want to go back to it: "I'm not even looking at the first rope," he said.

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Jonathan's personal values became apparent to me in our conversation about the arc of his work and creative career. I found a willingness to lean into serendipity, to let discovery guide the course of his decisions, and to do it all with care and competence. What he found important – his idea of a good life – concerned not only money or income or accolades, but freedom, honesty, camaraderie, knowledge-sharing, reciprocity, and craftsmanship. These values were not only apparent in his major life choices, such as abstaining from waged work, but also at a community and interpersonal level. His commitment to building community with others stemmed from his own experiences of exclusion and dismissal. His demands for not only technical competence but soul craft from others illustrated the importance he assigned to doing art well.

Most importantly, while stability was something he may have wanted, waged work was at odds with the moral values that were most important to him, so he declined doing it. Sustaining himself required more than money or a schedule, and independence meant something different than being able to feed, clothe, move, or house himself. Although scholars, researchers, service providers, and policymakers might wish for former foster youths to prioritize stability, Jonathan's floating was hardly directionless. In the process of pursuing his interests and values, he had built a community of like-minded people, and also learned to manage those relationships in more direct and open ways. He had crafted, with the help of others, a life for himself that gave him purpose and drive and allowed him to be himself.

During our conversation, he put it best: "It might not be the best rope, but I know that it can hold me, and that's enough."

CONCLUSION

When making art with former foster youths, I found them to be reflective about the emotional – and the ethical – value of work. Laboring, creative and otherwise, produced a wide range of emotions in my interlocutors: triumphant and enraged, inadequate and competent, connected and isolated. In analyzing their emotional responses to different kinds of work, I was able to glean parts of their inner moral systems, and better understand how and why they made decisions about how to prioritize different aspects of their lives.

In my encounters with Beu, I learned less about the value of different types of work than the social aspects of work that she found important. The camaraderie and support of her coworkers seemed to be a key part of her decision to stay in a job or not. It was over the course of her stay in the shelter and our conversations about her friends there that I learned what she

valued in a workplace, which mainly seem to be social support. I noticed this in retroactively observing our dynamics in the course of crafting, in a shift from an unwillingness to try a task on her own into a willingness to try something without my help or without my explanation.

Allison, who had tried a variety of conventional forms of waged work, had done nonetheless emerged from our day at the makerspace with a concrete political agenda. I interpreted her positions about the validity of sex work as revealing a value system that emphasized almost the opposite of Beu's: it was her bosses and coworkers who limited her freedom and skills, but without whom she would have felt isolated and lonely at work. She had, as a result, deprioritized conventional work, and instead sought to legitimate alternative forms of work. Against the negative moralization of the sex work that accompanied policymaking and research about former foster youth, Allison was carving out an alternative moral system that found value in ownership of one's body.

While Hayley chose to continue on the credentialed path, she nonetheless continued to develop her creative hobbies and volunteer work. The balance she struck between financial stability and creation worked for her, during a period of intense stress – the early days of the pandemic – as a form of release and relaxation. It was partially because her work life was so challenging and stressful that she found a social value in doing her art, in rebuilding herself and offering delight to others. In contrast, Jonathan chose to make art his primary focus, rejecting the stability of waged work. He hoped to grow a community with moral rules and continued to live by principles of reciprocity and craftsmanship. While not easy, Jonathan was happy with his decisions, and believed that returning to conventional work would ultimately be detrimental to his life.

Although art is rarely a priority for child welfare and aging out researchers, former foster youths engaged in creative practices often. With perhaps the exception of Jonathan, they were generally less self-reflective about why they created and what value their creative practices added to their lives. They simply created, either because they liked to create, they were inspired, or suddenly had access to art resources and were eager to make use of them. When given the time and the opportunity, they always chose to make something. As a co-creator and researcher, I was able to put their artistic outputs into broader conversations about moral value and work. By focusing on the things that mattered to them, I found that there were internal logics to the decisions they made about their lives, moral justifications underlying their desires.

V. EPILOGUE

In January 2020, Beu and I met for lunch and run some errands. As I was getting ready to drive her back to the shelter, she sheepishly asked if we could stop for ice cream. I laughed, teasing her about her sweet tooth, but acquiesced. We stopped at Graeter's. We talked through what kinds of flavors we wanted, and we each tried a handful — she loved the seasonal flavors, peppermint and cinnamon. We made our choices, I paid, then asked if she wanted to walk and eat outside or stay inside. She deferred, so I made an executive decision to go outside. It was an unseasonably nice day, so we stood in the parking lot, enjoying our ice cream. As we ate, we chatted until we hit a comfortable lull in the conversation.

"I really never thought that you and I would actually become friends," she said, interrupting the quiet.

"Yeah? And why not?" I asked with a grin.

"I thought you just wanted me to tell you all this shit that happened to me so you could put it in your lil book. I didn't expect you to like, actually hang out with me, but we do," she said, taking another bite. I paused, then reminded her that I *did* want her to tell me things so I *could* "put it in my lil book": "I take notes on all of our conversations!" I laughed.

"No, you know what I mean," she said. She went on, reiterating that it was important to her that we actually spent time together, and she appreciated that I actually wanted to get to know her. I told her stories about my time working in residential, and how the girls were interested in math, in chemistry, in nail art: they wanted a future. There were so many things that were more important to them than just their trauma histories, I explained, though of course those histories were important too. She finished her ice cream, then told me that there weren't many

people were interested in that. I agreed, then threw my trash in the garbage. She did the same, and we got back in the car and drove back to the shelter.

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In casual moments like these, Beu – along with Allison, Hayley, Jonathan, and the other young people I met on account of their time in state custody – transformed so much of what I thought I knew about trauma, care, and what it meant to be a responsible adult. In my encounters with former foster youth in Kentucky, I revisited the city where I grew up with fresh, critical eyes. In my encounters with policymakers, mentors, service providers, and journalists, I tried to situate young people within political, bureaucratic, racial, mobile, and moral landscapes in which they lived but over which they exercised little control.

I watched them reflect on their decisions, motivations, and desires; I watched them practice freedom, moving within the constraints of race, gender, religion, class, politics, and normative expectations of adulthood to try to carve out lives for themselves that aligned with their ideas of the good. I tried to treat them as ethical subjects, as people who were developing a relationship to themselves guided by principles and a freedom to make decisions aligned with those moral codes. I tried to make sense of their internal moral landscapes based on their actions and our conversations. In compiling and analyzing some of their offhandedly profound comments, I hope that this dissertation speaks to the complex ways they thought about the world and their relationships. I hope that it captures my own motivations – to actually, as Beu put it, get to know them on their own terms, even as I was collecting notes to put in my little book. Although our relationships began *because* of their time in care, meeting them once they aged out was part of my own effort to understand how their lives were influenced by, but not determined by, foster care.

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