

INTRODUCTION

Unfinished Business and the Sequelae of Racial Slavery

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Virginia's Recorder General, John Rolfe, known as Pocahontas's husband, produced Black America's birth certificate in 1619. He notified Sir Edwin Sandys, treasurer of the Virginia Company of London, that "a Dutch man of Warr . . . brought not anything but 20 an odd Negroes" and traded them for food.

—Ibram X. Kendi and Keisha N. Blain
(2021, p. xxii)

The inspirational story behind this book speaks to both the resilient and continuing painful journey of Black Americans in this contemporary society, a 400-year-old travail beginning in 1619, when the 20 Ndongo African indentured servants arrived in the American colonies. Likely, they were to become the first slaves in the United States, 150 years before the country was constituted. By 1690, every colony had African slaves (Shah & Adolphe, 2019). The observations of the authors of this book, all actively engaged in the delivery of public child welfare and juvenile services over multiple decades, suggest that the dynamics of racial slavery have continued to infest the social fabric over generations and undermine the constitutional ethic that the United States and its governmental institutions purport to uphold.

The plight of Black male children who are removed from their families before the age of majority and placed in the care of public systems represents the most powerful illustration of the "unfinished

business” of racial slavery. The social–economic–moral costs go well beyond the traumatic effects of family separation; these costs aptly reflect the symbolic systemic collusion of a consistent refusal to see and address the deleterious impact of culturally targeted policies and practices routinely applied to the care of these young Black descendants of chattel slavery who have been removed from their birth families.

This book aims to document and discuss these costs through the eyes of Black youth themselves. We, the authors, desire to challenge the silence, acceptance, and denial in the systems that we operate in, manage, and lead. De facto, these factors maintain the status quo of racial enslavement for those whose skin is different and who, if unchecked, will father the next generation of Black Americans who will also struggle for equity and a life beyond sheer survival. Responsibly, we directly sought out the unique voices and the narratives of Black male youth caught up in public systems. Their lives transformed ours.

INQUIRY AS INTERVENTION

In chapter 1, the author provides a detailed discussion of the research methodology employed to capture the authentic and unfiltered perspectives on effective best practices with Black male youth placed in out-of-home care. This youth-centered qualitative and quantitative study conducted with Black youth, parents, youth-serving staff, and community stakeholders in the National Capital Region identified strategies for culturally responsive social work practice with Black male youth placed out of their homes. The study revealed critical techniques for moving beyond the concepts of trauma-informed practices to healing engagement that focuses on recovery and the advancement of positive life outcomes for these highly vulnerable youth. The chapter describes the interdisciplinary, cross-generational research team’s study design and use of inquiry as both a transformative practice and an intervention to reveal key characteristics of healing engagement that cultivates protective factors, helps youth overcome adversity, and supports them as they flourish into adulthood.

GROWING UP BLACK AND MALE IN AMERICA: THE MYTHOLOGY

Chapter 2 highlights the current limitations of social science research in approaching the critical need to acknowledge unique aspects of growing up Black and male in American society. When we

attempt to intervene with Black male youth who are subjected to living away from their birth parents and assign them alternative placements sponsored by public governmental systems, the lack of understanding is maximized. Current research consistently highlights the problems and challenges presented by this youth population and often fails to suggest effective strategies for engaging this population.

In chapter 2, the authors summarize what everyone else has to say about them, moving from internal reflections to environmental narratives about Black male adolescents. This review of the literature follows seven broad categories, each with its emerging themes: (1) child welfare; (2) formation of identity; (3) family, community, and culture; (4) education and economic well-being; (5) juvenile and criminal justice; (6) interaction of trauma with systems, programs, and treatment; and (7) public policy and program initiatives. While the research cannot imply causation with correlational data—and experimental studies of this nature would be highly unethical—the authors urge the readers not to take the results in the extant literature as empirical evidence but, rather, interpret the research through a critical lens.

LIVING THE LIFE

In chapter 3, the authors describe what life looks like for Black male adolescents who are in out-of-home placements as they transition from adolescence to young adulthood. The youth voice is captured and informs the reader with firsthand accounts. The authors, who are Black men and have grown up in urban environments, also share their personal perspective and experiences, which provide further context for what life looks like for a Black male youth growing up in the United States. These voices describe the fear, anxiety, and complexity that assault Black male adolescents and addresses implications for Black male youth who spend time away from their families of origin in out-of-home care.

The chapter authors discuss the cultural context for survival: “street respect.” They argue that Black male adolescents receive strong messages about manliness and masculinity from their family and the media. These adolescents face ongoing pressure to conform to the mainstream idea of the images of Black manhood. This internal struggle is real, and for some youths, it can produce significant mental health concerns. Self-reliance, self-identity, and

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the pressure to conform to this notion of being “the man,” without the necessary resources to thrive, can lead to trauma.

The role of the Black Church in the life of the Black male adolescent is also explored along with pointing to its declining influence and both the positive and negative impact of the growing hip-hop culture. Many Black youth identify as being part of a religion but do not attend a church or mosque.

The chapter presents strategies for adults to utilize to support youth through their life, one that consistently has been described as filled with rejection, confusion, uncertainty, and anger. The authors conclude that Black male adolescents have proven to be resilient and can be engaged.

SURVIVAL AND PROTECTIVE CULTURE OF THE BLACK COMMUNITY

The authors in chapter 4 propose that the survival of Black families requires critical interdependence on their overwhelmingly racially segregated communities to safely rear their Black sons into productive adulthood while managing daunting social and economic circumstances. They report that, across diverse Black communities, racialized pressure resulting from economic disenfranchisement has generated polarized calls for reparations due to historical injustice and left a legacy of racial enslavement in this country, which has not yet been resolved.

The interface between the Black family and their community is a culturally adaptive model that extends past a “village” concept to share in a response to political backlash; an increase in racial violence; and the disproportionate, negative effects of the recent pandemic on Black mortality, illness, and loss of income. An author’s personal case study illustrates the essential role of the Black family to protect and access the community’s protective resources whenever and however those resources are available. Black male youth separated from their families and communities carry a unique burden that they manifest in how they cope with and adapt to the systems charged with their care, while their families and communities continue to battle the vestiges of slavery in the 21st century.

CONCENTRATED MANIFESTATION OF TRAUMA (CMT)

Utilizing focus groups, clinical record review, and survey data, the authors of chapter 5 frame the findings obtained from 200 young

Black male adolescents placed out of their homes. They describe how the Black youth adapt daily while they are triggered by a complex and hostile social context. Rather than being boxed in by contemporary clinical categorizations, the youth—through their own voices—identify adult engagement strategies that the authors believe are effective in targeting CMT. These strategies are critical to allowing Black male adolescents to let down their figurative “shield” while creating a safe psychological vehicle for revisiting what they have come to know based on experience, what they can do, their responsibility for giving back to the community, and their hopeful vision of a future life.

BLACK MALE YOUTH IN SYSTEMS

Chapter 6 addresses the challenges faced by Black male adolescents in out-of-home placement as they engage the very systems that are mandated to educate, treat, support, and guide them through their teenage years to young adulthood, but do not. The authors contend that these systems most often fail to achieve their mandates. Documented underachievement in academia, overinvolvement in the criminal justice system, and disproportionate placement in the foster care system are areas highlighted. The research clearly documents that Black male youth are overrepresented in systems, and yet, in truth, they are invisible. Their voices are silent.

Discussion centers on implicit bias, policies of oppression, prejudice, and systemic racism, which impact the ability of the Black male adolescent to overcome abuse and neglect and to heal and thrive. The Black male authors contrast their own experience growing up in urban settings to that of youth in out-of-home placement. Barriers to academic success of Black male youth are highlighted, and strategies are identified for adults to support Black male youth through their academic journey, including managing teacher expectations, differential cultural learning styles, and implicit bias.

The authors explore contributing factors, which include poverty, visibility hypothesis, policy, and racial bias underlying the overrepresentation of Black youth in the child welfare and juvenile services systems. The high number of placements for the study participants suggest that the public systems these Black male youth must navigate are fundamentally not designed to help them overcome trauma and to heal and thrive as they transition to young adulthood.

A PROTECTED CLASS

In chapter 7, the authors dissect the historical underserving of vulnerable Black male youth in the public care systems and the resulting devastating outcomes for these children, underscoring the need for greater constitutional protections under the law. The chapter provides a thorough analysis of systemic deprivation exacted on Black boys in out-of-home placement, revealing five far-reaching, disparate effects at the intersection of Black male child identity and inequality, while also proposing a constitutional remedy to reduce and prevent the harm caused to these Black male children who, often without fault, find themselves subject to America's child welfare system. Economic nihilism, health inequity, educational retardation, judicial and extrajudicial racial profiling, and the denial of childhood status represent critical domains that lay bare the inadequacy of currently available legal protections for this young, deserving youth population.

In the chapter, the reader explores the constitutional implications of systemic harm committed on a subpopulation of Black youth who are among the most vulnerable in the society, the urgency of this prevailing inequity, and the available remedies for historic discrimination at the state and national levels. The authors propose a new constitutionally protected classification designed to limit the intersectional harm experienced by Black male adolescents in the custody of public systems of care. The chapter closes with recommendations that are paramount for consideration if the needs of these youth are to be prioritized and protected and if the youth are to matriculate into productive adulthood and unimpeded citizenship.

FROM ENGAGEMENT TO HEALING

Chapter 8 introduces a focus on implicit biases and adultism, exploring the barriers for service professionals and caregivers who are unable to truly "see" the Black male adolescent. The authors provide illustrations of how abuse or neglect in children can evolve into more problematic presentations as children transition into adolescence and adulthood. They also discuss how "posttraumatic slave syndrome" impedes an adolescent's ability to trust and build healthy relationships. Effective engagement and trust-building by adults are essential to enhancing the capacity of Black male youth

in out-of-home care to successfully maneuver the programs in which they are placed, gain new life perspective, and transition toward an adulthood unencumbered by their past. In this chapter, the reader hears the voices from Black male youth in out-of-home care and also from community stakeholders and professionals who, as evidenced by their outcomes with this population, are experts at engagement and relationship-building with Black male youth within systems.

Black male adolescents share their perspectives on what they believe adults must do to build trust and engage Black male adolescents placed in out-of-home care who possess significant histories of trauma. Community stakeholders and professionals provide insight on techniques and best practices to effectively engage this young Black male population and support their healing and growth. The chapter authors present ideas that must be central and at the forefront to ensure professional proficiency in the art of engagement with Black male youth removed from the care of their families of origin.

ADVOCACY AND ACTION: MOVING FORWARD FROM THE RESEARCH

Pain can sear the human memory in two crippling ways: with forgetfulness of the past or imprisonment in it . . . too horrible to remember, too horrible to forget: down either path lies little health for the human sufferers of great evil.

—Donald W. Shriver, theologian
(quotation cited in *Brown University's Slavery and Justice Report*; Bogues et al., 2021, p. 193)

The book concludes with recommendations for influencing improved practice and for shifting public policy toward a more authentic, humane stance that powerfully owns and takes on the unfinished business of racial slavery with its long-standing destructive effect on Black male youth in our communities. In light of the ongoing and systemic assaults on Black Americans that are manifested in bank redlining that de facto segregates the Black community into neighborhoods of diminished resources, that allows racially targeted massacres in churches, malls, and schools, and that seeks to limit political power to influence public policies designed to address racial inequities and rampart discrimination, the reader

discovers an usual discourse that is propelled by the narratives of Black male youth themselves.

We welcome you to be open and lay aside your assumptions about Black male children and youth removed from their Black parents and, instead, consider their lives as the most profound barometer of the true level of progress made by Black Americans since 1619, when Africans first reached these shores. By the end of the book, you will be better prepared to move through the persistent and evolving complexity surrounding this concern while maintaining a personal commitment, deeply felt motivation, and the belief that, as a community of professionals, we can, we must, and we will foster critical change in our healing response to these most vulnerable children and youth in our society.

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