Conceptualizing Black Adulthood: Examining Black Youths' Developmental Experiences and Transitions to Adulthood Within One Community-Based Youth Serving Organization

by

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my late grandfather, Albert Jones, who embodied a deeply held love for learning. While he was unable to pursue his own educational journey due to the demands placed on him as a father of 12 children, he planted a dream - one that would outlive him and guide generations.

For my dad, that dream became a PhD. My grandfather would tell him, *"Son, go write that book,"* referring to his dissertation. Despite every challenge, my dad did. And in carrying forward his father's dream, he instilled that same call in me, pushing me to write that book, too.

So, I did.

I stand grounded in a legacy my grandfather began - one carried by my father and now living through me. What he started did not end with him; it multiplied. He awakened a generation of change agents, and I am grateful to be part of that lineage – a lineage that lives on through this work.

I also dedicate this work to my students. They are my heartbeat, my why. They are the reason I came to graduate school and the reason I kept going. This project exists because of their courage to boldly share their stories. Thank you for trusting me to honor and hold your words with care, knowing they carry truth, weight, and possibility.

I have always fought for young people to have a seat at the table. Now, they have more than a seat - they have 300 pages that speak, that challenge, that will shape the science and literature for years to come. They belong in every room they aspire to enter, and this is one of many spaces I will always make for them. This work is as much theirs as it is mine.

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I only finished this project because of his encouragement and love. He held me in the moments when I questioned why I was doing this - and why he was no longer here.

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Even before my earthly father planted in me the dream of pursuing a PhD, my heavenly Father had already written this path for my life. As a young child, I could not see it. I struggled in remedial classes, working to read on grade level and keep pace with my peers. But even then, God knew. He knew who I would become and what I would accomplish long before anyone else, aligning my life in ways that brought me to this moment, by miracle and by grace alone.

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Abstract

Black youth face significant systemic barriers that complicate their transitions to adulthood, including institutional racism, economic inequality, and educational disparities. Community-based youth-serving organizations (CBYSOs) are touted as important developmental intervention spaces for Black youth (Baldridge, 2018; Baldridge et al., 2017; Bergeson, 2022; Ginwright, 2007). However, it remains unclear how these organizations support Black youth beyond adolescence and into adulthood, particularly in how youth interpret and experience these supports during critical transitions. This multiple qualitative case study explores how Black youth in one longstanding CBYSO, Youth Enrichment Services (YES) in Pittsburgh, navigate adulthood. To examine these dynamics, the study is grounded in critical race theory, the counterspaces framework, and life course theory, and centers Black youths' perspectives to examine how they conceptualize their development and make meaning of YES' role over time. Guiding the study are the following research questions: (a) How do Black youth in YES conceptualize their transitions to adulthood? (b) How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in these transitions? Data were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews and organizational archives. Findings suggest that youth conceptualize adulthood as structurally racialized, racially disruptive, and disorienting to time and progress, challenging dominant linear and individualized models. Additionally, youth narrate YES not simply as a program, but as developmental infrastructure that stabilizes transitions, restructures opportunity under constraint, and serves as an identity and life-course anchor. This study provides theoretical, practical, and

methodological insights into how CBYSOs support more equitable pathways to adulthood. The findings suggest that Black youths' transitions cannot be understood without an intersectional frame accounting for race, gender, and class; that counterspaces scholarship must extend beyond psychosocial support to more explicitly address the material conditions shaping young people's lives; and that life course theory must be reconceptualized to account for disruption, instability, and racialized constraint rather than assuming orderly, normative life stages. Collectively, this study reframes CBYSOs as essential developmental infrastructure that mediates structural inequality and enables alternative pathways and reshapes how adulthood is experienced under conditions of structural constraint. It demonstrates the value of qualitative inquiry for examining Black youths' developmental experiences and underscores the urgency of equitably funding and sustaining CBYSOs given their critical role in supporting transitions to adulthood.

Keywords: Black youth, transitions to adulthood, community-based youth-serving organizations (CBYSOs), developmental infrastructure, racialized adulthood, critical race theory, life course theory, counterspaces

Chapter 1

Introduction

Black youth are subjected to an inequitable system anchored in racism and oppression that devalues their humanity and, in some cases, determines their right to live (Ray, 2022). For some, premature death is a significant threat, though it is not the only barrier to their well-being (Coates, 2015; Heron, 2019; Kids Count, 2020; Ray, 2022). From birth, many Black youth encounter systemic challenges related to access to healthcare, neighborhood conditions, quality education, equitable justice systems, economic resources, political representation, and nutritional sustenance (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2017; Ginwright, 2005; Ray, 2022). These challenges persist beyond childhood, intensifying as many Black youth move from adolescence to adulthood (Johnson et al., 2014). Progressing to adulthood is complex for any youth; however, Black youth are more likely to be vulnerable to additional challenges, as they are expected to meet traditional adulthood indicators such as educational attainment, civic engagement, family formation, and economic sufficiency while also negotiating heightened exposure to racial discrimination and systemic inequities (Adams et al., 2021; Barr et al., 2021; Hope et al., 2015; Pickney et al., 2011). Consequently, these young people experience disparities in various domains and exhibit the poorest developmental and social well-being outcomes compared to their peers (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018; Ray, 2022; Xie et al., 2013).

Economic systems embedded with centuries-long discriminatory policies and practices have constrained the wealth-building capacity of Black youth and their families and impacted their resource capital during their transition to adulthood. Research demonstrates that for more

than a decade, Black families have earned lower median incomes and wealth than White families in the United States (McKernan et al., 2023). This directly impacts the agency and ability of Black youth to meet their basic needs and access material support during this critical transitional life stage (Adams et al., 2021). Lower income and overall wealth accumulation also pose challenges to achieving long-term economic independence and financial security, a challenge research suggests is largely due to disparities in Black youths' employment prospects and workforce opportunities (Hudson & Young, 2022). Specifically, Black youth are unfairly relegated to lower-paying jobs and industries with minimal economic growth potential. They often have higher unemployment rates and experience workplace displacement for longer periods than their peers, further compromising their economic power in adulthood (Austin, 2022; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006).

Black youth are also more likely to confront challenges within their educational environments, which often result in disparities that hinder their transitions to adulthood. These youth are more likely to attend under-resourced schools with structural and curricular inequities and a higher prevalence of inexperienced teachers (Grey et al., 2018; Reid & Moore, 2008; Schwartz, 2021; Venezia & Kirst, 2005; Venezia et al., 2003). These instructional settings prioritize standardized testing and often place less emphasis on critical and meaningful learning opportunities that prepare Black youth for post-secondary education (Mehrotra et al., 2021). Within these educational contexts, Black youth are also more likely to be exposed to harsh disciplinary policies that propel them toward the prison pipeline (Blake et al., 2010), as well as counselors who are unable to provide navigational tools and resources that facilitate their post-secondary transitions (Brown et al., 2021; Carey, 2024; McKillip et al., 2012; Perna et al., 2008). These conditions place them at a severe disadvantage, given that secondary schools are

traditionally pivotal sites for post-secondary decision-making and future planning (Hooker et al., 2009; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013; McDaniel & Kuehn, 2012; Oyserman et al., 2011).

Post-secondary educational institutions have also presented persistent challenges for Black youth. Regarding attrition and completion rates, they are more likely to leave college or require more than four years to graduate than their White counterparts (Engle & Vinto, 2018). Despite being the most educated demographic in the country, Black women, even with multiple degrees, are underrepresented in roles that correspond to their educational achievements (Carnevale et al., 2011). This trend highlights systemic inequalities and concerns surrounding the accumulation of debt while pursuing higher education, access to employment, the need for mentoring, and transitional support as they enter adulthood and the workforce (Bradburn & Carroll, 2002; Ciocca et al., 2018; Engle & Vinto, 2018). Within post-secondary spaces, Black youth are also expected to persevere through racialized structural and individual forces without adequate support, which hinders their degree completion and post-secondary success rates (Harper, 2012; Smith et al., 2016).

Black youth also navigate oppressive and racist sociopolitical contexts that complicate their developmental trajectories (Brunson & Miller, 2006; Campos-Manzo et al., 2020; Rios, 2011). Many are often exposed to challenging environmental conditions within their neighborhoods, which threaten their safety and livelihoods and thereby reduce their future prospects for adulthood (Carey, 2015, 2022, 2023; Samblanet, 2014; So et al., 2018; Stewart & Simons, 2007). These youth are also more likely to experience pernicious poverty and resource droughts (Yates, 2014), heightened accounts of violence (So et al., 2018), and housing insecurity (Marçal & Maguire-Jack, 2021, 2022). Factors such as systemic biases and racial policing within their environments position them to be more prone to hypercriminalization, imprisonment, and

juvenile or adult justice system involvement (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016; Xie et al., 2013). Engagement with the justice system has long-term implications for their workforce entry and enactment of adulthood roles, further disconnecting them from important social institutions.

Overall, Black youths' exposure to institutional racism too often excludes them from formal institutions, support networks, and opportunities that would otherwise aid their development (Hope et al., 2015). Because the transition from adolescence into adulthood represents a critical developmental period in which young people must increasingly secure institutional access, economic positioning, and social stability, such exclusions have particularly profound consequences for how Black youth navigate this life-course transition. Limited access to economic, educational, and environmental resources negatively impacts their developmental outcomes and overall well-being (Gaylord-Harden et al., 2018). These constraints shape not only immediate developmental conditions but also young people's ability to successfully assume adult roles, establish independence, and navigate the institutional systems that structure pathways to adulthood. This further complicates these young people's ability to healthily transition into adulthood (Pickney et al., 2011).

While the institutional and societal deficiencies impacting these young people's adulthood progression are typically addressed through individual or policy-level interventions, these approaches tend to either reinforce deficit-based narratives about Black youth or fail to adequately account for the complexities of their development. Consequently, these strategies make minimal progress in addressing the effects of systemic inequalities on Black youths' development. Therefore, identifying developmental contexts that can meaningfully support young people during this transition becomes critical. Community-based youth-serving organizations (CBYSOs) are frequently identified as a potential resource for mitigating these

effects (Baldridge, 2014; Baldridge et al., 2017; Ginwright, 2007). Youth development literature acknowledges their ability to protect Black youth from systemic and oppressive forces that potentially thwart their adolescent development. However, there is limited understanding of their role in supporting these young people as they transition to adulthood. This multiple-case qualitative study explored how Black youth perceive their journey toward adulthood and how CBYSOs, specifically Youth Enrichment Services (YES), supported their developmental progression.

Study Preface: My YES Story

As I seek to understand how Black youth conceptualize their developmental transitions and narrate YES' role in supporting their adulthood journeys, I must first reflect on my own adulthood journey, which provides insight into how I arrived at and show up in this work. My father is YES' founder and executive director; thus, my childhood to adulthood journey is inextricably linked to the organization. Before my formal participation, my dad, an academic by trade, emulated YES' summer enrichment curriculum at home. At the age of eight, he had my sisters and me write daily journal entries, develop newspaper article reports, conduct a "research" project, and present our results before an informal panel of "stakeholders" (family members). When I became old enough to officially join YES, I urgently needed its support to overcome challenges from earlier educational environments. YES provided me with a mentor who worked with me extensively to strengthen my comprehension and writing skills. My parents and a close friend from YES also played critical roles in teaching me how to thrive as a Black girl in a predominantly White suburban high school.

I later attended college and, during the summers, interned at YES. I needed to give back and help other students regain their footing in education, as my dad and YES mentors had helped

me. I became a summer instructor who helped facilitate students' learning experiences. During these experiences, I realized how the school system had failed many of these students, who struggled to read, write, and complete their summer research projects as high schoolers, reminding me of myself in many ways. I designed a writing and tech laboratory to advance their literacy skills, yet I grew disheartened by how difficult it was to make substantial progress. After the challenges I endured the previous summer, I promised my dad I would not return to YES. I spent my junior year of college exploring other plans, but every path led me back to YES, even during the summers of my Teach for America tenure.

My commitment to helping struggling students grew over time as I stood before my own classroom and felt an innate responsibility to advocate for them. My educational trajectory, along with those of my students and peers, ignited a fire in me and cultivated my life purpose, calling me to graduate school. As I sat in classrooms at Columbia University researching the most pressing educational problems, I was reminded that while I had the resources to overcome my academic struggles, the same was not true for my peers or students. I felt a sense of guilt and a strong desire to make a difference.

After completing my master's degree in educational policy, I declined employment opportunities and returned to YES to continue building its program infrastructure and to leverage what I had learned from my graduate training. One planned summer of employment turned into four years of growing YES' programming, research profile, and organizational capacity in my role as program director. During this time, I connected with the young people who would become the focus of this study. They impressed me with their unique currencies, talents, and abilities as they partnered with the Health Department to investigate lead exposure and tobacco points of sale marketing in low-income communities, facilitated community-based research

projects to improve their neighborhoods, generated new business ideas through a youth incubator, supported minority business owners with technical capacity, developed a writing curriculum for their peers, among other initiatives. I worked closely with them and have remained actively involved in their post-secondary journeys even after transitioning from my role at YES to pursue my doctoral degree. Together, we have built a special, intimate, family-like community. I have attended celebrations, supported them in tragic moments, and cheered for them when obtaining marked milestones like childbirth, graduation, and new employment. I am a consistent source of support and encouragement in their lives, just as they are for me.

Although I have mentored these young people personally and professionally for more than a decade, I do not presume to fully understand their experiences navigating the contextual and systemic factors shaping their adulthood transitions. For this reason, I center their voices in this work, as they bring vital knowledge and expertise. Their brilliance, acuity, and intellectual prowess are a key to help us develop creative solutions to the challenges Black youth face. This dissertation is grounded in that conviction. By elevating youth perspectives and wisdom in my scholarly work, I am paying it forward and supporting the next wave of scholars, just as my dad and mentors did for me. YES has shaped every aspect of my personal and professional journey.

I have worked with the organization in many capacities, as a student, mentor, intern, researcher, program director, and now as an executive staff member and deputy director. Sharing my relationship with YES provides essential context for the motivations behind this study. I want YES to be for students what it has been for me—a guiding light, a compass, a facilitator of opportunity, a reminder of potential, a place of refuge, and an embodiment of possibility. As such, I advocate vigorously for these young people and stretch YES' capacity to create pathways and opportunities to aid their adulthood journeys just as it supported mine. My YES story is not

just mine alone, but also part of a larger collective story of Black youth in YES navigating their pathways into adulthood - the very journeys this study seeks to illuminate and understand.

Statement of the Problem

Within developmental literature, scholars have documented the transition from adolescence to adulthood. While an established literature base theorizes about this critical developmental transition, Black youths' transitions into adulthood are understudied and undertheorized (Rod et al., 2025). As such, limited information exists to explain how Black youth navigate one developmental period to the next. To further complicate matters, developmental models fail to consider Black youths' experiences, which obscures the understanding of their development. These developmental frameworks are largely void of context and ignore the racialized social systems in which Black youths' developmental transitions are situated (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). These racialized contexts substantially shape how Black youth experience development and their transitions to adulthood (Ray, 2022). Ignoring these systemic factors impacts the types of developmental supports and interventions that can be conceptualized and leads to misrepresented portraits of Black adulthood.

Scholars often scrutinize Black youths' developmental outcomes; however, they frequently do so with incomplete information and a narrow focus on individual actions rather than on the institutional and structural systems that produce those outcomes. This emphasis on individual-level explanations limits the field's ability to account for how opportunity structures, institutional access, and social conditions shape developmental pathways over time. Consequently, Black youth are often framed through a deficit lens and held responsible for systemic challenges that extend beyond individual control (Carey, 2016; Collins, 1990, 2022; Ray, 2022). Such deficit-oriented interpretations are reinforced when developmental models

assume universal pathways into adulthood without adequately accounting for historically patterned inequalities that influence how transitions unfold across populations.

Furthermore, the developmental literature has largely understood transitions to adulthood through quantitative approaches, without uncovering the unique developmental processes that may be revealed through qualitative and in-depth investigations. This is especially true for Black youth, as few qualitative studies examine their transitions to adulthood (Hartman & Swartz, 2007). As a result, their voices remain largely absent from the developmental literature, and other perspectives are acknowledged as more dominant and central to the field. Black youth are therefore limited in their ability to articulate their own developmental experiences within scholarly understandings of adulthood transitions.

In addition, the transition to adulthood represents a particularly consequential developmental period in which young people must increasingly navigate educational institutions, labor markets, and social systems with greater autonomy and responsibility. Yet little research examines how Black youth experience and interpret these institutional environments during this critical transitional window, or how community-based developmental contexts may shape their access to opportunities and supports. The adulthood context itself is also shifting rapidly, and these social, economic, and institutional changes have outpaced the production of research necessary to adequately explain the contemporary developmental landscape for Black youth (Mouchrek & Benson, 2023; Rod et al., 2025).

Significance of Research

Investigating Black youths' developmental experiences and transitions into adulthood and how community-based youth-serving organizations support them is both timely and relevant. Although developmental and youth-serving organization scholarship has extensively examined

adolescent outcomes and program effectiveness, far less attention has been given to how Black youth themselves experience and interpret the transition to adulthood or how community-based organizations function within that developmental process. Being Black in America is currently under attack and is being weaponized, causing safety concerns for individuals navigating and making sense of the world. Traditional support mechanisms for individuals transitioning to adulthood have been eroded in recent years (Bleich et al., 2025). This is even more critical, as many of the same social safety nets, facilitated through governmental assistance programs, university interventions, and national policy initiatives, no longer exist as they have historically for vulnerable individuals (Bleich et al., 2025; Schmidt et al., 2021). Given that not everyone has the resource affordances or family structure to healthily transition into adulthood, safety-net programming has been extremely important (Adams et al., 2021). Without these built-in scaffolds, many individuals may be exposed to harsher living conditions, developmental realities, and institutional neglect.

Since fewer resources are being invested in these programs, community-based organizations become increasingly important, as they are positioned to address the current support needs missing in society (Danish et al., 2025). Community-based organizations are now considered critical infrastructure to support individuals where broader societal limitations exist. As institutional pathways that once structured young people's transitions into adulthood become less stable or less accessible, community-based organizations may increasingly function as decentralized developmental supports that help individuals navigate educational, economic, and social systems. Understanding how young people engage in these organizations and how they operate within this shifting support landscape is, therefore, critical not only for immediate intervention design but also for documenting broader structural changes in how adulthood

transitions are supported in contemporary society. Those navigating difficulties are even more in need of resources and support to manage the expectations and challenges of adulthood.

This study sought to better understand the experience of adulthood for Black youth through qualitative methods. Existing scholarship on youth transitions often relies on large-scale quantitative indicators or institutional outcome measures, leaving limited insight into the lived developmental processes, interpretations, and relational dynamics shaping young people's movement into adulthood. Developing interventions to support them and uncovering the role of community-based youth-serving organizations in their developmental transitions will enable targeted resource dissemination, more strategic and effective intervention efforts, and clearer identification of where capacity-building investments are needed. In addition, this research contributes to the scholarly literature by moving beyond outcome-based evaluations of youth programs to examine how young people themselves interpret, access, and mobilize organizational supports during the transition to adulthood (Wong, 2011; Swartz & Suyemoto, 2012). Such insight is critical for understanding not only whether supports exist but also how developmental resources are experienced, navigated, and translated into long-term opportunity pathways.

Institutions are no longer able to carry the full weight of supporting individuals through their transitions from adolescence to adulthood; this responsibility may increasingly shift to individuals and community-based organizations that fill these gaps. Funding mechanisms have also made it more challenging to provide individuals with the same level of developmental protection, and shifts in resource allocation are particularly harmful for individuals with limited access (Tomasko et al., 2025). Understanding what helps Black youth healthily transition into adulthood is important for the long-term viability of communities and the broader economy, as

successful transitions contribute to workforce participation, economic stability, and expanded opportunities for social mobility (Staff, 2025). By clarifying the developmental mechanisms and support structures that facilitate successful transitions, this study provides evidence that can inform policymakers, practitioners, and community organizations seeking to design more responsive and equitable developmental supports for young people.

Having a first-person account of Black youths' experiences prioritizes their perspectives within developmental scholarship. Positioning youth narratives as primary sources of developmental knowledge further challenges dominant research approaches that interpret Black youths' outcomes without centering their experiential understandings of navigating institutions, accessing opportunities, and progressing toward adulthood. Centering youths' lived experiences strengthens the field's ability to develop contextually grounded theories of adulthood transitions that reflect the realities of navigating racialized social systems and diverse developmental environments rather than relying on generalized or decontextualized models.

Brief Overview of Conceptual Framework

Understanding Black youths' developmental transitions to adulthood requires explicit attention to the racialized social conditions, institutional structures, and community contexts shaping their lived experiences. Developmental scholarship has often relied on frameworks that center individual behavior while minimizing the broader social, political, and historical forces that structure opportunity and constrain developmental trajectories. As a result, dominant developmental models frequently obscure the contextual realities shaping Black youths' pathways to adulthood and fail to adequately capture how racialized systems influence their access to resources, institutional supports, and recognition (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Spencer, 2006). To address these limitations, this study was guided by an integrated conceptual

framework that draws on critical race theory (CRT), the counterspaces framework, and life course theory.

This composite framework reflects the premise that Black youths' transitions to adulthood cannot be fully understood through a single theoretical lens. Instead, their developmental journeys unfold at the intersection of systemic racial structures, community-based institutional supports, and individual meaning-making processes over time. Critical race theory provided a macro-level analytic lens for examining how structural racism shapes the social, political, and economic conditions under which Black youth develop and transition into adulthood (Bell, 1980, 1982, 1995; Crenshaw, 2017; Harris, 1993; Lawrence, 1995; Matsuda, 1987, 2018). Case and Hunter's (2012) counterspaces framework offered a meso-level perspective on how community-based youth-serving organizations, specifically YES, can function as culturally responsive, identity-affirming, and resource-mobilizing environments that counter systemic inequities. Elder's (1996) life course theory provided a micro-level lens for analyzing how youth interpret their own trajectories, transitions, and turning points as they navigate adulthood pathways shaped by both constraints and opportunities.

Together, these frameworks allowed the study to move beyond individualistic explanations of development and instead examine how systemic forces, community environments, and subjective experiences operate simultaneously. CRT foregrounds the permanence of racialized inequality (Bell, 1992; Lawrence, 1995) and whiteness as property (Harris, 1993), highlighting how institutional arrangements influence developmental capacity and opportunity access. The counterspaces framework explains how community-rooted organizations may actively intervene in these inequitable conditions by fostering identity affirmation, relational support, resistance practices, and access to both psychosocial and material

resources (Case & Hunter, 2012). Building on this framework, the study also incorporated the expanded tenet of opportunity cultivation and resource utilization, informed by Visser's (2018) work, which specifically attends to how community-based organizations mobilize opportunities and how youth strategically engage these resources to support their developmental progression. Life course theory complements these perspectives by emphasizing the temporal, relational, and experiential dimensions of development, enabling an analysis of how youth understand the timing, sequencing, and meaning of their adulthood transitions within broader sociohistorical contexts (Elder, 1996).

By integrating these three perspectives, the study captured the layered and interconnected processes shaping Black youths' transitions to adulthood. This framework guided the study's research design, interview protocols, and analytic approach by directing attention to (a) how systemic inequities steeped in racism shape developmental conditions, (b) how community-based organizations function as protective and opportunity-generating environments, and (c) how youth narrate and make sense of their own developmental journeys over time. In doing so, the conceptual framework provides the theoretical foundation for examining the complexity, nuance, and lived realities of Black youths' adulthood transitions and for understanding how organizations like YES operate as critical developmental infrastructure within those processes.

Dissertation Aims and Research Questions

This study sought to better understand Black youths' developmental experiences and how community-based youth-serving organizations serve as vital developmental infrastructure during their transition to adulthood. Specifically, it explored how Black youth in YES conceptualize and interpret their journey into adulthood transitions. To prioritize the voices of Black youth, they were invited to contribute to the knowledge-building on their developmental experiences. In

doing so, the participants were asked to share their stories of adulthood and their intimate sense-making processes surrounding their transitions into adulthood. As part of this process, participants also investigated how racialized experiences showed up in their transitions and informed their approach to adulthood.

Secondarily, this project aimed to uncover YES' roles inside of these young people's developmental narratives. More pointedly, young people were asked to share more about their experiences in YES and how they would describe YES' role in their developmental transitions. Through this focus, the study sought to illuminate not only how young people interpret their movement into adulthood but also how community-based organizational contexts are experienced, accessed, and integrated into their broader developmental pathways. Participants reflected on their experiences across two interviews, one of which was supported by artifact-elicitation materials to aid the youth in their retrospective exercise. These narrative reflections provided an opportunity to capture in-depth accounts of youths' lived developmental experiences and to surface the factors that shape how transitions to adulthood are understood.

The ultimate goal of this study was to center the experiences and voices of young people and to allow them to shed light on how they are navigating a unique time in their lives. By centering youths' lived perspectives, this study contributes to a more contextual understanding of how racialized environments and community-based supports shape young people's pathways into adulthood. The inclusion of their voices added the necessary nuance, complexity, and depth missing from the field. In line with these aims, the following research questions guided the study:

RQ1: How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions to adulthood?

RQ2: How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in shaping their developmental transitions?

Organization of Dissertation

This dissertation is organized into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces the study, providing background information, insight into the problem statement, the conceptual framework guiding the study, the study's significance, and the study's aims and research questions. The second chapter reviews the extant literature on adulthood and traditional developmental models conceptualizing transitions to adulthood. This chapter examines the limitations of these models and their impact on Black youths' transitions to adulthood. It also examines how the literature describes Black youths' transitions and explores the contexts shaping this transition, highlighting both the affordances and limitations of each context. The chapter then narrows its focus to community-based youth-serving organizations as potential contexts for supporting Black youths' transitions to adulthood. It concludes with a deeper examination of the study's conceptual framework.

Chapter 3 provides information on the study design, the research context, and participant information. The chapter concludes by outlining the analytic and data management strategies leveraged in the study. Chapter 4 presents the study findings related to Research Question 1, while Chapter 5 presents the findings related to Research Question 2. The dissertation concludes with Chapters 6 and 7, which discuss the findings, implications, and future directions. Together, these chapters provide a comprehensive examination of Black youths' developmental transitions and the role of CBYSOs in shaping their pathways into adulthood.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Adulthood transitions are critical to one's lifespan development because they lay the foundation for individuals' futures (Wood et al., 2017). Moving from adolescence to adulthood consists of shifts in roles, contexts, and expectations that demand the successful navigation of developmental tasks and psychological maturation. These processes are unevenly structured yet significant for one's long-term stability, identity development, and independence (Adams et al., 2021; Barr et al., 2021; Duncan et al., 1994; Gunn, 2002). The literature underscores the importance of these transitions and highlights several developmental models that allude to their centrality to one's life course (Berzin, 2008; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Rod et al., 2025; Wood et al., 2018).

Despite their developmental significance, adulthood transitions are often underrepresented in the scientific literature (Rod et al., 2025) or theorized with insufficient attention to the cultural, historical, and structural conditions that shape how this period is experienced across social groups. This omission is particularly consequential for Black youth whose developmental transitions unfold within racialized contexts yet are frequently explained using White-dominant psychological frameworks (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). As a result, current conceptualizations of adulthood transitions are often unfitting for the developmental experiences of Black youth, misaligning with their lived realities and overlooking the racialized conditions that influence their advancement into adulthood (Pickney et al., 2011). When such misalignment persists, Black youths' developmental pathways are interpreted through deficit

lenses, leading to theoretical distortions, ineffective developmental interventions, and institutional responses that fail to account for how young people navigate adulthood under structural constraints and racialized conditions (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Roy & Jones, 2014).

In response to these limitations, this chapter advances a critical rethinking of Black youths' transitions to adulthood that foregrounds racialized context, structural conditions, and developmental complexity. It first examines how adulthood has been defined and operationalized within dominant scholarship, and then reviews prevailing conceptualizations of the transition to adulthood. Building from this foundation, the chapter narrows in on the developmental contexts that shape Black youths' transitions, with particular attention to community-based settings. The chapter further considers how community-based youth-serving organizations can provide vital developmental infrastructure to support Black youth through these transitions. The latter part of the chapter identifies gaps in the literature that necessitate the present study and introduces the conceptual framework guiding this dissertation.

Overview of Adulthood

Adulthood is a foundational concept in developmental and life-course research, yet it is defined in multiple and often competing ways across scholarly traditions (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Settersen et al., 2015). Researchers have approached adulthood as a developmental stage, a social status, and a set of institutional or behavioral markers that signal entry into adult roles (Eliason et al., 2015; Furstenberg, 2013). These varied definitions reflect broader social, historical, and cultural understandings of what it means to be an adult and how adulthood is recognized within different contexts (Klimczuk, 2016; Mary, 2014). It further highlights the tension and complexity surrounding adulthood. Providing an overview of how adulthood has

been conceptualized in the literature offers an important foundation for examining how transitions into adulthood are subsequently modeled and evaluated. The sections that follow review dominant definitions, traditional indicators, and the historical conditions that have shaped contemporary understandings of adulthood.

What Is Adulthood?

Adulthood is a complex concept that holds varying meanings and characterizations across the literature. Scholars define adulthood in multiple, and sometimes conflicting or opposing ways, reflecting disciplinary differences in how developmental progression is understood. Some literature frames adulthood as a socially constructed developmental status whose meaning varies across historical periods, cultural contexts, and institutional systems rather than a fixed biological endpoint (Klimczuk, 2016). Developmental scholars conceptualize it as an age-graded life-course stage structured by normative developmental expectations (Eliason et al., 2025; Featherman & Learner, 1985; Hogan & Astone, 1986), whereas others define it as the attainment of peak psychological, cognitive, or social maturity (Miller, 2016). Biological approaches emphasize physical maturation and reproductive capacity, whereas legal definitions locate adulthood at the point at which individuals are formally granted responsibility for their own affairs and eligibility for age-dependent rights and obligations (Settersten et al., 2015).

Psychology scholarship further characterizes adulthood as a period marked by greater emotional regulation, more stable decision-making, and greater clarity in values and identity formation (Settersen et al., 2015). The varying definitions demonstrate the depth and complexity of this phenomenon and suggest that adulthood is less a singular developmental state than a constellation of socially and institutionally mediated criteria. The diversity of definitions underscores that adulthood is not universally experienced but is instead shaped by broader social

priorities, institutional structures, and cultural expectations. Despite this revelation, scholars representing various domains have yet to converge on a central way to discuss or understand this important developmental experience. This lack of disciplinary convergence demonstrates the need for further scholarly clarity and investigation on adulthood.

Traditional Operationalizations of Adulthood

The definitional divisiveness described results in a lack of clarity about how adulthood is operationalized. Although adulthood is conceptually defined in varied ways, scholars frequently operationalize it through the attainment of social, economic, and relational milestones that function as markers of developmental progress (Furstenberg, 2013; Mary, 2014). In many Western contexts, adulthood is commonly associated with completing formal education and obtaining stable employment, which often contribute to achieving financial independence and establishing residential autonomy (Furstenberg, 2013; Modell et al., 1967; Settersen et al., 2015). Hallmark studies further identify marriage, childrearing, and broader social contribution as central indicators of adulthood (Goode, 1963; Kalil, 2015; McLanahan, 2004). These indicators collectively signal responsibility, stability, and participation in institutional life (Settersten et al., 2015).

Embedded within these markers, however, were normative assumptions about appropriate timing, sequencing, and family structure. Scholars suggest that the traditional family structure shapes expectations for adulthood (Cherlin, 2012; Therborn, 2004). McLanahan and Jacobsen (2015) argued that traditional family structures uphold gendered expectations surrounding caregiving, breadwinning, and labor force participation. Women were expected to assume the adult responsibilities of childbearing and homekeeping, while men were expected to serve as financial providers and labor force participants (McLanahan, 2004; McLanahan &

Jacobsen, 2015; James Parker, 2019). Such assumptions often privilege individuals who possess the material resources, institutional knowledge, and social capital necessary to achieve these milestones without constraints or barriers, while disadvantaging others (Swartz, 2008). Consequently, the use of standardized adulthood markers establishes evaluative benchmarks that may misrepresent variation in developmental pathways and reinforce narrow criteria for assessing individuals' transitions.

Historical Definitions of Adulthood

Adulthood has been linked to historical contexts that inform how it is discussed, understood, and studied. Contemporary understandings of adulthood are deeply rooted in historical, social, and economic transformations that shape how it is situated (Mouchrek & Benson, 2023). Adulthood is the byproduct of industrialization and its influence on labor markets, family systems, and educational priorities (Mary, 2014; Wood et al., 2018). These societal impacts are linked to adulthood attainment and have informed early expectations of workforce participation, occupational specialization, and sustained economic productivity (Goode, 1963; Mouchrek & Benson, 2023). Within this context, adulthood became closely associated with human capital development, stable employment, and participation in institutionalized family structures (Mary, 2014).

Gender roles were simultaneously formulated and structured through conventional labor arrangements and technological advancements (Donnelly et al., 2016). These implications produced differentiated expectations for men and women, stabilizing both labor markets and household systems (Furstenberg, 2013; Jarnkvist, 2018; Webster, 2014). In this transition, marriage became central to social organization and was positioned as a catalyst for family formation and expansion (Baker, 2001; Bernardes, 1997; Bittman & Pixley, 1997; Jarnkvist,

2018; Mary, 2014; Rapoport & Rapoport, 1982; Weeks, 1986). This reinforced the Western nuclear family as the normative pathway to adulthood and positioned this institution as the core structure through which adulthood was recognized (Bernardes, 1997; Bittman & Pixley, 1997; Furstenberg, 2013; Saggers & Sims, 2005). The nuclear family remained a powerful normative ideal in much of the Western world, and those who did not conform to this pattern were considered deviant or excluded from recognition as legitimate families (Bittman & Pixley, 1997; Stacey, 1996). These institutional arrangements effectively defined what adulthood should look like and shaped who could realistically achieve recognized adulthood status.

Scholars have highlighted the inequitable context in which access to education, employment, and sanctioned family formation is unevenly distributed across class, gender, and racial lines (Amato et al., 2015). Evidence suggests that individuals from less-privileged homes experience lower success in completing a college degree, avoiding non-marital pregnancy, holding a full-time job, and earning a sustainable income (Amato et al., 2015; Billari et al., 2019; Johnson & Reynolds, 2013). These data points are echoed in the literature and further substantiated by scholars who highlight the immense disparities in access to adulthood (Shores et al., 2020). This pattern was not a recent development; rather, the historical construction of adulthood produced enduring systems of stratification and exclusion that persisted within adulthood structures. Billari et al. (2019) demonstrated how social stratification affects choice and access in adulthood. As a result, adult standards function not only as developmental indicators but also as mechanisms for reproducing and maintaining social inequality.

Evolution of Adulthood in Contemporary Contexts

While adulthood has historically been defined through relatively stable institutional pathways, contemporary social transformations have significantly altered how adulthood is

experienced and achieved. Adulthood has evolved since the concept's inception; although markers once served as clear indicators of its onset, it has become increasingly difficult to determine where adolescence ends and adulthood begins due to the absence of consistent signposts and symbols (Arnett, 2004; Hendry & Kloep, 2007). Scholars have attributed these blurred boundaries to shifts in technology, societal expectations, and resource constraints, among other factors that contribute to the evolving, unclear nature of adulthood (Hendry & Kloep, 2007). More specifically, economic restructuring and labor market shifts have been critical variables influencing how adulthood has evolved over time (Danzinger & Ratner, 2010). Billari and colleagues (2019) found that the economic infrastructure of the labor market has changed, affecting participation rates.

In addition, the demand for a skilled, trained workforce has led to higher educational requirements and greater skill development. Danzinger and Ratner (2010) illustrated that a college degree and advanced credentials are necessary to enter the labor market, as employment criteria have become more specialized and competitive. Educational training and skill development shifted from optional advantages to structural requirements within the new economy (Billari, 2018). These changes in educational status and expectations occurred alongside shifts in historical family norms. The traditional nuclear family has been dismantled, and contemporary families now comprise a diverse range of different family and so-called non-family types (Saggers & Sims, 2005). Amato et al. (2015) highlighted this transition, showing that families are less traditional in their composition and that many former family structures are obsolete, as new family structures have emerged. Technology advancements have also served as a catalyst for shifts in adulthood. The integration of new technology ignited growth and fundamentally altered how people live and experience adulthood (Hartman & Swartz, 2006;

Mary, 2014). Such advancements have affected the broader sociopolitical context, reshaping adulthood transitions over recent decades.

Postwar socioeconomic expansion once made it feasible for many individuals to meet standardized adulthood criteria within relatively predictable timelines (Mary, 2014; Liefbroer & Toulemon, 2010). However, contemporary adulthood transitions are increasingly prolonged, fragmented, and uncertain (Billari, 2018; Halfmon et al., 2018; Horowitz & Bromnick, 2007). Milestones such as stable employment, marriage, and independent living are frequently delayed or pursued in non-linear sequences. Halfmon et al. (2018) suggested that these patterns reflect broader shifts in economic opportunity and institutional accessibility. Liefbroer and Toulemon (2010) examined the impact of these shifts and alluded to external factors that complicate the pathway to adulthood and independence. They noted that stagnation in wages for low-skilled workers, a lack of work opportunities, rising education costs, and challenges with independent living were among the challenges.

In response to these extended transitions and evolving patterns of milestone attainment, scholars have theorized new ways of thinking about adulthood, while others have held on to traditional approaches. Arnett (1997, 1998, 2000, 2001) argued that traditional markers of adulthood, such as leaving home, marriage, and parenthood, no longer hold the significance for adulthood that they once did. He suggested that the reduced importance of the occurrence and timing of events has changed dramatically in U.S. society (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2000) conceptualized the concept of "emerging adulthood," which focuses on the period between adolescence and adulthood. This theory emerged in response to the shifting historical context of social structures and economic development, in which newly minted adults were navigating (Arnett, 2004; Bynner, 2005; Cote, 2006). It postulates that young people do not move

seamlessly from adolescence to adulthood, but rather engage in prolonged career and identity exploration, personal discovery, and the reimagining of the self (Arnett, 2000). Arnett (2000, 2004, 2008) characterized this developmental period as one of identity exploration, experimentation, and delayed commitment to enduring adult roles. This extended developmental stage - emerging adulthood - is relevant to individuals, particularly those aged 18 to 25, in Western and industrial societies. Having not yet entered the enduring responsibilities that are normative in adulthood, emerging adults often experience "relative independence from social roles and formative expectations" (Arnett, 2000, p. 469) and delaying of adulthood that could offer clarity or confusion. Emerging adulthood theory builds on the strengths and limitations of prior developmental frameworks and has advanced scholarly conversations about how the transition to adulthood is understood and studied.

Since the development of this theory, scholars have critically examined its scope and applicability while extending the discourse in meaningful ways. In contrast to Arnett's (2000) argument that the timing and significance of traditional adulthood markers have shifted, Liefbroer and Toulemon (2010) suggested that although young people may take more time to obtain traditional adulthood markers, these indicators still constitute important events in their life course that significantly influence their future life chances and outcomes. While this framework captures important generational shifts, research also indicates that prolonged transitions are not experienced uniformly or universally (Arnett, 2004; Billari, 2018). Syed and Mitchell (2013) challenged this theory, arguing that its foundation was largely derived from the experiences of White, college-attending populations and does not adequately represent individuals who do not attend college, racial and ethnic minority groups, or those from lower-resourced backgrounds. Their findings further suggest that emerging adulthood is most salient among relatively

privileged, college-educated populations with the resources to delay financial independence (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). For individuals facing economic instability or limited access to institutional supports, emerging adulthood is argued to be unfitting or uncharacteristic of their experience, further suggesting that extended transitions, which may increase vulnerability rather than opportunity (Arnett, 2000, 2004). These critiques underscore the need for continued theoretical refinement, especially given that adulthood expectations remain deeply shaped by access to structural resources, institutional supports, and broader social conditions and structures.

Conceptualizations of the Transition to Adulthood

Scholars across developmental psychology, sociology, and life-course research have proposed a range of theoretical models to explain how individuals transition from adolescence into adulthood (Arnett, 2000; Elder, 1998; Erikson, 1968; Shanahan, 2000; Settersten, 2007). Embedded within these models are assumptions about timing, structure, and developmental mechanisms and expectations for progress. Collectively, these developmental frameworks outline how individuals are presumed to navigate institutional demands, achieve developmental milestones, and assume adult roles (Modell et al., 1976; Shanahan et al., 2005). At the same time, these models privilege particular social experiences and trajectories that often reflect historically dominant institutional arrangements and resource conditions. Dominant conceptual models guiding scholarship on the transition to adulthood will be reviewed below before examining the assumptions and limitations embedded within these frameworks.

Dominant Models of the Transition to Adulthood

Scholars have developed a range of theoretical models to explain how individuals transition from adolescence into adulthood and how developmental progress during this period is typically understood and evaluated (Arnett, 2000; Coleman, 1961; Hollingshead, 1961; Hogan &

Astone, 1986; Mouchrek & Benson, 2023; Presidential Panel on Youth, 1974). These models have evolved over time but continue to purport similar processes, expectations, and markers that structure movement into adult roles. They emphasize patterns in the timing, sequencing, and organization of major life transitions. Within these frameworks, the transition to adulthood has frequently been conceptualized as a patterned developmental process shaped by social norms, institutional pathways, and expectations regarding independence and responsibility.

An examination of these dominant models reveals several recurring assumptions that structure how adulthood transitions have been theorized, particularly their temporal orientation, their emphasis on ordered and sequential progression, and their treatment of complexity within developmental pathways. The following sections critically examine each core assumption and its role in shaping scholarly understandings of adult transitions.

Temporal Orientation in Adulthood Transitions

Temporal orientation has been heavily emphasized during adult transitions. In fact, dominant developmental models of the transition to adulthood have historically relied on a strong temporal orientation that organizes developmental progress according to expectations about the timing of adulthood milestones (Graber & Brooks-Gunn; Wood et al., 2018). These models also prioritize the order in which milestones should unfold and the assumed complexity of the transition process (Woodman, 2011). Temporal orientation reflects how the past, present, and future are organized, valued, and discussed (Zax et al., 2025). These temporal assumptions also structure how adulthood attainment is evaluated and how developmental success or delay is interpreted within both scholarly and institutional frameworks.

Timing of the Transition to Adulthood. Early conceptualizations of adulthood transitions emphasized the importance of achieving developmental milestones within socially prescribed timeframes (Havighurst, 1953; Neugarten, 1968). Scholars framed adulthood attainment as governed by normative developmental schedules that defined the appropriate ages at which individuals should complete education, enter the workforce, establish independent households, and form families (Settersen et al., 2015). Meeting these milestones "on time" was interpreted as evidence of successful developmental progression, while delayed attainment was often viewed as indicative of developmental risk or instability (Amato et al., 2015; Eliason et al., 2015). Liefbroer and Toulemon (2010) demonstrated that young people identify timing as a critical part of how they define their transitions to adulthood. Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996) also suggested that the criticality of timing in adulthood relates to behavioral outcomes that influence biological, psychological, and social processes. Failure to meet timed milestones curtails the potential for on-time development, leading to adverse effects on individuals (Brooks-Gunn & Peterson, 1983; Neugarten, 1979; Petersen & Taylor, 1980).

These expectations reflect broader societal priorities that value rapid entry into productive adult roles and assume that young people possess the structural conditions necessary to move efficiently through institutional pathways. MacMillan (2007) examined how structural conditions may become barriers to individuals' time to marker completion and to their agency in their transitions to adulthood. He found that although time is a central feature of the transition to adulthood, it is less controllable when external factors are considered. Timing, therefore, functions not only as a descriptive feature of development but also as a regulatory mechanism shaping how adulthood legitimacy is socially recognized. Although timing has remained a central feature in adulthood models, it is based on obsolete logic and does not reflect the speed

and rhythm of the current adulthood context. Current patterns in the transition to adulthood demonstrate the postponement of events, their prolonged nature, and the idea that more time is being devoted between the start of one adulthood marker and the beginning of another (Billari & Liefbroer, 2010; Côté, 2002). While scholars have begun to interrogate these shifts, there remains limited consensus regarding how changing temporal patterns differentially affected diverse social groups (Côté & Bynner, 2008).

Order and Sequence of the Transition to Adulthood. In addition to timing expectations, dominant developmental frameworks have historically assumed that adulthood transitions would occur through a structured, sequential progression of milestones (Furstenberg, 2013; Hogan & Astone, 1986). Order and sequence were prioritized within these models because they served as indicators of an individual's successful developmental trajectory (Wood et al., 2018). Educational completion was typically expected to precede workforce entry, residential independence, and family formation. Scholars considered these indicators as the foundation of one's adulthood stability and longevity (Billari, 2001; Sharon, 2016). Sharon (2016) found that individuals who prioritized meeting traditional markers of adulthood sequentially articulated clearer future goals and were less dependent on their parents for support of their well-being needs. In prioritizing traditional adulthood markers, marriage was often positioned as a prerequisite for childrearing and a critical part of the adulthood experience, given the pressure on family formation (Bianchi, 2000; Donnelly et al., 2016). Marriage was often the catalyst for individuals' independent living and the foundation for family formation. This sequencing logic established a standardized developmental pathway in which the achievement of certain milestones depended upon the prior completion of others (Amato et al., 2015; Eliason et al., 2015).

Sequential ordering created predictability in life-course trajectories and enabled institutions to organize social roles, labor participation, and family systems around shared expectations for developmental progression. This was especially relevant, as certain institutions designed their systems around this prescriptive pathway (Benson & Elder, 2011; Mary, 2014; Settersen et al., 2015). Although some scholarship increasingly embraced non-linear understandings of adulthood transitions, these shifts were not interpreted or experienced uniformly. Individuals whose transitions followed ordered pathways were typically viewed as progressing normally, whereas those whose trajectories deviated from expected sequences were frequently interpreted as experiencing disruption or unsuccessful transitions (Hogan & Astone, 1986; Roy & Jones, 2014; Schoon & Lyon-Amos, 2016). Those varying from linear pathways may be viewed as lacking preparedness, direction, or developmental competence (Roy & Jones, 2014). This further reinforces deficit interpretations despite broader recognition that adulthood transitions are no longer linear or orderly.

Disparities in how nonlinearity is interpreted have prompted critical questions about whose transitions are afforded flexibility and whose are framed as failure. This challenge underscores the need to reconsider how adulthood is conceptualized for youth whose pathways unfold within racialized and structurally constrained contexts, as pathway deviance is classed and racialized in problematic ways. Norman et al. (2023) argued that pathway deviance and non-sequential attainment of adulthood markers obscure whether individuals ascribe to the same milestones in deciding and defining their adulthood status, making it harder to clearly and definitively characterize adulthood. Similarly, scholars have rarely examined variability in the experience of adulthood transitions. Additional research is necessary to understand how and

under what conditions adulthood markers are achieved and how those patterns shape individual life trajectories.

Complexity of the Transition to Adulthood. While early models treated adulthood attainment as relatively straightforward and bounded, contemporary research increasingly documents that transitions into adulthood are substantially more complex, multi-dimensional, and variable than previously assumed (Furstenberg, 2013; Nelson & Luster, 2016; Schneider et al., 2016). Horowitz and Bromnick (2007) examined variability in young people's journeys to adulthood and found that these pathways were highly diverse, internally complex, and difficult to categorize, contributing to a more contested understanding of adulthood. This body of work supports the notion that young people commonly experience overlapping transitions across education, employment, housing, and relationships, often navigating multiple domains simultaneously rather than sequentially (Billari, 2018; Robette, 2010; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2016). As a result, adulthood trajectories reflect increasing diversity in both structure and pacing.

Scholars have also observed reversibility in adulthood pathways, including returning to the parental home, re-entering education after workforce participation, or cycling between employment states in response to economic or personal circumstances (Hendry & Kloep, 2007; Roy & Jones, 2014). These patterns are especially more common and deface the rigidity of year-old adulthood transition models that purport standardized expectations for milestone achievements. Robette (2010) demonstrated that individuals may engage, disengage, and re-engage in these markers circuitously and remain in a constant state of navigating the adulthood landscape, making the former approach to adulthood transitions more challenging (Robette, 2010). Similarly, Hendry and Kloep (2007) found that some young people who established independent living arrangements later returned to the parental home following relationship

changes, illness, or job loss. These findings suggest that adulthood transitions are not singular events but extended developmental processes shaped by changing institutional conditions and evolving opportunity structures.

Scholars have also suggested that what young people consider as adulthood has become more complex. While traditional markers were once the dominant indicators of one's transition into adulthood, young people now characterize their transitions to adulthood with less emphasis on external markers and more on the development of internal resources (Liefbroer & Toulemon, 2010). This shift has added complexity to the transition to adulthood and increased subjectivity in the process. Hartmann and Swartz (2007) conducted one of the few qualitative studies examining how young people interpreted their transitions into adulthood. They found that young people experience their transitions into adulthood in a dynamic, constantly unfolding way as they unpack social roles and personal qualities. The authors acknowledged that significant questions remain regarding these young people's transitions to adulthood. While they could have predicted that those with more advantages are likely to succeed, they expressed uncertainty about the outcomes for others in their study sample. This study's findings suggest that further investigation is needed to understand the increasing complexity of this transition, as many prevailing frameworks still hold onto assumptions rooted in earlier linear and orderly models. Expectations that adulthood progression should remain relatively structured and predictable may inadequately account for the variability in how adulthood is currently experienced, leaving gaps in the developmental understanding that the current study sought to examine.

Individualized Responsibility in Adulthood Transitions

As traditional linear pathways have become less stable, dominant developmental frameworks have increasingly emphasized individualized responsibility as the primary

mechanism guiding adulthood transitions. Scholarship suggests that contemporary transitions are characterized by greater attention to personal choice, agency, and self-directed development (Shanahan, 2000; Stanger-Ross et al., 2005). Within this framing, variability in adulthood pathways is interpreted less as a reflection of structural transformation and more as an outcome of individual decision-making processes. Schoon and Lyons-Amos (2010) examined the extent to which young people's transitions to adulthood were shaped by interactions between structure and individual agency. They found that both structural and individual agency variables were associated with variations in transition patterns and pointed to the need to further conceptualize the role of individualism in understanding the processes of young people's transitions into adulthood.

Studies further indicate that young adults increasingly endorse internal psychological characteristics (Hartman & Swartz, 2007; Settersen et al., 2015). These characteristics include independence, self-definition, and personal responsibility and are framed as defining markers of adulthood rather than externally defined institutional roles (Furlong et al., 2011; Settersten et al., 2015). Adulthood is thus positioned as a personalized achievement shaped by one's capacity to regulate behavior, manage uncertainty, and construct a coherent life trajectory, rather than by a collective mechanism or engagement.

Côté (2002) noted that as trajectories increasingly depend on individuals' personal preferences and choices, individuals are being required to organize their own pathways through life, which influences how the transition to adulthood is understood. While this individualization framework acknowledges diversity in adulthood experiences, it simultaneously shifts responsibility for navigating prolonged and uncertain transitions onto individuals themselves (Côté , 2002). Côté further argued that individualism in the transition to adulthood can be

liberating for those with resources or burdensome for those without resources. This perspective places limited developmental accountability on traditional institutions and broader structural systems (Liefbroer & Toulemon, 2010). Under this logic, disrupted pathways are frequently interpreted as consequences of personal capacity rather than as outcomes of structural inequality or institutional constraint. Consequently, the burden of navigating systemic limitations is often placed on individuals, particularly those without sufficient social, economic, or institutional support.

Developmental Domains and Outcomes

Dominant models of adult transitions organize developmental progress through a set of domains that serve as benchmarks for assessing adulthood attainment. These domains commonly include financial self-sufficiency, educational and occupational engagement, independent living, family formation, health and well-being, and social or civic maturity (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2005; Mary, 2014; Scales et al., 2015). While scholarship often presents these domains as neutral areas of developmental growth, they also serve as evaluative standards through which the legitimacy of adulthood is assessed and recognized.

Self-sufficiency and autonomy are frequently positioned as central processes in attaining adulthood indicators (Berzin, 2008; Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2005; Romero et al., 2020). Scholars have suggested that enhancing individuals' self-sufficiency, their ability to attain an acceptable level of functioning across specific life domains, may contribute to a more successful transition from adolescence to adulthood (Fassaert et al., 2014; Lamborn & Groh, 2009). Romero et al. (2020) argued that young people should master the processes linked to autonomy, as these processes enable them to make decisions in complex situations and support their successful transitions into adulthood. van den Toren et al. (2020) investigated the association between

young adults' self-sufficiency in daily life and contextual factors and indicators of health status; their results suggest that young people transitioning to adulthood struggled to achieve self-sufficiency in the life domains of finances, mental health, and physical health. Given these findings, van den Toren and colleagues (2020) recommended early promotion of self-sufficiency, which would likely support greater gains in the life domains that are important to the adulthood transition for young people.

Financial independence and the capacity for self-directed decision-making are widely described as core developmental expectations and are often characterized in the literature as among the most critical aspects of adulthood (Macmillan, 2006). However, scholars have noted that individuals' paths to financial independence vary and have become increasingly difficult to achieve in today's economy (Bea & Yi, 2018). Rising post-secondary costs and housing have been identified as key contributors to obtaining financial independence and security (Addo et al., 2016; Houle, 2014; Killewald, 2013). As a result, many young adults rely on their families for substantial financial support well into early adulthood, even as they continue to view financial independence as a defining adulthood marker (Fingerman et al., 2015; Lee & Mortimer, 2009; Sironi & Furstenberg, 2012). Bea and Yi (2018) found that individuals with lower levels of family support reported higher levels of financial insecurity.

Educational participation and labor market engagement are similarly framed as foundational gatekeeping domains, shaping access to income, housing stability, and long-term opportunity structures. Braum (2016) found that educational credentials are associated with employment opportunities, and individuals with bachelor's degrees or higher experienced smoother entry pathways into the labor force following school completion. Danish et al. (2025) similarly found that engaging in educational networks enhances access to job opportunities in

adulthood transitions. Independent residential status, family formation, and childrearing are often treated as further evidence of developmental maturity and social responsibility (Eliason et al., 2015). Scholars have suggested that the ability to live independently demonstrates financial independence, self-sufficiency, and the ability to navigate tasks in adulthood (Fassaert et al., 2014; Lamborn & Groh, 2009). These expectations reinforce normative expectations tied to institutional participation and economic productivity.

In addition to structural domains, psychological and social characteristics such as emotional regulation, self-reliance, civic participation, and responsible decision-making are increasingly incorporated into adulthood evaluations (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2005; Mary, 2014). These internal markers position adulthood not only as the attainment of external milestones but also as the demonstration of behavioral and psychological readiness to manage adult roles (Masten et al., 2004). There is an expectation that mature social development is achieved during early adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Mercadel, 2022). Research indicates that the development of characteristics such as responsibility, the ability to plan, self-regulation, and moral development is important for future well-being, yet most research has focused on adolescents and has been correlational and short-term (Mercadel, 2022).

Civic engagement has also been identified as an important adulthood activity; however, evidence suggests that these young adults' political and voting activity varies considerably (Bronte-Tinkew, 2005). Recent national indicators suggest that fewer than half of 18-24-year-olds in the United States are registered to vote (The Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2023). At the same time, compared to older adults, individuals transitioning to adulthood show more engagement in community service and other activities that promote social development (Institute for Citizens & Scholars, 2023).

Although researchers have frequently acknowledged that there is no single pathway to these domains, the continued use of these benchmarks establishes implicit hierarchies among forms of development (Furstenberg, 2013; Settersten, 2007). Domains tied most closely to economic productivity and institutional engagement tend to be privileged, while alternative developmental trajectories are often marginalized or interpreted as delayed or deficient (Shanahan, 2000; Swartz, 2008). As a result, these domains function not merely as descriptive categories but as normative frameworks that shape how adulthood transitions are measured, supported, and judged.

Limitations of Dominant Adulthood Transition Models

The dominant transition models are built on flawed assumptions and logics that impose limitations on individuals' transitions to adulthood. As scholars seek to understand a diverse array of adulthood experiences, they often rely on models that do not explicitly consider, or problematically label, race and context as factors impacting developmental models. These limitations are increasingly evident as adulthood experiences evolve and those during this time become less traditional.

Many dominant developmental models treat adulthood transitions as race-neutral processes, implicitly assuming that developmental pathways operate similarly across social groups regardless of historical, cultural, or structural differences (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright, 2005; Roy & Jones, 2014). Ginwright and Cammarota (2002) argued that developmental models are limited in their ability to understand racial nuances within complex social, economic, and political systems. By omitting explicit racial analysis, developmental models under-theorize the influence of race on young people's trajectories. Because racial context shapes exposure to opportunities, constraints, and institutional treatment, its absence

creates significant conceptual blind spots in understanding the social forces shaping youth development. Framing adulthood attainment as primarily a function of individual progression through standardized institutional pathways further minimizes the structural dimensions of inequality. As a result, the role of racialized social structures in shaping access to educational opportunity, employment stability, housing security, and institutional protection becomes obscured (Ray, 2022).

By relying on samples and theoretical assumptions derived largely from White, middle-class populations, these frameworks purport universal developmental expectations that may not reflect the lived realities of youth navigating structurally unequal environments (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). As a result, differences in adulthood timing, sequencing, or outcomes among marginalized populations are often interpreted as deviations from normative development rather than as responses to unequal opportunity structures or systemic constraint. Race neutrality within developmental theory, therefore, operates not as an absence of race but as a methodological and conceptual omission that renders racialized conditions analytically invisible (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002). When the structural influence of racism, institutional exclusion, and differential resource distribution is left unexamined, models risk reinterpreting inequality as individual variation and developmental delay as personal failure. Such interpretations disproportionately burden marginalized individuals by attributing disparities to personal shortcomings rather than to entrenched structural barriers. This framing reinforces deficit-oriented interpretations and limits the field's capacity to accurately understand how adulthood transitions unfold within racially stratified social systems (Ray, 2022).

Recognizing these limitations is essential for developing frameworks that account for how developmental trajectories are shaped not only by individual agency but also by historically

embedded patterns of structural inequality and racialized social systems. More comprehensive models must account not only for individual agency but also for the structural and racialized contexts that shape opportunity, condition life-course timing, and influence how adulthood attainment is socially recognized (Elder et al., 2003; Settersten, 2007). Such an approach allows for a more accurate and contextually grounded understanding of adulthood transitions across diverse populations.

Assumptions of Institutional Stability, Resource Access, and Universality

Dominant adulthood models implicitly assume that institutional infrastructures such as educational systems, labor markets, and public support infrastructures are stable, accessible, and capable of supporting individuals' transitions into adulthood (Adams et al., 2021). Embedded within these frameworks is the assumption that individuals possess relatively equal opportunities to access the material, relational, and institutional resources necessary to achieve developmental milestones (Adams et al., 2021; Côté, 2002; Settersen et al., 2015). These frameworks further assume that institutional pathways are sufficiently coordinated and continuous to enable predictable movement from education to employment and into adult social roles (Elder, 1998; Shanahan et al., 2005). Evidence suggests that having resources, opportunities, a web of support, and a stable foundation can offset the difficulties and complexities associated with the transitions to adulthood. However, institutional supports are unevenly distributed and frequently subject to political, economic, and structural instability (Ray, 2022; Shanahan, 2000).

Research indicates that individuals with access to family resources, social capital, and institutional knowledge are better positioned to navigate extended or uncertain transitions, while those without such supports face heightened vulnerability (Adams et al., 2021; Côté & Bynner, 2008). Côté (2002) argued that institutional supports for adulthood transitions have become more

tenuous, creating disjunctures in institutional networks (e.g., the university-work and young-adulthood transitions). Accordingly, the transition to adulthood has become destabilized for young people, especially those with less predictable trajectories. When dominant models presume institutional stability, equal access to resources, and universal developmental pathways, they risk reframing structurally patterned inequality as individual variation and obscuring the broader social conditions shaping adulthood transitions (Ray, 2022; Settersten, 2007). Together, these assumptions reveal how prevailing adulthood transition frameworks may inadequately account for how developmental pathways unfold within racialized and structurally unequal social environments. Understanding how transitions into adulthood are experienced by youth whose developmental trajectories are shaped by systemic inequality requires moving beyond race-neutral and context-blind models toward frameworks that foreground lived developmental contexts and structural conditions.

Adulthood Transitions for Black Youth

Although transitions to adulthood are shaped by broader social and developmental contexts, these processes are not experienced uniformly across social groups (Shanahan, 2000; Settersten, 2007). For Black youth in the United States, pathways into adulthood often unfold within social, institutional, and economic environments structured by racial inequality, differential resource access, and historically patterned opportunity constraints (Ray, 2022; Swartz, 2008). As a result, the expectations, timelines, and markers commonly used to define adulthood may not fully capture the conditions under which many Black youth navigate this developmental period.

Understanding transitions to adulthood for Black youth, therefore, requires attention to the specific social environments, institutional dynamics, and structural conditions that shape their

developmental experiences. Examining these factors helps illuminate how access to opportunity, institutional engagement, and relational supports influence how Black youth approach key developmental decisions and milestones. The sections that follow explore the challenges, contextual influences, culturally relevant assets, and developmental supports that shape Black youths' transitions into adulthood.

Black Youth Transition to Adulthood in a Racialized Society

Transitions into adulthood for Black youth unfold within social environments structured by racial stratification, institutional inequality, and historically embedded patterns of exclusion (Bonilla-Silva, 2017; Ray, 2022). While dominant developmental models often conceptualize adulthood transitions as individualized processes shaped primarily by personal decision-making, Black youths' developmental pathways are more accurately understood as occurring within racialized opportunity structures that shape access to resources, institutional support, and social protection (Lateef & Balakrishnan, 2023; Pickney et al., 2011). As a result, the transition to adulthood for Black youth cannot be adequately understood through race-neutral developmental frameworks alone. Instead, these transitions must be examined within the broader social conditions that shape the timing, sequencing, and accessibility of adulthood markers (Elder et al., 2003; Shanahan, 2000; Swartz, 2008). Recognizing these conditions is essential for understanding both the challenges Black youth encounter and the adaptive strategies they employ as they navigate developmental transitions under structurally constrained circumstances.

Challenges in Transitioning to Adulthood

Black youth frequently encounter structural and developmental barriers that complicate their progression through commonly recognized adulthood pathways. These challenges may include unequal access to institutions, such as high-quality educational opportunities and

workforce experiences (Austin, 2022; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006). Educational inequities shape how youth transition out of school and into the workforce, often leading to fewer opportunities and, in turn, to poverty or reliance on government assistance (Austin, 2022; Bowman, 1990; Bronte-Tinkew, 2005; Hamilton & Hamilton, 2006; Ray, 2022). Scholars have further demonstrated how constrained labor market entry points may also produce challenges and inequitable employment opportunities for these young people (Visser, 2018, 2020). With employment limitations and inaccessible work opportunities, young people are positioned to experience heightened economic uncertainty, which threatens their overall stability and adulthood grounding (James & Pandolfi, 2016). Evidence also indicates that these individuals, on average, have limited access to institutional supports that facilitate stable housing or career advancement (Ray, 2022). Collins and Spindle-Jackson (2024) found that housing inaccessibility was associated with job instability among a sample of Black individuals.

In addition to these structural barriers, Black youth often navigate developmental transitions while simultaneously managing broader social pressures, including expectations related to family contribution, economic participation, and community responsibility that may emerge earlier or operate differently than assumed within dominant developmental models (Grills et al., 2016; Lateef & Balakrishnan, 2023). While some young people have access to material and relational privileges, many vulnerable individuals, including Black youth, are without sufficient access to resources, support infrastructures, and opportunity networks to aid their optimal development and healthy progression toward adulthood (Pickney et al., 2011). These young people disproportionately navigate adulthood with material gaps shaped by disinvestment, structural barriers, racial inequities, economic disenfranchisement, and

educational injustices (Adams et al., 2021; Barr et al., 2021; Hope et al., 2015; Pickney et al., 2011; Richards, 2018; Xie et al., 2013).

Black youth are not only navigating economic and institutional precarity, but they are also more susceptible to role strain and early adult responsibility as a byproduct of systemic inequities (Bowman, 1990; Sargent et al., 2025). Research shows that Black youth are also likely to experience adultification. Adultification, a concept rooted in the historical dehumanization of Black children during slavery, refers to the process by which children are perceived or treated as more mature and less in need of protection than their peers (Epstein et al., 2017; Schmitz, 2016). Black youth, particularly Black girls, are disproportionately subjected to adultification and are more likely to assume caregiving or adult-like roles at earlier ages than their White peers (Epstein et al., 2017; Brissett et al., 2025).

Adultification has costly implications for Black youth, both immediate and prolonged. Brissett et al. (2025) found that Black youth, especially Black young girls, experienced compromised well-being and mental health outcomes. Adultified children can become unable to articulate their own needs years after engaging in adult-like tasks (Banks & Shigemoto, 2024). Todmia (2025) found that adultified youth sacrifice their childhood, engage in normal developmental activities, and pursue educational and workforce opportunities to support a healthy transition into adulthood. When considered together, these conditions may alter both the timing and sequencing of adulthood transitions, producing pathways that appear non-normative when measured against dominant developmental benchmarks but reflect adaptive responses to unequal opportunity structures (Shanahan, 2000; Swartz, 2008).

Heightened Exposure to Racism

A defining feature of Black youths' developmental experiences is their heightened exposure to interpersonal, institutional, and structural forms of racism that shape their psychological development, institutional engagement, and long-term life trajectories (Hope et al., 2015). Research shows that as Black youth move into late adolescence and early adulthood, exposure to intensified and more institutionalized forms of racism increases, and the cumulative impact of that exposure becomes more pronounced (Hope et al., 2015; Ray, 2022). Research also shows that Black youths' experiences with racism lead to both psychological and physiological outcomes, such as such as depression, suicide, violence, stress disorders, and substance use among African Americans (Brown et al., 2000; Carter, 2007; Greene et al., 2006; Polanco-Roman & Miranda, 2013; Sellers & Shelton, 2003).

Racism operates in diverse ways that create complexities for Black youth. Ray (2022) reported that racism occurs through discrete discriminatory events as well as through cumulative exposure to unequal treatment, surveillance, and exclusion. Black youths' exposure to discriminatory events has been found to negatively impact developmental processes such as developing an ethnic-racial identity and a concept of self (Bernard et al., 2022). Racism also functions as a mechanism that constrains opportunity structures across educational, employment, housing, and legal systems (Ray, 2022; Visser, 2018). Research demonstrates that Black youth are more susceptible to institutional gatekeeping and systemic exclusion (Ray, 2022). The impact of these experiences influences how Black youth perceive institutional trustworthiness, assess opportunity pathways, and make decisions regarding educational persistence, employment engagement, and mobility.

Because adulthood transitions often require sustained interaction with institutions, including schools, employers, housing systems, and financial infrastructures, racialized institutional experiences may directly shape both access to adulthood markers and expectations regarding the feasibility of achieving them (Bounds et al., 2022). For example, Bounds et al. (2022) showed how institutions systematically marginalize Black youth and define what it means to transition into adulthood "successfully." Black youth experience institutional structures concurrently across multiple systems, resulting in their difficulty meeting adulthood indicators (Bounds et al., 2022). Also, Syed and Mitchell (2013) argued that attaining adulthood markers becomes almost impossible for Black youth as they are often met with systemic and structural barriers, such as exposure to poor-quality education, negatively impacting their sense of purpose and future endeavors. Given that racism is embedded within various systems, Black youth experience negative implications of system navigation and involvement, confining their ability to meet adulthood milestones (Silva, 2012). Adulthood then becomes a racialized experience for Black youth that further complicates their ability to navigate institutions.

Heightened exposure to racism may cause a trauma response within Black youth. Repeated exposure to racial discrimination and exclusion has been linked to forms of racialized trauma that affect psychological well-being and identity development (Onyewuenyi et al., 2025). Experiences of chronic discrimination, anticipatory bias, and institutional exclusion generate cumulative psychological strain that influences educational persistence, workforce engagement, and broader developmental decision-making. Onyewuenyi et al. (2025) found that exposure to on-campus discrimination led to higher levels of racialized stress for Black youth. Similarly, Sargent et al. (2025) found that Black youths' exposure to White spaces within institutions exacerbated the strain of racial discrimination.

Racialized trauma may also alter how young people interpret institutional barriers, shaping both coping strategies and long-term developmental planning (Saleem et al., 2019; Sargent et al., 2025). For example, persistent exposure to discrimination in educational or employment contexts may influence perceptions of institutional fairness, expectations regarding advancement, and willingness to invest in long-term institutional pathways. Black youths' consistent exposure to racism and racialized experiences creates trauma-driven exposure that has an erosive impact on the mental health of these adolescents (Bernard et al., 2022). Saleem et al. (2019) reported that Black youth are traumatized by historical, interpersonal, or vicarious encounters with racial discrimination within their communities at alarming rates. The effects of these experiences are not always immediate but may emerge later in the developmental trajectory, shaping identity formation, institutional engagement, and adulthood transitions.

In addition to discrete traumatic experiences, scholars have documented the phenomenon of racial battle fatigue, which captures the ongoing psychological, emotional, and physiological toll associated with navigating racially hostile or exclusionary environments (Smith, 2011). Franklin (2019) showed how racial battle fatigue negatively impacts Black youth who carry the weight of racial discrimination occurring both within broader society and within their immediate communities. Racial battle fatigue reflects the cumulative stress associated with constant vigilance, identity negotiation, and anticipatory coping required in environments where discrimination is expected or experienced. Research indicates that various contexts create overextended exposure to racist experiences that negatively impact Black youth; educational and work contexts are especially spaces where Black youth confront these consequences (Grier-Reed et al, 2020). Over time, this chronic stress burden may influence Black youths' cognitive bandwidth, emotional regulation, and institutional engagement. Such cumulative strain shapes

how Black youth navigate developmental transitions and respond to structural barriers encountered during adulthood entry.

The cumulative psychological costs associated with racism exposure extend beyond discrete traumatic events. These costs include heightened anxiety, depressive symptoms, identity strain, and diminished institutional trust (Hope et al., 2015; Polanco-Roman & Miranda, 2013; Sellers & Shelton, 2003). Such psychological impacts can influence educational persistence, employment engagement, and long-term planning capacity, all of which are central to navigating adulthood transitions successfully. Polanco-Roman and Miranda (2013) found that perceived racial discrimination was associated with increased suicide risk among Black adolescents. This elevated risk was linked, in part, to diminished efficacy and reduced perceptions of control over one's environment. Importantly, these psychological costs should not be interpreted as individual deficits but rather as predictable developmental consequences of navigating structurally unequal and racialized environments (Carter, 2007; Ray, 2022). Recognizing these impacts shifts explanatory focus away from individual responsibility and toward the structural conditions shaping developmental experiences.

Structural and Institutional Barriers

Beyond interpersonal experiences of discrimination, systemic inequities embedded within educational systems, labor markets, housing structures, and legal institutions shape Black youths' access to the social and economic markers commonly associated with adulthood attainment (Bounds et al., 2022). Research indicates that Black and Latino boys from low-income communities often have little support for adulthood markers such as obtaining careers post-college (Carey, 2022). Educational inequality may also influence access to advanced coursework, college preparation resources, and credentialing opportunities (Mehrotra et al.,

2021). Scholars have noted that exposure to certain educational content and curricula is a prerequisite for other opportunities and entry points (Mehrotra et al., 2021; Swartz, 2008). Without such exposure, navigating institutional systems becomes increasingly complex, particularly because many adulthood markers are closely tied to institutional access and recognition.

Labor market stratification further constrains entry into stable employment pathways. Austin (2022) reported that Black individuals remain underrepresented in advanced career sectors and higher-wage employment opportunities. Housing discrimination and wealth disparities may also constrain opportunities for residential independence or long-term financial stability. Marçal and Maguire-Jack (2021, 2022) found that housing instability functions as a barrier to broader institutional participation and opportunity access. Legal system disparities, including differential surveillance and criminalization, further disrupt educational continuity and employment prospects (Seabrook & Wyatt-Nichol, 2016; Xie et al., 2013). Disparities in policing also exist and contribute to perceptions of diminished social value and institutional mistrust among Black youth (Osai & Mattis, 2024).

Because dominant adulthood frameworks frequently measure developmental success through markers such as stable employment, financial independence, and residential autonomy, systemic inequities directly shape both the feasibility and timing of achieving these milestones for Black youth (Settersten, 2007). As a result, their developmental pathways are often evaluated against benchmarks whose accessibility has been unevenly structured from the outset. Carey (2022) found that for Black male youth, comparing their future prospects to those of White middle-class standards of respectability can lead to a perceived inadequacy.

The previous sections outlined how Black youth face systemic inequities that complicate their attainment of adulthood milestones. These barriers are not simply the result of isolated institutional failures; rather, they reflect the interaction of interconnected systems that collectively structure opportunity distribution across the life course (Ray, 2022; Roy & Jones, 2014). As the literature indicates, educational inequities shape labor market entry points (Bradburn & Carroll, 2002; Ciocca Eller & DiPrete, 2018; Engle & Vinto, 2018). Labor market instability, in turn, influences access to stable housing, often positioning Black youth within segregated or economically constrained housing markets. Residential location subsequently affects school quality, neighborhood resource availability, and exposure to institutional supports (Jones et al., 2024; Witherspoon et al., 2018). Legal system disparities further shape employment eligibility, educational continuity, and institutional trust (Ray, 2022).

Understanding adulthood transitions for Black youth, therefore, requires a systems-level perspective that recognizes how institutional arrangements interact to produce cumulative developmental constraints. Such an approach moves beyond individual-level explanations and prioritizes the way structures shape developmental pathways. Adopting this perspective provides a more accurate framework for understanding how youth navigate adulthood transitions within racialized environments.

Contexts Shaping Black Youths' Transitions to Adulthood

Transitions to adulthood are shaped not only by individual development but also by the broader social environments in which young people are embedded (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder et al., 2003). Developmental and life-course research consistently emphasizes that pathways into adulthood unfold across multiple interconnected contexts that influence access to resources, exposure to opportunities, and the expectations that structure young people's trajectories (Elder

et al., 2003; Shanahan, 2000; Settersten, 2007). These environments shape how individuals interpret developmental milestones, navigate institutional systems, and make decisions regarding education, work, relationships, and independence (Furstenberg, 2013; Shanahan et al., 2005).

Understanding the transition to adulthood, therefore, requires attention to the range of contexts that structure young people's everyday experiences. Family systems, peer networks, cultural environments, institutional settings, and community-level conditions all contribute to shaping developmental pathways in distinct but interrelated ways (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Sampson et al., 2002; Witherspoon et al., 2018). Examining these contexts provides a foundation for analyzing how opportunity structures emerge, how constraints are produced, and how young people navigate the environments that influence their movement into adulthood.

For Black youth, these contexts operate within broader racialized social structures, meaning that each context may simultaneously function as a site of support, adaptation, and constraint (Ray, 2022; Swartz, 2008). Adulthood transitions, therefore, unfold within overlapping developmental environments that shape access to resources, social capital, institutional navigation, and identity formation (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Elder et al., 2003). Understanding how adulthood transitions unfold, therefore, requires examining the distinct yet interconnected developmental environments through which young people move while navigating educational, occupational, relational, and civic pathways.

Family Contexts

Families are widely recognized as primary developmental contexts shaping youths' transitions into adulthood (Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Kerpelman et al., 2008). Research shows that healthy family environments traditionally provide emotional support (Knight et al., 2004), socialization processes (Griffith, 2022), financial assistance (Carey, 2016), and intergenerational

guidance that influence educational persistence, employment engagement, and long-term planning (Kerpelman et al., 2008; Smetana, 2011).

For Black youth, family systems often function as critical sources of resilience, cultural transmission, and adaptive socialization, including preparation for navigating racialized institutional environments (Carey, 2016, 2018). Families may provide guidance regarding educational decision-making, employment navigation, and strategies for responding to discrimination, thereby shaping how youth interpret and engage adulthood opportunities (Carey, 2016, 2018). Empirical studies substantiate this claim, underscoring the pivotal role that families play in shaping the eventual trajectories of youths' lives (Hill et al., 2004; Kerpelman et al., 2008; Trommsdorff et al., 1982). This is particularly important for Black youth who rely on and benefit from familial support for future planning and goal attainment (Carey, 2016; George Mwangi et al., 2020; McElhaney et al., 2009; Smetana, 2011).

For example, Kerperlman et al.'s (2008) study found that perceived parental support was associated with Black youths' future educational orientations. Similarly, McCabe and Barnett (2000) reported that among Black adolescents, parental encouragement to think about and plan for the future was predictive of frequent and detailed future-oriented thinking. These findings are consistent with studies showing that Black families provide a myriad of protective, non-academic supports that augment children's future transitions into adulthood (Azmitia & Brown, 2002; Brody et al., 2006; Mandara, 2006).

Familial messages communicated to children shape how youth interpret adulthood expectations and internalize developmental goals. Emphasizing how youth interpret their familial messages is important, as interpretation influences motivational processes that propel adulthood planning (Carey, 2016). This dynamic is especially critical for Black youth who often internalize

familial messages alongside other competing forces that could directly challenge those of their families and entice them to engage in deviant and risky behaviors (Torres et al., 2020).

Dominant developmental models frequently assume nuclear family structures characterized by stable economic resources and institutional access. Carey (2022) highlighted this assumption in work exploring how families influence an adolescent's perception of a "good life" and of fulfillment. However, cultural differences influence how individuals conceptualize success and adulthood. Normative assumptions embedded within dominant models may not reflect the diversity of Black family structures, which often include extended kinship networks, shared caregiving arrangements, and collective economic strategies developed in response to structural inequality (Collins, 1990; Stack, 1974). These non-traditional family environments are important for Black youths' adult journeys, as they influence their sense of belonging and connection and shape their desire for future stability (Allen, 2015). Structural economic disparities, employment instability, and wealth gaps may also limit families' capacity to provide sustained financial support during prolonged transitions into adulthood (Adams et al., 2021; Xie et al., 2013). As a result, while families remain central developmental anchors, their ability to facilitate access to traditional adulthood markers may be constrained by broader structural conditions beyond their control.

Peer Contexts

Peer networks represent another important developmental context influencing identity formation, social belonging, and behavioral norms during the transition to adulthood (Holland, 2011; Quimby et al., 2018; Rambaran et al., 2022). The literature on peer relationships suggests that young people, within their relationship networks, provide emotional support (Hoffman et al., 2019), shared knowledge regarding institutional navigation (Terrion, 2012), and reinforcement of

educational and occupational aspirations (Holland, 2011). Scholars have characterized peer and school environments as sites of possibility in which students imagine and theorize their futures (Gibbs Grey, 2018). For Black youth, peer networks may also function as spaces of collective coping, cultural affirmation, and shared interpretation of racialized experiences (Anyiwo et al., 2018; Seaton et al., 2010). Research indicates that racial and cultural socialization within peer networks can strengthen youths' ability to critically analyze social environments and increase community engagement (Anyiwo et al., 2018). These relational networks can shape expectations about opportunity structures, influence post-secondary planning, and provide informal information regarding employment or educational pathways (Holland, 2011; Terrion, 2012). Peer contexts are particularly influential for young people and can shape how they respond to racism and adversity, often encouraging sociopolitical action such as protests and boycotts (Anyiwo et al., 2018).

At the same time, peer networks themselves are embedded within structurally constrained opportunity environments. If peers collectively face limited institutional access or exposure to restricted opportunity pathways, informational networks may reproduce structural disadvantage rather than offset it (Visser, 2005). Consequently, while peers contribute important social and psychological support, they may not independently expand access to institutional resources necessary for achieving adulthood markers. Peers may also be sources of negative support or cause negative consequences when they are disconnected and without a stable foundation (Visser et al., 2021). Group dynamics can shape peer interactions in ways that either buffer or exacerbate experiences of marginalization. For example, Anyiwo et al. (2018) found that youth who perceived being Black as negatively evaluated by society reported more frequent experiences of racial discrimination amongst their peers.

Cultural Contexts

Cultural contexts, including media representation, societal narratives, symbolic messaging, and broader social schemas, shape how young people understand their futures, interpret opportunity structures, and construct expectations regarding adulthood (Collins, 1990, 2022; Carey, 2016, 2018). Although these influences are often subtle, they have a large impact on how young people think about and interpret the world around them. For Black youth, cultural messaging may simultaneously affirm identity while also exposing them to persistent deficit narratives, stereotypes, or constrained representations of success pathways (Carey, 2016). Symbolic portrayals of criminalization, limited occupational pathways, or narrowly defined success models may influence perceived possibility structures and shape long-term developmental aspirations (Carey, 2016, 2018).

Hegemonic structures also contribute to the justification of inequality through the reproduction of stereotypes and deficit-based narratives that frame Black Americans' social position as a product of cultural or individual deficiency (Collins, 1990, 2022). These ideologies purport certain messaging about inferior groups and leverage dominant narratives to uphold existing power structures (Collins, 1990, 2022). Certain cultural contexts have been social locations for manufacturing ideologies needed to maintain oppression; Black youth are especially impacted by the mass media's intersecting influence regarding what is disseminated about their value, worth, and possibilities (Collins, 1990, 2022).

Research suggests that Black youth often internalize deficit-based narratives or become reproducers or reinforcers of the cultural messaging that negatively shape their self-concepts and thoughts about their futures (Ross, 2023). Narratives portraying Black youth as broken and in need of saving have historical roots in political and educational discourse and are a product of

neoliberal ideology (Baldridge, 2014; Lewis & Diamond, 2015; Lipman, 2011). Black youth are inundated with deficit labels, such as "culturally deprived," "disadvantaged," and "at risk," that are used to define them and marginalize their experiences (Beatty, 2012; Martinez & Rury, 2012). This deficit framing disregards the assets that Black youth embody and communicates a message of insufficiency.

Cultural contexts also shape how adulthood itself is socially imagined. Dominant narratives regarding success, independence, and professional attainment often reflect culturally specific expectations that may not account for structurally mediated opportunity access (Schwartz & Pantin, 2006). Researchers have argued that Black adolescents living in economically challenged spaces are at a disadvantage because these spaces may be culture mismatches, and that misalignment may limit these young people's access to experiences that signify adulthood (Fauth et al., 2007; Wilson, 2012). As a result, cultural messaging may influence both self-concept and perceived feasibility of traditional adulthood trajectories, shaping how youth evaluate their own developmental progress.

Institutional and Policy Contexts

Educational institutions, labor markets, housing systems, and legal structures play decisive roles in structuring adulthood transitions. These systems regulate access to credentials, employment, financial capital, and civic participation (Adams et al., 2021; Ray, 2022). As developmental environments, institutions can both facilitate and constrain youths' movement into adulthood. Research shows that educational institutions may serve as sites where youth find purpose and motivation. Conversely, if youth attend school or live in neighborhoods where violence is common, it can hinder the development of future orientation and purpose (Osai & Mattis, 2024). Adams et al. (2021) examined the implications of policy for individuals'

transitions to adulthood, noting that although national and federal policies are designed to support individuals, their intended and theoretical design often misaligns with individuals' needs, producing unintended consequences.

For Black youth, institutional engagement often occurs within systems historically shaped by racial stratification (Anyiwo et al., 2018), resulting in unequal school funding (Grey et al., 2018), differential disciplinary practices (Brown et al., 2021; Carey, 2024), labor market segmentation (Austin, 2022), and housing discrimination (Marçal & Maguire-Jack, 2021, 2022). These institutional dynamics influence both immediate developmental opportunities and the stability of long-term trajectories. Perry (2019) demonstrated how housing policy has systematically disadvantaged Black individuals and families by limiting homeownership access, restricting rental opportunities, and contributing to the devaluation of property in Black neighborhoods, thereby constraining access to wealth accumulation and intergenerational stability.

Policy environments further shape adulthood transitions through eligibility rules governing financial aid, employment protections, criminal records, housing access, and public assistance programs (Adams et al., 2021). Policies related to school discipline, juvenile justice involvement, and workforce credentialing may produce long-term institutional consequences that extend into early adulthood, influencing educational persistence, employment eligibility, and housing mobility. Seabrook and Wyatt-Nichol (2016) reported that justice system involvement is associated with employment opportunities and often negatively impacts workforce entry. Because adulthood transitions require sustained institutional participation, unequal institutional responsiveness directly shapes both the accessibility and timing of adulthood markers. This

dynamic is particularly relevant for Black youth who reside in urban centers and live at or below the poverty line, since these conditions tend to limit access (Osai & Mattis, 2024).

Community Contexts

Neighborhood environments, local resource ecosystems, informal support networks, and community-level institutional infrastructures collectively shape developmental opportunity landscapes (Samblanet, 2014; Witherspoon et al., 2018). Research consistently associates the quality of one's neighborhood with developmental outcomes and opportunities. Evidence suggests that neighborhoods and their features are critical determinants of one's longevity, health, and viability (Carney et al., 2017; Witherspoon et al., 2018). These community-level factors are therefore directly connected to adulthood transitions and young people's evolving roles within their communities.

For Black youth, community contexts may provide relational assets (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016), mentorship access (Austin et al., 2020), cultural affirmation (Clark et al., 2023), and informal economic or educational supports that buffer structural inequality (Baldridge, 2014; Baldridge et al., 2017). Ginwright (2005) argued that local organizations, faith communities, neighborhood leaders, and extended relational networks function as protective developmental infrastructures supporting educational persistence, identity formation, and civic engagement. Research supports this characterization, demonstrating that such community-based supports can mitigate hopelessness and promote sociopolitical engagement among Black youth (Hope et al., 2015; Osai & Mattis, 2024). However, community environments themselves are shaped by broader patterns of residential segregation (Blessett & Littleton, 2017; Galster et al., 2016; Minh et al., 2017; Sharkey & Faber, 2014), resource disinvestment (Golash-Boza & Oh, 2021), and uneven institutional presence (Bell, 2020; Small & Dermott, 2006). These structural conditions

produce a host of inequities that are often shared by Black youth, who shoulder the burden of these disparities. Variability in school quality, transportation access, proximity to employment, and local institutional investment may influence the availability of developmental supports needed to navigate adulthood transitions successfully. Research indicates that the quality of local communities is related to outcomes that signify adulthood, including school achievement and labor market success (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2005; Samblanet, 2014; Witherspoon et al., 2018).

Consequently, community contexts may simultaneously function as sites of relational strength and structural constraint. Visser et al. (2021) highlighted the importance of ties, aligning with Granovetter's (1973) theory of weak ties, which emphasizes the role of distant relationships in expanding access to opportunity. In contrast, Coleman (1988) theorized that family and community networks are crucial for supporting educational success. These perspectives illustrate how relational structures within communities may expand or limit opportunity pathways. The distribution of community resources often reflects systemic inequalities related to class, gender, and race, resulting in uneven access to institutional supports and developmental opportunities (Danish et al., 2025). As such, community contexts can be both limiting and inviting, especially when resource affordances are constrained or nonexistent, and these conditions have real implications for individuals living in communities that directly affect their development. Recognizing both affordances and limitations of community contexts reinforces the importance of examining how youth access and mobilize resources within localized developmental ecosystems that can likely impact their developmental transition.

Overall, family, peer, cultural, institutional, and community contexts each contribute meaningfully to shaping Black youths' transitions into adulthood. Yet, none of these domains alone fully explains how young people successfully navigate complex institutional systems,

access opportunity structures, and sustain developmental progress under conditions of structural inequality (Elder et al., 2003; Ray, 2022). This suggests the importance of examining additional relational and institutional infrastructures that may coordinate developmental support across multiple contexts.

CBYSOs as Important Developmental Contexts for Black Youth

CBYSOs have been shown to influence Black youths' adolescent development. Research has especially demonstrated how CBYSOs have a long history of working to mitigate the impact of persistent systemic inequities on Black youth (Baldridge et al., 2017; Baldridge, 2018; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Shehaan et al., 2022). These spaces have been shown to protect young people from racial hostility and affirm their culture and identity (Baldridge et al., 2017; Baldridge et al., 2024; McKenzie, 2008). They also intervene against patterns of inequity for Black youth (Baldridge, 2017; Ginwright, 2007; Kirshner, 2015; Warren et al., 2008) and counteract the negative impact of systemic racism or racialized threats to the formation of Black youths' healthy development. As they redress and challenge inequity, CBYSOs help Black youth overcome systemic barriers and offer strategies to thwart the pervasive inequities that may stifle their adulthood futures (Farrington et al., 2012).

Scholarship situates CBYSOs not only as programmatic supports but as developmental contexts that warrant closer examination within broader ecological and institutional frameworks (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Baldridge, 2018). Despite the extensive literature on CBYSOs, more work is necessary to understand how these contexts assist Black youth in transitioning to adulthood. Evidence suggests that CBYSOs are likely agents in Black youths' adulthood transitions; however, greater specificity regarding how these supports operate remains necessary.

More importantly, how youth leverage these contexts to support their development is less understood and therefore explored in the current study.

CBYSOs Within Black Youths' Developmental Ecologies

Developmental research underscores the importance of community contexts in shaping the development of Black youth (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2005; Connell & Gambone, 2002; Spencer et al., 2003). Scholars have identified key contextual factors, including environmental conditions, family structures, and social roles, that influence youths' transitions into adulthood (Nagaoka et al., 2015; Rapa et al., 2020). However, researchers have also examined how communities influence development through various factors, including resource affordances, neighborhood conditions, residential stability, social isolation, safety, collective efficacy, and institutional supports, such as CBYSOs (Bronte-Tinkew et al., 2005; Sheehan et al., 2022).

Within developmental scholarship, these community-level influences are often conceptualized through ecological frameworks that emphasize the interaction between young people and the multiple environments in which their development unfolds (Brofennbrener, 1977; Danish et al., 2025). CBYSOs have long been essential to marginalized communities (Balridge et al., 2017; Theriault, 2018). From this perspective, community-based organizations are not peripheral supports but constitute meaningful developmental settings that shape access to opportunities, relational networks, and institutional knowledge during critical transitional periods (Baldridge, 2018, 2020. Such contexts may be especially consequential during the transition to adulthood, when young people must increasingly navigate educational systems, labor markets, and social institutions with greater autonomy and responsibility (Shehaan et al., 2022; Visser, 2018, 2020). Shehaan et al. (2022) found that alumni of a CBYSO improved their long-term educational and financial outcomes and experienced success in their employment endeavors.

These findings suggest that CBYSOs may serve as important institutional bridges during adulthood transitions, particularly for youth navigating structurally constrained opportunity environments.

Positioned within youths' broader developmental ecologies, CBYSOs frequently operate at the intersection of educational, familial, and neighborhood systems, allowing them to mediate how young people experience these institutional environments (Danish et al., 2025). Their community-embedded nature may enable them to respond more flexibly to localized needs, adapt programming to shifting social and economic conditions, and maintain sustained relational engagement with youth across multiple stages of development (Visser, 2016, 2018, 2020; Visser et al., 2021). This positioning may be particularly important for Black youth whose developmental trajectories are shaped not only by individual capacities but also by structural inequalities that influence institutional access and opportunity distribution.

The developmental opportunities and critical engagement practices of CBYSOs suggest they are unique sites where youth build, connect, and thrive and ultimately bolster their tools for their adulthood journeys (Baldridge, 2020; Bergeson, 2022; Ginwright, 2007; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002, 2007; Jones et al., 2021; Lardier et al., 2019; Noam & Tillinger, 2004). In this sense, CBYSOs may function not only as service providers but also as developmental infrastructure that supports the accumulation of social capital, institutional familiarity, and awareness of opportunities. These resources are often unevenly distributed across communities but are necessary for adulthood (Balridge; Miller, 2012; Shehaan et al., 2022). By providing sustained exposure to supportive adults, structured developmental programming, and access to institutional pathways, these organizations may help stabilize youths' transitions into adulthood and expand the range of trajectories perceived as attainable (Balridge, 2018, 2020; Bowers,

2015; Ginwright, 2007). Understanding CBYSOs as embedded developmental contexts, therefore, shifts the analytic focus from isolated program effects to the broader ecological role these organizations play in shaping youths' long-term developmental possibilities.

Role Within Broader Learning Ecosystems

CBYSOs are integral to the learning ecosystems of Black youth (Akiva et al., 2020; Ito et al., 2020; Knutson et al., 2011; Lee, 2010). Learning ecosystem frameworks conceptualize young people's development as occurring across interconnected settings, including schools, families, peer networks, community institutions, and informal learning environments (Baldridge, 2018; Knutson et al., 2011; Lee, 2010). Within these systems, community-based youth-serving organizations often serve as bridging institutions, connecting young people to resources, relationships, and developmental opportunities that extend beyond the boundaries of formal schooling (Baldridge, 2018, 2020). Rather than operating as isolated programmatic sites, CBYSOs may facilitate continuity across youths' educational, social, and professional trajectories by helping them align experiences occurring in multiple developmental settings (Gee et al., 2020; Jones et al., 2021).

For Black youth, CBYSOs may play an important role in expanding access to culturally responsive, relationally grounded, and community-specific learning opportunities (Baldridge, 2018; Case, 2020; Gibbs Grey, 2018). Baldridge (2018, 2020) argued that these environments are often sites of pedagogical possibility and offer autonomous decision-making, interest-driven discovery, and innovative and creative learning that directly challenge traditional conventions. Baldridge et al. (2017) further noted that CBYSOs have historically and contemporarily reimagined education and learning to include social, cultural, and political development while

supporting academic achievement. In their study, students reported increased perceptions of learning and measurable gains in academic performance.

These organizations frequently provide structured programming, mentoring relationships, leadership development opportunities, and workforce preparation experiences that complement formal educational instruction (Baldridge et al., 2024; Connell & Gambone, 2002; Hagler, 2018; Harris & Kiyama, 2015). They also address developmental needs that may remain unmet within school-based environments (Visser, 2018). In doing so, CBYSOs contribute to building expanded opportunity structures, which show up as networks of experiences, supports, and institutional connections that influence youths' developmental trajectories and access (Visser, 2016; Visser, 2019). Understanding CBYSOs as components of broader learning ecosystems underscores their role in supporting Black youth developmental outcomes. Their capacity to maintain relational continuity, provide access to community-based knowledge, and connect youth with external institutional actors may be particularly consequential during periods of transition. Such coordinated support is especially critical as young people navigate multiple institutional systems as they progress into adulthood.

Relationships with Families, Schools, and Communities

CBYSOs play an essential role in facilitating the development of Black youths and offering tangible, holistic, individualized, and system-disrupting support to overcome inequities (Baldridge, 2013, 2014, 2017, 2020; Baldridge et al., 2017; Gee et al., 2020; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; McLaughlin, 2005; Pavlakis & Pryor, 2020; Sheenan et al., 2022; Theriault, 2018; Wells et al., 2023). Research demonstrates that Black youth confront significant social and structural barriers that place them and their families at a disadvantage (Gee et al., 2020; Oyserman et al., 2011). Scholars have shown how these oppressive experiences influence Black

youths' and constrain their ability to pursue productive futures (Carey, 2019; Howard, 2014; Torres et al., 2020). CBYSOs challenge and disrupt these adverse effects inflicted upon Black youth by racist and oppressive systems, institutions, and structures that hinder their healthy development (Heath & McLaughlin, 1994; O'Donoghue, 2006). In doing so, these contexts augment the role of social institutions, such as families, schools, and churches, in the development of young people, providing extended resources and supportive services where these institutions fail or confront limitations (Deschenes et al., 2006; Eccles & Gootman, 2002; Ginwright, 2005; Visser, 2020).

In functioning alongside families, schools, and community institutions, CBYSOs often serve as intermediary spaces that help coordinate developmental supports across multiple domains of youths' lives (Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Visser, 2020). For some youth, these organizations may reinforce and extend the guidance already provided within family systems or educational environments, offering additional academic assistance, mentoring, or structured programming that complements existing institutional supports (Baldridge, 2014; Levine & Viano, 2025). For others, particularly those navigating under-resourced schools or limited institutional access, CBYSOs may help fill gaps by providing alternative sources of information, advocacy, and relational continuity (Harris & Kiyama, 2015; Visser, 2020; Sheehan et al., 2022).

Dill and Ozer (2019) suggested that CBYSOs serve as relational engines and play a crucial role in supplementing the support youth receive within their family contexts (Carey, 2016). Through these overlapping connections, CBYSOs may serve as relational bridges, helping youth interpret institutional expectations, maintain engagement with educational pathways, and access community-based opportunities that might otherwise remain inaccessible (Harris & Kiyama, 2015). This positioning within a network of social institutions highlights the role of

CBYSOs not as replacements for families or schools, but as complementary developmental partners embedded within youths' broader support infrastructures.

Community Embeddedness and Responsiveness

Within youths' broader developmental ecologies, CBYSOs function as embedded community institutions that operate alongside families, schools, and neighborhood systems to shape access to learning opportunities, social capital, and developmental supports (Baldridge, 2018; Baldridge et al., 2017; Miller, 2012; Wong, 2011). Their positioning within local community infrastructures enables them to respond to youths' lived conditions in ways that are often more flexible and relationally grounded than formal institutional systems, given that they are often locally governed and community-rooted (Theriault, 2018). CBYSOs may be able to adapt programming, services, and relational supports more rapidly than larger institutional systems that must operate within formal bureaucratic structures, standardized eligibility criteria, or rigid policy constraints (Harris & Kiyama, 2015). This organizational flexibility allows them to tailor supports to emerging youth needs, respond quickly to changing educational or economic conditions, and adjust developmental programming in ways that reflect the immediate realities of the communities they serve (Visser, 2020). Such responsiveness can be particularly important for Black youth navigating transitions to adulthood within structurally uneven environments, as timely access to mentorship, employment opportunities, institutional guidance, or crisis support may significantly influence developmental trajectories (Jones et al., 2021; Pickney et al., 2011). In this way, CBYSOs may be positioned to provide context-responsive developmental infrastructure that complements, and in some cases compensates for, the slower-moving institutional structures.

Developmental Contributions of CBYSOs

CBYSOs contribute to young people's development through a range of relational, institutional, and opportunity-building functions that extend beyond discrete programmatic outcomes. Rather than operating solely as sites of service delivery, CBYSOs often function as developmental environments in which youth encounter supportive adult relationships, structured learning opportunities, and institutional guidance that shape their educational, occupational, and psychosocial trajectories (Gibbs Grey, 2018; Sheehan et al., 2022; Visser, 2020). These contributions may be particularly consequential during the transition to adulthood, when young people must increasingly navigate complex institutional systems, make consequential life decisions, and build the competencies necessary for long-term stability.

For Black youth, whose developmental pathways frequently unfold within structurally uneven educational, economic, and policy environments, the supports provided by CBYSOs may influence not only immediate developmental outcomes but also broader opportunity access and institutional navigation capacity (Baldridge et al., 2017). The following sections examine key developmental contributions of CBYSOs, including identity affirmation, skill development, early employment exposure, support in navigating institutional systems, and the provision of holistic, relational developmental support.

Identity Affirmation and Mattering

CBYSOs are critical to the development of Black youth as they acknowledge their lived experiences, affirm their identities and mattering (Baldridge, 2020; Wright et al., 2010), and expand their possibilities and self-concepts (Gibbs Grey, 2023; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Nasir & Hand, 2008). Research on youth development consistently demonstrates that environments that affirm young people's identities and communicate their social significance

contribute to stronger developmental outcomes, including increased academic engagement, psychological well-being, and future orientation (Turner, 2022). For Black youth specifically, identity-affirming environments may play an especially important role, given the broader societal contexts in which racialized deficit narratives, stereotyping, and institutional exclusion are often encountered (Baldridge, 2014; Baldridge et al., 2017; Beatty, 2012; Martinez & Rury, 2012).

CBYSOs frequently provide spaces where youths' lived experiences are validated, their cultural identities are recognized as assets rather than liabilities, and their contributions to organizational communities are acknowledged as meaningful (Clark et al., 2023; Turner, 2022). These experiences of recognition and mattering may support the development of positive self-concept, purpose, institutional persistence, and long-term confidence in navigating adulthood pathways (Osai & Mattis, 2025). Turner (2022) found that reframing and affirming youth within a CBYSO space contributes to the development of their positive sense of self and sense of significance as they navigate their paths forward. CBYSOs may not only help refocus youth's beliefs and self-perceptions, but also remind youth that they are valued, supported, and celebrated, and that their lives matter (Clark et al., 2023; Osai & Mattis, 2025). Youths' skillsets, intellect, talents, ways of being, and cultural knowledge are honored in such community environments, reinforcing that youth are worthy individuals with valuable lived experiences (Brooms, 2019, 2021; Ladson-Billings, 2011; Smith & Smith Lee, 2020).

CBYSOs not only affirm youth but they also have been shown to ignite their future interests by helping them wonder and build the capacity to envision their ideal futures (Carey, 2016). Walsh (2008) suggested that CBYSOs support the construction of youths' possibilities and empower them to understand, envision, and facilitate their future decisions. In a study conducted by Gibbs Grey (2018), the researcher found that a community-based pre-college

program served as a buffer to stereotype threats about what was academically possible for Black youth. Gee et al.'s (2020) systematic review of out-of-school time programs showed that they provide opportunities for Black youth to explore potential pathways and acquire skills to realize their goals through hands-on approaches, such as crafting stories. These experience-driven opportunities may help young people envision their futures and link their present selves to their future selves (Pizzolato et al., 2012). Ultimately, this evidence suggests that CBYSOs assist youth in envisioning their futures to be different from what the world dictates and believing they will have the opportunity to reach for their hoped-for selves (Baldridge et al., 2017; Baldridge, 2018, 2020; Clark et al., 2023; Ginwright & Cammarota, 2007; Gibbs Grey, 2018; Yowell, 2000). It is, however, unclear how youth strive for their future selves after high school; more investigation is necessary to further uncover this nuance.

Skill Development and Early Employment

In addition to fostering identity development, CBYSOs often function as important sites for the acquisition of transferable skills that support youths' transitions into adulthood. Participation in organizational programming may expose youth to workplace norms (Akiva et al., 2025; Hutchinson et al., 2011), professional communication practices (Levine & Viano, 2025), collaborative project structures (Pearson et al., 2025), and time-management expectations that mirror those encountered in formal employment environments (Jones et al., 2024). Early employment placements, internships, and structured work-based learning opportunities offered through CBYSOs may help youth build initial work histories, develop professional networks, and build practical competencies that strengthen their labor market readiness (Greene & Seefeldt, 2023; Jones et al., 2024; Modestino, 2019).

Modestino and Paulsen (2019) found that participation in these CBYSO embedded employment experiences increased social skills, work readiness, and college aspirations. In a strengths-based study, Greene and Seefeldt (2023) reported that youth identified several benefits of their participation in an early employment program, including growth and skills related to transitioning to adulthood, building community and social capital, and accessing opportunities. These experiences may be particularly consequential for youth whose access to informal employment networks or family-based career pathways is limited, positioning CBYSOs as important institutional bridges into early workforce participation (Allen et al., 2020; Jones & Jones, 2020; McCombs et al., 2017; Modestino & Paulsen, 2019; Visser, 2018b, 2020). Visser (2018b) demonstrated that CBYSOs impact the economic integration of disconnected young people seeking employment and disrupt exclusionary forces impacting their labor market entry. However, because this study primarily focused on rural disconnected youth, it remains unclear how these findings translate to Black youth specifically. The present study addressed this gap by examining how employment supports function within CBYSOs serving Black youth, specifically through participants' narratives of YES's role in shaping their developmental experiences and transitions into adulthood.

In addition to early employment, CBYSOs are critical agents of skill development for young people (Levine & Viano, 2025; Moore et al., 2022). Levine and Viano (2025) highlighted the development of social literacies and soft skills as key outcomes of participation. Pearson et al. (2025) found that youths developed research skills through programming opportunities; these young people learned to engage with the community and communicate their findings to a shared audience. While evidence suggests that CBYSOs contribute to young people's skill-building, it is unclear how these skills help them beyond their time as program participants. Specifically,

limited research has examined whether youth transfer these competencies into adulthood contexts or how they draw upon them in educational and professional pursuits.

Navigation of Systems and Opportunities

In addition to providing developmental programming and identity-supportive environments, CBYSOs frequently assist youth in navigating complex institutional systems and opportunity structures that shape their access to education, employment, and post-secondary pathways (Visser, 2020). Staff within these organizations often serve as intermediaries who help youth interpret institutional expectations, identify available opportunities, complete application processes, and connect with external resources, thereby supporting youths' capacity to translate developmental preparation into tangible adulthood opportunities (Ramirez, 2021). CBYSOs also bridge the information gap that disproportionately impacts Black youth by sharing knowledge and insights. Gaining access to information from adults and peers is a critical mechanism in creating a social advantage and positioning youth for future-building opportunities (Burt, 2000; Philp & Gill, 2020). These findings highlight the role of CBYSOs as key facilitators of opportunity access, enabling youth to navigate institutional systems and translate developmental support into meaningful postsecondary and workforce outcomes.

Beyond providing direct assistance with institutional processes, CBYSOs may also support youths' broader capacity to understand and navigate complex opportunity systems, especially during the transition to adulthood. Through mentoring relationships, advising conversations, and exposure to institutional knowledge, youth may develop what scholars describe as navigational capital, which is the ability to interpret bureaucratic expectations, anticipate institutional barriers, and identify alternative pathways when traditional routes are obstructed (Yosso, 2005). CBYSOs have been instrumental in building Black youths' social

capital and linking them to the social resources that promote upward mobility (Byun et al., 2012). These spaces connect Black youth to important social and professional networks that provide them with support and opportunities that could shape their future orientations.

In Byun et al's (2012) study, social capital was important for predicting youths' future orientations beyond sociodemographic background. Such developmental support may influence not only immediate institutional engagement but also youths' long-term confidence in interacting with educational systems, financial aid structures, hiring processes, and professional advancement opportunities that shape adulthood transitions. However, much of this literature focuses on support given to current high school participants within CBYSO contexts. Less is known about whether these efforts are sustained post-high school or how they operate for youth transitioning into adulthood; this study endeavors to further understand this within a post-high school context.

Holistic and Relational Support

Holistic support within CBYSOs often extends beyond discrete programmatic services to encompass sustained relational engagement between youth and organizational staff. These relationships may provide consistent mentorship and emotional reassurance. The literature is less clear on the developmental guidance across multiple stages of youths' educational and professional trajectories (Case, 2020). Dill and Ozer (2019) explored relational engagement among young people in CBYSOs and found that young people built relationships with supportive, trusted adult staff who served as role models outside their families. These individuals were deemed critical forces for Black youth, as they poured into them and invested in their future trajectories. It is unclear, however, how these relationships are sustained and supported over

time. Therefore, this study included a relational dimension to its investigation within CBYSO spaces.

Because CBYSOs frequently maintain lower staff-to-youth ratios and prioritize relational continuity, they may be positioned to respond more flexibly to emerging developmental needs, including crises, transitions between institutional stages, or unexpected disruptions (Levine & Viano, 2025). Case (2020) found that CBYSOs often include caring adult mentors, or seed people, who provide informal and formal support for Black youths' academic, personal, socioemotional, and professional needs. These individuals are described as committed to "treating young people as seeds that require tending ... so the seeds will grow" (Jackson et al., 2014, p. 395), and they provide the space for Black youth to build their futures. Supportive adults within CBYSOs provide an ethos of care and set high expectations for youth as they prepare for their post-secondary futures (Baldridge, 2017; Clark et al., 2023; Wong, 2010). This relational infrastructure may function as a stabilizing developmental resource, supporting youths' persistence through extended or non-linear transitions into adulthood. This occurs while reinforcing their sense of belonging within supportive institutional environments.

Black Youth Engagement Practices with CBYSOs

While existing scholarship has documented the developmental supports and opportunities provided by community-based youth-serving organizations, less attention has been devoted to understanding how young people themselves actively engage with and utilize these organizational contexts (Baldridge, 2018; Visser, 2020). Examining youth engagement practices shifts the analytic focus from institutional provision to youths' strategic participation, highlighting how young people navigate available supports, form relationships within organizational settings, and selectively draw on resources to meet evolving developmental needs.

Such engagement may be particularly consequential during the transition to adulthood, when young people increasingly make intentional decisions about where to seek guidance, opportunities, and institutional support (Settersten, 2007; Shanahan et al., 2005).

For Black youth navigating structurally uneven educational, economic, and policy environments, engagement with CBYSOs may function not only as program participation but also as an adaptive developmental strategy, mobilizing organizational relationships, opportunities, and knowledge to support long-term trajectories (Baldridge et al., 2017; Baldridge, 2018; Ginwright, 2007). This perspective draws on scholarship examining key forms of engagement, including formal participation, informal relational involvement, and the strategic use of organizational resources across youths' developmental pathways.

Strategies of Engagement

Existing scholarship also provides limited insight into how Black youth themselves engage with CBYSOs and mobilize organizational resources across their developmental trajectories (Baldridge, 2018; Visser, 2020). Youth engagement with CBYSOs may take multiple forms, including structured program participation, informal relational involvement, and strategic utilization of organizational supports in response to emerging developmental needs (Visser, 2018). Formal participation often includes enrollment in workforce programs, academic enrichment initiatives, mentoring programs, or leadership development activities designed to build specific competencies or prepare youth for institutional transitions. Informal engagement may occur through ongoing relationships with staff, drop-in use of organizational spaces, phone communication, or participation in community events that provide relational continuity and emotional support (Schwartz & Suyemoto, 2012).

In addition, youth may strategically utilize CBYSO resources by selectively drawing on specific supports such as employment referrals, college application assistance, transportation access, or professional networking opportunities at key moments during their transition to adulthood (Imariez, 2021). Visser et al. (2020) suggested that individuals' engagement strategies depend on the strength of their relational ties and are largely determined by their disposable resources. Understanding these varied engagement patterns is essential for examining how CBYSOs function not only as service providers but also as relational infrastructures that youth actively navigate and mobilize to support their developmental progression into adulthood.

Structural Constraints and Tensions

Evidence suggests that CBYSOs serve as a substitute for youth who may experience weak or fractured support structures or limited resource networks (Greeson & Thompson, 2017; Ramirez, 2021; Visser, 2016, 2018b; Visser et al., 2021). The substitutive role of CBYSOs becomes particularly salient in contexts where young people encounter disruptions to institutional or relational supports conventionally assumed to facilitate adulthood transitions. Youth may experience school environments characterized by limited individualized guidance, family systems constrained by economic uncertainty or competing responsibilities, or community infrastructures lacking accessible developmental programming (Visser, 2020). In such contexts, CBYSOs may provide continuity of mentorship, access to structured opportunities, and sustained adult guidance that compensates for gaps across other institutional domains (Visser, 2018b). Visser (2018b) demonstrated that CBYSOs remain supportive of disconnected youth, particularly when educational and professional institutions fail to include them. This substitutive function does not imply that CBYSOs fully replace these systems; rather, they may operate as adaptive support mechanisms that stabilize youths' developmental

trajectories when traditional pathways are fragmented or inaccessible. However, the literature does not fully clarify how community-based organizations help maintain developmental momentum for youth navigating structurally constrained transitions into adulthood.

While CBYSOs frequently function as critical developmental supports, they often operate under significant structural constraints that may limit their reach, stability, and long-term capacity (Baldridge, 2018; Ginwright, 2005). Many organizations depend on unstable grant funding, shifting policy priorities, and fluctuating philanthropic investment, which can affect program continuity and staffing stability (Baldridge, 2018; Sheehan et al., 2022). These resource limitations may result in uneven service availability across communities and may constrain organizations' ability to sustain long-term support for youth navigating extended transitions into adulthood.

Limitations of Existing CBYSO Research

The extant literature limits the ability to articulate how these organizations support the advancement of Black youth into adulthood and underexamines how these young people utilize CBYSO resources and services during this critical developmental stage (Ginwright, 2007; Visser et al., 2020). Only a few researchers have investigated the strategies these youth employ to support their developmental transitions. For example, Sanders et al. (2024) examined how Black youth value protective community resources during emerging adulthood. Their research focused on broad community resources but did not specifically investigate Black youths' resource relationships with CBYSOs. Much of the existing literature reflects adults' framing and understanding of youth needs rather than centering youths' own voices (Baldridge, 2014; Eliasoph, 2011). Without incorporating these perspectives, developmental interventions risk reinforcing deficit narratives or missing the nuances of how community-based support is

mobilized by young people (Hartmann & Swartz, 2006). They may also face similar challenges associated with federal policy implementation and lack an understanding of how Black youth may potentially utilize community-based support during their transitions to adulthood (Adams et al., 2021). Addressing this gap was critical, given the developmental context in which Black youth progress toward adulthood.

Study Importance

The broader policy environment further amplified the importance of this study. Many social and federal safety net programs designed to aid marginalized individuals have faced restructuring, reduction, or elimination (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2023). Several university-level programs and interventions, conventionally designed to bridge developmental gaps, socialize youth into college, and prepare them for their post-college journeys, are now deemed illegal or viewed as problematic (Abdur-Rahman, 2025). While post-secondary transition programs are promising for Black youth, support often declines when the focus shifts from race to first-generation college status or economic need (Kim, 2025; Sequeria, 2025). The loss of these resources may create larger disparities and further exacerbate existing racial and economic gaps for Black youth. The removal of such support may continue to make Black youth vulnerable during this developmental stage.

Given this existing climate, CBYSOs may play an increasingly significant role within the support infrastructure of Black youth as they transition to adulthood. Thus, a deeper examination of the role, strategies, and mechanisms of CBYSOs was necessary to address, mitigate, and transform the challenges Black youth confront. Such inquiry may better position researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to support Black youth during adulthood transitions while recognizing the complexity of their developmental experiences.

The context in which Black youth advance toward adulthood is more intricate than the universalisms scholars have purported about this developmental transition (Pickney et al., 2011). The acute differences and uniqueness of Black youths' adulthood journeys required an intimate look into the support infrastructure needed to aid their productive transitions to adulthood. To better understand the developmental importance of CBYSOs for Black youths' adulthood transitions, it was necessary to examine how they assist Black youth in overcoming the structural and systemic barriers that hinder their development and how these efforts are actually experienced by Black youth. Accordingly, this study empirically investigated how Black youth narrated their developmental experiences with a CBYSO and how they draw on the organization's resources to support their transitions to adulthood. The ultimate goal was to better understand how Black youth transition into adulthood and describe the CBYSOs' role in shaping their developmental journeys.

Conceptual Framework

The previously reviewed literature explored how scholars examined Black youths' developmental experiences. As the literature ultimately suggests, understanding Black youths' developmental transitions requires explicit attention to the historical and contextual influences shaping their lives. Yet many developmental theories, particularly those within the psychological discipline, are disconnected from an analysis of social context (Cahill, 1997; Irby et al., 2001). These frameworks also fail to adequately capture the racialized nuances of Black youths' developmental experiences (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Spencer, 2006). Instead, they project universalisms based on the experiences of White middle-class youth, which homogenizes the experiences of Black youth, simplifies their identities, and evaluates them through a dominant cultural framework, ultimately assuming generalizability across racial or ethnic groups

(Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Ginwright, 2005; Roy & Jones, 2014; Tuck & Yang, 2014). In addition, current developmental models focus almost exclusively on individual attributes and overlook how social, economic, and political conditions shape Black youths' developmental outcomes (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Roy & Jones, 2014). Scholars' decontextualized approaches to studying Black youths' developmental transitions can misrepresent Black youths' complex and racialized environmental interactions and distort the systemic factors impeding their positive development (Ginwright et al., 2006). To address these limitations, this study drew on a composite framework that merged three interrelated theories: critical race theory (CRT), the counterspaces framework, and life course theory.

This study's framework was grounded in the argument that Black youths' developmental conceptualizations and transitions to adulthood differ significantly from those of their peers due to the racialized and structurally constrained nature of their development (Ginwright, 2006; Pinckney et al., 2011). Further, it posited that Black youth rely on CBYSOs as critical supports throughout their transitions to adulthood (Baldridge, 2014, 2018, 2020). Each theoretical lens, although not initially conceptualized as a youth-facing framework, had strengths that offered distinct contributions to this analysis. CRT provided a macro-level lens to examine the systemic and structural racism shaping Black youths' lives; the counterspaces framework offered a meso-level perspective to understand how YES functions as a culturally responsive and protective environment that fosters resistance and resilience; and life course theory offered a micro-level lens to analyze individual developmental trajectories, transitions, and turning points from Black youths' perspectives.

Together, these frameworks enabled a robust analysis of Black youths' developmental journeys, connecting systemic forces, community contexts, and individual meaning-making.

Specifically, they guided the study's research design and data analysis by highlighting: (a) how systemic racism structures the material and social conditions Black youth navigate (CRT); (b) how community-based organizations like YES counteract those inequities and cultivate supportive spaces (counterspaces); and (c) how youth perceive, construct, and move through their own adulthood trajectories over time (life course theory). This conceptual framework thus provided the foundation for a critical and nuanced exploration of the developmental experiences of Black youth within YES.

Critical Race Theory

In this study, critical race theory served as a comprehensive framework for understanding the racialized developmental experiences of Black youth. Although the theory originated in a legal context to address the dismantling of civil rights legislation (Bell, 1980; Crenshaw, 1991), its theoretical relevance extends to other disciplinary areas. CRT functions as a broad theory with underlying tenets that provide tangible evidence for racism's foundational role in America. It situates racism as a systemic and institutional phenomenon rather than an interpersonal experience embedded in America's legal systems, policies, and institutions that were intentionally designed to harm and exploit individuals, particularly Black people (Bell, 1980, 1982, 1985; Crenshaw, 1991; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, 2017).

A deeply held CRT premise is that race operates as a social construct that informs law and social policy, creating a racial hierarchy based on arbitrary metrics such as blood proportions, ancestry, phenotype, physical qualities, customs, and culture (Omi & Winant, 2002; Ray, 2022). Such practices have led to value-assigned racial categories that leave some individuals more privileged than others. Categorizing individuals by race has resulted in racial marginalization that is particularly damaging for Black individuals who are deemed less valuable

and human (Machery & Faucher, 2005; Ray, 2022). These ideas have social and political consequences and, in some cases, dictate who has the right to live and access resources (Ray, 2022). Leveraging race as a social construct illustrates how laws and policies influence the everyday experiences of Black youth and make them more vulnerable to racial inequity and exploitation during their adulthood transitions (Bell, 1980, 1982, 1995; Crenshaw, 2017; Harris, 1993; Lawrence, 1995; Matsuda, 1987, 2018).

Relying on critical race perspectives allowed for an intentional naming of the United States' racial social system and its role in shaping Black youths' development. It also highlighted the complex conditions in which Black youth transition to adulthood and showed how their developmental capacity and affordances are restricted by exploitative laws and policies governing an unjust society. This theoretical framework was used to demonstrate how Black youth navigate racialized experiences along their developmental journeys. At the same time, its use was not intended to ascribe these young people to a monolithic narrative about their racial group or to purport that all Black youth share the "same" racialized experiences or adulthood journeys.

For the purposes of this study, three of the core CRT tenets were emphasized: (a) permanence of race, (b) whiteness as property, and (c) counterstorytelling. These dimensions provided a macro-level lens through which to examine how racial systems and structures shape the conditions under which Black youth develop and transition into adulthood. Each dimension deepened the socio-historical analysis of how race-based inequities permeate developmental contexts and restrict access to resources, opportunities, and recognition (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002).

Permanence of Race

Critical race theory (CRT) posits that race is a permanent and enduring feature of the United States (Bell, 1992; Lawrence, 1995). The concept of racial permanence suggests that racism is an inherent part of U.S. identity and deeply ingrained in its psyche, culture, and customs (Matsuda et al., 1993). Racism has controlled the political, social, and economic realms of U.S. society since this nation's inception. According to CRT scholars, the same racism that upheld the institution of slavery continues to operate within current U.S. social systems and structures, demonstrating the permanence and intractable nature of race. The nation's reliance on race, therefore, has sustained a legacy of exploitation and discrimination against Black Americans while preserving Whiteness as the prevailing and dominant social structure and primary mechanism of access (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Lopez, 1997; Painter, 2010; Mills, 1997; Omi & Winant, 1994).

Despite decades of litigation and legal efforts to achieve civil rights for Black people, advances in race relations and social conditions in the U.S. have continued to be uprooted, eroded, and merely dismantled (Bell, 1992, 1995; Anderson, 1997). This result was as predicted, given CRT's premise that legal remedies to mitigate racism in America were temporary and ineffective over time (Bell, 1982). It also reflected CRT's claim that the struggle for racial justice, particularly through the legal system, is locked into a "pattern of cyclical progress and cyclical regression" (Bell, 1992, p. 98). CRT suggests that this failure is not aberrational or by happenstance but rather by intentional design to sustain and stabilize historically rooted systems of oppression.

As a result, Black people, especially Black youth, experience negative implications of the permanence of racism, such as inequities in resource access and opportunities through

institutional arrangements and policy frameworks (Ladson-Billings, 2000; Lawrence & Keleher, 2004; Ray, 2022). The enactment of racism further harms this population by controlling social organizations and institutions such as the court system, police departments, schools, banks, hospitals, and real estate offices (Egede & Walker, 2020; George, 2020; Ray, 2022). These conditions contribute to compromised resource allocation and discriminatory processes embedded within societal structures (Ray, 2022; Vaught & Castagno, 2008). CRT posits that structural racism is, therefore, a political system that determines differential access to employment, healthcare, education, and other important resources (Ray, 2022; Vaught & Castagno, 2008).

Evidence of this "unequal distributional system that combines ideas about race with unequal access to social and material resources" (Ray, 2022, p. 20) is shown in disparities between White and Black individuals. Research shows that White individuals outperform Black individuals on nearly every social well-being indicator (health, income, wealth, life expectancy, and occupational standing) due to structural racism (Ray, 2022). The permanence of race tenet helps depict how structural racism manifests and informs the unique context Black youth confront as they transition to adulthood. This transition is often complicated by structural constraints that limit resource access, intensify precarity, and reduce educational and professional opportunities. These conditions are not coincidental, but rather the result of historically entrenched systems that restrict Black mobility, stability, and advancement (Bell, 1992; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ray, 2022).

Whiteness as Property

CRT charts the relationship between whiteness and property, illustrating the interrelation of racial identity and privilege (Harris, 1993). This tenet was developed in response to early U.S.

legislation granting White men and, later, White women the unique affordance of obtaining property rights through land (Bell, 1995; Delgado & Stefancic, 2017; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). During this period, such access to physical property allowed White people to wield buying power and receive privileges that historically excluded and exploited people of color (Harris, 1993). These exclusionary practices are upheld today, even as the meaning of property has evolved from ownership to an ideology that seeks to uphold capitalistic structures and preserve power dynamics.

Whiteness, like race, is a social construction, and "the root of that construction is differential access to resources" (Ray, 2019, p. 72). As such, only certain individuals, primarily those with White racial identities or those who strive to associate with Whiteness through various approaches, benefit from Whiteness. Whiteness as property, therefore, explains White people's "possessive investment" in this socially constructed ideology and their desire to control its associated privileges (Lipsitz, 2006). The privileges associated with whiteness allow individuals to avoid unwarranted harassment, accumulate wealth, gain employment or housing, and live a relatively long and healthy life (Bierdz, 2021; Harris, 1993; Ray, 2022). It also enables White people to exert violence, colonizing practices, and land destruction against people of color without facing legal consequences.

Harris (1993) argued that employing whiteness also acts as an exclusionary tactic that limits Black youths' opportunities for social and economic mobility. This study applied the tenet of whiteness as property to analyze how Black youths' exclusion from and lack of access to whiteness make it more challenging to obtain adulthood markers and resource affordances associated with whiteness, including education, home ownership, and employment (e.g., challenges in housing securement, lack of access to higher education credentials, and dismissal

of qualifications in workspaces). This framework further highlights how whiteness structures access to opportunity and advancement and ultimately the racialized conditions Black youth navigate in their transitions to adulthood.

Counterstorytelling

Counterstorytelling is a foundational CRT tenet that uses alternative narratives to challenge dominant ideologies and unveil systems of oppression (DeCuir & Dixson, 2004; Delgado, 1989; Matsuda, 1987; Solórzano & Yosso, 2002). Solórzano and Yosso (2009) described counterstorytelling as "a tool for exposing, analyzing, and challenging the majoritarian stories of racial privilege" (p. 138) that reflect the values, assumptions, and perspectives of dominant social groups (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). They further argued that it is a powerful mechanism for troubling traditional characterizations of marginalized groups and "uncovering hidden stories of those on the margins of society" (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009, p. 138). Unlike majoritarian narratives, counterstories shift the story content and narrator to elevate the voices and experiences of those often omitted, pathologized, or distorted in mainstream discourse (Delgado & Stefancic, 1993). In doing so, these counterstories legitimize marginalized groups' knowledge production, birth resistance, and affirm their mere existence. Counternarratives also accentuate the lived experiences of people of color and offer insight into their everyday realities of navigating racialized systems (Delgado, 1989; Matsuda, 1987).

Counterstorytelling can create new forms of agency and resources for marginalized individuals, especially people of color, to counter the effects of oppressive power structures (Howard, 2008). It also empowers these individuals to reclaim their voices, center their experiences, and restore faulty and damaging societal perspectives. This study acknowledged Black youths' exposure to counternarratives and magnified their stories and experiences as

counterstories, prioritizing their truths and perspectives. Creating space for Black youth to chronicle their own developmental journeys is a central asset of counterstorytelling and the study's aim. Participants' personal and collective stories mattered in the study and will fill an important void in the developmental literature. As Black youth narrated their developmental experiences, they challenged universalized assumptions that have historically shaped how their development is understood.

Counterspaces Framework

The counterspaces framework, introduced by Case and Hunter (2012), highlights how settings referred to as "counterspaces" protect and preserve the well-being of individuals experiencing oppression and marginalization. Counterspaces are supportive, identity-affirming contexts created by and for marginalized individuals through family systems, natural support networks, and community gatherings. These settings share a common goal of nurturing the well-being of those susceptible to chronic and pervasive systemic inequities. Underscored by early and recent literature, counterspaces promote adaptive responses, resilience, and a sense of belonging among marginalized populations. For example, Maton and Salem (1995) found that diverse organizations enhance psychological resources among members of different marginalized groups. Similarly, Solórzano et al. (2000) found that, in response to a negative racial climate, Black students on a predominantly White campus created counterspaces within student organizations, such as culturally affirming associations, sororities, and fraternities.

Harper and Schneider (2003) further observed that several international and regional organizations exist to create communities in which marginalized people can find "acceptance, understanding, and a sense of belonging" (p. 243) to counteract their experiences of social exclusion. More recently, Lane (2016) examined how Black students developed STEM identities

and belongingness within educational counterspaces; their findings suggest that counterspaces cultivate both positive identity development in disciplines with limited representation and belongingness for Black youth. These findings suggest that counterspaces are critically important environments that support the development and psychological safety of marginalized individuals. Building on this foundation, the present study drew on the counterspaces framework to better understand how YES operates as a counterspace for Black youth and shaped their development and adaptive behaviors to address systemic inequities in their adult transitions.

Counterspaces challenge deficit-oriented societal narratives concerning marginalized individuals' identities (e.g., racial and sexual minority individuals) through narrative reclaiming, resistance, and relational care (Case & Hunter, 2012; Solórzano et al., 2000). More specifically, these contexts confront marginalization in their (a) narrative identity work, (b) acts of resistance, and (c) direct relational transactions. By engaging these mechanisms, counterspaces can become "sites of radical possibility" (hooks, 1990, p. 149) in which proactive attempts are made not to reproduce oppressive patterns in the larger societal context. They can also transform alienating individual experiences into collective understandings of social processes and structures that help rewrite the trajectories and developmental possibilities for Black youth in adulthood (Gibbs Grey, 2018; Ginwright, 2006).

These challenging processes are rooted in an ethic of care that works to transform political, social, and economic contexts confronting marginalized individuals (Visser, 2018). Wilson (2016) described this ethic as critical care, defined as "embracing and exhibiting values, dispositions, and behaviors related to empathy, compassion, advocacy, systemic critique, perseverance, and calculated risk-taking for the sake of justly serving students and improving schools" (p. 557). While critical care is traditionally used to describe the work of educators and

leaders within conventional educational spaces, it holds similar relevance within community-based counterspace contexts, where adult members demonstrate a deep commitment to responding to and countering the structural and institutional inequities that marginalized individuals face (Easley et al., 2025; Herrenkohl et al., 2025; Wilson, 2016). Like in educational settings, critical care within counterspaces is fueled by frustration with institutional power structures and a desire to address marginalization, systemic neglect, and institutional failures (Harris et al., 2013; Herrenkohl et al., 2025; Linville, 2020; Pena-Pencheira & De Costa, 2021; Ridley & King, 2013).

Although informed by the broader care literature (Noddings, 2012, 2019) that emphasizes caring dynamics in interpersonal relationships, scholars have emphasized that critical care is distinct from traditional definitions of care, as it extends beyond empathy, active listening, feelings of compassion, or relational nurturing (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2006; Cooper, 2009; Easley et al., 2025; Herrenkohl et al., 2025; Shields, 2003; Wilson, 2016). As Ginwright (2010) and other scholars suggested, critical care as praxis is enacted not through emotion but through action, the disruption of injustice, and solidarity, especially within the Black community (Herrenkohl et al., 2025; Wilson, 2016). Critical care is, therefore, foundational to counterspaces, shaping how they engage in the core processes of narrative identity work, acts of resistance, and direct relational transactions.

Narrative Identity Work

Counterspaces challenge the negative representations and notions concerning marginalized identities through narrative identity work. Narrative identity work refers to how individuals or collectives give meaning to themselves, their circumstances, and others through narratives that are congruent with and supportive of their self-concept (Snow & Anderson,

1987). Through this process, individuals negotiate their identities by either distancing themselves from traditional societal ascriptions or propelling themselves toward socially valued identities. As a result, they may reject pejorative societal representations or accept affirming ones (Opsal, 2011).

Counterspaces leverage narratives (oral or written stories that convey information about individuals) that are deliberately crafted (a priori) or emerge organically (Opsal, 2011; Rappaport, 1995). Narratives are sustained within environments such as counterspaces that promote shared ideologies, belief systems, and cultural worldviews tailored to the specific needs of marginalized individuals. The ease of identifying counterspace narratives may vary; some are more identifiable through written products, such as signs, blogs, and documents that highlight the setting's program model, philosophy, mission, or vision, while others are less formalized and visible. Narratives may be explicitly communicated through oral mantras or messages and represent three forms: (a) oppression, (b) resistance, or (c) reimagined personal narratives.

Oppression narratives articulate the nature of members' lived experiences with marginalization and mistreatment and make the invisible visible. Odera and Webster (2024) found evidence of this narrative in their qualitative study, in which Black students at a predominantly white institution (PWI) developed awareness of their marginalized positions in the world through a collective research project. Resistance narratives are liberatory and articulate individuals' strength and capacity to overcome oppressive practices. They also communicate what members believe they are owed from society and why they deserve improved conditions (Odera & Webster, 2024). Mills (2020) provided an example of resistance narratives among Black students at a PWI who were academically overlooked but engaged in meaning-making that allowed them to reclaim positive identity interpretations. Reimagined personal narratives

challenge marginalization, negative stereotypes, and deficit framing messages. They also affirm one's identity and reshape their self-concept, worth, and personal beliefs (Fine et al., 2000; Mankowski & Rappaport, 2000; Odera & Webster, 2024; Rappaport, 1995).

Grier-Reed (2010) identified reimagined narratives in their work, as group members discussed how they reconstructed their identities to emphasize their ability to engage in social change work and research-related activism. In this study, narrative identity work served as a lens for examining how Black youth construct meaning during developmental transitions, particularly in the face of racialized adversity. It also enabled an analysis of how narrative identity work is cultivated within YES, including how the organization supports youth in narrating their own stories and how YES contributes to creating, affirming, and disseminating narratives that reinforce Black youths' positive identity development and transition to adulthood.

Acts of Resistance

Counterspaces provide marginalized individuals with opportunities to think, feel, and act in ways consonant with their identities, yet devalued by society. These settings offer a space where cultural practices can be enacted without fear and where critiques of oppressive conditions can be made boldly. Counterspaces support the development and maintenance of identities at risk and create nurturing environments where these identities can be equally celebrated. Acts of resistance are strategic means by which marginalized individuals bolster their self-concepts and challenge dominant societal, cultural, or even familial expectations (Ginwright et al., 2006). They may be political, cycle-breaking, or rooted in individual advocacy to preserve marginalized individuals' well-being. While these acts vary, they are shaped by individuals' heightened critical awareness in counterspace settings and enacted in their respective contexts through personal resistance or reimagined narratives. This tenet was useful in understanding how YES

curated processes and mechanisms that birth resistance behaviors within Black youth that they display along their adulthood journeys, especially as they navigate systemic inequities and resist racial oppression. Equipping Black youth with tools and strategies to address inequitable social structures is a core function of counterspaces (Carter, 2007; Case & Hunter, 2012).

Carter (2007) illustrated this process in her study of Black students in a predominantly white secondary school who "enacted Blackness" (p. 549) as an identity-affirming act of resistance. She found these individuals openly expressed cultural values and routinely engaged in "certain styles of dress, speech and behavior [that] allow some members to reclaim and perform an intrinsic form of Blackness that affirms their racial and ethnic identities" (p. 549). This example demonstrates how acts of resistance are carried out by individuals and by groups that respond collectively to social and racial marginalization in school settings and other contexts (Ginwright, 2006).

Furthermore, counterspaces facilitate environments where critical strategies for collective resistance and, at times, survival are developed. Collective resistance includes leveraging group capacity to confront, challenge, and change issues related to marginalization and oppression. For instance, Lane (2016) described collective resistance when students engaged critically with their institution's diversity and inclusion efforts. Collective contestation and refusal to accept dominant societal practices are also core acts of resistance that can open pathways toward social change (Carter, 2007; Ginwright, 2006). Counterspaces foster collective recognition of systemic injustices, helping individuals examine the root causes of oppressive systems (Cooper, 2009; Dantley, 2005; Murtadha & Watts, 2005). Community-based counterspaces, like YES, have the potential to prepare young people and adult members to address quality-of-life issues arising from adverse economic, political, and social factors through various programming and

initiatives. Through shared commitment and coordinated action, these spaces can influence the environmental conditions in which Black youth develop and experience their transitions to adulthood.

Direct Relational Transactions

Relational transactions are an essential part of counterspaces. Although the term transaction can carry negative connotations, in this theoretical context, it signifies the reciprocal, mutually honoring, and empowering relational exchanges among members of counterspaces. Counterspaces foster deep, personal relationships in which individuals' emotional and physical well-being, growth, and development are prioritized. Within counterspaces, relational exchanges help to cultivate individuals' adaptive responses to oppression and marginalization (Case & Hunter, 2012). These include aspects of the relational environment such as emotional closeness and "social support and social transmission of behavioral and cognitive strategies to respond to the existence and consequences of oppression" (Case & Hunter, 2012, p. 266).

Members benefit from intentional interactions with others who empathize with their lived experiences, foster a shared sense of psychological and physical safety, and reduce feelings of isolation (Brodsky et al., 2011; Maton, 2008). This sense of safety and belongingness allows members to bring their whole selves into the space where they feel seen, valued, and respected. Participating vulnerably and willingly to share similar experiences of oppression and marginalization is likely to help ameliorate distress, confront systemic challenges, and mitigate the psychological consequences of exposure to adverse conditions (Brondolo et al., 2009; Jones, 2003, 2007). Through joint sharing, communicating, and relating, counterspace members develop strategies and wisdom to understand their own experiences and to respond intentionally to oppressive contexts. Balcazar et al. (2011) highlighted this perspective in their investigation of

relational transactions within a counterspace setting for Latino parents, showing how social networks among counterspace members facilitated useful sharing and knowledge exchanges about their rights, benefits, and entitled services when supporting youth with educational disabilities.

Counterspaces can also cultivate a sense of "fictive kinship," reducing feelings of alienation and exclusion (Carter, 2007). These family-like environments for members navigating marginalization and other systemic challenges are especially critical for Black youth who have historically relied on their chosen family connections for sources of support and resilience as they confront challenges and significant marginalization (Taylor et al., 2021). Members find solace in shared experiences and journeys, fostering feelings of belonging and community connection. The relational exchanges between youth and adult members in community-based counterspaces allow for shared power and decision-making, as well as organic connections, where youth-adult partnerships can help transform inequitable circumstances (Ginwright, 2006). Relationships within counterspaces can also shape young people's sense of purpose and recharge them in the midst of seeming defeat (Ginwright, 2005; Osai, 2016). Counterspaces may also serve as substitution functions that address relational limitations or system strains, such as challenging dynamics or a lack of resource affordances (Visser, 2018). Nurturing others within counterspaces through social support, relational guidance, and organic mentorship, where relational exchanges are reciprocal, purposeful, intentional, and interest-driven, is the essence of direct relational transactions. This particular tenet illustrated how youth draw on relational assets within counterspaces like YES to support their development and adulthood transitions.

Limitations of the Counterspaces Framework

The counterspaces framework outlines three distinct yet interrelated processes that represent activities within counterspace contexts, such as YES, that support Black youth and organizations in developing the capacity to challenge systemic inequities. The literature suggests that these challenging processes build members' capacity and catalyze critical reflection on how person-environment interactions produce adaptive responses to oppression and marginalization (Case & Hunter, 2012). While valuable and useful, these processes do not fully capture the range of strategies leveraged within counterspaces to support Black youth (Case & Hunter, 2012). The existing counterspaces framework emphasizes processes that address social and psychological indicators but overlooks those that address material and economic disparities.

Evidence from CRT and other scholarship suggests that improving the material conditions of Black youth is essential, as they may be unable to access resource networks to support their healthy transitions to adulthood due to systemic forces (Adams et al., 2021). Without considering how counterspaces equally mitigate resource gaps for Black youth, a critical function of these contexts remains unaccounted for. Exploring how these spaces meet both the psychological and material needs of young people is crucial for their livelihoods and overall transitions into adulthood. To address this limitation, this study theorized an additional counterspaces tenet that integrated scholarship from Visser (2018a) and Visser et al. (2020), broadening the framework's overall application. The new tenet "opportunity cultivation and resource utilization" considered the mechanisms that CBYSOs employ to influence social and economic conditions, as well as the livelihood strategies that youth utilize within counterspaces to access developmental resources. This approach enabled a more thorough analysis of YES as a counterspace that centers and prioritizes psychological wellness and material progress.

Opportunity Cultivation and Resource Utilization

Opportunity cultivation and resource utilization reflect how counterspaces shape opportunity structures and how members utilize those resources and opportunities. Because racial marginalization impacts the material and resource affordances available to individuals, particularly Black youth, counterspaces intervene to mobilize resources and structure opportunities that alter individuals' vulnerable conditions, while also upholding their humanity and personhood (Ray, 2022; Visser, 2018a). These spaces address individuals' economic and material exclusion through a relational understanding of youths' needs, strategic programming, and resource allocation, leveraging creative integration practices to reconnect members to institutions and networks for advancement, and, in some cases, survival (Briggs, 1998; Visser et al., 2020). Counterspaces may also form intermediary or alternative systems that help individuals build internal and external assets outside of traditional contexts through employment creation or the pursuit of alternative educational options (Visser, 2018a; Visser et al., 2020).

The conceptualization of opportunity cultivation and resource utilization draws from Visser's (2018a) typology of strategies, which specifies how community-based organizations respond to structural barriers their members confront. Aligning with Visser's work (2018a), counterspaces employ three approaches (direct, indirect, and alternative strategies) to connect individuals to vital resources and opportunities for advancement and thriving. According to Visser's typology (2018a), direct strategies involve activities or resources offered by an agency intended to directly influence the social and economic integration of young people into formal education or labor markets (e.g., workforce development, skill-building programs). When implemented, these strategies have the potential to create quality employment opportunities for young people.

Indirect strategies include activities and programming designed to address challenges and vulnerabilities (e.g., the lack of social service connections). These strategies address risks and social reproduction needs that may generate tensions and insecurities resulting from disconnection and marginalization (Picchio, 1992). Alternative strategies encompass activities and programs that foster economic and social inclusion by providing individuals with alternative pathways for engagement with educational and labor-market institutions (e.g., internships). Creating mechanisms for individuals to gain a "way in" to employment and other institutions are innovative practices that counterspaces rely on to mitigate marginalization and economic exclusion. Overall, these strategies expand individuals' resource capacity and transform their opportunity structures.

These reintegration efforts are further strengthened through what Briggs (1991) described as social leverage and social support. Counterspaces connect individuals to resources and opportunities that help them navigate their constrained circumstances (social support) or gain access to networks and resources that propel them toward economic mobility (social leverage; Briggs, 1998; Granovetter, 1995; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Adult members within counterspaces may facilitate this by supporting, advocating for, and advancing young people's trajectories, including by drawing on personal networks and resources when necessary.

This domain also addresses how individuals within counterspaces utilize allocated or constructed resources and opportunities. Understanding how individuals leverage and experience resources is central to opportunity cultivation. Individuals experiencing marginalization may have varying livelihood needs, with some seeking subsistence and resource relief, while others prioritize social network connections. This range of resource needs is often shaped by economic and social factors, as explored in Visser et al. (2020). Their work outlined livelihood strategies

that explain how individuals, such as Black youth, could utilize counterspaces to support their adulthood journeys and highlighted three livelihood strategies: (a) diversification, (b) transformation, and (c) last resort strategies. The diversification strategy focuses on how youth use CBYSOs to fill gaps in resources and opportunities. These resources and opportunities complement existing access to governmental programs and strong personal and social networks that help youth navigate pathways to adulthood. The transformation strategy focuses on how youth turn to CBYSOs to reconstruct constrained opportunity spaces. These youth seek to strengthen weak social networks by maximizing resources and opportunities that can yield real incomes, economic security, and enhanced personal experience (Visser et al., 2021). This may be reflected in a young person pursuing a curated employment connection with an established CBYSO partner due to challenges in finding employment. Finally, the last resort strategy focuses on youth who rely on CBYSOs as the sole mechanism for ensuring subsistence of housing, food, or other basic necessities as they confront extremely weak social networks and deep marginalization. These theoretical extensions offer a more expansive view of resource support and utilization within counterspaces. Material and resource augmentation constitute an essential value of counterspaces, particularly given the marginalization and exclusion experienced by their members. Reintegrating or integrating Black youth into socioeconomic networks is vital for their transitions to adulthood. As such, counterspaces are life-giving environments that serve as necessary and sometimes final safety nets for members, such as Black youth.

Collectively, the counterspaces framework illustrated how YES operates as both a support system for Black youth and a transformative, community-rooted space that counters racial marginalization and enables youth to envision alternative pathways to adulthood. With critical care as the foundation, counterspaces like YES can become places of restoration and

repositories of collective wisdom that equip marginalized individuals with narratives, resistance strategies, relationships, and resources to navigate oppressive conditions and ultimately, developmental transitions for Black youth.

Life Course Theory

Elder's (1996) life course theory provided a sociological perspective on Black youths' developmental trajectories. Leveraging a sociological framework to study development was critical, as it linked the past to the present and provided a comprehensive perspective on social interactions, structures, policies, and processes, revealing insights into behaviors, dynamics, and inequities. Life course theory posits that an individual's life is shaped by their family, friends, school, work, and other social institutions, not solely by their actions. More specifically, a life course perspective suggests that one's life history and social environment influence life outcomes. In this study, life course theory provided a lens for exploring how Black youths' early experiences, social conditions, and relational networks influence their transitions into adulthood within systemic contexts. Life course theory incorporates both objective and subjective dimensions (Eliason et al., 2015). The objective dimensions consist of social roles and transitions between them, while the subjective dimensions focus on a person's recognition, interpretation, and evaluation of the experiences associated with their trajectories. This distinction was used to understand not only the structural opportunities and barriers youth encounter but also how they make internal meaning of their adulthood journeys.

Life course theory was originally developed to explore the intricate interrelationship between social structures and the impact of time, place, and history on individuals' lives. It is known for its "methodological pluralism," drawing from the philosophies and research approaches from the social sciences and humanities (Elder, 1996). Continuity and change, social

structures, and the relationships among time, place, and lives as contexts for developmental processes are foci of life course theory (Elder, 1996; Elder et al., 2003; Settersten, 2003). These foci frame how Black youth describe the influences of systemic inequities and supportive interventions throughout their lives. Although life course theory traditionally assumes that lives unfold in orderly, patterned ways (Elder et al., 2003), scholars such as Roy and Jones (2014), Hendry and Kloep (2007), and Baltes (1987) have cautioned against applying a strictly linear model to marginalized populations. Hendry and Kloep (2007) noted that young people may reach adulthood according to their own perceptions and markers and find themselves in circumstances where their paths are circuitous. Roy and Jones (2014) similarly argued that developmental research must reflect diverse pathways, given the precarious nature of adulthood transitions for youth of color. Accordingly, this study employed a critical lens to examine non-linear, disrupted, reversible, or alternative trajectories that Black youth may describe as they narrate their transitions to adulthood.

Five core principles define life course theory: (a) time and place, (b) lifespan development, (c) timing, (d) agency, and (e) linked lives. These principles help to make sense of youths' perspectives on their own developmental transitions. Time and place suggest that individuals live their lives based on a particular time and place, which inform relevant cultural practices. Lifespan development is based on the belief that individuals develop biologically, socially, and psychologically beyond childhood (Elder et al., 2003). Life course theorists have suggested that circumstances in adulthood are shaped by earlier experiences and the meanings attached to them (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). Timing refers to the chronological ordering of events, rather than situating events in historical and cultural contexts. Although life events are

not rigidly predetermined, certain biological events are chronologically ordered and carry consequences if they occur outside the expected timing.

While life course theory emphasizes the importance of time, scholars have argued that time must be problematized for Black youth, suggesting that time is a tool of racialized and ontological violence. Specifically, Mahadeo (2019, 2024) claimed that discussions around time for Black youth must account for the role of power and privilege and how some individuals gain greater temporal value over others based on their racialized status. He also argued that time, for some Black youth, exceeds the conceptual capacity and temporal limits, demonstrating their prescience, closeness to the future, and de-arrestment from the present (Mahadeo, 2019, 2024).

Agency is also a core principle of life course theory, suggesting that individuals are not passive recipients of a predetermined life course but rather agentic individuals who make decisions that contribute to their lives. Hitlin and Elder (2007) explained that these decisions are influenced by an individual's temporal orientations to the situation at hand, with some decisions requiring intense focus on the present and others influenced by long-term goals. However, this idea is complex, as Black youths' agency can be compromised when fighting against and exposed to discriminatory systems and structures. Thus, understanding the nuances of agency within the life course perspective requires a structuralist orientation. Clancy and Holford's (2023) concept of bounded agency better reflects how Black youths' capacity to act and make choices may be constrained due to their social and structural environments. These young people's decision-making and movement through developmental transitions may be negatively affected by these arbitrary parameters.

Linked lives highlight the idea that individuals live interdependently, influenced by socio-historical factors (Marshall & Mueller, 2003). This concept encompasses social

connections that extend beyond immediate family relationships, including friendships, neighborly ties, and mentorships, all of which contribute to a "distinct orienting context" (Marshall & Mueller, p. 11). These social connections significantly inform how people interpret life events. Moreover, individuals differ notably in how they incorporate social norms, relationships, and institutions into their lives (Giele & Elder, 1998).

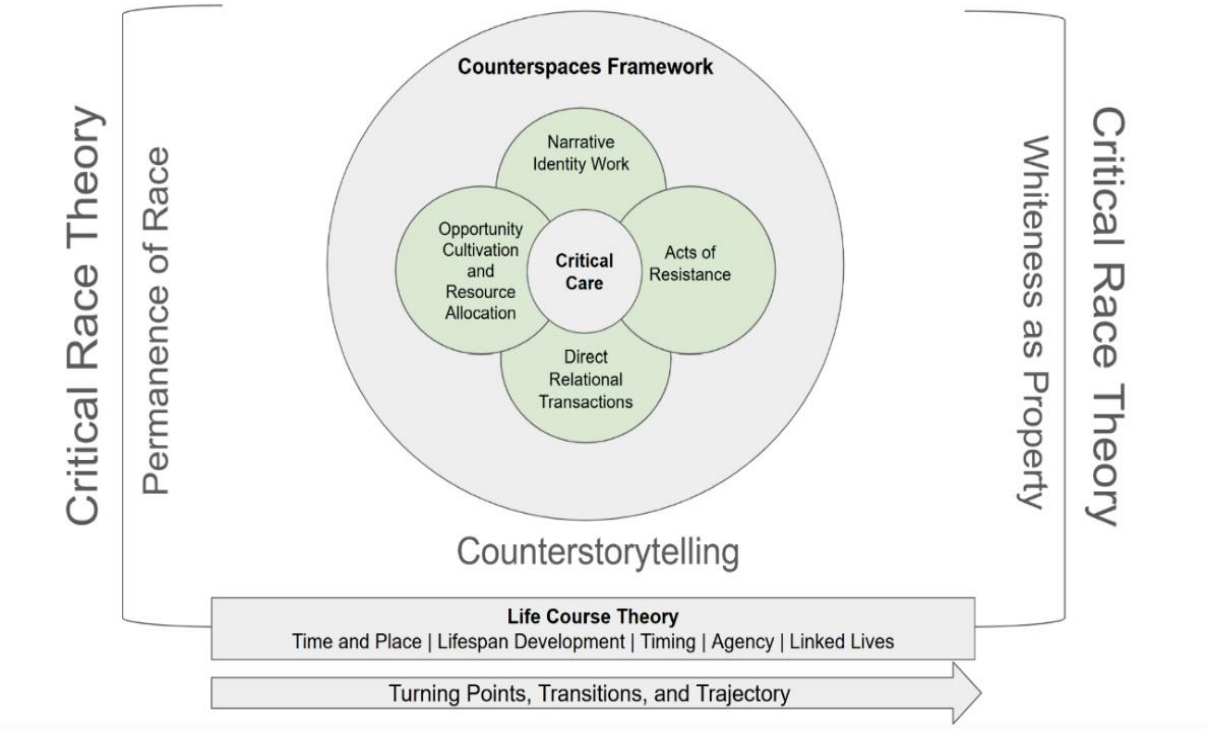
In addition to these principles, trajectory, transition, and turning point are commonly associated with life course theory to describe human developmental phenomena. Trajectories are the heart of the analysis and are shaped by life events. They are often described as "paths of change in developmental processes" (Van Geert, 1994, p. 31) and mark the long view of the life course. Long-term human phenomena such as work life, education, parenting, and marriage are often described in terms of trajectories (Black et al., 2009). Transitions are entry points for new states or roles within trajectories (Hagestad, 2003). They are also characterized by gradual change, frequently linked to the acquisition or relinquishment of roles, such as career changes within the work-life trajectory (Elder et al., 2003). Life course theory posits that roles represent the positions individuals occupy within social institutions. Transitions possess a liminal quality, which refers to being on the threshold or edge of a physical or psychological state (Turner, 1974). Turning points are defined as decisive moments when significant change occurs. They often involve events, experiences, or awareness that result in redirected or detoured trajectories. Scholars suggest that turning points are particularly salient to individuals and can alter behavior, affect, cognition, or context in ways that shape long-term outcomes (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996). Turning points linked to developmental transitions have been shown to facilitate and explain developmental change across the lifespan. These moments provide opportunities for

examining new, discontinued, or repatterned behaviors within specific context demands (Graber & Brooks-Gunn, 1996).

The life course theory tenets provided an analytic tool to explore how Black youth perceive their journeys to adulthood. The use of this theory further enhanced the understanding of how these youth navigate non-linear paths that challenge traditional, middle-class models of adult life and contextualize their development and agency over time in light of historical and structural limitations. It also provided insight into how youths create subjective meanings as they articulate their transitions, including their interpretations of the timing and sequencing of significant life events within a broader socio-historical framework. Additionally, it emphasized the influence of interconnected lives and collaborative figures, such as YES mentors, peers, or familial representatives, in shaping youths' decision-making and developmental trajectories. Through this lens, the study examined how Black youths' past experiences, present circumstances, and future aspirations intersected to inform their transitions into adulthood. Figure 1 presents a visual depiction of the study's integrated conceptual framework.

Figure 1

Conceptual Framework



CRT framed and established the systemic racial realities that shape Black youths' developmental conditions, offering a necessary macro-level understanding of the persistent inequities these youth face. The counterspaces framework, expanded with Visser's typology (2018a) and augmented by livelihood strategies (here referred to as opportunity cultivation and resource utilization), explained how YES operates as a protective and transformative space in which Black youth resist marginalization, build critical social capital, and access both psychosocial and material resources vital to their development. Critical care lies at the heart of the challenging mechanisms within the counterspace framework and provides a foundation for effective counterspaces. Life course theory offered the tools to trace individual developmental trajectories, transitions, and turning points while centering Black youths' subjective meaning-

making about adulthood amidst structural constraints. Together, these frameworks provided an analysis that moves beyond individualistic or deficit-based interpretations of Black youth development by illuminating how systemic forces, community-based interventions, and personal agency intersect. This integrated framework ensured that the study captured the complexity, nuance, and resilience inherent in the adulthood transitions of Black youth and provided critical insights into how community-based organizations like YES serve as catalysts for transformative development.

Summary

Chapter 2 reviewed the scholarly literature on Black youths' transitions into adulthood and the role of CBYSOs in that process. The chapter examined traditional and contemporary conceptualizations of adulthood, highlighting the limitations of universalized developmental models that insufficiently account for racialized and structurally mediated experiences. It further explored ecological and life course perspectives, emphasizing how institutional access, opportunity structures, and social capital shape developmental trajectories.

The chapter then examined the role of CBYSOs within Black youths' developmental ecologies, including their contributions to identity affirmation, skill development, institutional navigation, and relational support. Particular attention was paid to how these organizations function within broader learning ecosystems and operate amid structural constraints. The chapter identified critical gaps in the literature, especially the limited attention given to Black youths' own interpretations of their transitions into adulthood and their engagement practices with CBYSOs. These gaps provided the rationale for the present study and informed the development of the research questions. The latter part of this chapter outlined the conceptual framework undergirding the study, integrating critical race theory, the counterspaces framework - with

extensions drawing on Visser's livelihood and organizational strategies - and life course theory to examine how structural conditions shape Black youths' developmental transitions. Chapter 3 outlines the methodology for this study.

Chapter 3

Methods

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate Black youths' developmental experiences within YES. A qualitative methodology was warranted because extant scholarship on Black youths' transitions to adulthood has often relied on quantitative approaches or remains limited in scope, constraining opportunities to center Black youths' voices and meaning-making regarding their developmental experiences. Qualitative research provided a means to amplify the participants' lived experiences and facilitate an in-depth meaning-making process regarding racial, social, and cultural depositions (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Muzari et al., 2022; Roberts & Hyatt, 2019). This approach also allowed for both deductive and inductive analytical procedures to further strengthen the study's rigor. These features, along with the humanistic, naturalistic, and holistic characteristics of qualitative research, supported the selection of this design.

This study used a multiple cross-case study approach given the study's goals and research questions. Qualitative methodology was especially leveraged to more fully capture the complexity of Black youths' developmental experiences and transitions into adulthood. A case study approach offered several advantages for addressing the study's "how" questions and for examining the complex social and developmental processes associated with Black youths' transitions to adulthood. Interviews were the primary data collection method for understanding Black youths' conceptualizations of adulthood and YES' role in their developmental trajectories. To build more robust case studies, secondary archival

data analysis was deliberately applied to triangulate interviews and contextualize study participants' YES experiences. Case study methodology, therefore, enabled this study to achieve its goals of uncovering Black youths' conceptualizations of their journeys into adulthood and their narratives of YES' role in their development.

Epistemic Stance

My professional experiences, personal identities, and multiple worldviews shaped my research paradigm and use of qualitative research. While I am uniquely positioned as a researcher and community-based practitioner with over 15 years of experience to engage in this study, I approach research from the perspective that knowledge is constructed and informed by individuals' social interactions and personal histories, rather than by my own insights alone. From this standpoint, participants engaged in an active, collaborative meaning-making process that provided insights into my research praxis. Knowledge creation was catalyzed by participants' narratives and was grounded in their interpretations of their experiences. The research process involved shared learning, exchange, and knowledge building, in which individuals cultivate and retain knowledge rather than rely on academies or institutions. Because Black youth were centered and privileged in this study, their lived experiences were deemed dominant. This epistemic orientation functioned as an act of resistance and reflected a central aim of the study.

This work sought to empower Black youth from marginalized, minoritized, and racialized communities to tell their rich stories and experiences to enhance the understanding of Black youth development. Their language use was critical, as it created a platform for these young people to use their voices and to have a "seat at the table" at every stage of the research process. In spaces where "seats" are non-existent, these young people build their own "tables" and are

viewed as valuable partners and stakeholders, with currencies and expertise. Accordingly, this research positioned Black youth as knowledge producers, decision-makers, and invested stakeholders to generate social, cultural, and political transformation. This epistemic shift affirmed the legitimacy of Black youths' wisdom, challenged adult-centered assumptions about knowledge production, and disrupted traditional research hierarchies and power dynamics.

Through concerted, power-sharing efforts, young people, adults, and community members collaborated to conduct and lead research to improve their lives, their communities, and the institutions intended to serve them. This process supported shared ownership and authentic, organic engagement in the research. This research would have been incomplete without these collective voices. Furthermore, this study was grounded in social justice and real-world problem-solving and motivated by a sincere commitment to creating a more equitable and just world for young people of color transitioning to adulthood. The work was translational and practical, requiring a mix of approaches, intentional and careful listening, and diverse perspectives to advance knowledge and develop solutions that remove barriers to access and opportunity in adulthood.

Research Design

The voices of Black youth have been frequently omitted from the developmental literature, hindering a thorough understanding of their development. The stories about their adulthood transitions are often told through dominant frames without drawing on the lived experiences of Black youth. Adichie (2009) argued that these stories are shaped by power based on how, who, and when they are told. Therefore, it was important to dismantle these dominant narratives and allow Black youth to tell their own stories rooted in their own experiences. Given the traditional silencing of their voices in the literature, Black youth in this study were positioned

as storytellers with agency to narrate their own developmental experiences within YES. In doing so, they challenged the incomplete narratives about this population and this developmental period.

To interrupt this silencing and erasure, this study used a case study research design to explore the developmental transitions of Black youth. Case study scholars, including Merriam (2009), defined case studies as "in-depth descriptions and analysis of bounded systems" (p. 39). This definition encompasses four critical and distinct elements: (a) in-depth, (b) description, (c) analysis, and (d) bounded system. By upholding this rigorous approach, case studies aim to highlight a phenomenon by gathering as much information as possible about one or more cases rather than obtaining minimal information from a very large sample (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2005).

In case study research, one or more cases emerge that highlight the study phenomenon or object of the case. Cases reflect a population or conceptual interest and represent a bounded system within a real-life context (Adelman et al., 1983; Merriam, 1988, 2009; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Smith, 1978). Following Merriam's characterization of case study research as particularistic, descriptive, heuristic, and inductive, case studies require an intentional, thoughtful, and careful selection of cases that exemplify the phenomenon of interest, as well as a defined process for describing and analyzing them (Merriam, 1988). This selection process is supported by purposive sampling procedures that yield cases that meet necessary, but not sufficient, conditions. In this study, the case boundaries were defined as Black youth in YES. More specifically, participants' developmental narratives served as the unit of analysis in this multiple-case study and contributed to a deeper understanding of Black youths' transitions to adulthood and their use of YES' developmental support.

Understanding the experiences of Black youth during their transition to adulthood and the role CBYSOs play in their development was primarily achieved through semi-structured interviews with youth. However, consistent with case study methodology, multiple data sources were necessary to triangulate findings and enhance reliability and validity. Collecting data from multiple sources allows researchers to capture a "thick description" or a complete account of the case (Creswell & Poth, 2016; Geertz, 1973; Merriam, 1988). It also allows for the "small matters" to be unearthed, as they can offer additional complexity or nuance that would otherwise be overlooked in interpreting the case (Geertz, 1973). To better understand Black youths' developmental transitions and their use of YES' support infrastructure, additional data on youths' YES experiences were essential. As such, this study included archival data (i.e., reports, media files, case notes, student projects, and curriculum) to further contextualize the organization in which Black youths' developmental experiences were situated. These additional data sources contributed to a more holistic understanding of alumni experiences, organizational practices, and program priorities.

Research Context

The youth participating in this study were former YES participants, a grassroots, community-based youth-serving organization founded in 1994 to provide young people from low-income and communities of color with a portrait of themselves as successful, empowered, and confident leaders (YES, n.d.). Since its inception, YES has served more than 6,500 youth of color in Pittsburgh and Allegheny County, providing access to mentorship, enrichment, and employment opportunities to support their post-secondary journeys (Jones et al., 2024). YES aims to empower youth and families to become their own best resource and believes that its

status as a Black-operated nonprofit positions it to support Pittsburgh's communities of color (YES, n.d.).

YES currently serves youth ages 6 to 24 from disenfranchised and marginalized communities who are at heightened risk of economic, educational, and environmental risks (YES, n.d.). Many YES youth are referred by their peers, families, school representatives, or legal stakeholders. Some enter voluntarily, whereas others are referred for extrinsically regulated reasons, such as financial hardship or court-imposed requirements (Jones et al., 2021). However, many youth choose to stay in the program at their own discretion (Jones et al., 2021). YES strongly believes in and adheres to the ethos that there are no "throw-away kids" and everyone matters (YES, n.d.).

YES offers a variety of general services, including coalition building, wellness activities, enrichment, case management, and resource support, as well as a broad range of youth development programming in areas such as academic preparation, workforce and post-secondary development, diversion and restorative services, violence prevention, and mentoring and wellness. The organization is led by a diverse staff of directors, managers, coordinators, direct service providers, case managers, and specialists who bring unique experiences to this youth development work. YES also engages interns, instructors, and volunteers, some of whom are former YES students, to support and facilitate programming initiatives. Its ultimate goal is for students to obtain meaningful educational and career opportunities where they are self-sufficient, community stewards, peer role models for the next generation of leaders, and wealth-builders (YES, n.d.).

YES is situated in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, which is consistently touted as one of America's most livable cities. However, while Pittsburgh is indeed livable for some, data suggest

that it remains equally unlivable for others (Dickinson, 2021; Howell et al., 2019). Understanding this local context is important for situating the developmental trajectories of Black youth and the organizational practices of YES. The challenges, disparities, and living conditions in Pittsburgh provided a critical backdrop for understanding how youth experience and navigate their transition to adulthood and how YES structures its programming and support.

Pittsburgh is often described as a tale of two cities: a place with unique affordances and rich resources, and stark disparities. Research on racial and socioeconomic inequities, racially segregated communities, communal health challenges, heightened violence, and gentrification suggests that Pittsburgh is, as August Wilson suggested, "[a] very hard city, especially if you're Black" (Mock, 2019, para. 6). More than 50 years later, this sentiment continues to resonate, particularly for Black youth today, who are most vulnerable to racial inequities in education, employment, housing, and health (Young, 2019).

Despite its reputation for revitalization, Pittsburgh remains a highly segregated city with communities of color concentrated in neighborhoods with high rates of homelessness, poverty, violence, and dilapidation, similar to other northern and industrial Midwest cities. Black young adults living in these segregated communities face substantial developmental and community-based challenges rooted in historic underinvestment and ongoing systemic racism stemming from the 1930s (Osai, 2023). A byproduct of this underinvestment is the lack of access to equitable educational opportunities that support their transition from high school to college or desirable workforce pathways (Hallett, 2020; Osai, 2023). For instance, local school data indicate that only 16% of Black students in Pittsburgh Public Schools who pursue post-secondary education complete their degrees within four to six years (Osai, 2023). Black young adults are further disadvantaged professionally as they are "locked out" of career opportunities,

which is often explained by subpar preparation due to under-resourced schooling or structural racism (Hallett et al., 2020). Schools serving predominantly Black youth, particularly within the Pittsburgh Public Schools district, were less likely to offer Advanced Placement coursework, adequate access to counseling, or consistent opportunities for college and career exposure (Mistry et al., 2023). These limited preparatory resources and career exclusion relegate Black young adults to low-paying employment opportunities and limit their future mobility. Even worst, Pittsburgh ranked last in best United States cities for Black professionals (Young, 2019).

In addition to educational and professional barriers, Black youth in Pittsburgh are also more susceptible to harsh environmental conditions and community health challenges than their White peers (Bangs, 2021). Research shows that Black young adults live in neighborhoods with harmful levels of lead and other environmental toxins that impact their health outcomes. These conditions also contribute to these individuals' compromised life cycles, as they are among the population with the highest homicide rate. In fact, the mortality rate of young Black adults is higher in Pittsburgh than in 98% of similar cities (Howell et al., 2019). Black young adults' safety is constantly challenged and negotiated as they navigate innumerable risks to see and experience life beyond adolescence (Cotter, 2019). These intersecting challenges highlight the importance of considering Pittsburgh's developmental context in this study. They reflect the everyday realities Black youth must navigate and reveal how broader social, political, and institutional forces shape their lives. These same forces also influence how YES shows up for young people, building programs, supporting growth, and responding to need. Understanding the local landscape of Pittsburgh deepens insight into the Black youth in this study and helps to make sense of the organization working alongside them.

Researcher Positionality

I approached this work as a Black woman who was once a Black youth in YES. My shared racial identity allowed me to relate to feelings of racial marginalization, systemic inequities, and a history of racial trauma. My identity as a Black woman, mentor, and current role as YES' Deputy Director shaped the interpretive lenses through which I understood and made sense of the data. Given my previous and current experiences with YES, I was cognizant of both student and employee perspectives and positioned as an insider in this research study. With these identities, I approached the study from a standpoint of strong familiarity with the organization, its leadership, and the student participants. My role within YES allowed me to connect with participant experiences while remaining open to learn from them. This positionality required ongoing reflexive attention to how my relationships with participants shaped the research process, including how data were shared, interpreted, and represented.

My direct affiliation with YES and the study's confidentiality clause were communicated to all participants prior to the study and discussed extensively at the beginning of interviews to reassure them that their YES involvement would not be jeopardized by their shared reflections. I restated my established role in the study context as that of a researcher rather than a YES staff member or mentor. While I recognized that my personal relationship and role at YES may have influenced what participants chose to share, I reiterated the purpose of the study and asked interviewees to share transparently about their developmental journeys in order to meaningfully contribute to the literature. At the same time, I was intentional about approaching participants' reflections - particularly those that were vulnerable or trauma-related - with care, ensuring that participants-maintained control over what they chose to disclose. Along with acknowledging the natural occurrence of bias, this study positioned my mutual identification with participants as a

strength, as it enabled intersubjectivity that fostered positive rapport and trust throughout the study (Glesne & Peshkin, 1999). Such participant-researcher connection captured the use of my "multiple identities as an interaction quality" (Berry, 2008, p. 472) to create welcoming spaces for Black youth to share and reflect on their developmental experiences within YES. This relational approach also informed how participants' narratives were handled beyond the interview space, with careful attention to protecting their stories during analysis and representation.

I arrived at this research topic after a deep desire to understand how my former YES students conceptualized the future and prepared for their post-secondary trajectories. During my time at YES, my colleagues and I extensively supported young people in navigating barriers to access post-secondary opportunities. We approached this work from a pragmatic lens and did not hold an explicit scholarly interest in examining how youth understand their futures or opportunity structures. However, this work translated into scholarly inquiries once I matriculated at the University of Michigan, leading me to explore the concept of future orientation. I deeply immersed myself in the psychological literature to gain a comprehensive understanding of how one's future perception relates to their developmental trajectory. While I received further clarity and personally contributed to the future orientation scholarship (Jones et al., 2023, 2024), it also revealed critical limitations within that body of literature, particularly its reliance on the assumption that individuals possess sufficient agency to craft and pursue their futures equitably.

As I engaged more with the sociological literature on future orientation, I recognized how inaccurate this underlying premise was for many Black youth. I uncovered the racialized nature of temporal orientation and how Black youth were temporally disadvantaged. This awareness heightened my frustration with how scholars framed future orientation as it relates to Black

youth, placing blame on them for the challenges they endure, reinforcing a deficit narrative, and holding them responsible for systemic issues. The psychological literature narrowly focuses on the change capacity of individuals rather than on systems and structures, suggesting that Black youth should be altered rather than the oppressive environments constraining them. Scholars have highlighted the importance of honing individual internal assets as solutions to societal ills that disrupt Black individuals' futures, rather than focusing on mitigating the negative influences of structural and systemic barriers on their developmental outcomes (Bandura, 1997; Duckworth et al., 2007; Lerner et al., 2005).

As these patterns became more lucid, I pivoted away from future orientation as my primary focus. Instead, I shifted my interest to understanding Black youths' transitions into adulthood and became more curious about how Black youth become adults, especially in light of the bounded agency that constrains their developmental experiences and the structures that shape their developmental conditions. My extensive review of the developmental literature also highlighted the absence of Black youths' missing voices in narrating their developmental experiences and the lack of a critical, racialized framework for examining their developmental experiences in their adulthood transitions. This project emerged at the nexus of this frustration and an opportunity to add value to the developmental literature on Black youths' developmental transitions to adulthood.

Research Questions

This study addressed two research questions that center on the developmental transitions of Black youth. RQ1 focused on youths' conceptualization of adulthood and the sense-making of their own adulthood transition. RQ1 invited participants to share their understanding, interpretations, and definitions of adulthood. In doing so, they provided further insight into their

stories of adulthood and narrated what adulthood looks like for Black youth in YES. RQ2 investigated youths' experiences with YES as developmental infrastructure in their transition into adulthood. RQ2 sought to better understand the mechanisms and potential ways YES intervened programmatically, materially, and relationally to shape their transitions. Together, these questions provided a comprehensive picture of how Black youth conceptualize adulthood, engage with YES, and are supported by its organizational infrastructure.

RQ1: How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions to adulthood?

RQ2: How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in shaping their developmental transitions?

The data gathered from these questions provided valuable insights into how Black youth navigate structural barriers, cultivate resilience, and imagine future possibilities. These findings contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the socio-cultural and institutional factors shaping their pathways into adulthood. The following sections detail the strategies for participant selection, recruitment, data collection, and data analysis for both youth and stakeholder participants.

Participant Selection Approach

Youth participants were intentionally selected through purposive sampling. Purposive sampling was used to identify individuals with rich perspectives and insight into the phenomenon of interest (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). The use of purposive sampling enabled the identification of cases that were feasible to study and meaningfully representative of the population of interest (Patton, 2002). It is important to note that case study scholars do not claim that their sample case sizes are representative of a broader population or are generalizable.

Instead, case study research relies on the theoretical leverage produced through thick description and in-depth analysis to generate understanding that can illuminate similar cases (Merriam, 1988; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Stake, 1995).

Criterion sampling was used to identify participants who met the study's inclusion criteria, which included: (a) self-identification as Black or of African descent, (b) current age between 22 and 25 years, and (c) participation in YES during high school for a minimum of two years. This duration ensured sufficient familiarity with the organization's norms, practices, and overall ethos. Participants were also included if they were involved in YES' college and career preparation program and remained engaged with YES, formally or informally, post-high school graduation. Priority was given to individuals with varying levels of YES involvement and those with diverse educational and career experiences. Although YES serves youth as young as six, YES alumni were the focal point of the research. This demographic was uniquely positioned to participate, as alumni could draw on extensive familiarity with the organization and discuss their experiences retrospectively and prospectively.

Participant Recruitment

Participant recruitment initiated the process of establishing study relationships with participants. Given my pre-existing relationships with study participants, it was important to prioritize care and transparency, and to clearly define role boundaries, particularly by distinguishing my role as a researcher. Recruitment commenced after the Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted the study exemption status (Appendix A). YES alumni were invited to participate via email with an attached flyer, seeking their interest and willingness to participate (Appendix B). In addition to email outreach, alumni were contacted by phone to further assess their participation status. For those who expressed interest, a follow-up message was sent with

details about a virtual informational meeting designed to reinforce the study's purpose and clarify participant expectations.

Three informational meetings were held, including one meeting with nine participants and two meetings with one participant each. During these meetings, the study was described in detail, and participants were encouraged to ask questions. Alumni were reminded that their participation was entirely voluntary and that they may withdraw at any time without consequences for personal or professional relationships. After the session, consent forms were distributed via email, and interview appointments were scheduled via a pre-survey (Appendix C). Once participant availability was determined, initial interviews were scheduled through Google Calendar. Follow-up interviews were scheduled at the completion of Interview 1. Participants received a $100 cash incentive, reflecting $50 per interview.

Participant Profiles

This study included 11 Black youth who represented diverse profiles of YES participants and brought varied perspectives on their experiences. These individuals reflected a range of YES engagement, post-high school pathways, educational attainment levels, gender identities, and financial circumstances, offering both shared and divergent accounts of their developmental trajectories. This sample size was consistent with qualitative guidance suggesting that saturation can often be achieved with relatively small samples in in-depth designs (Ahmed, 2025). Selected individuals ranged in age from 23 to 25 years, with a mean participant age of 23.8 years.

Table 1 summarizes participant demographics. The youth sample reflected nearly equal male- and female-identifying participants and included a range of educational experiences. Some participants were degree holders and current graduate students, while others had minimal to no college experience. Participants also varied in their YES program start years, with more than half

having been involved in YES for a decade or more. Some participants experienced YES during high school in the context of COVID-19, while others navigated the pandemic as post-high school participants. As indicated in Table 1, all study participants had at least two years of YES engagement as high school students and at least four years of post-high school YES experience. As high school students, these individuals engaged in YES' academic enrichment, workforce development, and college and career preparation programming, with a few participating in YES' public health initiatives and mentoring programs. Post-high school, these participants continued to pursue workforce opportunities, educational resources, violence prevention leadership opportunities, and alumni support programming through YES. Participants represented a wide range of employment statuses, including full-time, part-time, and self-employed. Beyond employment status, study participants held a range of roles, from postal carriers and hospital care workers to cosmetologists and advanced doctoral students engaged in research and teaching, technology advisors, and engineers.

Table 1

Participant Demographics

Participant Name (Pseudonyms)	Racial Identity	Gender Identity	Age	Employment Status	Employment Role	Educational Status	Start Year	Enrollment Grade
Sage Anderson	Black/ African American	Male Identifying	25	Part-time; Student (Graduate)	Doctoral Student (Academic Research/ Teaching) & Executive Assistant	Bachelor's Degree, Currently enrolled in school	2017	11th
Omavi Kline	Black/ African American	Male Identifying	25	Student (Graduate)	Doctoral Student (Academic Research / Teaching)	Bachelor's Degree; Currently enrolled in school	2017	11th
Jasmine Jones	Black/ African American	Female Identifying	23	Full-time	Nutrition Advisor	Bachelor's Degree; Currently enrolled in school	2019	11th

Participant Name (Pseudonyms)	Racial Identity	Gender Identity	Age	Employment Status	Employment Role	Educational Status	Start Year	Enrollment Grade
Ryan Callings	Black/ African American	Male Identifying	25	Self-Employed	Social Media Influencer	Some College, No Degree	2014	9th
Kacey Brown	Black/ African American	Female Identifying	24	Full-time	IT Support Technician	Bachelor's Degree	2015	9th
Renee Montisch	Black/ African American	Female Identifying	25	Part-time	Clinical Care Attendant	Some College, No Degree	2013	8th
Diamond Banks	Black/ African American	Female Identifying	24	Full-time	Quality Assurance Specialist	Bachelor's Degree	2014	8th
Maurice Allen	Black/ African American	Male Identifying	24	Full-time	Security Officer	Some College, No Degree	2015	9th
Mary Lenin	Black/ African American; White	Female Identifying	24	Full-time	Software Engineer	Some College, No Degree	2017	11th
Simone Archer	Black/ African American	Female Identifying	24	Self-employed	Hairstylist/Beautician	High School Diploma	2014	8th
Nelson Pitts	Black/ African American	Male Identifying	23	Full-time	Postal Mail Carrier	Bachelor's Degree	2019	11th

Data Collection

Case study scholars offer guidance on how to approach data collection (Merriam, 1988; Stake, 2005). Stake (2005) stated, "Case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied. By whatever methods, we choose to study the case" (p. 443). As noted earlier, scholars have advised using common qualitative data collection techniques (interviews, observations, and artifact analysis) to achieve a deep, holistic understanding of a case (Merriam, 1988, 2009). Data were collected through a pre-survey, two semi-structured interview rounds with youth participants, and artifact analysis to better understand Black youths' developmental experiences and YES' role in supporting their transitions to adulthood.

The pre-survey gathered participant demographic data, employment status, educational achievements, and study availability. Semi-structured interviews with youth focused on participants' developmental experiences within YES and how they utilized YES resources to support their transitions into adulthood. Each participant was interviewed individually, with most conducted in person and two via Zoom, based on participant preference and convenience. Virtual participation options were made available for individuals living out of state or experiencing employment-related constraints. Providing a virtual option enhanced accessibility and supported participant comfort (Oliffe et al., 2021).

All interviews were audio-recorded using voice memo recording software on an iPad and transcribed via Temi within 24 hours to ensure accuracy and clarity. Interview 1 conversations lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interview 2 discussions exceeded the anticipated 60- to 90-minute range, with some interviews lasting 100 to 120 minutes. Pseudonyms were selected by each participant via the pre-survey to protect their confidentiality and anonymity. All collected data, including audio recordings, transcripts, and other materials from youth interviews, were securely stored and handled in compliance with ethical research practices.

Pre-Survey

Participant demographic data were best captured through a pre-survey to gather key information about study participants before Interview 1. Given this study's specific emphasis on Black youth, it was critical to understand how youth identified racially and ethnically, as this served as a study eligibility requirement. The pre-survey also allowed the researcher to further ensure study participants met the participation requirements.

The pre-survey was designed as a multiple-choice and open-ended response mechanism to collect key study information and support the development of preliminary participant profiles

before the first interview. The first section of the pre-survey collected participant background information. More specifically, the questions asked participants to select their pseudonym, racial and gender identity, preferred pronouns, and age. In the second section, participants shared their educational status, and in the final section, they reflected on their employment status and described their employment role in an open-ended response. The pre-survey also allowed participants to indicate their interview availability.

Interviews

To develop a comprehensive understanding of the youths' developmental journeys, the interview process was conducted in two distinct phases, each aligned with specific dimensions of the research questions and the conceptual framework. The first interview explored how Black youth perceived and made sense of their transitions to adulthood, while the second focused on how they engaged with YES resources to support these transitions. Both interview protocols were semi-structured, providing a loose conversational framework and a standardized yet flexible approach to question wording and ordering (Kelly, 2018, 2020b; Patterson et al., 2016). This process also allowed the researcher and participants to ask clarifying questions and to pivot the discussion as needed. These interview protocols were also informed by YES staff and instructors who responded to interview questions (Appendix D) solely to shape the protocols and mitigate researcher bias.

YES staff and seasonal program instructors were selected through a purposeful sampling process to ensure alignment with the study's objectives. To be eligible, staff and instructors were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: (a) a minimum of two years of employment at YES, and (b) the ability to speak to organizational practices that support alumni or experience working directly with YES alumni during or after high school. These criteria ensured that staff

participants possessed the depth of organizational knowledge required to contextualize alumni experiences and programmatic structures.

For the recruitment of staff and seasonal instructors, a request was submitted to YES' internal personnel listserv (Appendix E). Individuals who expressed interest were contacted via email to arrange a meeting, during which the study's purpose and participation expectations were explained. Staff were informed their participation was voluntary and that their interview responses would not be used as study data but rather as an internal resource to support protocol creation. Once consent was obtained, interviews were scheduled via email.

Four staff members were selected, including individuals from a range of organizational roles, start years, and demographic backgrounds. These individuals spent differing lengths of time at YES and held varying degrees of proximity to program delivery. A cross-section of staff was selected to capture a broad understanding of organizational practices. Four seasonal program instructors were selected with similar considerations, representing different entry points into YES and a diversity of program-related experiences. Staff and instructor interviews were facilitated by an external research associate to minimize conflicts of interest; these interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded. Analytic memos were written to summarize key ideas and themes. Themes were ascertained individually and then examined collectively across participants. These themes were then arranged into larger groups where cluster names were identified (Appendix F). Once thematic clusters were assigned, an assessment tool was used to examine how the first draft interview protocols aligned with staff themes (Appendix G). If a theme was highlighted in both protocols, it was noted; if not, questions were added to ensure the theme was appropriately represented. In addition to strengthening alignment between themes and protocol content, the interview questions were informed by the study's integrated conceptual

framework. Given the distinct purposes of Interviews 1 and 2, the following section provides more detail on the specific theoretical connections, protocol design, and intentions of each interview.

Interview 1

Informed by YES staff and instructor themes, RQ1, Elder's (1996) life course theory, and critical race theory, Interview 1 was designed to engage Black youth in unpacking and exploring their transitions to adulthood. Introductory questions in the Interview 1 protocol (Appendix H) helped establish a safe space for participants to share their developmental journeys comfortably and openly, with particular care taken when participants reflected on vulnerable or potentially traumatic experiences. The interview began informally and transitioned into a more structured discussion while remaining conscious of participants' needs. Probing questions were used to elicit greater depth when necessary. Through the first interview, participants shared insights into their definitions of adulthood, pathways and turning points, racialized and cultural contexts, and future vision and advice. Together, these interview sections provided a holistic picture of Black youths' experiences and developmental nuances.

Interview protocol questions included: (a) What does adulthood mean to you? (b) Tell me about your life since high school. What paths have you taken, and what moments stand out the most? (c) What kinds of challenges or opportunities have you encountered as a Black young adult? and (d) How do you envision your future, in terms of your hopes or plans for the next few years? In the longer term?

Prior to implementing this protocol, four peer reviewers were consulted to provide feedback. Additionally, three pilot interviews were conducted with former YES youth. Email and verbal feedback from peer reviewers and post-interview feedback from pilot participants were

used to refine interview questions and improve the overall structure of the protocol. After exploring how participants conceptualized adulthood in Interview 1, the second interview focused on how youth engaged YES to support their developmental transitions. This second phase of the interview process offered a deeper understanding of the strategies, relationships, and resources youth accessed through YES, illuminating the organization's role in shaping their trajectories.

Interview 2

Interview 2 examined how Black youth utilized YES to support their transitions into adulthood. The interview began with a brief reflection on the content of Interview 1 before narrowing in on youths' developmental experiences within YES. This interview protocol was informed by YES staff and instructor themes, RQ2, critical race theory, Elder's (1996) life course theory, and Case and Hunter's (2012) counterspaces framework, all of which offered lenses for understanding youths' social and material conditions, agency, resource navigation, help-seeking practices, and adaptive strategies over time. As with Interview 1, efforts were made to establish a safe, affirming space for participants to share openly, particularly when reflecting on vulnerable or potentially traumatic experiences. The conversation focused more specifically on how youth accessed, interpreted, and leveraged YES programming and relationships. Probing questions were used to elicit deeper insights when necessary. This interview aimed to generate a comprehensive picture of participants' developmental experiences and the mechanisms through which YES influenced or could have better supported their transition to adulthood.

Interview 2 incorporated artifact elicitation as a methodological tool to help students more vividly and narratively reconstruct their experiences with YES. Participants were provided with materials one week prior to their second interviews. These artifacts served as reflective

prompts that supported memory recall and meaning-making. They were also used to inform and better understand youths' individual cases. Participants were also given time during Interview 2 to review the materials, and many continued to reference them throughout the interview. Artifacts included a YES Youth Profile detailing their involvement in programs and initiatives (Appendix I) and an electronic folder with former pictures and projects, writing samples, and, in some cases, presentation videos (Appendix J). This approach "enable[d] access to unseen aspects" (Mannay et al., 2019, p. 759) of Black youths' experiences by inviting them to engage with meaningful objects that symbolize various aspects of their YES involvement. Through this interaction, students uncovered and articulated reflections that might otherwise have remained implicit or overlooked (Abildgaard, 2018; Johnson & Weller, 2001).

The time-stretching nature of artifact elicitation was especially important to gaining deeper insight into participants' thoughts and emotions and understanding Black youths' developmental experiences within YES (Clayton et al., 2021; Owusu et al., 2024). As demonstrated in this study, incorporating artifact elicitation "engender[ed] forms of temporal extension, that help[ed] the researcher disrupt the restrictions of tightly time bounded projects" (Mannay et al., 2019, p. 759). In seeking to understand Black youths' developmental experiences within YES, artifact elicitation helped participants explain their YES involvement with depth and richness, including both affirming and challenging aspects of their experiences.

Interview 2 protocol questions included:

1. When you started attending YES, what were you hoping to gain from your involvement?
2. What motivated you to keep coming back to YES during high school and even after?
3. Can you tell me about someone at YES who made you feel truly cared for, seen, or

valued? Can you describe a specific moment when this happened?

4. How would you describe YES' role in your transition from high school to post-high school?
5. How did YES support you during high school? How did that support continue or change after high school and as you moved further into your post-high school journey?
6. In which parts of your life did you feel most supported by YES? Were there areas where you felt less supported?
7. What skills or tools did you develop through your involvement with YES? How have you used them since graduating high school?
8. Can you share a time at YES when you felt proud of something you created or worked on? What made that experience meaningful to you?
9. How have your experiences at YES shaped how you see yourself and your future?
10. What lessons or values do you carry with you from your time at YES as you continue into adulthood?

The protocol was intentionally designed to invite a full range of reflections, including moments participants experienced as challenging, unsatisfactory, or in need of additional support. Notably, Example Question 6 explicitly created space for participants to reflect on areas where they felt less supported, reinforcing the study's openness to capturing both affirming and more critical dimensions of their experiences. The complete protocol is presented in Appendix K. As with Interview 1, Interview 2 underwent peer review and revisions based on pilot participant feedback to improve the protocol prior to implementation.

Archival Data

Archival data were collected to complement the semi-structured staff interviews and provide additional context regarding the organization's history and practices. These data sources

included grants, organizational reports, media files, student artifacts, case notes, assessments, and presentations (Appendix L). These documents added contextual insight and also helped the researcher understand students' developmental experiences within YES. Archival information was gathered through the organization's website and social media platforms. Additional documents, including student products, conference presentations, and articles, were requested directly from organizational stakeholders to provide greater insight into the analysis.

Data Management

Case studies generate extensive amounts of data. As such, organizing study materials in ways that ensure accessibility and meaningful storage was critical for drafting case narratives and preparing for data analysis. Data were managed and stored in an online inventory with Excel tracking spreadsheets. Analytic memos, interview transcripts, consent forms, and other study-related emails and presentations were secured in an organized online folder. These tools were critical in data analysis.

Data Analysis

According to case study scholars, the ultimate goal of case study "is to uncover patterns, determine meanings, construct conclusions, and build theory" (Patton & Applebaum, 2003, p. 67). To prepare for data analysis, analytic memos were developed to capture detailed observations and summaries of participants' interview contributions. These memos documented prominent ideas, participant demeanor, emotional response, and facial expressions, among other non-verbal cues (Lareau, 2021; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Once this process was completed, interviews were transcribed by a third-party transcription service (Temi) and reviewed and cleaned for accuracy and readability.

Interview Data Analysis

The analytic process began with a review of the codebook prior to evaluating participant interviews. Because each interview aligned with different research questions and conceptual dimensions, distinct a priori codes were developed to guide analysis and to provide a preliminary structure for organizing and interpreting the data. A priori codes for Interviews 1 and 2 were based on the study's conceptual framework. The study's codebook, including inductive and deductive codes (Appendix M), evolved throughout the coding and analytic processes. Over time, some codes were collapsed, rearranged, not utilized, or newly created based on insights emerging from the data. Code definitions were revised when necessary in response to data-driven developments, resulting in approximately 42 active codes.

The coding process began with a close read of both interviews for each youth participant. This line-by-line reading strategy ensured familiarization of each interview transcript before code application. Then, interview data for both transcripts were labeled using the predetermined or open codes to capture new and emerging ideas. As codes were assigned, coding memos were produced for both interviews to capture the thinking process and challenges or opportunities; these memos included the assigned coder's initial reactions, emerging patterns, and study connections (Appendix N). Coding meetings were then held to discuss analytic observations and to address coding challenges as they arose.

After coding was complete, data were exported from Atlas.ti and organized into individual graphic organizers with manageable segments to support thematic analysis. Within-code summaries were developed, along with within-code themes identified for each participant. These themes were organized into categories of before, during, and after YES to identify the developmental dimensions and through lines within each participant's narrative (Appendix O).

This process enabled developmental sketches that mapped participants' developmental trajectories (Appendix P) and reflected the themes that emerged.

As data analysis progressed, the study's analytic strategy shifted from individual-code-based analysis to discourse analysis, in which the central question became, "What is [participant's name] a case of?" This decision was made to better understand participant data holistically as a coherent narrative. Discourse analysis is an analytic approach to studying language in its social and cultural context (Bondarouk & Ruel, 2004). This strategy enabled a deeper, more coherent understanding of a participant's story and of how their language use informed their social identities, relationships, and values (Starks & Brown Trinidad, 2007). Analyzing the overall interview narrative, rather than its segmented parts, humanized the participants and expanded insight into the underlying power dynamics and real-world implications in each interview. Discourse analysis was also more useful for sensemaking, for understanding how the interview data mapped onto the theoretical framework, and for understanding how theoretical elements related to emerging themes that could then be traced across participants. In doing so, the theory alignment process within discourse analysis offered a more nuanced understanding of Black youths' developmental experiences within YES and how YES supports their transitions to adulthood (Appendix Q).

Once each case was reviewed and analyzed separately for theory alignment, theory mapping narratives were written (Appendix R). These were then translated into case narratives, each ranging from four to six pages per participant (Appendix S). The goal in composing case narratives was to represent potential results of the study. The case narratives were then aligned with the research questions to elicit participant themes (Appendix T). Once question-case maps were written, they were placed into dialogue with one another for cross-case analysis. This

process enabled the interpretation of case similarities and differences and the identification of overarching themes from interviews (Merriam, 1988). Themes across narratives were negotiated and developed by focusing on individual case content and reviewing the overall case sample. A participant-theme-and-theory analysis was conducted to identify which cases highlighted specific themes and theories (Appendix U). This information was then used to write comprehensive narratives, drawing on direct quotes from study participants.

Archival Data

Archival data were also analyzed to support case building through a process involving document analysis. Document analysis is a systematic procedure used to review or evaluate documents that occurred in parallel with the interview analysis (Bowen, 2009). Archival materials were reviewed and organized by document type and relevance to participant experiences. These documents were examined and coded using the same a priori codes as the interviews. Codes and themes from documents were triangulated with interview data to further substantiate findings and develop analytic depth.

Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness was prioritized throughout the study to ensure that findings were credible, consistent, and grounded in participants' lived experiences. Deliberate strategies were implemented to strengthen the rigor of the research process and the integrity of analytic conclusions. Given the relational nature of this study and the researcher's positionality within the organizational context, trustworthiness also involved ongoing reflexive attention to how participant narratives were engaged, interpreted, and represented. In alignment with established qualitative quality criteria, this study employed multiple procedures to enhance trustworthiness, including coding consistency through the use of multiple coders, member checking, and

triangulation across data sources. In addition, thick description and detailed contextual reporting were used to support transferability, while transparent documentation of analytic decisions and an audit trail strengthened dependability and confirmability.

The study's dependability was supported by multiple coders who reviewed and analyzed the data. To protect participant identities, all data provided to the coding team (two research assistants) was de-identified and labeled only with participant pseudonyms. Additional care was taken to ensure that sensitive or potentially identifying details - particularly those related to vulnerable or trauma-based experiences - were handled with discretion during the coding process. Once the data was fully developed, coders were trained to use the coding manual. The study PI coded all of the data. Two additional individuals independently coded a subset of the data after three transcripts from both interviews were coded together as a team using social moderation (Herrenkohl & Cornelius, 2013). This process involved the PI and two coders, who collaboratively coded transcripts and shared and compared their codes until consensus was reached. Major findings were retained when consensus was reached among the coding team.

Member Checking

Member checking was also employed to ensure participants' reflections and shared thoughts were accurately documented. Study participants were given access to initial findings, transcripts, and narratives to verify their accuracy and alleviate misunderstandings. This process gave participants the autonomy to expand on, modify, or remove any shared information, which enhanced the study's data credibility (Birt et al., 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2016). Participants outlined their requested changes orally or via email and reviewed updates once returned. Final materials were used only if participants agreed with the adjustments and revisions. This process

also functioned as a relational safeguard, allowing participants to dictate how their narratives were represented in the study.

Triangulation

Triangulation was employed to strengthen the credibility of the findings by drawing from multiple data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2016). These included interviews, archival documents, and organizational artifacts. Triangulation improved the examination of the research problem by incorporating data from multiple perspectives, which enhanced the study's overall credibility and robustness (Patton, 2015).

Transferability

Findings from this study were specific to the context and setting under investigation. The extent to which the results can be applied to other situations is known as transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Qualitative research is limited in its ability to generalize findings; however, the richness and thickness of participants' descriptions allow researchers to engage with participants' extensive reflections and determine their relevance and connection to their own context (Creswell & Poth, 2018). To enhance transferability, this study provided detailed accounts of participants' experiences, their contextual backgrounds, and the research procedures.

Dependability and Confirmability

Dependability was addressed through transparent documentation of the research design, data collection, and analytic decision-making processes to allow for consistency and the potential for external audit. Confirmability was supported by maintaining an audit trail of analytic memos, coding decisions, and reflections to ensure findings were grounded in the data and not shaped by researcher bias or assumptions. Reflexive memoing was also used to critically examine how the researcher's positionality and relationships within the research context may have shaped analytic

interpretations. Together, these strategies strengthened the study's methodological rigor and ensured the trustworthiness of its findings.

Summary

This chapter outlined the methodological approach used to explore and understand Black youths' developmental transitions to adulthood. Drawing on case study methodology, this study employed a multiple-case design to examine developmental insights from Black youth in YES, both individually and collectively. Through discourse analysis, interview data were assessed for theoretical alignment, and themes were identified. Case narratives allowed for a nuanced understanding of Black youths' individual developmental experiences and served as a cross-analytic tool for understanding how each narrative related to the others. From this process, themes were identified and translated into findings. Chapter 4 presents findings from the interviews and archival data analysis, drawing on Black youths' learning, responses, and meaning-making in YES to illuminate how they understand their adulthood journeys and narrate YES' role in their developmental transitions.

Chapter 4

Findings for Research Question 1

Adulthood is experienced differently across cultures, racial and ethnic groups, and geographies (Syed & Mitchell, 2013). The developmental literature, however, remains limited and unclear regarding how Black youth conceptualize and make sense of their transitions into adulthood. In particular, less is known about whether Black youth interpret the transition to adulthood as an ongoing developmental process shaped by social conditions rather than a single life stage. To address this gap, this study examined how Black youth in YES perceive adulthood, experience their transitions, and locate themselves within adulthood.

This chapter presents the findings related to Research Question 1: How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions into adulthood? Chapter 4 reports the results of the data analysis and presents the themes that emerged from participants' narratives. The findings reveal that adulthood is not a neutral developmental stage but rather a racialized, relational, and structurally mediated experience for Black youth in YES, with many of these racialized experiences also unfolding through gendered and classed expectations and interpretations. These results reflect the lived experiences of participants as they described their adulthood transitions, the meanings they assigned to those experiences, and the mechanisms shaping their developmental transitions.

Data were analyzed using discourse analysis, and themes were derived from participant interviews and supporting materials. The chapter begins with an overview of the participants, followed by a structured presentation of analytic domains and themes supported by illustrative

excerpts from participant narratives. Specifically, participants' accounts are grouped into three distinct domains reflecting adulthood as structurally racialized, disruptive, and reorienting. Within each domain, patterned themes emerge and are further illustrated through three in-depth case portraits. This structure allows for the identification of shared themes across participants while preserving the developmental depth of individual narratives. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of findings specific to Research Question 1 and a foreshadowing of the findings related to Research Question 2, presented in Chapter 5.

Participant Profiles

To situate the findings that follow, participant profiles provide contextual information regarding age, educational pathways, employment and parenthood statuses, and engagement history with YES. These profiles provide the necessary background for understanding the developmental trajectories discussed throughout the chapter and context for the case portraits illustrated below.

Sage

Sage Anderson is a 25-year-old father of two and a doctoral student in Africana Studies at a research-intensive university in the Northeast, where he engages in both research and teaching. Prior to his doctoral studies, he taught science and social studies at a neighborhood school in a southern city through Teach For America. He holds a Bachelor's degree in Philosophy with a minor in Black Studies. Sage began his engagement with YES in 2017 as a rising high school senior, participating in enrichment, employment, and college preparatory programming, as well as receiving alumni support services post–high school. He has remained connected to YES through employment, research, and mentorship roles.

Simone

Simone Archer is a 24-year-old mother of a one-year-old daughter and an entrepreneur and business owner. She is a skilled hairstylist with over a decade of experience in the hair industry, refining her craft through continued education, self-directed learning, and teaching in other cities. Simone has also developed and sells several original hair care products as part of her business. She began her engagement with YES as an eighth-grader in 2014 and has remained connected to the organization for 10 years. As a participant, she engaged in gender-specific mentoring, community health, research, employment, and college preparatory programming.

Jasmine

Jasmine Jones is a 23-year-old mother of a one-year-old son and a recent graduate of a research-intensive university in the Northeast. She earned a Bachelor's degree in BioRenewable Systems and has engaged in urban community agriculture through her own nonprofit and educational initiatives. Jasmine is currently pursuing a master's degree in Renewable Systems and Sustainability while working as a nutrition advisor for a science-based university collaboration. She began her involvement with YES as a high school junior in 2019, participating in gender-specific mentoring, employment, enrichment, and college and career programming. She continued to receive alumni support throughout her post-secondary education and remains engaged with YES by creating pathways that connect her work to the organization's mission and current students.

Kacey

Kacey Brown is a 24-year-old Black woman pursuing a career in information technology. She attended a historically Black college and university, where she earned a Bachelor's degree in Computer Science. Kacey first became involved with YES during her freshman year of high

school in 2015, participating in mentoring, employment, enrichment, and college and career programming. She remained engaged throughout high school and into her early college years. Although attending college out of state limited her later involvement, Kacey remains relationally connected to YES and continues to view the organization as a reliable community fixture.

Mary

Mary Lenin is a 24-year-old Black woman working as a front-end engineer at a local technology company. Prior to this role, she completed a rigorous coding apprenticeship to develop her technical skills and prepare for the workforce. Mary began her post-secondary education at a local college but experienced disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. She first engaged with YES in 2017 as a high school junior, initially participating in college and career programming before expanding her involvement to include gender-specific mentoring, enrichment, and employment programming. Mary remained involved with YES during her post-secondary education and received alumni services, later shifting her engagement after deciding to pivot from formal schooling. She remains relationally connected and views YES as an ongoing source of support if needed.

Maurice

Maurice Allen is a 24-year-old Black man who works in security at a local hospital and became an expectant parent during the study period. He began his post-secondary education at a local university with aspirations to study engineering but later pivoted away from a traditional four-year pathway. Maurice enrolled in trade school and participated in Job Corps programming, though he discontinued his involvement due to the onset of COVID-19. He began his engagement with YES in 2015 as a high school freshman and participated for several years in a rigorous internship program, along with academic enrichment, research, employment, and

college and career programming. He received post-secondary support from YES and remains relationally involved in the organization.

Nelson

Nelson Pitts is a 23-year-old Black man employed by the United States Postal Service. Prior to this role, he studied at a local conservatory, earning a Bachelor's degree in Vocal Performance with a minor in Theater. Nelson is a talented musician and is highly sought after within the local music community. He became involved with YES as a high school junior in 2018 through a peer connection and participated in college and career programming, employment preparation, and educational enrichment. Nelson received alumni support services and remains connected to YES.

Renee

Renee Montisch is a 25-year-old Black woman who works as a care attendant at a local hospital and is committed to serving patients during moments of vulnerability. She previously attended a local university as an undergraduate student studying psychology and nursing. Following the COVID-19 pandemic and a traumatic life event, Renee shortened her academic trajectory and transitioned into full-time hospital care work, which she continues to pursue. She began her involvement with YES as an eighth grader in 2013 and remains connected to the organization as she navigates her adulthood journey.

Diamond

Diamond Brown is a 24-year-old Black woman who works as a quality assurance specialist for a startup company. She entered this role after completing multiple STEM internships and earning a bachelor's degree in Information Sciences from a local university following an initial college transfer. She aspires to pursue graduate study shortly. Diamond

began her involvement with YES nearly a decade ago as an eighth grader and participated in enrichment, academic preparation, employment, and college and career programming. She remained actively involved with YES throughout her post–high school journey and continues to be connected to the YES community.

Ryan

Ryan Collins is a 25-year-old Black man who is an entrepreneur and social media influencer. He initially enrolled at a local college with plans to pursue pre-medicine but paused his post-secondary education following the COVID-19 pandemic and transitioned into full-time entrepreneurship. Ryan began his involvement with YES in 2014 as a freshman and participated in academic enrichment, research, employment, and college and career preparation programming. He remained engaged with YES beyond high school and continues his involvement as an organizational partner.

Omavi

Omavi Kline is a 25-year-old Black man and father to a one-year-old son. He balances his parenting responsibilities alongside his role as a doctoral student in psychology at a university in the western region, where he engages in both teaching and research. Prior to his doctoral studies, Omavi worked in a clinical setting at a local hospital and served as a lab manager at a university. He first became involved with YES in 2017 during his junior year of high school. Omavi initially participated in YES' employment programming and later engaged in college and career preparation, academic enrichment initiatives, and community health–related projects.

While participants' educational, occupational, and relational pathways varied, patterned similarities emerged in their conceptualizations and experiences of adulthood. The analysis

identified three overarching domains that organize these shared patterns while preserving individual developmental nuance. The following table presents the analytic domains, corresponding themes, and case representation across participants.

Table 2

Domains, Themes, and Case Representation: RQ1

Domain	Theme	Case Representation
Domain 1: Adulthood is structurally racialized	Theme 1: Adulthood as a Racialized Condition	11/11 (100%)
	Theme 2: Racialized Adulthood Across Contexts	11/11 (100%)
Domain 2: Racialized adulthood disrupts everyday life	Theme 3: Racialized Adulthood as Disruption for Black Youth	6/11 (55%)
	Theme 4: Racialized Adulthood as a Reorientation to Black Masculinity and Femininity	7/11 (64%)
Domain 3: Racialized adulthood causes a reorganization of identity and time	Theme 5: Racialized Adulthood as a Disorientation to Time and Progress	9/11 (82%)

Domain 1: Adulthood as Structurally Racialized

Participants' narratives suggested that adulthood was experienced as a condition shaped by racialized structural realities. Young people described entering adulthood with an awareness that their social positioning, institutional treatment, and everyday mobility would be influenced by how they were read racially in the world. Rather than encountering racialization as an occasional or situational barrier, participants often spoke about adulthood as a stage in which racialized expectations, surveillance, and constraints became more visible, more consequential, and more difficult to avoid. In this sense, adulthood was not understood simply as a developmental transition marked by increased independence or responsibility, but as a period in

which racialized social structures more directly shaped how young people anticipated their opportunities, risks, and social navigation.

Within this domain, participants' narratives revealed two related but analytically distinct ways of understanding this racialized experience of adulthood. First, young people described adulthood itself as a racialized condition, in which being perceived as a Black young adult carried immediate implications for safety, social treatment, and expectations placed upon them. These accounts reflected an understanding of adulthood as inseparable from racialized social positioning rather than as a universal developmental stage. Participants also narrated how this racialized adulthood unfolded across multiple institutional and relational contexts, including post-secondary settings, workplaces, and family environments. In these narratives, racialization did not remain confined to a single domain of life but instead appeared as a cross-contextual experience shaping how young people moved through educational systems, navigated employment spaces, and interpreted their evolving family roles.

Together, these themes illustrate how participants understood adulthood as structurally mediated rather than individually achieved. The sections that follow first examine how participants conceptualized adulthood as a racialized condition, and then explore how this racialized experience manifested across the multiple contexts in which young people lived as they progressed into adulthood. Within each theme, individual case narratives provide a deeper portrait of how study participants interpreted, negotiated, and narrated these experiences.

Theme 1: Adulthood as a Racialized Condition

Participants' narratives suggested that adulthood was understood as a racialized social condition rather than a developmental milestone that shaped what they anticipated and experienced as they moved through the world. Participants frequently framed entry into

adulthood as the point at which racialized visibility, social scrutiny, and personal vulnerability became more pronounced, instead of independence, financial stability, and role transitions. For many young people, becoming an adult did not signal expanded freedom alone, but also heightened awareness of how their identities would be read, evaluated, and responded to within broader social structures. In Interview 1 on 11/5/2025, Maurice reflected that everyday encounters, such as being "followed in a store," were not isolated incidents but recurring reminders that racialized visibility intensified over time. Maurice stated:

> And those moments come and go, you know, being followed in a store… I've dealt with this so long that it's just apparent to me. At this point, I'm looking to improve my individuality. I'll be Black no matter what.

Maurice's reflection illustrates how racialized encounters become normalized across time, shaping how Black youth interpret their presence in public spaces and their expectations of adulthood. At the same time, his statement that he will "be Black no matter what" reflects a stance that affirms and values his racial identity rather than distancing himself from it, signaling a form of racial pride in the face of recurring scrutiny. While several participants similarly described embracing or affirming their Blackness as they navigated these experiences, others reflected on these encounters with greater frustration, caution, or strategy, highlighting variation in their racialized responses.

Across cases, participants described recognizing that adulthood carried different implications for them as Black young people than for others. This recognition often emerged through reflections on safety, public perception, institutional interactions, and the increased responsibility for managing society's perception of them. For some, this meant understanding that decision-making itself required racialized calculation. In Interview 1 on 11/5/2025, Ryan

explained that adulthood required viewing choices "through a Black lens," particularly when considering where to live and how to navigate unequal contexts, stating:

> But a lot of things you need to choose because you are Black. You need to keep that in mind when you are doing a lot of things, when you are making decisions like what city you live in, what town you want to live in. Is there a high level of racism where you live? You have to do things kind of through a Black lens, if you will. You have to view the world … You have to make sure you have your Black lens so you can see where things are for you, because with inequality, that means you have to get in where you fit in, I guess. You know things are not equal.

In this sense, adulthood was narrated less as a neutral life stage and more as a shift into a social position in which racialized expectations became more consequential. Participants referred to adulthood as a period requiring greater vigilance, strategic self-presentation, and awareness of how their actions might be interpreted. These accounts suggest that adulthood does not simply introduce new responsibilities; rather, it intensifies existing racialized realities and requires more deliberate navigation of them. While this understanding appeared across multiple participants, the ways in which young people articulated and interpreted this racialized condition varied in emphasis and lived experience. The following cases illustrate how participants described coming to understand adulthood through this racialized lens and how this awareness shaped their expectations, behaviors, and sense-making as they moved into adult roles and responsibilities.

Omavi

Omavi described adulthood as a stage defined by an intensified awareness of his racial identity and the historical and collective responsibilities attached to it. For Omavi, becoming an adult did not simply involve managing individual life decisions; it involved coming to understand Black adulthood as a position embedded within an ongoing racial struggle that required both personal commitment and collective consciousness. In this sense, his narrative reflects the internalized dimension of adulthood as a racialized condition, in which adulthood is

understood from the outset as structured by racial identity, historical awareness, and collective responsibility rather than as a neutral developmental stage.

Central to Omavi's narrative was the idea that Black identity itself carried enduring significance that extended into adulthood as both a grounding force and a source of responsibility. Rather than describing his racial identity as something externally imposed, he framed it as something deeply held and personally meaningful, explaining, "My Blackness is of extreme importance; it's something that I hold sacred." This framing positioned adulthood not as a movement away from identity concerns, but as a period in which the meaning of that identity became more consequential. For Omavi, adulthood involved recognizing that racial identity was inseparable from his understanding of his role in the world and of his developmental path.

Omavi further described Black adulthood as requiring an almost continuous awareness of structural opposition, suggesting that the experience of growing into adulthood involved internalizing the expectation that progress would often require resistance. He reflected, "Being Black means that I almost subconsciously always had to be fighting against something." In his narrative, this sense of ongoing struggle was not framed as situational but as a persistent condition that shaped how he understood adulthood itself. Rather than interpreting adulthood as a stage of security or arrival, Omavi described it as a period requiring continued engagement with structural barriers and collective advancement.

This vigilance extended beyond concerns for personal safety or individual success. Omavi described Black adulthood as involving a broader intellectual and moral orientation toward collective progress, explaining the importance of "remembering that you have to fight, which is definitely of utmost importance, especially when you're thinking about a group struggle and making progress." Through these reflections, Omavi's narrative illustrates how adulthood

was understood as a historically situated social position requiring ongoing awareness, commitment, and participation in collective racial advancement. Rather than emphasizing external encounters with racialized institutions alone, his account highlights how racial consciousness itself structured how adulthood was defined and experienced. His account further frames adulthood as inseparable from racial consciousness, positioning Black adulthood as a condition shaped by both personal identity and broader communal struggle.

Nelson

Nelson described adulthood as a period in which his awareness of racial inequality became increasingly sharpened through his everyday movement across different neighborhoods and environments. Nelson framed this stage as one marked by heightened vigilance and interpretive awareness of how race organizes space, resources, and opportunity. In this sense, Nelson's narrative reflects the spatial and environmental dimension of adulthood as a racialized condition, in which adulthood involves learning to read and navigate the racialized nature of neighborhoods, infrastructure, and access to institutional resources.

Central to Nelson's account was the way his work as a postal service employee exposed him to stark contrasts between racially and economically segregated communities. Moving daily between housing projects, working-class neighborhoods, and more affluent suburban areas, he described developing an increasingly analytical understanding of how structural inequality was embedded in the physical and social landscape. In Interview 1 on 11/4/2025, he explained:

> And so with mail carrying, I've now been more analytical of different neighborhoods, like, okay, this is why this is set up like this, or this is where I can see where the neighborhood splits, or where I see potential redlining, or where this neighborhood has been redlined. I see why this terrain has been split up like this. It just makes me more aware that there is environmental racism in different neighborhoods.

For Nelson, adulthood sharpened not only his awareness of inequality but also his ability

to interpret the infrastructural signals that shaped how communities functioned. He described how routine movement through these spaces required continuous observation and interpretation of who lived there, what resources were available, and how the environment itself reflected broader patterns of racial and economic stratification. Reflecting on these experiences in the same interview, he noted:

> With mail carrying, I'm seeing the demographic of people as well. What faces am I seeing every day? What color people am I seeing every day? And that kind of right there already gives me an inkling of what neighborhood I'm stepping in or what type of vibe I'm getting from this house. I've delivered from projects then to the suburbs. So that's a huge difference from the demographic of people and seeing their needs.

Nelson further emphasized that these differences were not abstract observations but had concrete implications for residents' daily lives. He described how access to hospitals, infrastructure quality, and even basic housing maintenance varied dramatically depending on the neighborhood, reinforcing his understanding that race and economic position shaped proximity to essential resources. He explained:

> But I would probably say because when I go into these communities, the proximity to resources is always apparent. When I'm in the suburbs, there's usually a direct hospital, and then in the projects, certain resources they have to catch the bus to … So it brings an onset of different problems that each people have to deal with. It literally changes their livelihood and how either rough it is or how easy it is.

Through these reflections, Nelson's narrative illustrates how adulthood was experienced as a personal developmental transition and a stage in which structural inequalities became materially visible through everyday spatial navigation. Rather than emphasizing internal identity consciousness alone, Nelson's account highlights that adulthood involves developing the interpretive vigilance necessary to understand and navigate racialized environments. His experience positions adulthood as a racialized condition shaped by personal identity and the ongoing need to read, interpret, and navigate structurally unequal social landscapes.

Ryan

Ryan described adulthood as a stage marked by an intensified sense of racial exposure in which personal safety, public movement, and social interaction required continuous monitoring and assessment. He framed this period as one in which racialized visibility as a Black man became newly consequential, shaping how he interpreted both physical and digital environments. In this sense, Ryan's narrative reflects the embodied and affective dimension of adulthood as a racialized condition, in which adulthood involves managing heightened vulnerability, persistent exposure, and the ongoing need to assess safety across everyday spaces.

Central to Ryan's account was the idea that adulthood introduced a shift from assumed safety to actively managed safety. He described how, as he entered adulthood, ordinary movement through public spaces increasingly required situational awareness and defensive preparedness. In Interview 1 on 11/4/2025, Ryan reflected on how his sense of safety had changed over time, explaining:

> Well, it's just like now when I go somewhere. I feel like a lot more anxiety, a lot more anxious. Before, I would just go where I wanted to go, but now, I don't feel safe. As a Black person, I'm looking around; I just don't feel safe.

Ryan framed this shift not as the result of a single incident, but as part of a broader realization tied to the current political and social climate, which he felt had permanently altered how he navigated public life. In describing this realization, he reflected on the difficulty of separating everyday life from racial dynamics, noting, "I don't want to make everything about race, but I guess we have to, because everything is about race." This acknowledgement captures how Ryan understood racial awareness not as a personal choice but as a structural necessity shaping how he interpreted adulthood itself. He further described adulthood as involving a persistent sense that safety could no longer be assumed in any setting, emphasizing the emotional

and cognitive strain this produced. He reflected, “I almost feel like there's no more safety, no more assurances. There's no comfortability; there's no rest. If you're Black, you're probably worried.”

This awareness extended into his everyday interactions, where Ryan described feeling compelled to continually monitor how others perceived or responded to him. He noted that in many situations he found himself wondering, “What are they thinking of me?” and explained that these thoughts often produced an immediate sense that he needed to remain defensive and alert because of “how people act toward Black people,” adding, “I instantly feel like I have to be a lot more defensive all the time.”

Ryan also described how this vigilance extended beyond physical environments into online spaces and broader social discourse, reinforcing his sense that racialized exposure was continuous rather than confined to particular locations. In response to this perceived permanence of vulnerability, he described taking concrete steps to prepare himself physically and mentally, explaining, “I wanted to prioritize taekwondo this year because of how everything in this country has changed. I just need to be ready.”

Through these reflections, Ryan’s narrative illustrates how adulthood was experienced not simply as a personal developmental transition but as a condition in which racialized visibility required continuous emotional, cognitive, and behavioral preparedness. Rather than emphasizing identity consciousness or spatial interpretation alone, Ryan’s account highlights that adulthood involves the ongoing management of perceived vulnerability and the need for constant safety assessment. His experience positions adulthood as a racialized condition shaped not only by structural realities but also by the lived, embodied experience of navigating those realities daily. Table 3 presents the brief case summaries for Theme 1.

Table 3

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 1

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Omavi	Omavi's narrative illustrates adulthood as a structurally racialized condition grounded in collective historical awareness and moral responsibility. He frames Black adulthood as requiring continuous vigilance and preparedness for resistance, positioning racial consciousness as an enduring intellectual and ethical orientation rather than a situational reaction. His account suggests that entering adulthood involves recognizing one's embeddedness within ongoing racial struggle and collective progress. Through this framing, Omavi demonstrates how racialization operates as a foundational organizing condition of adulthood itself.
Nelson	Nelson's narrative demonstrates how adulthood sharpens racialized environmental awareness and interpretive vigilance across physical spaces. Through his work delivering mail across segregated neighborhoods, he describes learning to read infrastructure, demographics, and access to resources as indicators of environmental racism and institutional inequality. Adulthood, in his account, introduces heightened responsibility for interpreting space, mobility, and belonging through racialized and economic markers. His case shows how adulthood involves continuous observational labor, positioning racialized awareness as an everyday condition rather than an isolated experience.
Ryan	Ryan's narrative portrays adulthood as a condition marked by persistent racial exposure, anxiety, and the need for constant self-monitoring across both physical and digital environments. He describes adulthood as the point at which safety can no longer be assumed and must instead be actively managed, particularly within contemporary political and social climates. His account emphasizes how racialized vigilance becomes permanent and unavoidable, shaping everyday movement, public interaction, and emotional security. Ryan's case highlights how adulthood is experienced as a state of continuous defensive preparedness, reinforcing racialization as a defining condition of adult life.

Theme 1 Synthesis

These narratives illustrate how participants understood adulthood as a racialized condition. While each participant articulated this understanding through distinct experiences,

their accounts consistently suggested that adulthood introduced a heightened awareness of how race shaped safety, mobility, opportunity, and social interpretation. Rather than encountering racialization only through isolated events or institutional encounters, participants described adulthood itself as a stage in which racial positioning became more visible, more consequential, and more difficult to separate from everyday life.

Across cases, this racialized condition appeared in multiple forms. For some participants, adulthood intensified an internalized awareness of collective racial struggle and responsibility, shaping their understanding of their identity and developmental role within a broader historical and communal context. For others, adulthood sharpened their ability to interpret the racialized organization of neighborhoods, infrastructure, and access to resources, revealing how spatial environments reflected structural inequality. Still others described adulthood as a period marked by heightened vulnerability in which safety could no longer be assumed and everyday movement required continuous assessment of social risk. These accounts suggest that participants did not experience adulthood simply as an expansion of autonomy, but as an entry into a social position in which racialized awareness, interpretation, and vigilance became central components of navigating adult life. The following section builds on this understanding by examining how this racialized experience of adulthood unfolded across multiple institutional and relational contexts, shaping how participants navigated post-secondary environments, workplaces, and family responsibilities as they progressed into adulthood.

Theme 2: Racialized Adulthood Across Contexts

Participants' narratives further illustrated that their racialized adulthood experience was not confined to a single setting or life domain. Instead, participants consistently described how the racialized nature of adulthood became visible through their navigation of multiple

institutional and relational contexts. As young people progressed into adulthood, their movement through post-secondary environments, workplaces, and family systems revealed how racialized expectations, access to resources, and social interpretation shaped their developmental experiences in distinct but interconnected ways. As Jasmine reflected, this pattern was not limited to one environment but extended "at school and the workplace, down the street, entering a room," where she described a "long-term history of lack of acceptance, not really feeling accepted by the White majority." Omavi similarly described navigating workplace environments where he experienced being "both hyper visible, but also invisible," capturing the paradox of racialized adulthood in which one's presence is constantly marked yet one's competence or belonging is simultaneously diminished. He further reflected on the isolation of entering spaces "that weren't carved out" for him, noting "direct attempts to make it even more exclusionary for people" like himself, underscoring how adulthood required confronting not only subtle exclusion but active boundary enforcement in certain environments.

Participants' accounts suggested that adulthood required not only recognizing racialized structural realities but also learning to interpret and respond to them across specific contexts. In educational settings, young people described encountering racialized expectations, representation dynamics, and institutional barriers that influenced their sense of belonging and opportunity. Within employment environments, participants reflected on how workplace hierarchies, professional interactions, and perceptions of competence were shaped by racialized assumptions. In family contexts, adulthood introduced evolving responsibilities and relational expectations that were often interpreted through broader cultural and structural pressures shaping Black adulthood. Together, these experiences illustrate how the racialized condition of adulthood

unfolded as a cross-contextual process in which participants navigated multiple environments that each carried distinct racialized implications.

For some participants, this cross-contextual navigation was experienced as a transition between racialized worlds rather than a seamless developmental progression. Jasmine described adulthood as "a transition between a predominantly white world and the predominantly Black world that we grew up in," noting that "there wasn't enough bridge between those two to help assimilate into adulthood, especially as a Black person." These reflections highlight how adulthood required not only movement across institutional spaces, but also ongoing negotiation between racialized social worlds. The cases that follow illustrate how participants experienced this cross-contextual navigation in practice, demonstrating how adulthood required ongoing interpretation of educational, occupational, and familial spaces.

Jasmine

Jasmine's narrative further illustrates how adulthood unfolded as a racialized experience across multiple institutional and relational contexts, shaping how she navigated educational environments, employment structures, and motherhood. Jasmine portrayed adulthood as a stage in which awareness of structural exclusion and racialization intensified across domains of life. Her account demonstrates how racialized adulthood operates simultaneously within institutional systems and intimate caregiving relationships, requiring ongoing negotiation of legitimacy, opportunity access, and protective responsibility.

Post-Secondary as a Racialized Context. Jasmine described her post-secondary experience as one of persistent academic and intellectual exclusion, particularly as one of the few Black students within her program. She recalled feeling that her contributions were frequently

overlooked or minimized, even when they mirrored ideas later affirmed when voiced by white classmates. In Interview 1 on 11/3/2025, she explained:

> It's easy to get overlooked as a Black person. I felt excluded. I felt like I had to raise my voice. I felt like I was in so many positions where I was saying the same exact things as a White person, but because they said it, it mattered. You have to really fight to be heard and to be seen in many of the cases.

These experiences undermined her sense of academic legitimacy and reinforced her understanding that institutional recognition was unevenly distributed. Jasmine described this pattern not as an isolated occurrence, but as part of a broader awareness that whiteness frequently functioned as an unspoken credential, shaping whose knowledge was validated and whose presence was assumed to belong. At the same time, she emphasized that these experiences sharpened rather than diminished her commitment to her education. She noted that, irrespective of these circumstances, they "pushed [her] to pursue academia further and to see that [her] journey doesn't just end at a bachelor's degree," strengthening both her understanding of systemic inequality and her embrace of Black identity as central to her academic and professional trajectory.

Work as a Racialized Context. Within employment contexts, Jasmine described encountering similar patterns of exclusion and racialized evaluation. Despite strong academic qualifications and professional preparation, she repeatedly experienced being overlooked or dismissed in hiring and professional environments. In the same interview, she reflected, "I am repeatedly being overlooked, overshadowed, dismissed, and counted second, even having the same qualifications, if not more. Being Black just is something that is inherently taken into consideration while also being told it's not."

Jasmine further described navigating the labor market as structurally uneven, explaining, "Trying to find a job in this economy is a hot mess. Trying to find a job that supports Black

people at that, it's like an attack." Across these experiences, Jasmine noted that workplace navigation often required strategic assimilation practices, even when they conflicted with her sense of self: "I still feel the need to assimilate. I have to carry myself a certain way to be fully accepted and treated with respect." For Jasmine, these repeated institutional encounters reinforced adulthood as a period requiring constant adjustment and strategic presentation to access opportunities and professional legitimacy.

Family as a Racialized Context. Jasmine described motherhood as the clearest turning point marking her transition into adulthood. Unlike traditional developmental narratives that frame adulthood through independence, she characterized adulthood primarily in terms of caregiving responsibilities and protective decision-making. She explained:

> So, motherhood, from my perspective, was when I turned from a youth to an adult; motherhood was when I had to completely put my needs aside for another human. I had to think about the best way to support him, given all the challenges in the world.

Motherhood intensified her awareness of structural racism, particularly in relation to how her son might be perceived and treated within institutional systems. She described engaging in deliberate anticipatory practices intended to protect him from potential racial bias, including decisions about how he is presented in medical settings. Jasmine stated:

> Being Black informs how I choose to dress my child at times. Like going to a doctor's appointment, wanting him to be taken as seriously as possible 'cause I don't want any opportunity for prejudice in this medical setting. Being Black informs almost every choice that I make.

In addition to these protective strategies, Jasmine described adulthood as involving intentional intergenerational repair. Reflecting on painful family histories and past parental relationships, she emphasized her commitment to building a different caregiving model for her son:

> Due to the trauma I experienced from my parents, I feel the need to separate. However, I

> want to parent my son differently, but definitely with more love and care. To do so, I am unlearning … taking a step back and reevaluating where I am.

She described this process as one of actively "unlearning and letting go of the things" that no longer served her from her parents' care, positioning adulthood as both a healing process and a protective restructuring of family life. Jasmine's experiences illustrated how adulthood was experienced as a racialized process unfolding simultaneously across educational, professional, and familial domains. Her narrative demonstrates how institutional exclusion, professional navigation, and caregiving responsibility intersect to shape adulthood as an ongoing process of negotiating legitimacy, protecting future generations, and restructuring inherited patterns within structurally unequal environments.

Renee

Renee's narrative further illustrates how adulthood was experienced as a racialized condition unfolding across educational, workplace, and family contexts. Unlike participants whose experiences emphasized opportunity navigation or institutional belonging, Renee's account foregrounded surveillance, hyper-responsibility, and the need to continually demonstrate competence and trustworthiness across settings. Her story demonstrates how racialized adulthood may be experienced as a continuous demand for proof, endurance, and vigilance across multiple domains of life.

Post-Secondary as a Racialized Context. Renee described her post-secondary trajectory as shaped by financial uncertainty and uneven educational preparation. She stated, "At the beginning of [my post-high school] transition, I had found myself working three jobs. I don't know how I kept it all together, but had to do this to support myself." Without parental financial support, she sustained herself by working three jobs while enrolled in college. At the same time, gaps in her high school preparation required her to enroll in remedial coursework, including a

math course she noted that "[she] struggled to pass since [she] did not take a course like it before."

These overlapping pressures, along with other challenges yet to be explored, ultimately shortened her academic pathway and contributed to her transition into full-time care work at the local hospital. Renee's educational experience reflected how structural inequalities shaped not only access to higher education but also the conditions under which persistence was possible, positioning adulthood less as a period of exploration and more as one defined by survival, resource management, and accelerated responsibility.

Work as a Racialized Context. Within her current role as a hospital care attendant, Renee described adulthood as deeply shaped by racialized workplace dynamics involving scrutiny, recognition disparities, and uneven expectations of professionalism. Renee also described how racialized dynamics within the healthcare environment extended beyond individual interactions to shape broader perceptions of authority, legitimacy, and professional credibility. She explained that even when staff possessed comparable training or expertise, racial identity often appeared to influence how families and institutional actors interpreted their competence and authority. In Interview 1 on 11/6/2025, she reflected:

> And I think it becomes a level of hierarchy where you have people that don't have a degree or certification in this versus somebody with true knowledge or somebody that is licensed. I feel like even then, you will see a lot of families and just different staffing really just treat and behave differently with somebody that is Black versus somebody that is White.

Through these experiences, Renee described navigating not only the technical responsibilities of care work but also the additional burden of continually establishing legitimacy within an environment where trust, authority, and recognition did not operate evenly across racial lines. In the same interview, she explained that Black workers in her environment were often required to

demonstrate their competence more consistently than their White peers:

> I think there's this notion about whether our Black colleagues are doing everything that they are asked of. When we have White colleagues in the same exact position, you kind of see that. Oh, well, thank you so much for your dedication and help. And so when I go into a space, and I do all these things, and it's not being acknowledged, it kind of makes me think, well, why?

Renee also described how trust itself became racialized in patient interactions, noting that families sometimes responded differently depending on the racial identity of the caregiver providing support:

> Parents and families, giving their trust to us, taking care of their children with that barrier of obviously having a different skin color. I often find some parents stepping back to really see what's going on. It's hard to create that space for them to be comfortable.

These repeated interactions required her to perform emotional labor while simultaneously maintaining professionalism, as mistakes or perceived shortcomings were less easily forgiven. For Renee, workplace adulthood was therefore marked not by stability, but by ongoing surveillance and the need to continually justify her presence, competence, and trustworthiness within institutional spaces.

Family as a Racialized Context. Renee traced many of her adulthood orientations back to early caregiving responsibilities within her family. Raised by a single mother working long hours, she assumed responsibility for her younger siblings at a young age, internalizing expectations of vigilance, maturity, and perfection long before reaching legal adulthood. She recalled, "I've had to grow up a lot sooner than 15, even before then. I found myself really taking on the meaning of safety for myself and my younger siblings." Describing one period in particular, she explained:

> I was 11 years old, and I had taken on the role of caring for my siblings, picking them up off the bus, making sure they had their homework done, finishing the prepped dinner, making sure everyone's getting in the shower, making sure safety points are locked at all times, just really kind of being that mature leadership role.

These experiences positioned adulthood as a continuation of long-standing expectations around responsibility, vigilance, and self-sacrifice. In her interview, Renee explained that this early positioning fostered a persistent drive toward perfectionism and constant productivity, stating, “It just put me in a space of just almost like a perfectionist, really just trying to make sure that I’m always doing something more mature or just better than what I’m doing.”

Through these family experiences, adulthood came to be understood primarily as endurance and responsibility rather than freedom or independence. Overall, Renee’s narrative demonstrates how adulthood was experienced as a racialized condition across educational, professional, and familial domains, each requiring sustained vigilance, performance, and responsibility. Her account illustrates how racialized adulthood may emerge not from a single institutional encounter but from the cumulative demands of proving competence, sustaining trust, and maintaining safety across multiple contexts simultaneously.

Diamond

Diamond’s narrative further illustrates how adulthood was experienced as a racialized condition unfolding across educational, professional, and familial contexts. While several participants described adulthood primarily through exclusion or surveillance, Diamond’s account emphasized the ongoing need to establish legitimacy, navigate institutional norms, and strategically reposition herself within systems structured by white male dominance. Her story demonstrates how racialized adulthood may involve both constraint and active navigation, requiring continuous adjustment while sustaining long-term professional aspirations.

Post-Secondary as a Racialized Context. Diamond described her post-secondary experience as shaped by racialized marginalization within computer science environments that she perceived as heavily dominated by White men and structured around narrow norms of

competence and belonging. In this environment, she recalled that help-seeking was frequently interpreted not as intellectual curiosity but as evidence of inadequacy, reinforcing the perception that she did not belong in the field. In Interview 1 on 11/8/2025, she reflected on these experiences, explaining:

> I feel like computer science during that semester was just very White male-dominated. My peers were not very helpful. There was a conversation I had. I was struggling, and [a peer advisor] was like, "You don't know this, do you? You must be changing your major, aren't you?" Just hearing demeaning things like that, it's just hard.

Rather than abandoning her aspirations in STEM, Diamond described making an intentional decision to shift from computer science to information science, reframing this transition not as a failure but as a strategic repositioning that kept her aligned with her technological interests while pursuing an environment that supported collaboration and intellectual engagement. She reflected, "When I switched my major, I realized that I'm supposed to be here. You all are going to have to move and make room for me and just deal with my presence." She emphasized that her commitment to STEM remained unchanged, stating, "My experience with being a Black woman in STEM [was] really hard. I decided to switch one of my majors, but not because I was leaving STEM. I've been so passionate about technology my whole life." Through this pathway adjustment, Diamond described reclaiming her space within the field while maintaining both her professional trajectory and sense of belonging.

Work as a Racialized Context. Within her current role in a startup STEM environment, Diamond described adulthood as requiring continuous professional self-monitoring and performance management within workplaces shaped by White normativity. She explained that she often felt pressure to continually prove her competence and credibility, noting:

> Yeah. I feel like it's also you proving yourself all the time, which can be exhausting… proving myself, getting a lot of "oh" moments for the things that I have presented. Like, "Oh, I didn't," and it's like, "Why, you didn't think I could produce this type of work?"

Diamond further described how navigating professional environments often required careful management of tone, demeanor, and presentation, linking these adjustments to broader norms of whiteness embedded in professional culture. She stated, "You learn your octaves. You learn your tone. You learn how to say different things in certain ways. When you go into professional workspaces which have been adjusted and mangled to whiteness, you got to conform to that." For Diamond, these workplace experiences reinforced adulthood as a stage requiring both technical performance and ongoing management of racialized expectations surrounding professionalism, credibility, and intellectual authority.

In addition to navigating expectations around professionalism and credibility, Diamond also described developing a broader awareness of how power structures within STEM fields shape who is permitted authority, visibility, and advancement. Reflecting on her observations of the technology industry, she explained that the concentration of wealth, leadership, and decision-making power among white male founders reinforced the perception that the field functioned as an exclusive professional space. She noted:

> If you look at Elon and Jeff, Mark Zuckerberg, that's a power dynamic there. Once you have money, then you have power; it feels like a boys club, like, "Oh, we're men. We're supposed to be here. Women have found their way in, but this is a guy thing."

Through this awareness, Diamond described adulthood within professional environments as requiring individual competence along with the ability to interpret institutional power structures and navigate spaces where legitimacy, leadership, and opportunity often appeared unevenly distributed.

Family as a Racialized Context. Diamond also described how her approach to navigating institutional environments was deeply shaped by lessons inherited from her family. From an early age, she learned that, as a Black woman entering predominantly white spaces, she

would need to appear prepared, controlled, and consistently competent in order to succeed. These lessons continued to inform her adult decisions, particularly in STEM spaces, where she remained aware of how she might be perceived and evaluated.

At the same time, Diamond emphasized that adulthood entailed reciprocal caregiving responsibilities toward her grandmother, whose sacrifices she credited with making her educational and professional opportunities possible. This sense of intergenerational obligation influenced major life decisions, including her choice to remain geographically close rather than relocate for personal advancement. She explained:

> With adulting, there are certain things that you have to sacrifice. For example, with my grandmother, I wanted to move, but I didn't. I need to be available to care for her. I feel like it's a pay-it-back type of thing.

Through these experiences, adulthood came to be defined not only by professional advancement but also by relational responsibility, reciprocity, and sustained family commitment.

Diamond's narrative illustrates how adulthood unfolded as a racialized condition across educational, professional, and familial domains, each requiring ongoing navigation of legitimacy, belonging, and relational responsibility. Her account demonstrates how racialized adulthood may involve not only managing institutional barriers but also strategically repositioning oneself within those systems while sustaining both professional aspirations and intergenerational commitments. Table 4 presents brief case summaries for Theme 2.

Table 4

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Jasmine	Jasmine's narrative demonstrates how racialized adulthood emerges across institutional, professional, and caregiving contexts, structuring both opportunity access and relational responsibility. In post-secondary education and employment spaces, she describes repeated experiences of dismissal, exclusion, and the need for strategic assimilation despite strong qualifications. Motherhood intensifies her awareness of racial vulnerability, prompting anticipatory decision-making aimed at protecting her son within unequal institutional systems. Her case illustrates how racialized adulthood extends beyond individual advancement to include intergenerational protection, healing, and strategic navigation across multiple domains of life.
Renee	Renee's narrative highlights how racialized adulthood is experienced through institutional scrutiny, workplace surveillance, and early internalization of responsibility across educational, professional, and family contexts. Financial constraints and uneven academic preparation shaped her post-secondary trajectory, while her hospital work requires continuous demonstration of competence and emotional labor in racially stratified professional environments. Her early caregiving responsibilities further normalized adulthood as endurance, vigilance, and self-sacrifice rather than exploration. Renee's case demonstrates how racialized adulthood is sustained through institutional expectations of perfection, trust negotiation, and long-standing patterns of hyper-responsibility.
Diamond	Diamond's narrative illustrates how racialized adulthood operates through professional normativity, institutional gatekeeping, and intergenerational obligation across educational, workplace, and family domains. In STEM education and employment, she describes navigating white male-dominated environments that require constant proof of competence, tone management, and strategic conformity to professional norms shaped by whiteness. Her career decisions and geographic stability are also shaped by family responsibility and reciprocal caregiving commitments. Diamond's case shows how racialized adulthood involves continuous negotiation between personal ambition, institutional legitimacy, and relational accountability across life contexts.

Theme 2 Synthesis

Participants' narratives demonstrated that adulthood was experienced as a racialized condition unfolding simultaneously across educational, workplace, and family contexts. Across cases, young people described how institutional structures, professional environments, and relational responsibilities each carried distinct racialized expectations that shaped how they navigated opportunity, legitimacy, and responsibility in adulthood. Participants portrayed adulthood itself as a time in which racial awareness intensified across multiple areas at once.

Within post-secondary settings, participants described negotiating belonging, legitimacy, and access within environments structured by unequal preparation, exclusionary norms, or racialized academic expectations. Some participants experienced financial uncertainty or uneven institutional preparation that constrained their educational pathways, while others encountered marginalization within classrooms or academic fields that reinforced perceptions of non-belonging. These educational experiences often shaped not only participants' academic trajectories but also their broader understanding of how opportunity systems functioned in adulthood.

Workplace environments similarly emerged as sites where racialized adulthood became highly visible. Participants described navigating professional settings in which credibility, recognition, and trust did not operate evenly across racial lines. Many reported feeling required to continually demonstrate competence, carefully manage professional presentation, or interpret organizational hierarchies shaped by White normativity. For some, this involved performing emotional labor to maintain institutional trust; for others, it involved strategic adaptation to workplace expectations or broader awareness of structural power distributions within professional industries. Across these experiences, employment was not simply a site of economic

participation but a domain requiring sustained navigation of racialized institutional dynamics.

Family contexts further illustrated how adulthood responsibilities were shaped by relational and intergenerational dynamics that intersected with broader racialized conditions. Participants described adulthood not primarily through independence, but through caregiving, reciprocity, protection of younger family members, or commitment to interrupting inherited survival patterns. For some, early caregiving roles blurred the boundary between youth and adulthood, while for others, parenting responsibilities intensified their awareness of systemic inequities affecting future generations. In this way, adulthood frequently involved not only individual advancement but also collective responsibility and intergenerational accountability. Across educational, professional, and familial domains, participants' accounts revealed that racialized adulthood operated as a continuous process requiring ongoing adjustment, vigilance, and decision-making across contexts. These findings suggest that for Black youth in this study, adulthood was experienced less as a discrete developmental milestone and more as a structurally mediated condition that shaped how opportunity, responsibility, and belonging were negotiated across multiple spheres of everyday life.

Domain 2: Racialized Adulthood Disrupts Everyday Life

This domain examines how participants described adulthood as a period marked by disruption, moments when racialized and structural conditions interrupted expected developmental pathways and forced young people to recalibrate their understanding of progress, stability, and selfhood. Across cases, disruption did not appear as a single event that occurred and then resolved; instead, participants narrated it as something that unfolded over time. In some cases, it reshaped daily navigation and reconfigured what adulthood required of them. Participants' accounts demonstrate that these disruptions were not merely personal setbacks but

were experienced as deeply entangled with institutional volatility, uneven opportunity structures, and the racialized nature of adult life.

Within this domain, participants also described what it meant to live through disruption—how they carried its consequences into everyday routines, decision-making, and identity work. Some narrated adulthood as requiring persistent vigilance, strategic adjustment, or emotional containment as they navigated destabilized pathways. At the same time, participants described efforts to repair what disruption had altered, whether through reorienting goals, rebuilding support infrastructures, or redefining what success and stability could look like. In some cases, this repair process extended toward reclaiming aspects of self, recovering a sense of agency, purpose, or possibility that disruption threatened to foreclose. Together, these narratives highlight disruption as both a structural experience and a developmental process that shapes how Black youth make sense of adulthood in real time.

Theme 3: Racialized Adulthood as Disruption for Black Youth

Theme 3 captures how participants experienced adulthood as a period in which racialized and structural forces actively disrupted their trajectories. In some cases, this interrupted youths' plans, destabilized institutions they once relied on, and altered what felt possible moving forward. Rather than describing disruption as an external interruption that occurred outside of development, participants narrated disruption as part of adulthood itself: a condition that reshaped their access to opportunity, their sense of safety, and their ability to move through institutions with predictability. In these accounts, adulthood was not simply a time of increased independence; it was a time when instability became more visible, and the consequences of racialized systems became harder to avoid or ignore. In Interview 1 on 11/5/2025, Ryan explained that instability became cyclical rather than exceptional, stating:

> Every time I think I have something figured out, something changes, and I have to rethink what I'm doing or where I'm going. I feel like things don't really go how you expect them to. You kind of just have to adjust and figure out what the next move is going to be.

Participants also described how disruption required ongoing navigation, not just immediate response. They shared how they learned to live through these ruptures while still attempting to maintain forward momentum. Ryan's reflection illustrates this adaptive process, highlighting how adulthood required continual recalibration rather than linear progression. The narratives in this theme show that disruption did not end at the moment of loss, exclusion, or institutional failure; it extended into how participants restructured their goals and attempted to repair their pathways. In some cases, participants described reclaiming a sense of self or direction through new relationships, renewed purpose, or reframed definitions of adulthood progress. The cases that follow illustrate how racialized adulthood disruption operates across different life circumstances while producing similar developmental consequences, including altered trajectories, intensified responsibility, and the need to rebuild meaning and stability under constraint.

Omavi

Omavi's narrative illustrates how racialized adulthood can unfold through a sudden institutional rupture that destabilizes carefully constructed pathways toward professional stability, intellectual identity, and long-term opportunity. At the time of the disruption, Omavi had secured a lab manager position for a prominent Black scholar at a prestigious academic institution, an opportunity he understood as foundational to his academic future, upward mobility, and sense of belonging within scholarly spaces. However, the position was unexpectedly terminated within only a few months. For Omavi, this loss was not experienced simply as job instability but as a collapse of the adulthood trajectory he had been methodically

building. In Interview 1 on 11/3/2025, he described the experience as existentially disorienting, explaining:

> I felt like I lost at that time. I felt like I was Blacklisted from academia. I felt like there were no longer possibilities — like, man, this whole thing I've been working toward for the past four years, maybe there's really not a space for a person like me.

Omavi came to understand the event as embedded within broader institutional allegiances to whiteness and the preservation of power, rather than as an isolated organizational decision. He recounts that when he began to voice intellectual critiques and raise concerns within the institutional environment, his presence quickly became untenable. He reflected, “My whole earth shattered. When I started to speak up on things, that’s when it was like, ‘Oh yeah, no.’ And it was like, people like me aren’t good here.”

This moment marked a developmental turning point in which adulthood became newly defined by instability rather than progress and was less about possibilities. The disruption forced Omavi into immediate survival decision-making about whether to abandon his trajectory entirely or to attempt to remain geographically and professionally independent despite lacking predictable employment or nearby family support. He ultimately chose to stay and search for alternative work, later securing hospital employment, though the process was circuitous, financially uncertain, and emotionally taxing.

Importantly, Omavi emphasized that the consequences of this disruption were not limited to employment loss but extended into deep psychological and intellectual withdrawal. He described losing trust in his own ideas, disengaging from reading and scholarly activity, and approaching academic spaces thereafter with heightened fear and guardedness. He explained

> It made me feel like there’s just no point. I kind of viewed these spaces as even more of a threatening space. It was the first time where I realized someone really has control over whether I eat or I don’t.

In this way, institutional disruption produced not only economic precarity but also existential vulnerability tied directly to adulthood survival.

Although Omavi eventually re-entered academia through doctoral study and reports being in a significantly healthier advising relationship that provides both structural and emotional scaffolding, the earlier rupture has shaped how he experiences stability in adulthood. He described persistent anxiety about whether his position could again be removed without warning, noting that his responsibilities as a father intensify this vigilance and heighten the stakes of institutional performance. In the same interview, he reflected on this lingering insecurity, explaining, “I know what it’s like to lose your livelihood. Now that I have even more responsibilities, I’m so stressed about just how I’m doing because I know my stability is inherently tied to how well I’m performing.”

At the same time, this experience has reshaped how Omavi defines success in adulthood. Rather than prioritizing academic prestige or productivity alone, he increasingly frames adulthood through relational time and family presence, particularly in relation to his son. He explained that what matters most is not scholarly output but the ability to remain present in his child’s life. He stated, “Is my son gonna care about his father being super accomplished or the time that he had? I have to have time to actually make memories.” Omavi’s narrative, therefore, demonstrates how racialized adulthood disruption operates not only through the loss of institutional opportunity but also through the enduring psychological recalibration required to rebuild trust, redefine success, and continue pursuing stability under the persistent possibility of renewed institutional exclusion.

Renee

Renee's narrative illustrates how racialized adulthood disruption can accumulate across multiple domains simultaneously, reshaping educational pathways, employment stability, and personal safety in ways that require continuous recalibration. At the time she reached adulthood, Renee was enrolled in undergraduate studies in psychology and nursing while working to support herself independently. However, her developmental trajectory was abruptly altered by a series of destabilizing events, including sexual assault, housing uncertainty, and financial strain, which collectively forced her to suspend her academic progress and reorganize her livelihood. In Interview 1 on 11/6/2025, she described the assault as a moment that halted the adulthood trajectory she had been actively constructing, stating:

> The assault had put a halt on everything, from me being a scholar in school full-time and working to having to pick up the pieces and having to go to court. A complete restart of everything that I had built up into that point was overwhelming.

Beyond interrupting her educational trajectory, the assault also carried lasting emotional and physical consequences that shaped how she moved through adulthood. As a Black woman, this experience unfolded within a broader context of racialized and gendered violence, where harm is often minimized or insufficiently addressed. The disruption she described was therefore not only institutional, but rooted in trauma that compounded existing instability.

Rather than experiencing disruption as a single isolated event, Renee narrated adulthood as shaped by cascading interruptions that required her to continually revise expectations about stability, progress, and timing. Educational advancement, housing security, and employment continuity did not unfold in parallel but were repeatedly interrupted, forcing her to adjust her goals to match shifting life conditions rather than holding herself to linear developmental

timelines. In this way, adulthood emerged less as forward movement and more as sustained endurance and strategic survival.

Her transition into full-time hospital care work reflects this adaptive recalibration. Although the position was not originally her intended endpoint, it became a necessary stabilizing structure that allowed her to remain financially afloat while navigating the personal and institutional aftermath of disruption. Renee did not narrate this adjustment as abandonment of her professional ambitions but as a temporary restructuring of pathway sequencing. She explained:

> I feel like, even for me, not really having the advantage of taking on my goals a lot sooner than now, really trusting myself and allowing myself to still move forward despite what happens, but also knowing and learning how to navigate the transition to maybe something different.

Despite the layered disruptions she endured, Renee consistently framed adulthood through persistence rather than resignation. She emphasized a continued commitment to educational completion and professional advancement, explaining, "I have that motivation of wanting to be successful in spite of everything. I see myself finishing my education in psychology so that I can sit in spaces with patients and be able to navigate clinical long-term safety plans."

Her narrative also revealed how disruption itself becomes formative to her adult identity. Renee described a growing desire to transform her experiences into future advocacy and support for others who have endured similar trauma, rather than solely attempting to recover what was lost. She imagined building spaces for survivors that prioritize healing, knowledge, and collective support, stating, "I'm looking forward to creating a women's group just to give women that platform to be heard, understood, and grasp information about these topics."

Through this orientation, Renee's adulthood became structured not only around rebuilding stability but also around reclaiming dignity and purpose following violation and

institutional strain. Renee's narrative, therefore, demonstrated how racialized adulthood disruption may operate not through a singular institutional event but through cumulative instability across the domains of personal safety, housing, education, and employment. Her experience highlighted how Black young adults are often left carrying the primary burden of reconstruction, requiring flexible goal restructuring, prolonged endurance, and continuous emotional repair in order to remain oriented toward long-term adulthood possibilities.

Maurice

Maurice's narrative illustrates how racialized adulthood disruption may emerge through structural educational inequities that surface most visibly during post-secondary transition, where preparation gaps, institutional neglect, and racial isolation combine to destabilize academic persistence and reshape adulthood pathways. Prior to entering college, Maurice was already aware that his K–12 schooling had not provided the same level of academic preparation or institutional scaffolding available to students from more resourced educational environments. Reflecting on this realization, he described recognizing the presence of "different preparations, different lineage," noting that many of his peers entered college with inherited institutional familiarity and academic supports that he did not possess.

Once enrolled, these preparation disparities became especially pronounced in his math coursework, where Maurice found himself simultaneously attempting to learn foundational material while keeping pace with advanced instruction. In Interview 1 on 11/5/2025, he described the experience as requiring constant self-teaching simply to remain academically afloat, stating:

> I didn't have the course I needed in high school, so I was learning two different math subjects at the same time. I was teaching myself one, just to keep up with a more advanced one. I was working hard just to stay above water.

Rather than receiving institutional support for these structural preparation gaps, Maurice encountered classroom environments that framed his struggle as evidence of personal inadequacy. He recalled repeated discouragement from his professor, who questioned his academic viability each week. He stated, “Every week I’m coming to this math class, and the first thing the professor is saying, ‘Are you sure you want to do this?’ Hearing that every time I walk into this classroom, it’s just debilitating.

These experiences of academic discouragement were compounded by racial isolation within his courses, where Maurice was often one of the few Black male students present. He described feeling excluded both intellectually and socially, including in a social justice classroom where classmates failed to engage his lived perspective or invite his contributions. Over time, these layered experiences of institutional neglect, racial marginalization, and unsupported academic struggle contributed to his eventual disengagement from higher education. Reflecting on this outcome, Maurice explained that the cumulative effect led him to conclude that college “was not a place for Black people.”

Maurice did not narrate his departure from higher education as personal failure. Instead, he interpreted the disruption as evidence of institutional systems that obscure structural inequities, framing academic difficulty as an individual deficiency rather than recognizing disparities in educational access and preparation. This interpretive shift became central to the recalibration of his adult trajectory. Following his educational disengagement, Maurice pursued alternative vocational pathways, including trade school and Job Corps, though these routes were later interrupted by COVID-related environmental and familial pressures. Despite these additional disruptions, Maurice described engaging in deliberate reflection and emotional processing to redefine success in adulthood beyond institutional validation. In Interview 1 on

11/5/ 2025, he explained, “Leaving school, I had to reevaluate how I was living and what I wanted, really sit down and be vulnerable, reassess, make sense of the pieces, and manage my way forward.”

Through this process, Maurice reconstructed adulthood not as achievement of traditional academic credentials but as a developmental journey centered on emotional growth, self-reflection, and relational responsibility. His narrative, therefore, demonstrated how racialized adulthood disruption may operate through educational systems that fail to accommodate structural inequities, forcing Black young adults to renegotiate definitions of success, belonging, and forward movement outside of institutional pathways that were never fully accessible to begin with. Table 5 presents brief case summaries for Theme 3.

Table 5

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 3

Participant	Brief Case Summaries
Omavi	Omavi’s narrative illustrates how racialized adulthood disruption can occur through a sudden institutional rupture that destabilizes professional identity, economic stability, and academic belonging. After securing a prestigious academic lab manager position, his unexpected termination led him to question whether scholarly spaces were viable for Black professionals and forced immediate survival-based career recalibration. The experience produced lasting psychological consequences, including guardedness toward academic environments and persistent anxiety about institutional stability. Although he later reentered doctoral study with stronger advising support, his adulthood orientation remains shaped by vigilance and a redefined emphasis on relational time with his family. His case demonstrates how institutional exclusion can transform adulthood from a trajectory of advancement into one structured around instability and reconstruction.
Renee	Renee’s narrative demonstrates how racialized adulthood disruption may accumulate across multiple domains, including personal safety, housing stability, education, and employment. Experiences such as sexual assault, eviction, and financial strain forced her to suspend her academic trajectory and continually revise expectations about progress and stability. Rather than a single interruption, adulthood unfolded for Renee through layered disruptions requiring sustained endurance and strategic survival. Despite these conditions, she maintains long-term

	professional aspirations and actively works to transform her experiences into future advocacy for survivors. Her case highlights how adulthood reconstruction for Black youth may involve prolonged recalibration while sustaining forward orientation toward educational and professional goals.
Maurice	Maurice's narrative illustrates how racialized adulthood disruption may emerge through structural educational inequities that surface during post-secondary transition. Entering college academically underprepared due to unequal K–12 resources, he encountered classroom environments that framed structural gaps as a personal deficiency while also experiencing racial isolation and discouragement from instructors. These compounded experiences contributed to his disengagement from higher education and his reassessment of institutional pathways as inaccessible. Maurice subsequently pursued alternative vocational routes while redefining adulthood success through emotional growth, reflection, and relational responsibility rather than academic credentialing alone. His case demonstrates how institutional neglect and preparation inequities can redirect adulthood trajectories and require the reconstruction of viable definitions of progress.

Theme 3 Synthesis

Across participants, adulthood emerged as a developmental period marked by repeated disruption across institutional, personal, educational, and societal domains. While the specific sources of disruption varied, participants consistently described adulthood as requiring immediate adaptation to forces that destabilized carefully constructed pathways toward educational completion, employment security, and personal safety, often in ways participants understood as shaped by racialized institutional dynamics, unequal resource distribution, and differential access to protection and support. For some participants, disruption manifested as institutional exclusion or professional instability; for others, it unfolded through cumulative personal trauma, structural preparation gaps, or large-scale societal crises that dismantled the infrastructures supporting their developmental continuity, with participants frequently interpreting these experiences through their positioning as Black young adults navigating systems where belonging, credibility, and stability were unevenly distributed. Despite these

differences, participants' narratives collectively revealed that disruption was experienced as an organizing condition of adulthood itself, shaping how they understood stability, success, and forward movement within a broader racialized social context that rendered adulthood pathways more fragile and contingent. In response, participants engaged in processes of recalibration, redefining adulthood not through linear advancement but through endurance, strategic adaptation, and the reconstruction of viable futures under structurally uncertain conditions.

Domain 3: Racialized Adulthood Causes a Reorganization of Identity and Time

Participants' narratives further revealed that these disruptions did not remain confined to external conditions; rather, racialized adulthood required young people to reorganize how they understood themselves, their relationships, and their position within developmental time. In this sense, adulthood did not simply introduce new responsibilities; it required ongoing interpretive work as participants recalibrated inherited identities, social expectations, and assumptions about linear progress.

Across narratives, participants described adulthood as a period in which earlier models of gender, family roles, emotional expression, achievement, and developmental timing became insufficient for navigating racialized social realities. These inherited scripts often reflected cultural expectations, familial messaging, or dominant societal narratives about what adulthood should look like. However, as participants confronted racialized institutional structures, relational pressures, and shifting life conditions, they increasingly engaged in processes of reinterpretation and reconstruction. Adulthood thus emerged not as a stable endpoint but as an active developmental reorganization shaped by both identity renegotiation and altered temporal experience.

This domain, therefore, captured two interconnected dimensions of this reorganization. First, participants described adulthood as requiring a reorientation to racialized expectations surrounding Black masculinity and femininity. Second, they narrated adulthood as producing a disorientation to time and progress, in which conventional developmental timelines appeared unstable, nonlinear, or continually deferred. Together, these themes demonstrate how racialized adulthood reshapes not only external opportunity structures but also the internal frameworks through which young people understand identity, success, and developmental movement.

Theme 4: Adulthood as a Reorientation of Black Masculinity and Black Femininity

Participants' narratives revealed that adulthood frequently required a reconsideration of inherited understandings of gender, particularly as these understandings intersected with racialized expectations surrounding Black masculinity and Black femininity. Rather than simply adopting socially prescribed adult roles, participants described adulthood as a developmental stage in which earlier gender scripts were questioned, resisted, or intentionally reconstructed in response to lived experience. These processes often emerged as participants navigated parenthood, professional identity, relational responsibilities, and institutional engagement, all of which made visible the constraints embedded in dominant narratives about how Black men and Black women are expected to behave in adulthood.

For some participants, adulthood prompted a reassessment of masculinity, especially norms emphasizing emotional suppression, hyper-independence, or performative strength. For Omavi, this reassessment became particularly visible through fatherhood, where racialized stereotypes about Black men intensified pressure to perform provider-based masculinity. Although he described not fully endorsing traditional gender roles, in Interview 1 on 11/3/2025, he acknowledged that racialized expectations shaped how he experienced adulthood, stating:

> And in my situation right now as a father, it's hard for me to separate that. There's still that expectation to be a provider, even if I don't necessarily believe in endorsing gender roles. I still know that as a Black man, with there being this whole stereotype that we're deadbeats, this, this, this, or that, it's just [that] there's so much pressure to make sure that I'm taking care of my family in every way. So, yeah.

His reflection illustrated how adulthood did not simply involve stepping into fatherhood; it requires negotiating masculinity under the weight of racialized stereotypes and structural scrutiny. Others described adulthood as requiring a renegotiation of femininity, particularly expectations tied to care labor, endurance, overfunctioning, or self-sacrifice. Across cases, participants framed adulthood not as the moment when these expectations were fulfilled, but as the period when they were most actively contested. In this way, racialized adulthood functioned as a site of gender reorientation, where inherited models were reworked through parenting, professional navigation, healing, relational accountability, and intentional identity construction.

The cases presented in this theme illustrate these processes across both masculinity and femininity. Two participants illuminated how adulthood reshaped their understandings of Black masculinity through emotional reconstruction, relational responsibility, and vulnerability. Two additional participants demonstrated how adulthood prompted a renegotiation of Black femininity through resistance to inherited gendered labor expectations, reconstruction of caregiving models, and intentional pursuit of relational and personal autonomy. These narratives showed how racialized adulthood functions not only as a structural condition but also as an interpretive space in which gendered identities are actively reorganized.

Sage

Sage, a 25-year-old father of two and doctoral student in Africana Studies, narrated adulthood as a period in which he had been forced to actively reconstruct his understanding of masculinity, fatherhood, and relational responsibility. Navigating simultaneous roles as a scholar,

professional, and parent, Sage described adulthood as a site where inherited expectations about Black manhood must be consciously interrogated and reshaped. His developmental journey demonstrates how adulthood for Black men necessitates an active redefinition of emotional strength, responsibility, and support in practical terms.

Central to Sage's narrative was the recognition that he was socialized into a model of masculinity emphasizing independence, emotional restraint, and self-sufficiency. He explained that growing up, his father encouraged him to "figure it out" on his own, a lesson that created what he now understands as a false perception that adulthood requires handling struggles internally rather than seeking assistance. Reflecting on this upbringing, Sage noted, "My dad was just a figure-it-out parent. It was very much instilled in me to make sure that I can handle things on my own." He further reflected that this orientation was deeply tied to broader gender expectations, explaining that this mindset was "very rooted in patriarchy," signaling his later recognition that independence had been framed as a masculine requirement rather than simply a personal trait. While he did not reject this upbringing entirely, adulthood has forced him to reassess the limits and emotional costs of this model, particularly as his responsibilities have expanded.

Becoming a father shortly after college marked a decisive turning point in this reorientation. Sage described fatherhood as both a developmental responsibility and an intentional site of resistance against dominant narratives surrounding Black fathers. He was acutely aware of the cultural portrayal of Black fatherhood as disengaged or absent and recognized that "the bar is so low for Black fathers." Rather than internalizing this framing, Sage stated that he approaches parenting as an opportunity to construct an alternative relational model grounded in emotional presence, accessibility, and vulnerability. He explained, "I don't want my

son to grow up feeling like he can't ask for help or be vulnerable, knowing he's going to emulate what he sees in me."

He also situated this commitment within a broader collective learning process, noting that he intentionally surrounds himself with other Black fathers because "just seeing other Black men, their relationship with their family and their children has been helpful" for his transition into adulthood. This orientation reshaped not only how Sage parents but also how he conceptualized adulthood itself. He reported increasingly viewing emotional openness, relational investment, and collective support as central markers of responsible manhood rather than signs of weakness. In this way, his adulthood transition has involved not simply assuming paternal responsibilities but actively reconstructing the developmental scripts that define masculinity.

Sage's academic training further sharpened this reorientation. Through his scholarly engagement with historical and structural analyses of Black family narratives, he situated contemporary representations of Black fatherhood within longer institutional histories, including the prison industrial complex and systemic exclusion. He noted that these structural conditions contributed to the construction of narratives portraying Black fathers as absent, while institutional practices continue to render Black fathers invisible in caregiving spaces. Drawing from research he encountered, Sage reflected on how even medical professionals often fail to engage Black fathers in neonatal care contexts, reinforcing their marginalization and institutional invisibility within systems designed to support families. In Interview 2 on 11/18/2025, he stated:

> I remember I was reading a study following three Black dads who had children in the NICU, and it was just talking about the ways mental health professional care workers really didn't know how to engage with the Black men in that particular setting. When it came to mothers or White fathers, they were able to talk about some of the things that they were experiencing, talk about some of the things they were going through. These Black men didn't even receive phone calls, and they weren't checked up on or whatnot. I think there's just a natural … Black men are just rendered invisible in a lot of contexts.

> When it comes to parenthood and fatherhood, there is this lack of engagement with Black fathers that just contributes to this narrative of them not being present.

This structural awareness deepened his commitment to intentional fatherhood and has strengthened his view that parenting itself constitutes a form of counter-narrative practice. Sage's reflection highlighted how institutional settings can render Black fathers invisible even in spaces designed to support families. Recognizing these patterns reinforced his belief that intentional fatherhood can challenge dominant narratives that position Black men as disengaged or absent.

At the same time, Sage's transition into adulthood has remained marked by ongoing negotiation rather than full resolution. Despite his intellectual commitment to vulnerability and collective support, he acknowledged that help-seeking continues to feel difficult, revealing how deeply earlier masculinized expectations remain embedded. He reflected candidly, "Sometimes you really do need to ask some people for help. Mistakes in adulthood can really set you back." To counter this internalized resistance, Sage stated that he actively surrounds himself with other Black fathers and mentors, and explained that observing their relationships with their children allows him to "learn from them and implement some of their principles into [his] daily life." This collective orientation reframes adulthood as a relational learning process rather than an individual proving ground.

Through these experiences, Sage's narrative illustrated how adulthood for Black men can involve an active reorientation of masculinity itself. Rather than inheriting fixed gender expectations, he expressed that he treats adulthood as an opportunity to reconstruct relational norms, redefine emotional strength, and normalize help-seeking as part of responsible fatherhood. His developmental story demonstrated that adulthood is not merely a transition into greater independence, but also a period in which Black men may consciously renegotiate

inherited scripts about vulnerability, caregiving, and communal responsibility to construct alternative models of Black manhood for the next generation.

Maurice

Maurice's narrative illustrated how adulthood for Black men can involve an intentional rejection of dominant masculinity norms centered on emotional suppression, hyper-independence, and aggression. As Maurice entered adulthood, he increasingly recognized masculinity as an expression of emotion, a relational responsibility, and a form of healing. He explained that one of the most important lessons shaping his adulthood was recognizing that "there is also no innate aggression in masculinity" and that it is not weak to be gentle or emotionally open.

Central to Maurice's developmental trajectory is a sustained process of internal and relational repair. He reflected on how the anger that once shaped his youth was later understood as a protective response masking deeper emotional experiences. In Interview 2 on 11/24/2025, he explained:

> Just growing enough and addressing my own issues thoroughly enough to hit a place to understand that I was probably never angry in the first place. And I was probably a lot more sad or scared or hurt than I cared to be.

Through therapy, mentorship, and reflective interpersonal relationships, Maurice began reconstructing his understanding of both himself and Black manhood more broadly. Rather than interpreting vulnerability as weakness, he reframed emotional openness as a necessary component of maturity and relational responsibility. His healing process was therefore not framed as purely individual but as socially negotiated, shaped through exposure to mentors and peers who modeled alternative forms of masculinity grounded in care, accountability, and emotional presence. He described witnessing prior models of masculinity defined by "men be

loud, aggressive, rude, belligerent," and recognized how these patterns had once been passed down to him before he began actively challenging them.

This shift became especially clear when Maurice reflected on how those inherited expectations shaped his earlier emotional responses. In the same interview, he stated:

> Seeing men be loud, aggressive, rude, belligerent, just whatever traumas that they were dealing with manifesting as the aggression, that version of masculinity got passed on to me in my lashing out as a youth, feeling like I had to be physically strong or intimidating to have control.

Maurice's adulthood was thus defined by his ongoing commitment to emotional repair, relational restoration, and self-understanding. He explicitly framed this work as part of a broader generational shift, explaining, "I think we're [Black men] healing. I am committed to doing the necessary work to continue this." In this way, Maurice's developmental story reflected a quiet but deliberate reconstruction of Black masculinity, one rooted in healing, emotional literacy, and relational accountability rather than dominance or control.

Through this process, Maurice also became increasingly aware that dominant portrayals of Black masculinity, particularly those linking Black men to aggression, emotional hardness, or intimidation, shaped both how others perceived him and how he initially understood himself. His adulthood transition, therefore, involved an intentional rejection of racialized expectations about how Black men are supposed to behave, express emotion, and assert control in social spaces. Overall, Maurice's narrative demonstrated how racialized adulthood can require Black men to actively reconstruct inherited models of masculinity, reframing vulnerability, healing, and relational accountability as central components of adult identity.

Simone

Simone's narrative illustrated how racialized adulthood for Black women involves a deliberate reorientation away from inherited expectations of strength, endurance, and caregiving

toward a reconstructed model of femininity grounded in self-preservation, emotional care, and personal agency. Having been adultified early through caregiving responsibilities and financial provision, Simone described entering adulthood already accustomed to carrying the burdens typically associated with maturity. As both a mother and entrepreneur, she experienced adulthood as the continuation of labor she had long performed, now intensified through the simultaneous demands of parenting, business ownership, and emotional survival.

Within this context, Simone narrated her adulthood transition as a period of rehabilitation and relational repair. She reflected on how prolonged overfunctioning, unhealthy relationships, and years of operating in survival mode shaped what she describes as a hardened, hyper-responsible posture that she now interprets as adopting a "masculine" identity out of necessity rather than choice. Rather than viewing this orientation as empowering, Simone stated that she increasingly views it as emotionally costly and unsustainable, prompting her to intentionally reconstruct her approach to adulthood and womanhood.

As part of this reconstruction, Simone repeatedly framed her current life phase as entering her "soft girl era," a deliberate attempt to release expectations that Black women must continuously demonstrate strength through sacrifice, overwork, and emotional suppression. In Interview 1 on 11/4/2025, she explained:

> I don't have to be in my masculine era anymore. I could be feminine. I don't have to feel like I'm striving for others. I'm striving for myself now. I don't want nobody trying to keep bending me until I break.

She further connected this shift to an intentional commitment to self-care and emotional restoration, explaining:

> Like, I want to start living life a little bit more again. That's important too, like self-care. I feel like I have not spent too much self-care on myself. I'm always doing for others. I'm ready to start doing for myself.

This shift reflects more than personal preference; it represents Simone's active resistance to gendered survival frameworks inherited both intergenerationally and structurally. She mentioned frequently contrasting her own aspirations with her mother's model of adulthood, which she perceived as rooted in endurance, domestic obligation, and limited opportunity. Observing this pattern, Simone expressed concern about replicating a similar life trajectory and gender expectations, explaining:

> As far as my mom, she always tries to make it seem like she's showing me what a woman needs to do or have to do. And most of the time when she says that, it's just something about like being clean, or I don't even know. I'm not gonna say I don't listen, but it's just like a lot of things my mom says. I don't listen because I don't see it half the time. I don't see her talk about things that I find important; it's just always about washing clothes and doing dishes and taking out the trash. None of those things in my head are important as far as my future. I'm not a maid. She has no life outside of home and work, and I feel like I'm falling into those categories as well, and that's why I'm just like, no.

Motherhood itself intensified this reorientation process. While Simone acknowledged the non-negotiable responsibilities of caring for her daughter, she simultaneously framed this role as motivating her to pursue a version of adulthood that includes emotional presence, self-care, and personal fulfillment rather than relentless obligation. She described actively restructuring her time and priorities, noting, "I'm definitely making more time for her, myself. Beyond being a mom, just being someone who … getting it done. Like there's no backing out no more."

Across her narrative, Simone positioned adulthood as learning how to redistribute responsibility in ways that allow for sustainability, joy, and relational presence. Her transition, therefore, involved not only navigating external adulthood demands but also reconstructing an internalized model of Black femininity, shifting from survival-based strength to a self-defined framework that allows for rest, emotional openness, and personal aspiration. Simone's narrative demonstrated how racialized adulthood can require Black women to actively dismantle inherited gendered survival scripts and intentionally construct alternative models of femininity that

prioritize care for self alongside care for others. Table 6 presents brief case summaries for Theme 4.

Table 6

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 4

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Sage	Sage's adulthood narrative illustrates how becoming a father and scholar required him to actively reconstruct inherited expectations of Black masculinity centered on emotional self-sufficiency and independence. Socialized to "figure it out" on his own, adulthood forced him to reassess the emotional limits of this model and instead prioritize vulnerability, help-seeking, and relational presence as central components of responsible manhood. His fatherhood practices became an intentional counter-narrative to dominant portrayals of disengaged Black fathers, emphasizing emotional accessibility and collective support. Through academic reflection and lived parenting experience, Sage reframed adulthood as a relational process grounded in intentional caregiving and communal learning. His story demonstrates how racialized adulthood can require Black men to consciously reconstruct masculinity in response to both structural narratives and intergenerational socialization.
Maurice	Maurice's adulthood transition reflects an intentional rejection of dominant racialized masculinity norms linking Black men to aggression, emotional suppression, and hyper-independence. Through therapy, mentorship, and relational repair, he reframed adulthood as a process centered on emotional healing, accountability, and self-reflection rather than toughness or control. Maurice interpreted earlier anger not as inherent aggression but as a protective response to unresolved hurt, allowing him to reconstruct emotional openness as a strength rather than a weakness. His developmental trajectory emphasizes vulnerability, gentleness, and interpersonal responsibility as defining features of adult manhood. Maurice's narrative illustrates how racialized adulthood may involve reconstructing masculinity through healing work that challenges both inherited behavioral patterns and dominant social stereotypes about Black men.

Table 6

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 4

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Simone	Simone's narrative highlights how racialized adulthood for Black women can involve resisting gendered expectations of perpetual strength, overwork, and survival-based caregiving formed through early adultification. Having long carried provider and caregiving responsibilities, she entered adulthood already positioned within a hardened model of womanhood defined by endurance and emotional suppression. As a young mother and entrepreneur, Simone describes actively reconstructing her identity by releasing what she terms a "masculine" survival posture and moving toward a self-defined "soft girl era" grounded in rest, self-care, and emotional presence. This shift reflects a deliberate refusal of inherited expectations that Black womanhood requires constant sacrifice and labor. Her story demonstrates how adulthood can function as a rehabilitative period in which Black women intentionally reconstruct femininity to prioritize healing, balance, and self-preservation.

Theme 4 Synthesis

Participants' narratives illustrated that their transitions into adulthood involved not simply assuming gendered roles, but actively renegotiating racialized expectations attached to Black masculinity and Black femininity. Across cases, adulthood functioned as a developmental period in which inherited scripts about emotional strength, independence, caregiving, endurance, and professional limitation were critically examined and, in many instances, deliberately reworked. For Black men in the study, this reorientation often involved rejecting dominant masculinized expectations of emotional suppression, invulnerability, and hyper-independence in favor of relational accountability, vulnerability, and collective models of fatherhood and support. For Black women, adulthood frequently required resisting gendered expectations rooted in overwork, settlement, and survival-based caregiving, instead pursuing models of femininity that prioritized self-preservation, expanded opportunity, emotional healing, and generational

mobility. Importantly, these reconstructions were not framed as abstract identity shifts but as practical developmental responses to racialized structural conditions, intergenerational histories, and institutional narratives that shaped how participants believed Black adults were expected to live, work, parent, and aspire. In this way, participants' stories demonstrated that adulthood for Black youth in this study was experienced not only as a transition into new responsibilities, but as a racialized process of redefining what it means to inhabit Black manhood and Black womanhood in the present.

Theme 5: Racialized Adulthood as Disorientation to Time and Progress

Participants' narratives further revealed that racialized adulthood was experienced not only through structural disruption or identity reorientation, but also through a growing disorientation in how time, progress, and developmental milestones were understood. Rather than experiencing adulthood as a linear progression marked by predictable institutional markers such as educational completion, stable employment, financial independence, or family formation, many participants described feeling temporally unsettled, uncertain about whether they were ahead, behind, stalled, or forced onto alternative timelines. In Interview 1 on 11/5/2025, Maurice described adulthood as "a moving goalpost," where milestones existed but remained in motion, stating:

> I think it's like a moving goalpost. It's definitely still milestones I have yet to reach, but it's things I've accomplished, just places that I've hit, and just to give credit where it's due, but to become the person I'm looking to become. It's an ongoing process.

This temporal instability often reflected what can be understood as the racialization of time itself, in which structural inequities, institutional exclusion, and uneven access to opportunity reshaped when and how developmental progress could realistically occur. Participants frequently described how disruptions, delayed access to resources, caregiving responsibilities, and

racialized opportunity constraints altered not only their material pathways but also their perception of what constituted "normal" timing for adulthood transitions. For Omavi, this disruption produced a felt sense of nonlinear reconstruction rather than steady advancement. In Interview 1 on 11/3/2025, he stated:

> It's been a hectic journey. But now I'm finally kind of at the point where I can see how it all connects, and I'm trying to navigate from it, basically putting myself back together. So, I don't know. I don't think that's as clear an answer, but I think it's because my actual experience was this hard. It's not as linear in my mind yet because I'm still figuring it out.

As a result, adulthood was experienced less as a steady forward movement and more as an uneven process marked by pauses, recalibration, nonlinear advancement, and the need to continuously reinterpret one's developmental trajectory. In this way, racialized adulthood shaped not only available opportunities, but also participants' lived relationship to time, progress, and the meaning of being "on track" in adulthood.

Sage

Sage's narrative illustrated how adulthood can be experienced not as a sequential progression through milestones, but as a layered and unresolved temporal condition shaped by competing responsibilities unfolding simultaneously. Rather than moving through adulthood markers one at a time, Sage navigated fatherhood, doctoral study, and employment concurrently, producing an experience of adulthood that feels ongoing, unsettled, and temporally compressed. His account challenged conventional developmental assumptions that adulthood becomes more stable once major milestones are achieved. Instead, Sage demonstrated how achievement itself does not resolve the temporal instability of adulthood, but can intensify it. He repeatedly described himself as existing within a state of transition without a clear origin or endpoint,

suggesting that adulthood is less a destination than a continuous motion that resists closure. In Interview 1 on 11/4/2025, Sage explained:

> I think I'm still in some type of transition. I don't know where I'm transitioning to. I don't know what I'm transitioning from, but I feel like things are moving so fast that sometimes I don't have the time to just sit down and think and reflect on what's going on, but I know that things are constantly evolving, constantly changing.

This sense of accelerated movement without temporal resolution was intensified by the simultaneous acquisition of multiple adult roles. Becoming a parent shortly after completing his undergraduate degree introduced caregiving responsibilities that immediately reshaped how he allocated time, made decisions, and prioritized his own needs. Rather than allowing for a gradual transition into adulthood, these overlapping demands required Sage to continuously negotiate his commitments as a father, scholar, and employee, leaving little opportunity to stabilize within any single role. Adulthood, for Sage, therefore emerged as a condition of constant negotiation rather than progressive settlement.

To manage this accumulation of responsibilities, Sage developed an intentionally structured and disciplined approach to time management, relying heavily on compartmentalization and routine in order to function across domains. He explained:

> I have to be more intentional about the time that I put into things. I compartmentalize my time more; I am very intentional about the ways in which I structure my time. So if I only have two hours to get this work done, then I only have two hours to get this work done, just being more responsible and intentional in those areas to make sure I'm setting myself up so that I can wear multiple hats as challenging as it can be sometimes.

While these strategies allowed Sage to maintain outward functionality, they also masked the internal instability that has continued to shape his adulthood experience. His visible accomplishments (doctoral enrollment, employment, and fatherhood) signaled competence and stability to others, yet he described a persistent dissonance between how adulthood is perceived externally and how it is experienced internally. He explained, "People think that you have it

figured out. This guy has it figured out. He's a dad, he's in a PhD program, he's working, but I'm literally falling apart."

This gap between external achievement and internal vulnerability highlights that, for Sage, adulthood progress was not measured solely by institutional markers. Instead, his reflections suggested that developmental progress increasingly involves learning how to remain emotionally and structurally sustained within demanding roles rather than simply accumulating them. Over time, Sage started to redefine adulthood less in terms of external advancement and more in sustainable functioning. He did so by managing time, setting limits, and acknowledging the need for support even when others assumed self-sufficiency. Through this reframing, Sage's narrative demonstrated how racialized adulthood can produce a disorientation to time in which responsibilities accumulate rapidly, transitions remain unresolved, and outward success masks ongoing instability. His experience illustrated that adulthood for Black young adults may not follow a linear trajectory toward stability, but instead unfolds as a continuous process of temporal negotiation shaped by overlapping roles, compressed timelines, and persistent expectations of resilience.

Nelson

Nelson's narrative illustrated how adulthood could be experienced as prolonged preparation rather than arrival, producing a temporal orientation marked by motion without visible advancement. Unlike conventional developmental frameworks in which effort is expected to yield predictable progress, Nelson described his adulthood as a suspended phase of training, where sustained labor does not yet translate into the stability or achievement typically associated with adult success. His reflections suggested that adulthood unfolds less as a sequence of

completed milestones and more as an interim state defined by ongoing exertion, uncertainty, and deferred payoff.

To explain this experience, in Interview 1 on 11/4/2025, Nelson repeatedly relied on a training metaphor that captures how adult time can feel active yet stationary. He described:

> I kind of want to refer to, like I'm on a treadmill; you're running in place. I'm running, I'm running, I'm running. I'm preparing. I'm kind of in that phase of preparing myself to then take on the 5k, then the 13.5k, then to take on the mega marathon. I think I'm just in the training phase right now.

This metaphor reflects a temporal experience in which progress is understood not through completed achievements but through ongoing preparation for a future that has not yet materialized. For Nelson, adulthood was therefore not a settled identity but a condition of continual readiness, where effort accumulates while arrival remains uncertain. This sense of suspended movement contributes to a persistent feeling of being "not yet" fully established, even as he remained actively engaged in work, community involvement, and artistic development.

Nelson's perception of stalled or delayed progress was further intensified by relational comparison, particularly through social media and peer networks. He explained that observing the visible achievements of others his age often prompted him to evaluate his own trajectory, generating pressure to continually assess what he had not yet attained. In Interview 1 on 11/4/2025, he reflected:

> Compared to my peers, it kind of keeps me on my toes. My friends are doing this, so I need to always upgrade and evolve. Social media makes you compare yourself, "Oh, well, this person has this, and they're my age, so why don't I have that?"

These comparisons not only produced personal insecurity; rather, Nelson situated them within broader structural uncertainty about economic conditions, job stability, and the long-term viability of opportunity structures. His concerns about layoffs, market instability, and the unpredictability of systems "not made for you" highlighted how feelings of delay were not

merely psychological but connected to wider institutional fragility. In this way, Nelson's sense of being behind became intertwined with a racialized awareness that sustained effort does not guarantee equitable advancement, and that timelines for stability may be structurally extended for Black young adults navigating uneven opportunity terrains.

Despite this uncertainty, Nelson's narrative also revealed an ongoing effort to recalibrate his evaluation of progress. Rather than interpreting adulthood solely through external milestones, he described his experience as an emotional balancing act, shifting between feelings of stagnation and gratitude depending on what he accomplished in a given period. He stated:

> I would say grateful and stuck. I feel like it's a two-sided coin. The scale is always moving between stuck and grateful, depending on how I feel that day or what have I achieved. What have I done to make the scale now stuck to grateful or grateful to stuck?

This internal recalibration suggests that adulthood, for Nelson, involved learning to interpret progress as incremental and provisional rather than definitive or final.

Through these reflections, Nelson's developmental story demonstrated how racialized adulthood can produce a disorientation to time in which preparation extends indefinitely, comparison amplifies perceived delay, and movement does not always translate into visible arrival. His account underscored how adulthood for Black young adults may be experienced not as a linear progression toward stability, but as an extended temporal negotiation shaped by structural uncertainty, relational comparison, and the persistent sense of running forward while remaining in place.

Maurice

Maurice's narrative illustrated how adulthood could be experienced through a persistent sense of falling behind, where time is not simply measured by chronological age but by the perceived distance between one's current life and expected developmental milestones. For Maurice, adulthood has been saturated with markers he believed he "should" have achieved by

now, such as independence, transportation, financial stability, and degree completion, producing a temporal experience shaped less by forward movement and more by ongoing evaluation of what remains unfinished. In Interview 1 on 11/5/2025, he explained:

> I'm living at home with my mom at the moment. I don't have a vehicle. I have my bedroom to my name and a little bit of money in my bank account, but nothing really of my own to say I've gone and obtained.

This sense of lag was not framed simply as a comparison with peers but as a deeply relational and moralized experience tied to expectations he once held for himself and that others held for him. Maurice repeatedly described adulthood as confronting the emotional weight of perceived underachievement, explaining that he felt he had "missed the mark" relative to the ambitions once imagined for his future. Reflecting on these pressures, he noted:

> I still haven't got my driver's license. I'm genuinely feeling a little bit behind in life. I'm just trying to re-evaluate at the moment. I feel like I missed the mark. Everybody had just such high expectations and just then feeling like I've fallen short of that.

In this way, Maurice's temporal orientation highlighted how racialized adulthood is shaped not only by structural barriers but also by internalized responsibility and relational accountability. Delay was experienced personally even when produced by uneven institutional preparation, economic instability, or shifting opportunity structures. His narrative demonstrated how nonlinear adulthood timelines could become emotionally heavy because they were interpreted not merely as postponed milestones but as evidence of having failed to meet socially scripted expectations of progress.

Maurice's story showed that feeling behind does not operate solely as paralysis; it can also become a site of recalibration and renewed aspiration. He explained that exposure to new peer environments has reshaped how he interprets both his present circumstances and future possibilities, noting that being surrounded by supportive friends has made him "more optimistic" and more determined to pursue independence and financial goals. He reflected, "I'm around a

great group of people. The environment I'm in, it's made me more optimistic, now I've hit this point of just needing more." These relational shifts revealed that temporal feeling itself was socially produced: who surrounds an individual influences which timelines appear realistic, which milestones feel urgent, and which futures seem attainable. In Maurice's case, the recognition of delay became intertwined with emerging saving habits, renewed goal setting, and the gradual reconstruction of a forward-looking orientation.

Maurice's trajectory further demonstrated how delays rarely occur in isolation. Instead, unfinished milestones compound across domains, producing a cumulative temporal weight in which educational disruption affects employment options, financial instability delays independence, and limited mobility constrains opportunity access. His adulthood, therefore, unfolded as a prolonged negotiation with overlapping unfinished transitions rather than a sequence of completed stages.

Through these experiences, Maurice's developmental story illustrated how racialized adulthood could produce a disorientation to time in which progress feels uneven, milestones accumulate without resolution, and delay becomes both emotionally burdensome and motivational. His narrative underscored how adulthood for Black young adults might be experienced not as a steady march toward independence, but as a socially and structurally mediated negotiation with expectations, resources, and the persistent feeling of catching up. Table 7 presents brief case summaries for Theme 5.

Table 7

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 5

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Sage	Sage's narrative illustrates how adulthood can feel temporally unstable when multiple major roles accumulate simultaneously rather than sequentially. Navigating fatherhood, doctoral study, and employment at

	the same time, he describes adulthood as an ongoing transition marked by rapid change without clear endpoints or moments of stability. Although his visible achievements signal success, they conceal an internal sense of fragility and overwhelm, complicating assumptions that milestones resolve developmental uncertainty. Sage therefore reframes progress not as completing roles, but as learning how to manage time, set boundaries, and sustain himself across competing demands. His experience demonstrates how racialized adulthood can involve navigating constant motion without the temporal security typically associated with achievement.
Nelson	Nelson's narrative portrays adulthood as a prolonged preparatory phase in which sustained effort does not always translate into visible advancement. Using a treadmill metaphor, he describes feeling as though he is continuously "training" and exerting energy while remaining stationary in terms of major life milestones. Social comparison, economic instability, and structural uncertainty intensify this sense of being perpetually "not yet," reinforcing anxiety about whether progress is attainable within systems he perceives as inequitable. Rather than interpreting this condition as personal failure, Nelson understands it as part of a broader structural reality shaping opportunity access. His account demonstrates how racialized adulthood can be experienced as movement without arrival, where time feels suspended between preparation and payoff.
Maurice	Maurice's narrative demonstrates how adulthood can be experienced through accumulated delay across multiple life domains, including education, financial independence, and housing stability. He describes feeling "behind" relative to both personal expectations and perceived social timelines, with unfinished milestones producing emotional weight and relational pressure. Importantly, these delays are not isolated but compounding, as limited institutional preparation and constrained resources create cascading barriers to advancement. At the same time, Maurice reframes this period as one of recalibration, using new peer influences and financial planning to reorient toward future goals. His experience shows how racialized adulthood can involve negotiating nonlinear timelines in which delay becomes both a source of strain and a catalyst for renewed direction.

Theme 5 Synthesis

Across participant narratives, adulthood was not experienced as a linear developmental progression marked by sequential milestones and stable advancement. Instead, participants described a profound disorientation to time in which adulthood unfolded through overlapping

responsibilities, delayed markers, and persistent uncertainty about whether progress was actually occurring. For some, adulthood felt temporally compressed, with multiple life roles accumulating simultaneously and producing a sense of constant transition without resolution. Others described adulthood as suspended in an extended preparatory phase, characterized by continuous effort and motion while meaningful advancement remained deferred. Still others experienced adulthood through the emotional weight of perceived delay, where unfinished milestones accumulated across domains and produced an ongoing sense of needing to "catch up."

This temporal disorientation was not narrated as an individual failure of planning or motivation. Rather, participants consistently linked their nonlinear timelines to broader structural instability, economic uncertainty, institutional barriers, and racialized uncertainty about opportunity access and long-term security. In this way, time itself emerged as racialized: progress could not be assumed to follow predictable schedules, effort did not reliably produce advancement, and adulthood stability remained contingent rather than guaranteed. Participants, therefore, engaged in ongoing processes of redefining what progress meant, shifting from externally visible milestones toward more sustainable measures such as survival, adaptability, relational grounding, and the ability to function within competing demands. Altogether, these narratives demonstrate that for many Black young adults in the study, adulthood was experienced less as a settled developmental stage and more as an ongoing temporal negotiation, one in which movement, delay, responsibility, and uncertainty coexist, and where learning how to endure, recalibrate, and redefine progress becomes itself a central developmental task.

Summary

Across these domains, participants' narratives collectively demonstrated that adulthood for Black youth is not experienced as a neutral developmental stage but as a racialized condition

shaped by structural constraints, social expectations, and ongoing negotiation of identity, responsibility, and time. Participants described adulthood as emerging through encounters with racialized systems that shaped how they understood opportunity, safety, belonging, and progress. In many cases, adulthood was experienced not as a singular transition marked by independence or stability, but as a layered developmental process involving disruption, reorientation, and continuous recalibration. Whether through navigating institutional instability, renegotiating gendered expectations, or confronting nonlinear experiences of time and progress, participants' accounts revealed that adulthood is actively constructed in response to racialized realities rather than passively entered as a universal life stage.

These findings illuminate how Black youth in YES conceptualize and experience adulthood itself, clarifying the developmental conditions under which their transitions unfold. While this chapter focused on how participants make sense of adulthood and their movement toward it, the following chapter addresses the second research question, examining how YES functioned within these developmental processes. Specifically, Chapter 5 explores how participants understood YES as an organizational, relational, and developmental structure that supported their navigation of racialized adulthood and shaped their trajectories over time.

Chapter 5

Findings for Research Question 2

Chapter 4 examined how Black youth in YES conceptualized and experienced their transitions into adulthood. Findings revealed adulthood as structurally racialized, disruptive to youths' trajectories, and disorienting to identity and time. As participants transitioned to adulthood, they described ongoing identity negotiation, reclamation, and repair work necessary to navigate racialized social structures. Across these narratives, YES frequently appeared as an important relational and institutional presence in youths' lives. These findings provide the foundation for RQ2, which shifts focus to how YES shapes Black youths' developmental transitions.

To organize these findings, this chapter groups participants' accounts into three domains reflecting YES' multi-layered developmental role: (a) stabilization and protection, (b) opportunity expansion, and (c) identity and life course orientation. Although presented as distinct domains for analytic clarity, these themes are not mutually exclusive and frequently overlap across participants' narratives. Together, they follow a developmental arc, illustrating how youth first experienced YES as a stabilizing and protective presence, then as a site of opportunity expansion, and ultimately as an enduring influence on identity formation and life course orientation. Within each domain, patterned themes are illustrated through three in-depth case portraits. This structure allows the chapter to identify shared organizational functions while preserving the developmental depth of individual narratives. Case summaries are available at the end of each theme for reference. Table 8 outlines the domains, themes, and corresponding cases.

Table 8

Domains, Themes, and Case Representation: RQ2

Domain	Theme	Case Representation
Domain 1: YES as a Protective and Stabilizing Infrastructure	Theme 1: YES as an Intervention Against Harm	7/11 (64%)
	Theme 2: YES as Protection from Racial Pressure, Surveillance, and Racialized Responsibility	8/11 (73%)
	Theme 3: YES as Relational Care Infrastructure	11/11 (100%)
	Theme 4: YES as Black Social Belonging and Collective Ease	11/11 (100%)
Domain 2: YES as Developmental Opportunity Infrastructure	Theme 5: YES as Opportunity Cultivator	11/11 (100%)
Domain 3: YES as Identity and Life-Course Developmental Anchor	Theme 6: YES as a Developmental Bridge Across Time	9/11 (82%)
	Theme 7: YES as Narrative Labor and Identity Formation	11/11 (100%)
	Theme 8: YES as a Model for Black Adulthood	6/11 (55%)

Domain 1: YES as a Protective and Stabilizing Infrastructure

Across participant narratives, YES was described first and foremost as a protective and stabilizing institutional presence. Before opportunity expansion or long-term identity formation could occur, youth consistently emphasized YES' role in interrupting harm, buffering instability, and preserving their developmental trajectories during vulnerable moments. Participants described YES as stepping into structural, familial, and institutional gaps that might otherwise have narrowed or foreclosed pathways altogether.

Protection in this domain operated across multiple layers. At times, protection was material such as financial assistance, emergency resources, advocacy with schools, or logistical

support that prevented immediate crises from escalating. At other times, protection was relational and psychological, creating a space where youth could disengage from premature adult responsibilities, racialized performance pressure, or the cumulative strain of navigating institutions that did not consistently protect them. In still other instances, it emerged through sustained adult presence and peer belonging, both of which reduce isolation and affirm dignity.

Participants did not narrate YES as a reactive support. Instead, YES was described as an ongoing infrastructure that stabilizes young people during fragile developmental junctures and shields them from harm that might otherwise accumulate across adolescence and early adulthood. The themes in this domain illustrate how protection was enacted through intervention, refuge from racialized pressure, relational care, and collective belonging. Together, these findings position YES not simply as programmatic support, but as an institutional counterweight to environments that routinely expose Black youth to instability and constraint.

Theme 1: YES as an Intervention Against Harm

Participants repeatedly described YES as intervening at critical moments when harm, exclusion, or instability threatened to derail their educational or developmental pathways. In these accounts, harm was not always dramatic or singular. It appeared as missed deadlines due to financial constraints, school removal linked to family instability, bullying, premature caregiving burdens, or crisis-level material vulnerability. Left unaddressed, these moments carried the potential to quietly narrow opportunity and alter life-course trajectories. As Maurice described, YES intervened at precisely these vulnerable inflection points. He explained that staff helped him figure it out and caught him before he fell, particularly when he lacked clarity about how to navigate institutional barriers. In Interview 2 on 11/24/2025, Maurice stated:

> The best way I can describe it is y'all helped me figure it out and caught me before I fell. I didn't have a good sense of where to go or what I needed to do, but y'all helped me

> address the institutional barriers. I still rely on y'all's wisdom when I am up against challenges at work or in other contexts.

Participants also described YES intervening directly in moments when institutional challenges threatened to derail key educational opportunities. When barriers jeopardized Jasmine's college enrollment, she credited YES with advocating on her behalf and altering the outcome. In Interview 1 on 11/3/2025, Jasmine stated:

> So I realized I [am] in this position because of [YES]. [YES] called [institution redacted], and you all advocated on my behalf and got me in there. There wasn't anything else I could have done. So when I think about my college journey, I have to go back to the source, which was [YES].

Omavi similarly recalled how staff intervened when financial barriers threatened to redirect his college plans, working alongside his family to renegotiate institutional constraints and expand his available options. In Interview 2 on 11/17/2025, he stated:

> I remember, oh my God, at this point I just thought I had to go to [institution redacted]. I did not want to go there, but I had already signed the paperwork or whatever. And then I remember [YES] was like, "No, no, no, no, we're going to figure this out. And I remember [YES] really working with my mom, helping and getting me connected to the people there who literally knocked the tuition down a lot.

These accounts illustrated how participants experienced YES not simply as a source of encouragement, but as an active institutional advocate capable of intervening directly in systems that otherwise constrained their options.

Within this theme, YES operated as an institutional interrupter. Staff advocated with schools, mobilized financial resources, negotiated bureaucratic barriers, and provided immediate material assistance when systems are slow, inaccessible, or indifferent. These interventions were described as pivotal actions that prevented pathway foreclosure and not simply supplemental supports. Diamond similarly reflected on witnessing staff challenge institutional authority in ways that reshaped her understanding of what was possible, noting that YES was "there early on

fighting institutional battles" and modeling how to appeal school denials and refuse exclusion. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she stated:

> Y'all were there early on, fighting institutional battles. That was very meaningful as I did not even know that you could challenge institutional decisions or appeal school denials. But you all were right there, and I was watching you remove barriers with your approach to institutional advocacy. This changed my mind and perspective on what is possible and to never accept no for an answer.

In many cases, participants explicitly attributed key educational or developmental outcomes to YES' willingness to challenge institutional decisions and absorb material strain. Across narratives, intervention was also described as developmental protection. By interrupting adultification, advocating for reinstatement, ensuring access to education, and stabilizing households during crisis, YES preserved participants' ability to experience adolescence and pursue long-term goals. The following cases illustrate how intervention against harm functioned as both material and symbolic protection, demonstrating how these moments of institutional advocacy and crisis response reshaped youths' developmental trajectories, communicating to youth that their futures were worth institutional effort and that structural barriers were not immutable.

Kacey

Kacey described her HBCU tour experience as a defining moment in her educational trajectory, one that almost did not happen. As a high school senior, she missed the application deadline and lacked the financial resources to participate. In Interview 2 on 11/18/2025, she reflected on that moment and explained:

> I remember the only reason, which is crazy. The only reason why I went to the college that I went to and went on the college tour is because [YES] really advocated for me to go. I missed the deadline or something. I didn't have the money for it, and so I missed the deadline. [You all] were harassing them to make sure that I could go. [YES] provided me with the money as well to send me on the trip. Somehow, [YES] was able to make sure

> that I went on the trip. I went to the college that I viewed on the tour, and I wouldn't have been able to without YES coming through for me.

Kacey emphasized that without YES' intervention, she would not have been able to attend the tour at all. Her family did not have the capacity to fund independent college visits. She noted, "My mom wasn't taking me on college tours because she couldn't afford to do so." What appeared administratively minor—a missed deadline—carried larger developmental implications. Without material and relational intervention, her post-secondary options would have narrowed quietly and significantly.

Through financial support and direct advocacy with tour organizers, YES ensured that she participated despite structural constraints. The institution she ultimately attended and earned her degree from in Computer Science was one she encountered on that tour. In Kacey's telling, YES did not merely assist; the organization directly interrupted pathway foreclosure at a moment when institutional access was fragile and almost nonexistent. Her case illustrates how intervention against harm often operates through immediate, practical action—covering costs, negotiating deadlines, refusing to accept bureaucratic closure as final. In doing so, YES preserved not only access, but possibility.

Simone

Simone described YES as the first place where she was allowed to simply exist without carrying the weight of adult responsibility. She entered adolescence already overfunctioning within her family. In Interview 2 on 11/22/2025, she explained:

> But I think YES gave me that time to just be, especially because I told you I picked up a lot of the slack at home. So YES gave me that time to just be a teenager. I didn't feel like it was a commitment that I didn't want or a responsibility I had to take on, like how home or school felt.

Before she identified herself as an adult, Simone was already managing caregiving, emotional labor, and household strain. YES interrupted that pattern of early adultification. Rather than demanding performance or productivity, the organization functioned as a stabilizing presence, a physical and emotional refuge where she did not have to manage crises or provide for others. Stabilization, in Simone's account, was not a one-time intervention; it was an ongoing environment that shielded her from cumulative familial strain and preserved her capacity to imagine a future beyond survival.

That protective role became especially visible during moments of institutional exclusion. When Simone was removed from her magnet high school due to attendance instability connected to family stressors, YES intervened directly. In the same interview, she recalled:

> Remember when I got kicked out of [institution redacted] my freshman year and YES wrote that letter and met with my school principal to help me get me back in? Or even just being on academic probation, and YES helped make sure I didn't fall through the cracks?

She understood what removal would have meant and explained:

> Things could've been a lot worse for me if I actually did get removed from my school. That would mean that I would have been without a lot of things that my current school had to offer. I wouldn't be able to graduate with my engineering certification.

YES' advocacy preserved her placement within a resource-rich academic environment that offered engineering coursework and certifications unavailable elsewhere. This intervention was not only about reinstatement; it communicated that her educational trajectory warranted institutional effort. In challenging the school's decision through written appeals and direct meetings, YES countered the quiet foreclosure of opportunity that might otherwise have reshaped her future.

Simone also recognized YES as a material safety net during periods of financial and housing instability. She recalled when her family faced utility shutoffs, stating:

> Our lights and water were off, and instead of putting us through all the hoops to get support, you all just took care of it. You didn't want anything in return, or you didn't make me and my family feel less than. You just handled it.

She contrasted this responsiveness with other agencies she experienced as slow or bureaucratic, stating:

> When it comes to other agencies, resource support could be slow. I've never felt like that with YES. If I came to you all with an issue, I knew I wasn't walking out the door without it being resolved or without feeling like I wasn't listened to.

In Simone's narrative, YES functioned as both interrupter and stabilizer, preventing educational derailment, absorbing material crises, and creating developmental breathing room within a life otherwise structured by over-responsibility. The organization did not eliminate hardship, but it shielded her from its most destabilizing consequences, preserving both access and dignity during vulnerable transitions.

Renee

Renee described YES as a consistent presence during moments when her material stability was fragile and her educational trajectory uncertain. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she reflected on periods when employment was inconsistent and financial strain intensified and explained:

> YES was heavily involved in making sure that I had the financial resources I needed to continue my secondary education, and helping me with my personal expenses at difficult times, and classroom materials like books, and just different things of that nature when resources were running low. YES also set this tone where it's like, "Hey, we're still here to support you in any way."

For Renee, this support was not symbolic; it directly altered her material conditions. When crisis-level instability made it difficult to maintain employment and financial independence, YES covered costs for school materials and personal expenses, ensuring that short-term hardship did not permanently derail her educational progress. Her narrative illustrated how intervention

against harm operates not only at dramatic turning points but also in the quiet, compounding moments when financial strain threatens persistence.

At the same time, Renee situated YES as an environment that interrupted early caregiving burdens and expanded her access to adolescence. Having matured quickly within her family system, she recalled:

> Having the life that I had with maturing fast, I never really had that experience of just having an environment with kids around my age that I'm able to relate to. Initially going to [YES], I was excited to just be a kid and connect with people my age.

Participation in YES created structured time and space in which she could disengage from adult-like responsibilities and experience age-appropriate peer connections. Stabilization, in her case, included emotional and social preservation—protecting her developmental trajectory from the long-term effects of premature adulthood.

Renee also recounted how YES intervened when bullying compromised her sense of safety in school. She explained:

> YES had followed closely with my education and made sure that my school was providing everything that I needed during that time. A lot of issues that had come up was bullying, and [YES was] making sure that I'm in a safe space where I'm able to continue my education and being able to concentrate and just utilizing counselor resources. [YES] made it a matter of getting me to the finish line and seeing me through.

Rather than leaving her to navigate school-based harm on her own, YES held institutional actors accountable and ensured she had access to appropriate supports. In Renee's telling, the organization functioned as an advocate and stabilizer, preserving both her educational access and her emotional safety during turbulent developmental transitions.

Across material assistance, school advocacy, and relational belonging, Renee's case demonstrates how intervention against harm often requires layered forms of protection. YES did not entirely remove instability from her life, but it mitigated its most destabilizing consequences,

reinforcing that her persistence and well-being were worth sustained institutional effort. Table 9 presents brief case summaries for Theme 1.

Table 9

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 1 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Kacey	Kacey's case illustrates how YES intervened at a critical moment of potential pathway foreclosure. After missing the deadline and lacking funds to attend an HBCU college tour, YES provided financial support and directly advocated on her behalf, ensuring her participation. The institution she ultimately enrolled in was one she encountered on that tour, making the intervention developmentally consequential. Without YES' material and relational advocacy, her post-secondary options would have narrowed significantly. Her case demonstrates how timely institutional interruption can preserve opportunity at moments when access is fragile.
Simone	Simone's narrative highlights YES' stabilizing role amid early adultification, school exclusion, and material instability. Having carried caregiving responsibilities at home, she describes YES as the first space where she could "just be a teenager" without survival pressure. When she was removed from her magnet high school, YES advocated for her reinstatement, preserving access to advanced academic programming. During periods of housing and utility insecurity, YES provided immediate material support without stigma or bureaucratic delay. Her case demonstrates how intervention against harm operates across educational, emotional, and material domains simultaneously.
Renee	Renee's case demonstrates how YES functioned as both a material and developmental safeguard during periods of crisis and instability. When financial strain threatened her educational persistence, YES provided direct assistance for school-related and personal expenses. The organization also intervened during school-based bullying, ensuring institutional accountability and continued access to safe learning environments. Beyond crisis response, YES offered one of the first spaces where Renee could disengage from early caregiving responsibilities and experience age-appropriate peer connection. Her narrative illustrates how stabilization for Black youth often requires layered intervention across family, school, and economic contexts.

Theme 1 Synthesis

Across participants' narratives, YES was shown to operate as an institutional interrupter that actively intervenes against harm. Youth described moments where their educational pathways, material stability, or developmental well-being were fragile and easily foreclosed. In these moments, YES did not respond passively; rather, it mobilized resources, advocacy, and relational presence to prevent quiet derailment. Whether advocating with school administrators, covering household utilities, funding college exposure opportunities, or ensuring access to educational materials, YES functioned as a buffer against structural neglect and bureaucratic indifference.

Significantly, intervention in these cases extended beyond material assistance. YES also disrupted patterns of early adultification and premature responsibility that shaped participants' adolescence. For Simone and Renee in particular, the organization provided a structured space to experience age-appropriate development. It protected access to opportunity as well as emotional and social growth. In this way, stabilization was not a single event but an ongoing presence that shielded youth from cumulative strain.

These cases illustrate that harm in Black youths' adulthood transitions is often subtle, administrative, and cumulative, showing up as missed deadlines, school removal, financial instability, exclusion, bullying, or unmet resource needs. YES intervened precisely at these fragile moments, preserving educational mobility, dignity, and developmental continuity. Through material responsiveness and relational advocacy, YES served as protective infrastructure, ensuring that temporary crises did not calcify into permanent constraints.

Theme 2: YES as Protection from Racial Pressure, Surveillance, and Racialized Responsibility

Beyond intervening during moments of extreme harm, participants described YES as protecting them from the everyday racial pressures that shape their developmental environments. Across schools, workplaces, and public spaces, youth recounted feeling surveilled, evaluated, and burdened by racialized expectations to perform, self-monitor, and over-function. In contrast, YES operated as a space where these pressures could temporarily subside. Participants described entering YES and experiencing relief from the need to code-switch, defend their competence, or carry collective racial responsibility. As Simone explained, "just having a safe haven at the office, that's why YES was a good thing. It gave us a safe place, a space to unwind when the weight of the world was on us." Within this context, Blackness was not hypervisible, questioned, or policed; at YES, it was normalized. Protection, in this theme, is therefore relational and psychological: YES reduced racial strain by creating an environment where youth could exist without constant vigilance, allowing for collective ease, emotional release, and developmental breathing room.

Diamond

Diamond explicitly linked her development to the long-term navigation of predominantly White educational and professional environments. In those spaces, she described learning to manage her appearance, tone, and emotional expression in order to avoid misinterpretation. In Interview 2 on 11/20/ 2025, she reflected on the pressures she experiences as a Black woman in STEM contexts and explained:

> I have to wear my hair a certain way. I have to watch how I dress because Black women can be curvier and things like that. The way that clothes look on us versus somebody else, we might get picked on more about it than our counterparts.

Her account underscored the hypervisibility and scrutiny placed on Black girls and women in White-dominated institutions. The labor of self-monitoring, more specifically, how she dresses, speaks, and presents herself, became a daily strategy for protection. In these environments, competence alone was insufficient; safety, in her case, required calibration. She described her predominantly White school context as isolating and emotionally taxing, marked by subtle policing and misrecognition.

Against this backdrop, YES functioned as a site of psychological relief. Diamond is clear that she returned to YES not merely for programming, but for restoration. She shared, "I come to YES to decompress and talk about the issues that I am dealing with because I was in a predominantly white school in the city of Pittsburgh, which was hard." She further acknowledged, "Coming back to a safe space like YES with the community that I had definitely helped. YES was definitely a decompressing safe space."

In Diamond's narrative, YES operated as more than a supportive organization, reducing the psychological cost of navigating whiteness. Within YES, she did not have to manage tone, presentation, or bodily perception to the same degree. Blackness was not scrutinized or pathologized; it was instead normalized. This normalization offered collective ease and emotional recalibration in contrast to the vigilance required elsewhere. Diamond's case demonstrates that protection from racial pressure is not only about shielding youth from overt harm, but also about mitigating the cumulative strain of racialized surveillance and performance. YES provided a counterspace where the labor of constant calibration could temporarily dissipate, allowing her to exhale before re-entering institutions structured by Whiteness.

Nelson

Nelson described adulthood as a constant process of interpreting how he is being perceived in different environments. In predominantly White and public spaces, belonging often feels conditional. As explained, Nelson stated that he frequently assesses where he fits, how he is being read, and what version of himself is required in a given setting. Surveillance, in his case, was not always overt; it was embedded in everyday navigation, in the quiet awareness that he must manage perception and expectation.

Against this backdrop, YES functioned as relief from that interpretive burden. In Interview 2 on 11/23/2025, Nelson reflected on what the space offered him, sharing:

> [YES] gave me a safe and organized space to work. When I was having a bad day or wasn't in it that day, I came to YES to lay my burden, speak what's on my mind, get it out, and move forward.

His language of "lay my burden" signaled more than emotional expression; it suggested a release from accumulated racial pressure. In YES, he did not have to hold tension in his body or monitor how his words would be received. He described the space as one where he could be emotionally transparent without fear of misinterpretation. He further explained, "YES allowed me to see how it feels to be around community, to be seen, to be heard, and to be supported through rough times."

Within YES, Nelson was not positioned as exceptional, isolated, or hypervisible. Instead, he experienced collective ease, a form of belonging that reduced the demand to constantly manage external perception. Protection in this instance was subtle but profound; YES did not remove him from racialized environments entirely, but it provided a counterspace where he could recalibrate before re-entering them. Nelson's narrative demonstrated that protection from racial pressure is not solely about shielding youth from overt harm. It also involves creating

environments where the psychological labor of vigilance can be quieted, even temporarily. In offering community, emotional transparency, and freedom from interpretive strain, YES reduced the cumulative toll of racialized responsibility in his everyday life.

Ryan

Ryan articulated the need for counterspaces through a realization that emerged over time. While he initially understood Black-specific programs as beneficial, he later came to see them as necessary. In Interview 2 on 11/19/2025, he reflected on this shift and explained:

> One thing that I would note that I noticed—not extremely recently—is the fact that I knew that we needed Black-specific programs, but I didn't realize that we need those to actually have a place to go as Black people. Because a lot of stuff in the world is not made for Black people at all. You actually need a place where you can go and actually be Black and just be Black.

His reflection captured a subtle but critical awareness that many institutional and public environments are not designed with Black people in mind. What once felt "normal," such as moving through racially mixed spaces, later proved to be conditional belonging. The recognition that "a lot of stuff in the world is not made for Black people" reframed YES not as an extracurricular option, but as a structural necessity. Within this context, Ryan recognized YES as one of the few places where he did not have to negotiate his presence. He could exist without calibrating his speech, demeanor, or affect to fit external expectations. The protection offered by YES was not merely emotional reassurance; it responded to the structural absence by creating a space in which Black presence was normalized rather than questioned.

Ryan's account underscored that racial pressure is often quieter than dramatic. Racial pressure accumulates through subtle exclusions, cultural misalignment, and the awareness that one is navigating spaces not built with one's safety or affirmation in mind. YES functioned as a refuge from that constant negotiation. In offering a place to "just be Black," the organization

reduced the burden of surveillance and racialized responsibility, affirming that belonging need not be earned or managed. Table 10 presents brief case summaries for Theme 2.

Table 10

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 2 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Diamond	Diamond's case illustrates how YES reduced the psychological cost of navigating predominantly white educational and professional environments. In STEM contexts, she describes managing her appearance, tone, and emotional expression to avoid racialized misinterpretation. YES functioned as a decompressing counterspace where she could return to a shared community without constant calibration. Within YES, Blackness was normalized rather than scrutinized, allowing her to temporarily release performance pressure. Her narrative demonstrates how protection from racial surveillance operates through relational and psychological relief.
Simone	Nelson describes adulthood as requiring constant interpretation of how he is perceived in predominantly white and public spaces. The need to manage belonging and external perception produces ongoing tension and emotional burden. YES provided a space where he could "lay [his] burden," speak freely, and experience community without hypervisibility. This relief reduced the labor of self-monitoring and racial performance. His case highlights how counterspaces mitigate the cumulative strain of conditional belonging.
Renee	Ryan articulates the necessity of Black-specific spaces after recognizing that many institutions are "not made for Black people." He reframes YES as a structural response to this absence — a place where he could "actually be Black and just be Black" without negotiation. Within YES, belonging was not conditional or earned through performance. The organization provided refuge from racial pressure embedded in broader environments. His narrative underscores how protection from surveillance and racialized responsibility affirms presence as ordinary rather than exceptional.

Theme 2 Synthesis

Across these narratives, YES functioned as protection not only from acute harm but from the everyday racial pressures that shape Black youths' developmental environments. Participants

described schools, workplaces, and public spaces as contexts in which they must monitor their tone, appearance, competence, and emotional expression to avoid misinterpretation or sanctions. This constant calibration produces psychological strain, reinforcing hypervisibility, conditional belonging, and racialized responsibility. In contrast, YES emerged as a counterspace in which these demands temporarily retreated.

Youth consistently framed YES as a place where Blackness was normalized rather than scrutinized. Within this environment, they reported being able to speak freely, release accumulated tension, and disengage from the labor of racial performance. Protection in this theme was subtle but consequential; YES reduced the interpretive burden of navigating Whiteness by creating space for collective ease, affirmation, and emotional transparency. Rather than merely offering comfort, they stated that YES responds to structural absence by cultivating environments where Black youth are not required to negotiate their presence. In doing so, it mitigates the cumulative psychological toll of surveillance and racialized responsibility, reinforcing developmental stability across time.

Theme 3: YES as Relational Care Infrastructure

Beyond intervening in moments of crisis and protecting youth from racialized pressure, participants described YES as a sustained relational care infrastructure embedded in their developmental lives. Unlike time-bound programs and services, YES was narrated as a consistent presence, marked by staff constancy, critical care, advocacy rooted in relationship, and long-term commitment. Youth emphasized that care at YES was not transactional or conditional; it was relational, personalized, and enduring. As Jasmine reflected, YES staff "were there from the beginning to end throughout the whole thing," serving as the "go-to people for support in all aspects of life," not only during school-based challenges but across evolving goals and

transitions. She emphasized that staff "were available then, and you're still available now," underscoring care as continuity rather than short-term assistance.

Staff members remembered details, checked in without prompting, extended support beyond formal programming, and remained accessible across developmental stages. Mary described this constancy in personal terms, noting that "[Ms. Denise] continued to show up, has seen me through different things, and checked up on me," emphasizing that support extended across multiple phases of her life. She further recalled staff "stayed out so late with me, writing [my college materials] together late into the night," pushing back on institutional barriers, renegotiating opportunities, and consistently appearing at both academic and creative milestones.

Omavi's reflection further illustrated that this care was not contingent upon perfection or ease. He described YES as a space that allowed him to be "different versions of myself, good and bad," acknowledging moments when he could be "frustrating to deal with" or "challenging." Yet, he emphasized that YES continued to provide space to "mess up, try again, learn from it, grow from it," framing this sustained patience as central to why young people ultimately "do well when they work with YES." His account underscored that relational care within YES endured through missteps and growth, reinforcing the organization's role as a developmental anchor rather than a conditional support system.

When reflecting further on care within YES, Omavi described it as cumulative and embedded in everyday interactions rather than tied to a single defining moment. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, he explained:

> It's hard to just think about like one major moment. I think in general, my difficulty to think about one major moment is more so a reflection of the fact that [care] was consistent, and it was the small things.

He continued by emphasizing that what made YES meaningful was not a single dramatic gesture, but the steady presence of support over time:

> Like you just had to be there. Because there's so many things where I feel the things [YES] did, it wasn't just like, there's this grand gesture; it literally was just you all being consistent and literally just us being in a space where we're supported, just literally still having open doors.

For Omavi, relational care appeared as open doors, guidance, and responsiveness that accumulated over time to build trust, stability, and a sense of relational security. Participants also described intergenerational bonds within YES that reinforced stability and modeled forms of accountability and presence across generations. In this theme, care operates as infrastructure, not a single intervention, but an ongoing relational system that anchors youth across transitions, offering continuity in environments otherwise marked by instability and conditional support.

Renee

Renee described YES not only as a place that provided resources, but as a space defined by consistent relational presence. Reflecting on her time there, she explains, "[YES] had created this safe space where I'm able to come into this open space and be able to express my concerns or anything that I'd had going on." Her emphasis is not on a single intervention, but on the experience of being able to enter a space where emotional expression was welcomed rather than managed. For Renee, care operated through co-presence. According to Renee, adults who were available, attentive, and willing to sit with students without requiring them to perform competence or resolve their struggles immediately. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she elaborated on what made this environment distinct, sharing:

> It's just showing consistency, just ensuring and sitting down with students to just ensure that it is a safe space for them to come and feel and be open. I feel like there's a lot of spaces where there's certain rules in place, but I feel like YES has that open space where you're able to be yourself, and it allows that opportunity of closeness to happen.

In her account, she stated that relational infrastructure is built through repetition and constancy. Staff did not simply intervene during crisis; they remained accessible across time. Their willingness to "sit down" and ensure safety communicated that vulnerability did not need to be navigated alone. These seemingly small gestures, such as listening, checking in, and remaining physically and emotionally present, functioned as developmental protection. Renee's narrative illustrated that care infrastructure is not defined solely by material assistance or formal programming. Rather, it is constructed through sustained relational availability that normalizes openness and reinforces belonging. In environments where support was often conditional or procedural, YES offered relational continuity, a form of care that anchored her during periods of stress and uncertainty.

Jasmine

Jasmine anchored this theme by repeatedly emphasizing the constancy and accessibility of YES staff over time. When asked about her relationship with YES beyond high school, she did not describe a program she completed, but a network that remained present. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she explained:

> [YES staff] were there from the beginning to end throughout the whole thing. [YES staff] just provided everything. You guys helped me succeed and tackle challenges with unconditional love and support. If I encountered an issue with school or my academics, [YES] helped me or knew how to point me in the right direction. You guys were available then, and you're still available now.

For Jasmine, relational care was defined by reachability. She repeatedly emphasized that she was "never unsure" about whether she could call, return to the office, or ask for help. That certainty transformed how she navigated institutional barriers. Rather than withdrawing or attempting to self-manage in isolation, her instinct became to contact trusted adults within YES. This sense of reliable access reframed help-seeking as a normal and expected part of navigating challenges,

rather than a sign of personal failure or inadequacy. She underscored the depth of that availability, stating, “But if I was there till midnight, [YES staff] were there till midnight. Whatever I wanted to achieve, [YES staff] made sure they were there backing it 110%. The support, the unwavering support, was there.

This form of accompaniment extended beyond academic advising. Jasmine described staff who remained physically present during late nights, provided meals when she was hungry, checked in consistently, and offered guidance across educational, emotional, and professional domains. These moments, though often small in isolation, accumulated into a broader relational environment in which she felt consistently supported and valued. She reflected, “Ms. Denise made me feel so loved at a point where I didn’t love myself; Dr. Jones as well. I feel like he did a great job of recognizing positive achievements.”

Care infrastructure, in Jasmine’s narrative, was deeply personalized. Relationships evolved over time, from teacher to mentor to coach, and were sustained as she transitioned into college, motherhood, and her professional life. She explained, “Yeah, during high school, my relationship with Ms. Denise started off as a teacher relationship. It grew into a mentorship, and then it became more like a personal coach and therapist. It just continued supplying the growth I needed.” Through these evolving roles, Jasmine described YES not as a temporary program but as a relational system that adapted alongside her changing developmental needs. Staff relationships expanded in scope as her life circumstances shifted, offering guidance, affirmation, and accountability across multiple phases of adulthood.

Jasmine’s case demonstrates that relational care infrastructure is built through unwavering availability, intergenerational bonds, and advocacy embedded in trust. In her account, YES not only supported her transition to adulthood but also accompanied her throughout the process.

Rather than experiencing care as a discrete intervention tied to a single moment, Jasmine described an enduring relational presence that continued to shape how she navigated education, family life, and professional aspirations over time.

Maurice

Maurice described YES as a community of mentors who helped shape his understanding of guidance, masculinity, and relational responsibility. When reflecting on his time with the organization, he repeatedly returned to the importance of having adults who felt accountable to him and invested in his growth. In Interview 2 on 11/24/2025, he explained:

> I feel like a lot of that community that I was looking for just in having designated mentors, people with responsibility to me, and just in feeling like I was really engaged with and cared for while I was there. Just the male mentors—Raheem, Nate—just any interactions I had on field trips, Faith Ranch, during the presentations and research projects, just them overlooking us, being something helpful that helped guide me to what I thought masculinity and manhood was.

For Maurice, these relationships provided more than supervision or programmatic oversight. The presence of male mentors offered a model of adulthood grounded in attentiveness and guidance. Through everyday interactions such as shared activities, field trips, and informal conversations, mentors demonstrated forms of masculinity that emphasized responsibility, engagement, and relational presence.

Maurice also emphasized that the value of YES extended beyond financial opportunities or structured programming. Although he participated in activities in which youth earned income, he consistently framed the organization's impact in terms of mentorship rather than employment. He reflected:

> More than just the job and the income, it was a sense of mentorship, just in having role models and having direction and guidance; it was good for us as youth. I can't say I had any real goals or anything I was looking to take away. I was just taking away everything that was available.

Maurice described mentorship as an open, developmental environment in which young people absorbed guidance through exposure to supportive adults. Rather than approaching YES with predetermined goals, he recalled gathering "everything that was available," including experiences, advice, and encouragement that gradually shaped how he understood himself and his future. One memory in particular illustrated how mentorship within YES was often expressed through quiet relational presence rather than direct instruction. Maurice recalled an early morning run at Faith Ranch when a mentor noticed he was attempting to isolate himself. He stated:

> We were out at Faith Ranch, and I was probably upset. I don't know why I was a little bit ahead, just trying to keep my own pace by myself, and [one of the YES male mentors] just ran up and kept pace with me, just talked to me a little bit. We did not speak about anything super memorable, but just his attendance. He saw I was trying to be alone. He didn't want to let me be alone, but he wasn't invasive; he just was sort of present with me.

Maurice explained that what stayed with him from that interaction was not the conversation itself, but the mentor's attentiveness. Rather than forcing engagement or leaving him alone, his YES mentor simply matched his pace and remained nearby, demonstrating care through presence. Reflecting on that moment, he explained:

> I think at the time I really just needed somebody to be present, not in a way that something was expected of me or in a way that I had something to accomplish, but just that it was okay for me to be, and that somebody was just willing to be with me.

For Maurice, this kind of presence conveyed acceptance and stability at a moment when he might otherwise have withdrawn. The interaction illustrated how relational care within YES often appeared through subtle acts of attentiveness that affirmed young people's emotional experiences while allowing them space to process them.

Maurice also described how mentors modeled creative dedication in ways that influenced his own aspirations. One mentor in particular, an artist who openly shared his craft with youth,

helped Maurice develop confidence in his own musical pursuits. In the same interview, he explained:

> I think offhand I'd have to go with Raheem. It's just an overall experience with him. He is an artist, drawing and whatnot, but I do music, so to see him dive into his craft and really give the care that it deserves helped to imbue me with a sense of belief in what I was doing, just that overall Big Brother experience when I needed it.

Seeing mentors pursue their passions while remaining present for younger participants reinforced Maurice's belief that adulthood could involve both personal purpose and responsibility to others. Because many of these mentors were only a few years older than him, their example felt attainable and relatable.

Over time, these experiences shaped how Maurice thought about mentorship and his own future role in supporting younger generations. Reflecting on the men who guided him through YES, he explained that their presence inspired him to one day offer the same support to youth navigating similar transitions. In this way, Maurice's story illustrated how relational care infrastructure functions not only as immediate support but as a generative cycle in which mentorship is carried forward across generations. Through Maurice's experiences, YES emerged as a relational environment grounded in mentorship, presence, and example. Rather than a program defined by discrete services, it functioned as a network of relationships that modeled adulthood, affirmed identity, and provided young people with the grounding necessary to navigate their transitions into adulthood. Table 11 presents brief case summaries for Theme 3.

Table 11

Brief Case Summaries – Theme 3 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Renee	Renee's narrative highlights YES as a space defined by consistent emotional co-presence. She describes staff who "sat down" with students, ensured safety, and remained available without requiring immediate resolution. Rather than intervening only during crisis, YES provided relational continuity that normalized openness and vulnerability. This steady adult engagement functioned as developmental protection during periods of stress and uncertainty. Her case demonstrates how care infrastructure operates through predictable presence and sustained accessibility.
Jasmine	Jasmine frames YES as a network of adults who were "there from the beginning to end" and remained reachable throughout her transition into college and motherhood. She describes late-night accompaniment, mentorship that evolved over time, and institutional advocacy that made higher education materially accessible. Help-seeking became normalized because she was never uncertain about whether support was available. YES transformed relational trust into tangible educational access and long-term guidance. Her narrative illustrates how care infrastructure extends across developmental stages rather than ending at program completion.
Maurice	Maurice's narrative illustrates how YES functioned as relational care infrastructure through sustained mentorship and presence. He emphasizes the importance of male mentors who modeled alternative forms of masculinity, responsibility, and guidance through everyday interactions. Rather than viewing YES primarily as a source of employment or programming, Maurice describes it as a community of mentors who offered direction, encouragement, and emotional support. Moments of quiet attentiveness, such as a mentor simply running alongside him during a difficult moment, communicated care through presence rather than intervention. These experiences shaped Maurice's understanding of mentorship and inspired his desire to provide similar guidance to younger generations.

Theme 3 Synthesis

Across these cases, YES was described as a relational infrastructure that remained accessible across time. Participants emphasized constancy, illustrating adults who were reachable, responsive, and physically present during moments of uncertainty. Care in this theme

was enacted through sustained accompaniment rather than episodic crisis response. Staff remembered details, stayed late, checked in without prompting, and remained available beyond formal programming windows. Participants also emphasized the role of mentors who offered guidance, molded an ethic of care, and demonstrated presence in everyday interactions, shaping how youth understood responsibility, identity, and relational support. This consistency built trust and normalized help-seeking as a developmental strategy rather than a sign of deficiency.

Furthermore, relational care also extended into institutional advocacy. Youth described staff who negotiated with schools, contacted universities, supported documentation processes, and reframed structural barriers as challenges to be addressed rather than inevitabilities to accept. In doing so, YES transformed relational trust into material access. Participants repeatedly highlighted that their adulthood trajectories were shaped not by single moments of support, but by steady adult engagement that accumulated over time. As infrastructure, care was predictable, enduring, and embedded in a relationship. It provided continuity in environments otherwise marked by instability and conditional support.

Theme 4: YES as Black Social Belonging and Collective Ease

While earlier themes emphasized protection, advocacy, and relational care, this theme highlights something quieter but equally consequential: YES as a site of Black social belonging and collective ease. Participants described YES not only as a place where harm was interrupted, or care was provided, but also as an environment where Black youth could gather, laugh, relate, and exist without explanation. In contrast to spaces where they were isolated, hypervisible, or racially tokenized, YES normalized Black presence. As Omavi reflected, YES fostered a sense of closeness and shared understanding, describing peers “like a family that really cares for each other,” grounded in the feeling that “we just know.” He emphasized that traveling, working, and

spending sustained time together deepened connection in ways that felt organic rather than forced.

Youth recall shared cultural references, inside jokes, mutual understanding, and an atmosphere where they did not have to translate themselves. Maurice similarly described "band[ing] together in an alliance because we were all accepted [at YES] but not everywhere else," highlighting belonging as both affirmation and refuge. Simone echoed this collective anchoring, recalling being at YES "all hours of the night," sometimes not wanting to leave, because it "gave us community with our peers, all the things that schools weren't giving us." This collective ease reduced racial isolation and affirmed that community, joy, and ordinariness are developmental resources rather than luxuries. In this theme, stabilization operates through social anchoring, through the everyday experience of belonging among other Black youth navigating similar transitions.

Nelson

Nelson described YES as a rare space where the Black community was both centered and expansive. In Interview 2 on 11/23/2025, he reflected on his experience and explained:

> YES definitely gave that sense of community with other African American students. But it's always been inclusive. It's never been just African American or Black people. It's always been inclusive, but it has been a place of Black community for a lot of us, especially after school and in Pittsburgh, where that's not at the forefront.

His reflection highlighted the distinctiveness of YES as a site where Black youth could gather without being numerically isolated or culturally peripheral. While inclusive, YES offered a social environment where Black presence was visible, ordinary, and shared. In a broader city context where such a community was "not at the forefront," this mattered developmentally.

For Nelson, peer kinship functioned as protection. Being surrounded by other Black youth navigating similar transitions reduced the isolation he experienced in school and removed

the emotional labor of constant explanation. Within YES, recognition was immediate. Shared cultural reference, mutual understanding, and unspoken familiarity replaced the need for translation. This collective ease allowed him to participate socially without managing how his identity would be received. Nelson's case illustrates that belonging itself can serve as a stabilizing force. Beyond intervention or advocacy, YES cultivated a social anchor where Black youth could experience community as normal rather than exceptional. In doing so, the organization affirmed that shared social life, laughter, and presence are developmental resources that sustain young people across transitions.

Diamond

Diamond described YES as a "safe haven" that existed alongside her predominantly white schooling environments. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she reflected on the duality of her experience and explained:

> YES was my safe haven when I was at [institution redacted]. Yes, I had Black friends there, but I also had Black friends here at YES as well, and it just felt good to have those two differences. I went to school, but I had something to look forward to. I had programming to look forward to after school, so I could decompress all that stuff that I was dealing with at school and kind of bring that here with my peers and just discuss it and have it off my shoulders. My peer community here understood and just kinda got it.

Her language of "safe haven" and "something to look forward to" signaled that YES functioned as more than extracurricular engagement; to her, it was emotional recalibration. While she maintained friendships in school, the racialized context of that environment positioned her as isolated. Although Diamond mentioned having Black friends in both spaces, her reflection emphasized that the peer community within YES shared a collective understanding of the racialized experiences she navigated in school. YES offered a parallel community where shared understanding did not require explanation, allowing her to decompress among peers who "just

kinda got it" and creating a sense of collective ease rooted in shared racial experience rather than friendship alone.

For Diamond, peer co-presence interrupted racial isolation. Within YES, she did not have to contextualize her experiences or translate her frustrations about school. Her peers "just kinda got it." This immediate recognition reduced the emotional labor of navigating Whiteness and provided affirmation that her experiences were neither exaggerated nor individual. Diamond's narrative illustrated how belonging operates as psychological stabilization. YES did not simply protect her from institutional marginalization; it offered relational continuity that affirmed her identity across environments that frequently positioned her as the exception. Through collective ease and peer kinship, YES functions as a social counterweight to racial isolation, anchoring her development within the community rather than solitude.

Jasmine

Jasmine explicitly described seeking YES as an act of searching for belonging. Reflecting on her decision to engage more deeply with the organization, she explained, "Being Black led me [to YES] because I was searching [for] a place where I could feel belonging and also a place that would supply my growth." Her search was shaped by racial displacement and social division. After spending nearly a decade in a predominantly White environment, she returned to Pittsburgh feeling disconnected, not only from White spaces, but initially from Black social environments as well. In Interview 1 on 11/3/2025, she reflected:

> So being a Black person in the city of Pittsburgh, I was around all these Black people who looked and talked a certain way, and I felt like instantly excluded from them due to my experiences. The more differences I could see in the quality of life that a lot of the Black people had and the resources and opportunity that Black people had. Seeing my mom work twice as hard as White counterparts and not being able to afford basic necessities was hard.

Her awareness of racial and economic inequality intensified her sense of social dislocation. Within this context, YES became more than a refuge. In her account, it became a racial and relational homeplace. It was one of the first spaces where she encountered Black peers navigating similar academic ambitions, institutional barriers, and social pressures.

As Jasmine transitioned into college at a predominantly White university, she returned repeatedly to YES as a stabilizing social anchor. She explained:

> YES was a place to come home to and continue to get that boost. When I came back from college, seeing people who were also struggling still make it through was a reminder that it's possible. I can get through it, and I'm not the only one struggling; there's support here from my peers to help me succeed.

Peer kinship functioned as collective reassurance. Witnessing other Black youth persist reframed her own struggles as structural rather than individual failure. YES reduced isolation by transforming adversity into shared navigation. In this way, belonging operated not only as emotional comfort but as interpretive support that helped her make sense of discrimination and marginalization within a community that "got it."

Jasmine's case demonstrates that Black social belonging is not incidental; it is actively cultivated and intentionally sought when racial displacement becomes emotionally and socially isolating. Through peer recognition, shared aspiration, and collective reassurance, YES provided a form of social anchoring that sustained her across fractured institutional landscapes. Table 12 presents brief case narratives for Theme 4.

Table 12

Brief Case Narratives – Theme 4 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Nelson	Nelson describes YES as a rare space where the Black community was visible and normalized within a broader city context where such belonging was not at the forefront. Being around other Black youth navigating similar transitions reduced the isolation he experienced in school. Peer kinship removed the emotional labor of constant explanation and allowed him to participate socially without hypervisibility. YES functioned as a site of collective ease and shared recognition. His case demonstrates how belonging itself operates as developmental stabilization.
Diamond	Diamond frames YES as a "safe haven" that existed alongside her predominantly white schooling environments. While she maintained friendships elsewhere, YES offered peer community where shared understanding required no translation. Returning to YES allowed her to decompress racial strain and reaffirm her identity among others who "just kinda got it." This peer co-presence interrupted racial isolation and affirmed her experience as valid rather than exceptional. Her case illustrates how collective ease functions as a psychological counterweight to institutional marginalization.
Jasmine	Jasmine intentionally sought YES as a place of belonging after experiencing racial displacement and social fragmentation. She describes YES as a "homeplace" where Black peers shared similar academic aspirations and institutional challenges. Witnessing others persist helped her reinterpret her own struggles as survivable and structurally produced. Peer community transformed isolation into collective navigation. Her narrative demonstrates how Black social belonging actively rebuilds social anchoring across racialized and institutional landscapes.

Theme 4 Synthesis

Across these cases, YES emerged as more than a site of intervention or care; it functions as a space of Black social belonging and collective ease. Participants described YES as an environment where Black presence was normalized rather than romanticized, where peer kinship reduced racial isolation, and where shared understanding minimized the need for explanation. In contrast to schools and workplaces that positioned them as hypervisible or marginal, YES

cultivated a sense of ordinariness, a place to laugh, relate, decompress, and be among others navigating similar racial and institutional landscapes.

It is important to highlight that belonging in this theme operated as developmental infrastructure. Peer co-presence served as a psychological counterweight to marginalization, transforming individual struggle into collective navigation. Youth described witnessing one another persist, which reframed adversity as structural rather than personal failure. In this way, YES did not simply offer emotional comfort; it rebuilt social anchoring across fractured environments. Collective ease, affirmation, and shared experience functioned as stabilizing forces that sustained young people across transitions into college and adulthood.

Domain 2: YES as Developmental Opportunity Infrastructure

While Domain 1 emphasizes YES as a protective and stabilizing presence, Domain 2 shifts the analytic focus toward expansion. Participants described YES not only as shielding them from harm but also as actively cultivating opportunities and widening their developmental horizons. Youth narrated experiences in which YES exposed them to new environments, expanded their access to social capital, and introduced pathways that had previously felt distant or unattainable. In this domain, YES functions as developmental opportunity infrastructure, a system that does not merely respond to constraint but proactively constructs alternative trajectories. Rather than allowing structural barriers to dictate the limits of possibility, YES created new points of entry into educational, professional, and leadership spaces that reshaped how participants imagined their futures.

Theme 5: YES as Opportunity Cultivator

Across cases, participants described YES as intentionally cultivating opportunity through exposure, skill-building, and strategic access to networks. Youth recounted being introduced to

college campuses, internships, travel experiences, professional mentors, and leadership platforms that expanded their understanding of what was possible. As Simone explained, YES "went out of the way to make sure we were able to see all of our options, even if they were farther out," describing internship placements and work experiences that were "way out of my boundaries of what I knew," yet became spaces she entered consistently and willingly. These experiences did not operate as isolated events; they functioned as developmental catalysts that altered self-concept, aspiration, and perceived attainability. YES did not simply provide information about opportunity, it facilitated entry into spaces that would otherwise remain structurally distant.

Omavi similarly described internship placements that extended beyond short-term participation, emphasizing that it was not just "for the summer [he'd] be working with this organization," but a lasting institutional connection. He noted, "I got to go work with the health department at Pitt, and it was a real experience. So it is like connections and academic experiences like that." He further noted opportunities to develop projects, assist with programs, and receive sustained writing support, underscoring how access translated into durable skill-building and professional capital. Through repeated exposure and guided navigation, youth learned how to interpret institutional pathways, leverage resources, and imagine themselves within professional and academic environments that had previously felt out of reach. In this way, opportunity cultivation became both material and cognitive. YES reshaped not only access, but participants' internal calculations of what was realistically attainable.

Mary

Mary's narrative illustrated how YES operated not merely as a provider of access but as an intentional cultivator of opportunity that expanded her academic imagination, creative identity, and professional trajectory. She described YES-sponsored writing programs, travel

experiences, and research-oriented exposure as formative to how she came to see herself. She did not relate her experiences to a student completing coursework, but rather as a scholar and creative with voice, history, and intellectual belonging.

Mary's case adds another layer by demonstrating that opportunity expansion can involve intellectual and identity expansion, not only conventional post-secondary planning. In Interview 2 on 11/23/2025, she reflected:

> [YES] gave us opportunities to develop outside of the classroom, like creating research projects, visiting cultural landscapes, studying historic writers, traveling to different places and schools; these were big. They gave us new perspectives on learning and showed us how to see ourselves differently in the process.

Through the YES Writers group, Mary encountered literary traditions that situated her within broader Black intellectual lineages. She further reflected:

> I was part of the YES Writers group that YES created for students. I really liked that group. It was more intimate. We studied writers of the Harlem Renaissance and then got the opportunity to go to Harlem together and immerse ourselves in the environment that produced those writers. It gave me a way to see myself differently, take pride in my writing, and build my confidence as a scholar.

This experience extended beyond academic enrichment. It cultivated a scholarly identity. Studying Harlem Renaissance writers and physically traveling to Harlem reframed history as living, embodied, and accessible. Travel functioned not as tourism, but as an intellectual affirmation that positioned her voice within a lineage of Black artistry and thought. Mary explained:

> Just being able to go to New York and explore the city and learn so much history was amazing. It was just a beautiful experience. Studying the people that meant so much to the movement made this trip stand out, too. Seeing the artistry and creative scenes also moved me to think about my own possibilities.

In addition to academic cultivation, YES expanded Mary's creative and technical pathways. She described how the organization created structured opportunities for students to

pitch and develop projects aligned with their interests. For Mary, this meant pursuing music production, an avenue often restricted by financial barriers and industry gatekeeping. She recounted:

> YES also created an opportunity for us to pitch a project of interest to them. I did one with my best friend where we produced an album, given our shared career interest in music; that was so special. I'm really grateful we got to do something like that, especially something surrounding my craft. YES also helped me go to the [institution redacted], where I trained under leading musicians for the summer and built my technical skills through mentors and teachers. YES made that program experience possible and helped me pay the cost of attendance.

In this instance, opportunity cultivation was both material and relational. YES not only removed financial constraints but also connected Mary to mentors and professionals who leveraged their expertise to develop her technical competence. These experiences enhanced her self-efficacy and reinforced her capacity to imagine multiple professional futures, including those beyond traditional academic tracks.

Mary also underscored the importance of YES-facilitated college exposure. Through coordinated visits, logistical support, and structured school exploration, YES expanded her understanding of what post-secondary options were available to her. In the same interview, she stated:

> [YES] definitely opened up opportunities to travel to different places and schools; those experiences were big. [YES] coordinat[ed] trips to visit different schools, provid[ed] transportation, room and board, and set up meetings. We visited a handful of schools. This opened my eyes to so many possibilities and to see beyond Pittsburgh.

In Mary's case, opportunity was cultivated through layered exposure, more specifically, through intellectual, creative, professional, and geographic exposure. YES did not simply encourage ambition; it materially scaffolded it. By pairing experiential learning with financial and relational infrastructure, YES transformed abstract possibility into embodied experience. These cultivated opportunities expanded her sense of belonging within scholarly and creative

communities and strengthened her ability to pursue professional goals across evolving adulthood pathways.

Diamond

Diamond's narrative illustrated how YES served as a deliberate cultivator of professional opportunities, particularly in competitive STEM spaces where early exposure and technical training often determine long-term access. She described struggling to independently secure internships that would translate her academic learning into practical experience. In response, YES leveraged its institutional partnerships to connect her with career-specific placements that ultimately shaped her professional trajectory. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she reflected on these experiences, explaining:

> The internships that you all have connected me with, the professionals that I was able to connect with in college were extremely important. My first internship really helped shape the current work environment I'm in. First of all, I'm remote, and also, I'm in a startup company. I think that's what helped me so much with my adjustment in my current job because I've been here before. Being able to see that and be connected with that through you all, and then have that preparedness going into my career and being in where I am now is largely because of YES.

For Diamond, internships were not résumé additions; they were rehearsals for adulthood. Exposure to startup culture, remote work structures, and multi-hat professional environments prepared her for the realities of her current position. YES did not simply encourage her interest in STEM; it positioned her within spaces where she could practice, observe, and build competence.

One internship experience was particularly transformative because it introduced her to Black leadership within technology spaces. She recounted:

> I was able to see what it was like to be in a professional tech working space, and surprisingly, working with a Black tech professional who had a significant role. I saw that, "Wow, this is a Black woman, number one, running a department in tech, which is

> very rare to see." I was like, "Okay, if she can do it, then I can do it." Having that start there is what continued to allow me to stick with where I am now.

In this case, opportunity cultivation extended beyond skill-building to identity affirmation. Witnessing a Black woman in a senior technology role reshaped Diamond's sense of belonging within a field that often marginalizes Black women. Representation functioned as motivational infrastructure, reinforcing persistence in environments that might otherwise feel exclusionary.

Diamond also emphasized YES-facilitated college tours and geographic exposure as pivotal in expanding her educational imagination. Growing up in Pittsburgh, she initially perceived her world as geographically and institutionally limited. Through organized campus visits and travel, that perception shifted. She reflected:

> Also, just being able to do college tours. I've seen other institutions that were around, that weren't even just in the city, so that I could have a bigger base of what is out there outside of the city. I definitely would say YES was like a major, major part.

She further stated:

> We went to Maryland. We went to places in Ohio, which really helped me come out of this shell of there's nothing outside of Pittsburgh. I think that's where I first started. It's like, "Oh, it's just Pittsburgh. This is it. That's all." Now I'm able to know there's other parts of the world.

These experiences expanded not only her institutional awareness but also her sense of mobility. YES cultivated possibility by physically relocating her into environments that disrupted geographic and psychological containment. College tours, administrative meetings, and campus immersion allowed her to envision herself within institutions that might otherwise have felt abstract or inaccessible. In Diamond's case, opportunity cultivation operated on three interlocking levels: (a) professional opportunity through internships, (b) identity affirmation through Black leadership exposure, and (c) geographic imagination through travel and institutional engagement. Together, these experiences strengthened her persistence in STEM,

expanded her professional identity, and reinforced her belief that she belonged within competitive academic and technological spaces. YES did not merely open doors; it prepared her to walk through them with competence and confidence.

Sage

Sage's narrative illustrated how YES functioned as an academic incubator, cultivating opportunity within his scholarly pathway at moments when institutional infrastructure was lacking. As an undergraduate pursuing Africana-centered inquiry at a university with limited research support in his discipline, Sage repeatedly encountered barriers to research preparation programs typically considered essential for doctoral competitiveness. He described being denied entry to prestigious summer research fellowships despite strong academic performance, which was discouraging and destabilizing. In Interview 2 on 11/18/2025, he explained:

> I wasn't getting those research opportunities throughout my college experience. Like I said, YES became this place where it was filling the gaps in my own education that I wasn't getting at the time. I knew that going back to YES, I was going to gain experiences that I could build on the next school year or that would set me up for my future career.

Rather than allowing these institutional exclusions to narrow his trajectory, YES stepped into the void. During the same summer when he was denied a formal research institute placement, YES created an alternative scholarly experience aligned directly with his intellectual interests. He recalled:

> That year, I did not get into my research institute, but YES created an opportunity for me to run a program called [YES Writers] that focused on African American literature as an alternative. We specifically tailored it to the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Renaissance. It was an eight-week program where we developed a syllabus focused on African American literature, talked about prevalent themes throughout the literature, and connected with some of the things students were experiencing or thinking about at the time.

This opportunity provided substantive research training to support Sage's research trajectory. Sage developed the curriculum, engaged in archival and literary scholarship, facilitated weekly instruction, and ultimately presented student work at the organization's annual symposium. In effect, YES provided research design, intellectual leadership, and public presentation experience comparable to the fellowships from which he had been excluded. At a critical point when summer research opportunities often function as gatekeepers to doctoral pipelines, YES cultivated an alternative pathway that preserved his academic competitiveness.

Sage explicitly connected these experiences to his long-term doctoral aspirations. He reflected:

> YES has been instrumental in creating new ways for me to prepare for my academic and professional aspirations. I did not understand why I was not getting admitted into these prestigious fellowship programs, given my grades and academic accolades. It was discouraging and demoralizing, but YES never let me experience this defeat; they remained committed to helping me, especially when I expressed a desire to pursue my PhD.

Opportunity cultivation in Sage's case also extended through exposure-based experiences that expanded his intellectual mobility. YES-sponsored programming and cultural excursions placed him in environments where Black intellectual traditions were centered and affirmed. These spaces countered the disciplinary narrowness he experienced at his university and allowed him to situate his scholarship within broader historical and cultural landscapes. Exposure, for Sage, served as intellectual legitimacy, positioning his academic interests as serious, rigorous, and worthy of investment. He poignantly summarized this transformation, stating, "I became a dreamer at YES. I never imagined this being a space that would ignite my scholarly imagination in the way it did. But YES did just that through programming and opportunities to explore the world."

In Sage's narrative, YES did not simply provide enrichment; it reconstructed the opportunity structure itself. When traditional institutional pathways proved inaccessible, YES created alternative infrastructures that sustained his research development, strengthened his scholarly identity, and expanded his academic imagination. Through intentional programming, mentorship, and exposure, YES cultivated the conditions under which doctoral aspiration could not only survive exclusion but grow beyond it. Table 13 presents brief case narratives for Theme 5.

Table 13

Brief Case Narratives – Theme 5 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Mary	Mary's case illustrates how YES cultivated layered academic and creative opportunities that expanded her scholarly imagination and professional confidence. Through writing programs, Harlem Renaissance immersion experiences, music production initiatives, and college tours, YES provided intellectual exposure and skill-building experiences that were otherwise financially and structurally inaccessible. These opportunities strengthened her self-efficacy, reinforced her creative and technical competence, and broadened her understanding of post-secondary possibilities. In Mary's narrative, opportunity cultivation operates as identity affirmation and career expansion.
Diamond	Diamond's narrative demonstrates how YES constructed professional pipelines within competitive STEM spaces through internships, mentorship, and representation-rich exposure. YES connected her to career-specific placements that prepared her for startup environments and strengthened her technical confidence. Exposure to Black leadership in technology reshaped her sense of belonging and reinforced her persistence in an exclusionary field. College tours and geographic mobility further expanded her educational imagination, illustrating how opportunity cultivation can shift both professional readiness and perceived possibility.

Table 13

Brief Case Narratives – Theme 5 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Sage	Sage's case anchors Theme 5 by illustrating how YES functioned as an academic incubator when traditional university research pathways excluded him. After being denied entry into prestigious summer fellowship programs, YES created alternative research experiences aligned with his Africana Studies interests, allowing him to develop curriculum, conduct scholarly inquiry, and present research publicly. These cultivated opportunities preserved his doctoral competitiveness and strengthened his scholarly identity. In Sage's narrative, YES reconstructs opportunity structures by generating alternative infrastructures for intellectual growth when institutional systems fall short.

Theme 5 Synthesis

Across participants, YES was not described as merely providing access to pre-existing opportunities; rather, it was narrated as actively cultivating opportunity where institutional pathways are absent, exclusionary, or underdeveloped. Youth repeatedly described YES stepping into structural gaps and creating internships when professional pipelines were inaccessible, facilitating research experiences when university infrastructure failed, and organizing exposure-based travel when geographic imagination was constrained. For Mary, opportunity cultivation expanded intellectual and creative identity through writing programs, cultural immersion, and music production experiences that strengthened her scholarly confidence and artistic competence. For Diamond, YES constructed career-specific internship pipelines and representation-rich professional exposure that prepared her to persist within STEM fields. For Sage, YES functioned as an academic incubator, generating alternative research training and scholarly production when formal fellowship programs excluded him.

Across cases, opportunity cultivation operated on multiple levels simultaneously: material access (funding, travel, placements), relational brokerage (mentors, institutional

negotiation, professional networks), and imaginative expansion (exposure to Black intellectual traditions, professional role models, and environments beyond local constraint). Importantly, these opportunities were not framed as isolated events. They were described as strategically timed interventions that alter developmental trajectories at critical timepoints such as summer research seasons, internship windows, college exploration periods, and moments of disciplinary exclusion.

Theme 5 demonstrates that YES operated as a developmental opportunity infrastructure by transforming possibility into practice. It did not merely encourage aspiration; rather, it scaffolded it. Through intentional cultivation, YES expanded what youth perceive as attainable, strengthened their capacity to compete within inequitable systems, and reconfigured pathways that might otherwise narrow due to institutional fragility or racialized constraint.

Domain 3: YES as Identity and Life Course Developmental Anchor

While the previous domains highlighted YES as a protective infrastructure and opportunity cultivator, Domain 3 provides a deeper temporal layer of analysis. Participants did not describe YES as an organization they completed or aged out of; rather, they narrated it as a consistent presence that anchored their identities and developmental trajectories across shifting life stages. YES appeared not only during moments of crisis or opportunity, but also across time (adolescence, college, early career, and parenthood), functioning as a stabilizing point of continuity in otherwise fragmented institutional landscapes. At the same time, participants' narratives suggest that this continuity was not uniformly experienced across all domains of their lives, with some describing YES as more central and concentrated during certain periods than others.

In this domain, YES operates as an identity and life course anchor. It provides relational consistency across developmental transitions that are otherwise marked by instability, relocation, role shifts, and institutional turnover. Participants repeatedly describe returning to YES physically, relationally, or psychologically as they navigate new phases of adulthood. For some, however, these returns became less frequent or more symbolic over time, reflecting an evolving relationship with the organization as participants moved further into post-secondary and early career contexts. Even among participants less connected to the organization, YES becomes embedded in their sense of self. It is not external to their development; it is a mechanism through which they understand who they are becoming.

Beyond continuity, participants described YES as an interpretive developmental infrastructure that actively shaped their understanding of their own capacity, potential, and life trajectories. Staff interactions were narrated not simply as supportive but as moments where intellectual ability, future possibility, and developmental direction were explicitly named, reframed, or challenged. In this sense, YES performed narrative labor; rather than waiting for youth to demonstrate capacity, staff actively constructed narratives of capability and expectations that participants later internalized. These high expectations were rarely experienced as pressure; instead, they were retrospectively understood as evidence of belief, reshaping the identity schemas youth carry into adulthood and influencing how they interpret institutional barriers and personal success. This domain centers how continuity itself becomes developmental infrastructure. YES anchors identity across time, preserving relational bonds and reinforcing narrative coherence as youth cross major life thresholds.

Theme 6: YES as a Developmental Bridge Across Time

Across participants, YES was described as a bridge connecting adolescence to adulthood, and early adulthood to future possibilities. Rather than functioning as a time-bound intervention, YES remained relationally accessible across life-course stages. Participants described maintaining contact with staff long after formal programming ended, seeking guidance during college transitions, returning during periods of professional uncertainty, and reconnecting during parenthood. While this continuity was widely described, participants indicated that the bridge functioned more strongly and intensely during certain transitions than others. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, Jasmine stated that this continuity extended across major developmental milestones:

> After high school and college, you guys continued to help me do the scholarships, afford to go to college, and stay in college, and you provided me with a mentor that helped connect me with other resources and just to have someone check in periodically to see where I'm at, what I'm doing, what could I need help with, and you supplied that. You guys helped me become a mother, as far as preparing myself and making sure I had the resources that I need and the help that I needed and just the support that I needed. So in big life transitions, YES was there a hundred percent.

This sustained relational continuity transformed YES from a program to a bridge. The bridge metaphor is both relational and temporal. YES linked past and present selves, helping youth integrate who they were as adolescents with who they are becoming as adults. It also linked institutional stages—high school to college, college to career, singlehood to parenthood—smoothing transitions that might have otherwise felt abrupt or isolating for certain participants. Nelson described this function directly, noting that YES "was definitely a bridge," one that "bridged that gap" so he could see himself in future schools, spaces, and programs. In this way, YES reduced the developmental rupture that often accompanies structural mobility.

In participants' accounts, this bridge was not passive. It carried forward accumulated care, knowledge, and identity affirmation into new contexts. Youth described drawing upon

lessons, language, and relational confidence cultivated in earlier years as they navigated later transitions. YES thus became part of their developmental memory, a relational constant that stabilized movement across time, even as participants' circumstances and needs evolved. This theme illustrates how YES functions as a life course infrastructure, anchoring identity, sustaining continuity, and bridging developmental stages in ways that extend well beyond adolescence.

Mary

Mary's narrative illustrated how YES functions as a developmental bridge across time, linking high school uncertainty, post-secondary navigation, pandemic disruption, and eventual career pivot into a coherent trajectory. As she began approaching graduation, Mary described feeling disoriented and unprepared for what came next. College was an expectation, but not a clearly understood process. Reflecting on that moment, she explained, "I was trying to understand the post-secondary world. At that time, I did not know what to do, and [YES] provided a lot of support in thinking through that and helping me understand and develop a plan of action."

Without institutional literacy at home, Mary relied heavily on YES to translate post-secondary expectations into actionable steps. She described entering the organization as transformative, particularly because it helped her organize what previously felt overwhelming and abstract. In Interview 2 on 11/23/2025, she stated:

> I needed help, especially with organizing future plans. I really had no understanding of what was needed for the next step. I definitely wasn't getting that at home; I don't think anyone at home knew how to do it. I had no idea what the next step was. College was the looming next expectation of me, and [YES] seemed like a way to get organized and have some structure to propel me into that next step.

In this way, YES functioned as a bridge between status and competence. While Mary aspired to attend college, she lacked the procedural knowledge needed to move forward. YES became the

intermediary, offering hands-on guidance with applications, writing, professional communication, and long-term planning. As she noted, “I really needed help with college applications, my writing, how to send a proper email. The college and career prep kept bringing me back until I decided where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do.”

The bridging role of YES became especially pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic. When schools closed and students were abruptly disconnected from institutional support, YES remained a consistent presence. Rather than experiencing that period as a complete educational rupture, Mary continued to receive mentorship and structure through the organization. Even as her trajectory shifted and she ultimately pivoted from traditional post-secondary continuation into a coding apprenticeship, YES was less central but remained part of her decision-making ecosystem. Importantly, Mary did not describe this bridge as static. She emphasized that her needs evolved over time, stating:

> I feel like my needs have evolved over time, so they haven’t been as necessary in the same way. I don’t need the same things anymore, and with that, some relationships naturally shifted. I think it just evolved as my needs changed.

This evolution underscored the life course dimension of the bridge. YES did not end its relationship with Mary during adolescence; it adjusted as she assumed new roles, pursued new pathways, and developed new competencies, yet the relational anchor remained intact. She stated:

> I feel like YES is always going to be there if I need something. If I ever need support or guidance, it’s still a place I can reach out to. It’s just in the back of my mind as somewhere I can go if I need help.

Mary’s case demonstrates that developmental bridging is not only about active intervention but also about enduring accessibility. YES connected stages of her life, from high school to college exploration, college disruption to career pivot, while simultaneously

embedding a durable sense of relational fallback. The bridge persisted even when it was not actively crossed. Through Mary's narrative, YES emerged as a structure that carried youth across institutional thresholds while reinforcing the confidence that support remains available as adulthood unfolds.

Omavi

Omavi's narrative most explicitly captured the longitudinal nature of YES as a developmental bridge across time. Before encountering YES, college was not an active plan. He described entering the organization at a moment of uncertainty, where post-secondary education felt distant and undefined. YES became the site where confusion was translated into strategy and where abstract possibility was turned into concrete planning.

As he transitioned into college, that bridge did not collapse once he enrolled. Instead, it adapted. In the early years of college, Omavi relied heavily on YES for direct academic and strategic support. In Interview 2 on 11/17/2025, he stated:

> In the beginning stages—freshman and sophomore year of college—I needed a lot more direct support. I came home [to YES] in the summers. But as I progressed in college, [YES] bridged me. My skills grew. I used to need [YES'] help with assignments, like, "I don't know how to go about this." But my skills grew.

This bridge was developmental, not dependency-based. YES did not hold him in place; it scaffolded growth. As his competence increased, the nature of support shifted. Unlike other programs that he described as ending at high school graduation, YES remained relationally present across stages. He shared:

> Most programs after high school were kind of like, "yeah, alright, figure it out," but it felt like y'all were almost growing with us. It didn't feel weird to walk into YES at 20 or 21, 22. It felt like there was something for us at every stage of the youth–adolescent to young adulthood.

This language of "growing with us" underscored the life-course dimension of the bridge. YES was not fixed in adolescence; it evolved alongside him. Even during COVID, when institutional disconnection was widespread, Omavi remained engaged through podcasting, office work, and informal connections. The organization continued to serve as a social, professional, and intellectual epicenter. Importantly, the bridge extended well into adulthood. When Omavi lost his job, YES was still part of his decision-making infrastructure. He stated:

> When I lost my job, I came to y'all, and you helped me with how to handle this severance situation, how to handle writing, and trying to find other opportunities. It was a lot of strategizing on how to get from this point to that point.

In this case, YES served as an interpretive partner, helping him navigate structural disruption and make complex choices. Even geographic relocation did not sever this continuity. When he moved out west for doctoral study, he recalled that YES supported the transition and remained connected to his PhD journey. He captured this ongoing connection in relational terms, sharing, "It felt like I never left, if that makes sense." He further stated, "When I say 'one deviation away,' I mean if you need me, I'm here. If I need you, you're there."

Omavi's narrative illustrated that YES, as a developmental bridge, was not only about moving youth from one stage to another; it was about sustaining relational proximity across time. The organization became part of his enduring ecosystem that manifested socially, professionally, and emotionally. Even when not physically present, YES remained within reach, though he was mindful not to rely too heavily on its resources despite recognizing their continued availability. Even within this context of continued access and intentional boundary-setting, Omavi noted moments where additional support could have been extended, particularly as his academic and professional progress signaled success. Omavi's case nuances Theme 6 and illustrates how YES bridges adolescence to adulthood, college to career, employment to doctoral study, and local

belonging to geographic mobility while preserving relational continuity. For youth like Omavi, this bridge did not disappear once crossed, even as more tailored support was desired later in his developmental transition. It remained structurally intact, available whenever needed, thereby reinforcing identity stability and developmental coherence across the life course.

Diamond

Diamond's narrative most clearly illustrated YES as a developmental bridge sustained across an entire decade of her life. She traced her involvement back to eighth grade and describes a continuity that spans adolescence, college, and early professional adulthood. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she stated:

> I would even say, moving into my college era, you've all supported me there as well, and even as an adult now, you all support me. I would say, literally, all stages of life from when I first started until now. I was what, 14? I'm 24, so yeah, a decade.

Unlike programs that end at high school graduation, YES did not recede once Diamond enrolled in college. Instead, it evolved. In her early college years, she continued to seek mentorship and feedback, often in the form of reviewing her first papers and refining applications and resumes. She stated, "After high school, definitely, I reached out … helping me with applying for jobs and just reviewing information." She later noted, "YES has helped me so much. [YES] showed me how to form a formal email. They don't show you that … I knew graduating from high school, how to communicate with my professors in a professional manner."

These early professionalization skills functioned as forward-leaning scaffolding. Although Diamond attended an elite, predominantly White school, she distinguished YES as the context that provided niche, actionable tools her institution did not. Resume development, email formatting, workplace communication, and interview preparation were not incidental supports; they were instead pathway-building mechanisms that accumulated into professional fluency.

The bridge extended most clearly into adulthood. Diamond described entering the professional workforce and realizing that guidance becomes scarce once formal schooling ends. She shared:

> I would say, now that I am in this adult type of transition, being in a professional job like this is new, and it's not like college, where you have people instructing you. It's just like you're here, and unfortunately, they do expect you to know.

In that absence of institutional scaffolding, YES remained accessible. She returned for help interpreting offer letters, navigating workplace expectations, and making sense of professional transitions. She stated, "Things like being able to read offer letters. I didn't even know what was being said in the offer letter, so being able to talk to [YES] about that was helpful."

She even described turning to YES for guidance on racialized professional navigation and asking questions she would not comfortably pose to coworkers. In the same interview, she added:

> Can I wear this? Is this hair appropriate? What is a premium? How do I pick my insurance? Things like that, and just being able to talk through things as well, that I'm experiencing at work, like, oh, I'm on this project, and I'm trying to figure out what I can do with it, or just discussing the things that I'm just experiencing at work, has been helpful.

In this context, YES operated as an interpretive safe space throughout adulthood, neither bureaucratic nor dismissive, but relationally grounded and culturally responsive. Diamond emphasized that this continuity was formative. She noted, "[YES] helped me become the professional person that I am today." She added, "I was definitely shaped and molded in a good way to be so professional and have that early on before my peers."

Her narrative illustrated that YES did not simply bridge adolescence to college; it bridges identity across time. The organization translates early potential into cumulative competencies that carry forward into professional legitimacy. Even when her formal participation lessened, the

relational anchor remained intact, as she continued to return during holidays, reach out remotely, and consult staff during major transitions. Diamond's case demonstrates that developmental bridging is not episodic. It is longitudinal, adaptive, and embedded within identity formation. YES did not disappear once milestones were achieved; it remained within reach and served as a steady interpretive partner as adulthood intensified rather than stabilized. Table 15 presents brief case narratives for Theme 6.

Table 14

Brief Case Narratives – Theme 6 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Mary	Mary's case illustrates YES as a bridge between post-secondary aspiration and adult navigation competence. Entering her senior year, uncertain about college processes and lacking institutional literacy at home, she relied heavily on YES to translate abstract expectations into actionable plans. During the COVID-19 disruption, YES remained a consistent presence, supporting her decision-making and eventual pivot into a coding apprenticeship. Even as her needs evolved, she describes YES as an enduring fallback resource, a relational bridge connecting high school uncertainty to professional adulthood.
Omavi	Omavi's narrative illustrates how YES functioned as a developmental bridge across time, supporting his transition from uncertainty about post-secondary education to strategic college planning. Rather than ending after high school, the organization remained present as his needs evolved, shifting from direct academic assistance to broader strategic guidance as his skills grew. Omavi describes YES as "growing with us," emphasizing that the organization adapted alongside youth as they moved from adolescence into young adulthood. Even during moments of disruption, such as job loss or geographic relocation for doctoral study, YES continued to serve as a relational and strategic anchor. His story demonstrates how YES sustained continuity across educational, professional, and personal transitions, remaining part of his developmental ecosystem over time.

Table 14

Brief Case Narratives – Theme 6 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Diamond	Diamond's decade-long engagement with YES anchors Theme 6 through explicit life course continuity. From eighth grade through early professional adulthood, YES provided evolving mentorship, professionalization training, and interpretive guidance. She describes returning to YES to navigate offer letters, workplace norms, and racialized professional expectations, particularly in environments where adult scaffolding is absent. Her case illustrates developmental bridging as cumulative preparation and enduring accessibility, linking adolescence, college, and professional identity formation into a coherent trajectory.

Theme 6 Synthesis

Across participants, YES was not narrated as a time-bound intervention confined to adolescence, but as a developmental bridge that extends across the life course. Youth described the organization as present at key transition points through high school graduation, college entry, academic disruption, employment loss, career pivots, relocation, and early parenthood. Rather than disappearing once a milestone was reached, YES adapted alongside their evolving needs.

For Mary, YES translated post-secondary confusion into strategy and remained present during pandemic disruption and career redirection. For Omavi, YES scaffolded college planning grew with him through undergraduate and doctoral stages, and remained central during job loss and geographic relocation. For Diamond, YES provided a decade-long continuum of mentorship that extended from adolescent programming to professional workforce navigation, including interpreting offer letters and negotiating racialized workplace norms.

Participants noted that bridging does not operate as a dependency. Participants consistently described their skills expanding over time while relational accessibility remains

intact. YES does not hold them in place; it carries them forward. The organization functions as an interpretive partner across stages that helps youth make sense of institutional expectations, recalibrate after disruption, and navigate adult environments that no longer provide built-in scaffolding.

Theme 6, therefore, demonstrates that YES operates as a life-course infrastructure that evolves with participants' transitions and needs. It links fragmented institutional stages into coherent developmental pathways, preserves relational continuity amid structural mobility, and remains available as a trusted point of return. The bridge persists even when not actively crossed, anchoring identity and reinforcing developmental stability across time.

Theme 7: Narrative Labor and Identity Schema Formation

While Theme 6 demonstrates how YES bridges developmental stages across time, Theme 7 moves inward to examine how YES shapes the interpretive architecture through which youth understand themselves. Participants did not describe staff interactions as merely encouraging or affirming. Instead, they narrated moments in which adults at YES actively named their capacity, challenged their self-limiting assumptions, and constructed narratives of intellectual and professional viability that youth later internalized. As Mary reflected, staff consistently "tried to speak life into us, into what we're capable of and what we can achieve," a process she described as instilling "confidence and grit" that carried into later accomplishments. Renee similarly described feeling that YES "really believed in me during that time," explaining that staff "saw the fire lit into me" and worked to "get me to the finish line," ensuring she had "all the tools I needed for life." Her reflection underscored how adult belief was not abstract encouragement, but an active interpretive intervention that framed her as capable, forward-moving, and worthy of investment. In this sense, YES performed narrative labor by engaging in the deliberate work of

reframing experience, interrupting deficit interpretations, and articulating high expectations that expand how youth imagine their own futures.

Across cases, participants described being pushed beyond what they initially believed was possible, often experiencing discomfort that they later interpreted as evidence of staff belief in their potential. These high expectations were not framed as punitive or pressuring; rather, they were understood retrospectively as developmental investment. Ryan described this shift in self-understanding, noting that participation in YES reframed his identity from "just a kid" to someone in an "advanced program that pushes you to literally just think more, do more, care more," emphasizing experiential learning that required more than passive engagement. He further reflected that YES "taught me that I can be Black and educated," capturing how staff disrupted racialized assumptions that intellectual seriousness and Black identity were incompatible. Through this process, YES shaped identity schemas, which reflect internal frameworks that guide how youth interpret institutional barriers, evaluate their own competence, and define what success looks like. Rather than internalizing racialized constraint as personal failure, participants described learning to read institutions structurally, locate themselves as capable within them, and pursue trajectories that once felt inaccessible. Theme 7, therefore, centers the cognitive and narrative dimensions of development. It illustrates how YES shapes not only what youth achieve or access, but how they understand who they are and what they are capable of becoming across the life course.

Maurice

Maurice's narrative strengthened Theme 7 by illustrating how YES engaged in narrative labor around intellectual identity formation. While other institutions assessed him based on grades, compliance, or performance, Maurice describes YES as a context in which his analytical

capacity, academic potential, and leadership qualities were explicitly named and cultivated. This was often before he fully recognized them himself. In Interview 2 on 11/24/2025, he explained:

> Academically, intellectually… definitely just helping us to understand that we are academics, we are intellectuals, that we are studious and bright. That sense of belief becomes a driving force, just in knowing that somebody genuinely feels that you're capable.

In this case, affirmation was not generic encouragement; it was identity construction. YES did not wait for Maurice to prove himself. Instead, staff spoke to him as if he were already intellectually viable. That framing became a schema, an internalized understanding of himself as capable of operating within academic and professional spaces, even when institutional transitions became unstable or nonlinear.

Maurice further described how YES helped him develop the interpretive language necessary to make sense of both structural barriers and his own experiences within them. He stated:

> Youth Enrichment Services was definitely a slingshot for me, providing me with mentors who did help to teach me the language that is foundational to a lot of what I'm saying now. A lot of how I feel and how I think now, just in helping me to kind of step back to see the issues that we do face.

This language of "slingshot" signals acceleration, but also trajectory redirection. Through mentorship and exposure, Maurice learned how to interpret institutional constraints structurally rather than personally. This interpretive framework became especially critical as his educational pathway shifted away from a traditional four-year trajectory. When life transitions felt uncertain, YES provided a cognitive anchor that protected his self-concept. He described this protection as both preventative and corrective, stating:

> The best way I can describe it is y'all helped me figure it out and caught me before I fell. I didn't have a good sense of where to go or what I needed to do, but y'all helped me address the institutional barriers. I still rely on y'all's wisdom when I am up against challenges at work or in other contexts.

The phrase “caught me before I fell” captures the anticipatory dimension of narrative labor. YES intervened not only materially but also interpretively, ensuring that confusion did not become internalized as incapacity. Even now, in professional adulthood, Maurice reported that he draws upon those earlier frameworks when navigating workplace challenges.

It is important to note that this affirmation extended beyond academic planning to intellectual belonging. Maurice emphasized that YES positioned him as worthy of respect within adult intellectual spaces. In the same interview, he stated:

> Sense of purpose, a sense of belonging. Not even necessarily amongst my peers, but just intellectually, academically. We were looked at with respect. We were looked at with care. I felt like our opinions mattered.

Being treated as intellectually serious reshaped how he understood his own capacity to operate in “adult spaces.” He added, “Intellectually, just in showing me that I can operate in adult spaces, in foreign locations by myself. And just understanding that I will be accepted.” Even his internship experiences reinforced this schema. Exposure to research and applied work did more than build skills; it affirmed competence and adaptability across environments.

Maurice’s case demonstrates that narrative labor operates as developmental protection. YES shaped not only what he attempted but how he interpreted his ability to attempt it. By identifying him as intellectual, capable, and legitimate, YES constructed an identity framework that he has continued to carry into adulthood, particularly during moments when institutional pathways shift or stall. Through Maurice’s narrative, Theme 7 illustrates that identity schema formation is not accidental. It is relationally cultivated, explicitly articulated, and internalized over time. As such, it becomes a durable resource for navigating nonlinear adulthood transitions.

Omavi

Omavi's narrative illustrated how narrative affirmation began at the point of initial engagement. Entering his senior year without a clear post-secondary plan, he recalled arriving at YES with anxiety and a limited sense of direction. Rather than interpreting this uncertainty as failure or lack of preparation, staff immediately oriented their response toward possibility. In Interview 2 on 11/17/2025, he vividly recalled:

> I remember [Ms. Denise]'s reaction and Doc's reaction. It was like a very—oh my—like not like a, oh my God, you're going into senior year, you don't have anything figured out, but more so like, what do we got to do to help you have something figured out? And then from there, I just remember feeling like y'all set me up with a plan.

This interaction marked a foundational moment of narrative construction. Instead of positioning him as behind, the staff framed him as developmentally viable and worthy of investment. Achievement was not the prerequisite for belief; belief preceded the plan. Omavi described leaving that initial encounter with a new interpretive lens. He stated:

> I think I remember going home and feeling—for the first time—I felt optimistic. And I didn't think of myself in that way [as someone going to college]. And so I think just leaving that [interview], I felt a lot of hope that like, oh wait, maybe there is something for me.

The shift here is cognitive and relational. YES did not simply provide guidance; it reconstructed how he understood his own capacity. In contrast to peers he assumed were "naturally" college-bound, Omavi had not previously imagined himself within that category. Staff intervention repositioned him inside that narrative. In his account, affirmation did not occur in isolation from expectation. Staff responses paired belief with structured planning, requiring him to actively build toward a trajectory. This coupling of high expectations and interpretive permission created both psychological safety and developmental direction. YES modeled that uncertainty was not evidence of incapacity but rather a starting point for strategy.

As Omavi's pathway unfolded, this narrative labor expanded into institutional literacy. When structural and financial barriers threatened his preferred college plans, YES did not treat those constraints as fixed. Instead, they demonstrated how institutions could be interpreted, negotiated, and strategically engaged. In the same interview, he stated:

> Yeah, I mean, it's different when you're literate enough to know the terms and conditions. YES knows the hidden language and how to finesse institutions when necessary. If you could help it, y'all didn't let barriers remain barriers. Y'all ultimately showed me that I also get to choose how and when I show up because of the context and what it requires.

In this case, identity schema formation extended beyond self-belief to structural analysis. YES helped him read power, decode institutional language, and understand that systems could be navigated rather than simply endured. Observing staff engage elite institutions further deepened this framework. Omavi shared:

> By seeing how y'all showed up in different spaces—professionally addressing people, code-switching, I developed these skills by observing y'all speak the language of institutions, finesse power dynamics, and fight for what we needed, making the impossible possible in difficult situations.

Through these interactions, Omavi internalized more than encouragement; he internalized a model of strategic engagement. He learned that barriers are contextual, that negotiation is possible, and that presence in elite spaces can be intentional rather than accidental. Omavi's case demonstrates that narrative labor begins at the moment of uncertainty and extends into adulthood as structural fluency. YES reshaped how he understood his future, positioned him within narratives of capability, and equipped him with interpretive tools for critically reading institutions. These schemas now guide how he mentors others, how he navigates doctoral spaces, and how he understands adulthood as something actively constructed rather than passively inherited. Through Omavi's narrative, Theme 7 reveals that identity schema formation is both

relational and strategic. For Omavi, it was rooted in affirmation, structured by expectation, and sustained through institutional literacy.

Sage

Sage provided the clearest illustration of narrative labor functioning as care. When he first entered YES, he described himself as academically strong but aspirationally modest. College admission itself was the goal; institutional fit, program quality, and long-term positioning were not yet part of his evaluative framework. In Interview 2 on 11/18/2025, he explained:

> With the college process, I was very much set on just getting into a college and then going, instead of thinking, "Oh, well, what are some of the best programs in the nation?" I knew I was a high-level student but just wasn't thinking on some of the things that had been instilled with me.

YES disrupted that ceiling. Rather than celebrating minimal compliance with expectations, staff challenged him directly. He shared, "Right off the bat, there was a lot of like, oh wait, you're doing this, you're doing this, you're doing this. No, you got to shoot for the stars. You're selling yourself short." This intervention was not corrective in response to failure; it was expansive in response to underestimation. Sage also described the discomfort of having his assumptions challenged, stating:

> It was challenging at first because your ideas are being challenged. At first, it was very challenging for me to be like, oh, well, what else do I have to do? I'm going to school. I'm getting good grades. It ended up just being helpful to just think beyond some of the ways in which I've been programmed to think about how I'm going to go about things.

In this case, narrative labor took the form of ceiling elevation. YES did not simply affirm Sage's existing trajectory; it reconstructed his evaluative framework. Success was no longer defined as "getting into a college," but as critically assessing institutional alignment, rigor, and long-term academic positioning.

Over time, this shift crystallized into an identity transformation. Exposure to professionals, researchers, artists, and grant writers within YES expanded his understanding of intellectual and professional possibilities. Sage stated, "I think it just expanded my horizon in terms of what's possible and what's out there just opened up my scope of what the world was and the type of jobs that you could seek out." More significantly, he began to internalize a new self-concept. He shared:

> It was a shift; now, I am a student engaged in research. I once thought so small when I could see myself as an intellectual. It felt good to be in a position where you know you deserve to be there—a seat at the table. YES pushed me, and now I am an academic scholar.

The phrase "I once thought so small" marked the schema transformation. YES did not merely raise his aspirations; it altered the framework through which he assessed his belonging in elite intellectual spaces. He reported that he no longer narrates himself as fortunate to access academia; he speaks as someone who deserves to occupy it.

Importantly, this expansion did not detach him from community accountability. Instead, YES helped him integrate scholarly ambition with relational and civic consciousness. Sage shared:

> Participating in YES allowed me to get some of that research experience while also being engaged in community work and just thinking about the ways in which you can bridge those two things. YES was foundational for that for me.

Sage's case demonstrates that narrative labor can operate through discomfort, expectation, and horizon expansion. By insisting he was "selling himself short," YES restructured how he evaluated possibilities. The result was not merely higher aspiration, but identity consolidation—an integrated adulthood vision in which academic self, civic self, and relational self coexist coherently. Through Sage's narrative, Theme 7 illustrates that identity schema formation involves raising the ceiling of what feels legitimate to pursue, normalizing

belonging in elite spaces, and embedding ambition within collective responsibility. Narrative labor, in this sense, is not only affirmational but also transformative. Table 15 presents brief case narratives for Theme 7.

Table 15

Brief Case Narratives – Theme 7 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Maurice	Maurice's case illustrates how YES performs narrative labor by affirming intellectual identity during moments of instability and transition. Staff positioned him as academically capable and analytically strong even when his post-secondary pathway became nonlinear, protecting him from internalizing disruption as deficiency. Through mentorship, internships, and interpretive guidance, YES helped Maurice see himself as someone whose thinking and voice carried legitimacy. This affirmation became a stabilizing force, allowing him to interpret setbacks as navigable rather than defining. His narrative demonstrates how identity schema formation protects self-concept during uncertain adulthood transitions.
Omavi	Omavi's narrative shows how narrative labor begins at the point of uncertainty and evolves into institutional literacy. Entering his senior year without a clear plan, YES reframed his confusion as strategizable rather than shameful, pairing affirmation with structured expectation. Over time, this early intervention reshaped how he understood himself, not as someone likely to "flame out," but as someone capable of shaping his trajectory. Observing staff negotiate institutions further equipped him with frameworks for interpreting and challenging structural barriers. His case illustrates how YES cultivates schemas that enable youth to read power, navigate constraint, and approach adulthood as something actively constructed.
Sage	Sage's case most clearly demonstrates developmental challenges in functioning as care. Although academically strong, he initially defined success narrowly, focusing on college admission rather than institutional alignment or long-term scholarly positioning. YES staff challenged him to "shoot for the stars," pushing him beyond self-limiting assumptions and expanding his evaluative framework for success. What began as discomfort evolved into a durable identity shift, as Sage came to see himself not merely as college-bound but as an intellectual deserving of space within elite scholarly communities. His narrative illustrates how narrative labor raises the ceiling of possibility and consolidates academic, civic, and relational identities into a coherent adulthood vision.

Theme 7 Synthesis

Across cases, YES operates not only as a site of support or opportunity, but as an interpretive developmental infrastructure that actively shapes how youth understand their own capacity, potential, and life trajectories. Participants consistently described staff interactions as moments where intellectual ability, future possibility, and developmental direction were explicitly named, reframed, or challenged. In this sense, YES performed narrative labor. Staff did not wait for youth to demonstrate capacity; they constructed narratives of capability first, allowing achievement to follow.

For Maurice, narrative affirmation centered intellectual legitimacy. YES positioned him as an academic and analytical thinker, even when institutional disruptions destabilized his educational pathway. This affirmation functioned as identity protection, preventing nonlinear transitions from being internalized as evidence of deficiency. His story illustrated how narrative labor stabilizes self-concept during uncertainty by offering interpretive frameworks that protect against derailment.

For Omavi, narrative labor began at the point of confusion. Entering senior year without a clear plan, staff responded not with shame but with structured possibility. This initial reframing transformed anxiety into optimism and introduced a developmental model in which uncertainty signaled strategy rather than failure. Over time, this affirmation expanded into institutional literacy; YES modeled how systems could be read, negotiated, and strategically engaged. Identity schema formation here included both self-belief and structural fluency.

Sage's narrative demonstrated developmental challenges functioning as care. Staff elevated his ceiling, insisting he was "selling himself short" and pushing him to reconsider how he defined success. Though initially uncomfortable, this intervention produced a durable

cognitive shift; he moved from seeing college admission as the endpoint to conceptualizing academic life as layered, expansive, and intellectually rigorous. Sage reported that he now narrates himself as someone who belongs in elite scholarly spaces, not as an exception, but as expected.

Collectively, these cases show that YES shapes not only outcomes but cognition. Youth learned how to read institutions, interpret constraints, and define success in ways that extend beyond hidden curriculum skills. YES cultivated internal schemas that serve as frameworks for understanding what was happening to them and what they could do about it. They ultimately allowed participants to navigate racialized institutions without internalizing harm as personal failure. Through affirmation, high expectation, and strategic reframing, narrative labor became a developmental resource that anchored identity across adulthood transitions.

Theme 8: YES as a Model for Black Adulthood

While Theme 7 demonstrates how YES shapes internal identity schemas, Theme 8 illustrates how YES provides embodied examples of Black adulthood. Across cases, participants described staff not only as supportive figures but as visible representations of what Black adulthood can look like—intellectually serious, emotionally regulated, relationally accountable, professionally competent, and structurally aware. These models matter because many participants navigated racialized environments where Black adulthood is either misrepresented, surveilled, or narrowly defined. Within YES, they encountered alternative enactments of maturity, leadership, and success that expanded their understanding of who they can become. As Renee reflected, there was "a turning point" when she began "looking up" to Denise, describing how she "learned" from her and how Denise "modeled what care and consistency look like - things important for adulthood."

Participants did not describe these models as abstract inspiration. Rather, they referenced observing how staff communicate in professional spaces, negotiate institutions, carry themselves with authority, care for family, and remain accountable to the community. In this sense, YES functioned as a developmental mirror. Youth saw versions of Black adulthood that are stable, strategic, and self-possessed - adulthood that is neither hyper-assimilated nor oppositional but intentional and grounded.

These models also complicate dominant narratives of adulthood as purely individual achievement. Staff demonstrated that professional success can coexist with communal responsibility, cultural fluency, and relational care. Through daily exposure to these embodied practices, participants internalized adulthood not as an arrival at a static milestone but as a way of moving through institutions with dignity, competence, and accountability. Theme 8, therefore, extends Domain 3 by showing that YES anchors identity not only through affirmation and cognitive schema formation, but through lived examples of Black adulthood in motion. These examples serve as templates that youth draw upon as they construct their own pathway to adulthood.

Omavi

Omavi's narrative demonstrated how YES functions as a lived model of Black adulthood that extends beyond inspiration into replication. Rather than describing staff as admirable figures from a distance, he explained how their care ethic became embedded in his own adult practice. Central to this model is a reorientation of responsibility. He described learning that outcomes are not determined solely by individual effort, but by the presence or absence of support structures, stating:

> I would say support goes a long way. And I think it helped me realize that what determines a large amount of outcomes is not just an individual's abilities or their effort, but it's the actual support that they have.

Omavi shared that this insight now shapes how he approaches his role as a doctoral student and instructor. Drawing directly on his YES experiences, he has intentionally structured his teaching around proactive support, in which he monitors students' circumstances, identifies barriers, and intervenes where possible. He recounted working with a nontraditional student and mother whose academic performance was strong, but attendance was inconsistent. In Interview 2 on 11/17/2025, he stated:

> When it comes to my students, my goal is always, "How can we make sure you're successful?" If there's something that I can do within my power, my goal is to make sure that you are successful. So that's one thing that I would definitely attribute to YES. Because I've benefited from that and I wanna make sure that I can do that for a bunch of people.

In this case, adulthood was modeled as structural care rather than detached authority. Omavi did not frame his role as gatekeeper or evaluator; instead, he positioned himself as someone responsible for reducing institutional friction. He stated that his practice mirrors YES' approach, where he anticipates barriers, normalizes vulnerability, and leverages whatever power he holds to create possibilities.

This reinvestment was not confined to returning to YES. It manifested as a broader orientation toward mentorship, community accountability, and relational continuity within elite academic spaces. In this way, YES modeled a version of Black adulthood that integrates intellectual achievement with responsibility to others. Omavi's case illustrates that modeling operates developmentally. What he once received as protective infrastructure, he now reproduces as institutional care. Through Omavi's narrative, Theme 8 demonstrates that YES did not simply prepare youth for adulthood; it shaped the kind of adults they become.

Jasmine

Jasmine's narrative demonstrated how YES served as a visible, embodied model of Black adulthood that fundamentally recalibrated her sense of what was attainable. She repeatedly emphasized the density of highly educated Black professionals within YES—staff and mentors with master's degrees, doctorates, nonprofit leadership roles, and academic influence—and described this exposure as transformative. What began as admiration gradually became normalization. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, Jasmine stated, "It was the exposure, seeing so many Black educated professionals to look up to, and how high they were in academia, was incredible and very inspiring to help me want to go further as well."

Advanced education moved from distant abstraction to an observable norm. Where her earlier orientation centered on simply completing college, sustained exposure to accomplished Black professionals expanded her cognitive horizon. She described this exposure as a turning point, stating:

> Yeah, I think it was really the turning point of being exposed to the professionals when I got that award, but also coming home and seeing other Black people, specifically seeing Black people in the YES space who had their master's, who had their doctorate degree, and just thinking, well, you know what? If they can do it, if all these people in this room can do it despite the challenges, then I can do it.

She explained that possibilities once unimaginable became integrated into her own developmental planning, sharing:

> I feel like I could do anything. I might go to law school when before I was barely even trying to get to college. I feel like my future is so bright, especially seeing people in the YES program also have children and pursue higher education. Because of YES, my future is going to be very successful.

This recalibration was not merely motivational rhetoric; it was cognitive restructuring. Jasmine began to interpret her life trajectory through a broader ceiling of possibility. Importantly, she did not frame staff simply as supportive adults. She studied them as institutional actors. She

described intentionally learning how leadership functioned, more specifically, how organizations were structured, sustained, and guided, sharing:

> I really wanted to learn from the lens of nonprofit staff. And the fact that YES staff are so educated and decorated with degrees, accolades, and experiences, they were just a wealth of knowledge that I was fortunate to tap into.

In this case, modeling became professional socialization. Through proximity, Jasmine acquired organizational cognition where she learned how to structure programs, sustain initiatives, and operate within institutional systems. Exposure became an apprenticeship. Her narrative also illustrated how modeling produces reciprocity. Mentorship was not remembered as temporary assistance; it became a relational ethic to be reproduced. In Interview 2 on 11/20/2025, she explained, "I spent a lot of time in college being a mentor because I was mentored. After I had a Miss Denise, I wanted to be like the mother of all kids, and I became that." Her return to YES as a professional further reflected this cycle of embodied modeling. She shared, "As soon as I got my first real job, I was right back at YES. Instead of just trying to receive help, I'm trying to be the help."

Through Jasmine's case, Theme 8 demonstrates that YES modeled Black adulthood not simply through encouragement, but through visible enactments of educational attainment, institutional fluency, leadership, and communal responsibility. Exposure became normalization, normalization became aspiration, and aspiration became embodiment. Jasmine's narrative showed how youth move from observing adulthood to inhabiting it and then reproducing it for others.

Sage

Sage's narrative complemented Jasmine's by emphasizing identity modeling through relational mentorship rather than exposure alone. He repeatedly framed his relationship with

YES leadership as blueprint formation. The language of "blueprint" was analytically significant; a blueprint is not inspiration; it is a structural guide. In Interview 2 on 11/18/2025, Sage explained:

> A lot of it was seeing [Ms. Denise]. Working under [Ms. Denise] and she just mentoring me through the years, I think it just gave me a blueprint on some things that were possible that I didn't consider beforehand, being able to work under someone who I want to emulate in a sense.

In this case, modeling operated as procedural knowledge. Sage did not simply observe educational attainment; he studied how adulthood was enacted. In doing so, he observed how decisions were made, how responsibility was carried, and how leadership was sustained over time. He extended this observation to witnessing Black leadership under structural constraint, sharing:

> Seeing how [Dr. Jones] navigates being this Black man who has this nonprofit business that is tailored for Black youth and the challenges that come with that, and seeing the ways in which he has to navigate those challenges, it's just important to find those models of Black men and Black women that can just help you kind of shape your approach to it.

Exposure here included watching how success was maintained within racialized institutional environments. Sage learned not only what achievement looks like but also how authority is exercised, how institutions are negotiated, and how public responsibility is carried as a Black adult. Modeling thus became instructional, shaping how he approached his own professional and academic roles. His return to YES marked a structural role reversal within the same institutional ecology. When he described coming back to work at the organization that once guided him, he framed it as continuity rather than departure. In the same interview, he shared:

> It was just kind of this circle of life moment where I'm back at the place that kind of propelled me into that spot. It felt good being back in the space and being able to just be with youth who were in similar shoes that I was in.

Returning to YES as a staff member and mentor represented a meaningful extension of Sage's adulthood transition. He embodied the organization's model of return, seeking to give back to a community that shaped him. Facilitating programs and mentoring younger participants allowed Sage to reflect on his own growth and recognize the trust now placed in him. Adulthood, in his telling, was not about leaving the support network but assuming responsibility for sustaining it. He made this shift explicit; he shared, "Now I'm shifting into a mentor role, it gives me the feeling of how I felt coming to the office as a high school student."

Through Sage's case, Theme 8 demonstrates that YES modeled Black adulthood as relational continuity, strategic leadership, and community accountability. Blueprint became embodiment. The youth who once studied adulthood now enact it, sustaining the same structures that shaped them. Table 16 presents brief case narratives for Theme 8.

Table 16

Brief Case Narratives – Theme 8 RQ2

Participant	Brief Case Summary
Omavi	Omavi's case illustrates how YES models adulthood through a structural ethic of care that he now reproduces in his own professional life. Rather than viewing teaching as evaluation alone, he intentionally reduces institutional barriers for his students, mirroring the proactive support he once received. He frames adulthood not as individual achievement, but as responsibility for cultivating others' success. The relational and institutional modeling he experienced at YES has become embedded in his pedagogical philosophy. His narrative demonstrates how modeled adulthood becomes replicated adulthood.
Jasmine	Jasmine's narrative highlights how sustained exposure to highly educated Black professionals recalibrated her understanding of what was attainable. Observing staff with advanced degrees and leadership roles normalized graduate education and expanded her cognitive horizon beyond college completion. She did not merely admire these professionals; she studied their leadership practices and organizational decision-making, acquiring professional socialization through proximity. Over time, mentorship became a relational ethic she actively reproduces, returning to YES as both contributor and program leader. Her case illustrates how visibility

	becomes normalization, and normalization becomes embodied adulthood.
Sage	Sage's case emphasizes blueprint formation as a mechanism of adulthood modeling. Through close mentorship, he observed how Black professionals navigated institutional constraints, exercised leadership, and maintained accountability to the community. This modeling provided procedural guidance for how to enact adulthood under structural pressure. His return to YES as a mentor reflects continuity rather than departure, signaling that adulthood involves sustaining the networks that once provided support. Sage demonstrates how modeled adulthood becomes structural responsibility within the same developmental ecology.

Theme 8 Synthesis

Across cases, YES functioned not simply as a site of preparation, but as an embodied model of Black adulthood in motion. Participants described staff not as distant authority figures, but as visible enactments of intellectual rigor, institutional fluency, relational accountability, and community commitment. Through sustained exposure, youth did not merely admire these adults; they studied them. Modeling became procedural. Participants observed how leadership was exercised, how institutions were navigated under constraint, and how success was maintained without severing ties to the community.

For Jasmine, visibility recalibrated possibility, belief in self, and purpose-driven living. Seeing Black professionals with advanced degrees normalized postgraduate education and expanded her cognitive horizon. Exposure shifted graduate study from abstraction to expectation, and mentorship evolved into a relational ethic she now reproduces. For Sage, modeling operated as blueprint formation. Observing Black leadership managing structural pressures provided not only inspiration but instruction. This shaped how he conceptualizes authority, responsibility, and adulthood itself. His return to YES reflected role continuity rather than rupture, illustrating how adulthood involves sustaining the very networks that once provided support. For Omavi, modeling translated into replication. The structural care ethic he received now informs his own

teaching practice, where he actively reduces institutional friction for vulnerable students. What he once experienced as protective infrastructure, he now enacts as institutional responsibility.

Collectively, these narratives demonstrated that YES expanded adulthood through embodiment. Participants internalized adulthood not as a static milestone but as a way of moving through institutions with dignity, competence, and accountability. Black adulthood was modeled as intellectually serious yet relationally grounded, professionally ambitious yet community connected, structurally aware yet emotionally accessible. Theme 8, therefore, extends Domain 3 by illustrating that identity anchoring is not only cognitive or narrative, but also lived. Youth did not simply leave YES with altered aspirations; they left with templates for how to inhabit adulthood. As they transitioned into mentorship, leadership, and professional roles, they reproduced those templates, sustaining a developmental ecology that spans generations

Summary

This chapter examined how YES functioned as a multidimensional developmental ecology shaping Black youth transitions into adulthood. Across three domains, findings demonstrate that YES operates simultaneously as a protective infrastructure, opportunity cultivator, and identity anchor. Participants described YES as intervening against harm, reducing racialized pressure, and stabilizing vulnerability. They further narrated YES as cultivating layered exposure experiences that expand educational, professional, and geographic horizons. Finally, youth articulated YES as shaping how they understand themselves through narrative affirmation, high expectations, schema formation, and embodied models of Black adulthood.

Together, these findings reveal that YES did not simply provide programs or services; it constructed an environment that actively reorganizes how youth interpret constraints, possibilities, and adulthood itself. Participants' narratives illustrated that protection, opportunity,

and identity development were not discrete processes; rather, they operated in tandem across time. The organization's relational continuity and institutional fluency allowed youth to navigate racialized systems without internalizing harm as personal failure, while simultaneously expanding their sense of what futures are attainable.

Participants highlighted that YES' influence extends beyond adolescence. Youth did not describe the organization as a completed program but as an ongoing presence that adapted as their needs evolved. As participants moved into parenthood, graduate study, entrepreneurship, and professional leadership, they continued to draw upon YES as an interpretive guide, relational anchor, and developmental bridge. In many cases, they returned as mentors and leaders, reproducing the very infrastructures that shaped them.

The following chapters expand on these findings by discussing implications and conclusions in relation to the broader literature on racialized adulthood, counterspaces, and life-course development. The discussion explores theoretical contributions, methodological considerations, and practical implications for youth-serving organizations aiming to create protective, opportunity-rich, and identity-affirming environments for Black youth as they transition into adulthood. The study concludes by explaining how it advances understanding of racialized adulthood transitions and the institutional ecologies that shape them.

Chapter 6

Discussion

This study examined how Black youth participating in YES conceptualized their transitions into adulthood and how YES shaped those developmental experiences. These findings demonstrate that Black youths' transitions to adulthood cannot be understood as neutral or linear developmental milestones. Rather, they unfold within racialized social structures that organize access to safety, opportunity, identity, time, and possibility, shaping how youth interpret these dimensions of development. At the same time, the findings reveal that YES was not simply a supportive program but also served as a form of developmental infrastructure that intervened against structural constraints, cultivated opportunity, reshaped identity schemas, and anchored youth across the life course. This chapter builds on the results by situating them within relevant theoretical frameworks, engaging with the broader research literature, and articulating the study's central contributions and scholarly significance.

RQ1 sought to understand how Black youth interpret their adulthood experiences. The findings demonstrate that participants did not experience adulthood as a neutral developmental milestone marked by independence or role attainment. Instead, they conceptualized adulthood as a racialized social condition, one that heightens visibility, vulnerability, and consequence. Youth described engaging in forms of hypervigilance as they navigated educational, professional, and familial spaces, managing their movement, presentation, and safety within racialized institutional contexts where surveillance, exclusion, and differential treatment are structurally embedded.

This condition was not confined to isolated moments of discrimination but was woven across domains, shaping how youth interpreted belonging, credibility, and possibility.

Participants further narrated adulthood as punctuated by institutional rupture. Rather than unfolding through predictable sequences, their transitions were frequently interrupted by exclusion, termination, financial instability, familial strain, and other structural disruptions that severed connections to institutions intended to support their advancement, challenging the linear sequencing often assumed within dominant life course models. These moments of rupture required not only material adjustment but also identity repair. Youth described recalibrating goals, reconstructing trust in themselves and institutions, and renegotiating their relationship to possibility. In this way, disruption was not peripheral to adulthood; it became central for Black youth.

These disruptions were also gendered. Black men in the study described consciously resisting dominant stereotypes of aggression, irresponsibility, or emotional detachment, instead reframing masculinity through softness, accountability, and relational presence; these adjustments were particularly evident in examples of fatherhood practices. Black women similarly narrated a renegotiation of femininity, resisting narratives of overextension, hyper-responsibility, and silent endurance in favor of self-definition, boundary-setting, and relational reciprocity. Adulthood thus became a site of counterstorytelling, where racialized gender norms were deconstructed and reimagined by young people.

Finally, the youth described a disorientation in their relationship to time and progress. Their transitions did not adhere to linear timelines or traditional milestone sequences.

Participants frequently articulated feeling "behind," accelerated, or temporally unsettled as they navigated cumulative structural barriers. Time itself functioned differently in their adulthood journeys, shaped by racialized opportunity structures and institutional instability, complicating normative assumptions about timing, sequencing, and developmental progression embedded within life course theory. Together, these findings suggest that Black youths' adulthood transitions can be best understood not as linear progressions but as racialized, nonlinear, and structurally mediated processes requiring ongoing recalibration.

RQ2 examined how youth experienced and interpreted YES' role in their developmental trajectories. In the study, the youth did not describe YES as a discrete programmatic intervention but rather as a sustained developmental presence that operated across domains and over time. YES functioned as a protective intervention against racialized stress, familial strain, and institutional harm, operating as a relationally embedded context that extended beyond formal programmatic boundaries. In moments where schools, workplaces, or family systems fractured or failed, YES absorbed strain, advocated within institutions, and provided material, emotional, and relational stabilization. Protection was not situational; it was embedded within an open-door relational infrastructure that extended beyond formal programming and developmental timepoints.

The results also suggest that YES did more than stabilize. Youth narrated YES as an opportunity cultivator that actively shifted their social and material conditions. Where institutional pathways were foreclosed or inaccessible, YES constructed alternative routes. They helped facilitate exposure to academic, professional, and leadership spaces, altering how youth understood what was attainable, demonstrating how relational contexts can also function as sites of material intervention and opportunity redistribution. These opportunities were not simply

experiential; they reshaped self-concept and recalibrated future orientation. In this way, YES did not merely respond to structural constraint; they intervened against it.

Participants also described YES as a site of narrative labor. Staff engaged in the deliberate work of naming capacity, interrupting deficit interpretations, and constructing alternative scripts of Black adulthood that youth later internalized, actively reshaping identity schemas and expanding youths' sense of possible selves. Through embodied modeling, institutional advocacy, and sustained relational commitment, YES expanded youths' interpretive frameworks regarding whom they could become. Youth described learning not only new skills but also new ways of thinking and seeing themselves.

Moreover, YES operated as a developmental bridge across the life course. Relationships extended from adolescence into post-secondary education, early career navigation, and parenthood. Rather than serving as temporary support, YES became a relational constant that linked developmental stages and reduced ruptures across transitions, providing continuity across otherwise fragmented developmental pathways. Participants frequently returned to reconnect with their YES community. These young people reengaged with YES not only for assistance but also to pay it forward by assuming mentorship roles themselves. In doing so, they illustrated a cyclical model of adulthood grounded in generativity and reciprocity. These findings position YES as developmental infrastructure: a relational, institutional, and narrative ecosystem that stabilizes, expands, and reshapes Black youths' transitions into adulthood.

The findings resonate strongly with scholarship on racial trauma and the cumulative psychological toll of navigating racially stratified institutions. Hope et al. (2015) found that Black young adults experience heightened forms of racism as they move into adulthood, a pattern that youth in this study similarly narrated as part of their transition experiences. Their

heightened exposure to racism had psychological and material implications, causing them to carry racialized loads and remain in ongoing states of identity negotiation, reflecting the enduring nature of racism across developmental stages. This is consistent with scholarship documenting the cumulative impact of racialized experiences over time (Onyewuenyi et al., 2025; Saleem et al., 2019; Sargent et al., 2025). Participants' accounts of institutional rupture, surveillance, exclusion, and instability aligned with literature documenting the enduring effects of racialized stressors on Black youth and emerging adults. Youth described what Smith (2011) conceptualized as racial battle fatigue, reflecting sustained exposure to racialized contexts and discriminatory situations where they were targeted, excluded, and at times isolated. While alignment exists between youths' stress-induced racial experiences and prior scholarship, this study extends that body of work by situating racial trauma within developmental transitions. It demonstrates how racialized experiences are not merely circumstantial but structurally embedded within the movement into adulthood and the institutions that organize it.

The findings also challenge dominant developmental models that assume institutions such as schools, workplaces, and families function as stable scaffolds for advancement. Côté (2002) suggested that as institutions become more tenuous, they are less reliable sources of stability. Youth in this study affirmed this claim, illustrating how they navigated institutions that were fractured, fragile, or exclusionary, disrupting the assumed continuity and sequencing of developmental pathways. Familial strain often reflected broader exposure to racialized social systems, challenging narratives that frame family solely as support or deficit. Much of the developmental literature positions the nuclear family as the core developmental agent, presuming stable economic resources and institutional access to support youths' needs (Carey, 2016, 2018, 2022; Kerpelman et al., 2008; Hill et al., 2004; Trommsdorff et al., 1982). However, youth in

this study revealed their families' limitations, as caregivers were themselves impacted by racialized social structures and unable to buffer structural inequities. Development unfolded not through seamless institutional alignment but through negotiated survival, disruption, and relational repair across interconnected contexts.

Additionally, the data reinforce existing scholarship on the importance of role modeling and representation for Black youth. Gibbs Grey (2018) highlighted how Black youth leaders served as visual counternarratives within a pre-college program, communicating that young people from urban communities can and do access higher education. While this study's findings align with Gibbs Grey (2018), they extend beyond representation alone by illustrating how embodied examples of Black adulthood (emotionally regulated, professionally competent, and relationally accountable) functioned as instructional templates and blueprints that youth actively studied and later enacted. The embodiment of role models became especially consequential as youth worked to become what they observed in their YES mentors over time, demonstrating how relational contexts shape identity development through ongoing interaction and modeling. This study contributes to the literature on mentoring and modeling by foregrounding embodiment, continuity, and generativity across the life course.

Finally, the study challenged assumptions within the broader adulthood literature that emphasize individual achievement, independence, and milestone attainment. Participants narrated adulthood as collective, relational, and recursive rather than solely individualized (Furlong et al., 2011; Settersten et al., 2015). For Black youth, communal connection, collective care, shared decision-making, and resistance were prioritized over the neoliberal individualism often presumed within developmental scholarship (Liefbroer & Toulemon, 2010; Shanahan, 2000; Stanger-Ross et al., 2005). Rather than striving primarily for independence, youth

frequently articulated adulthood as relational responsibility. This suggests the need for developmental scholarship to more fully account for communal orientation and structural mediation within adulthood transitions. These dimensions remain underexamined in existing frameworks.

The findings of this study carry significant implications for youth-serving practice, particularly for CBYSOs. One of the clearest conclusions is that YES operates not merely as a programmatic intervention, but as developmental infrastructure. Youth consistently described YES as stabilizing, protective, opportunity-generating, relationally constant, and ideologically expansive. These are not supplemental services delivered alongside development; they are foundational elements that make development possible in the face of racialized constraint.

Notably, the findings underscore an important boundary: YES cannot fully undo the effects of racialized social systems. While the organization interrupts harm, cultivates opportunity, and reconstructs identity schemas, it cannot eradicate institutional racism, economic precarity, or intergenerational exposure to racialized structures. Although YES fills critical gaps, it cannot be the sole developmental agent responsible for counteracting structural inequality. This finding suggests the need for clearer articulation of how responsibility for the development of Black youth is distributed among families, schools, workplaces, and community institutions. When community-based organizations are expected to absorb the consequences of systemic failure, their labor becomes both essential and structurally overextended. This tension remains largely unacknowledged in dominant practice models.

The study also challenged traditional notions of youth programming. Participants rarely attributed their growth solely to the formal curriculum. Instead, they emphasized informal relational moments: (a) late-night advocacy, (b) check-ins during crisis, (c) modeling adulthood

in motion, and (d) being allowed to fail and try again. These findings suggest that developmental impact is often embedded in relational continuity and institutional navigation rather than discrete programmatic outputs (Imariez, 2021; Noam & Tillinger, 2004; Visser, 2018), underscoring how relational infrastructures operate as core mechanisms of development rather than supplementary supports. Practice models that privilege measurable deliverables without accounting for relational and narrative labor risk overlooking the very mechanisms youth describe as most transformative (Case & Hunter, 2012; Moore et al., 2022).

The findings also indicate that youth-serving organizations must be understood not only as sites of belonging, but also as opportunity cultivators (Visser, 2018). YES did not simply affirm identity; it strategically constructed alternative pathways when institutional access was restricted (Collins, 1990, 2022). This required network building, institutional literacy, and material intervention. As such, opportunity cultivation should be recognized as a core practice function rather than an ancillary benefit.

Finally, the findings invite broader reflection on what it would mean to resource community-based organizations as essential developmental infrastructure rather than supplementary programming. If organizations like YES function as stabilizing anchors across adolescence and early adulthood, then sustained investment, institutional partnerships, and cross-sector coordination become matters of developmental equity rather than charitable support. Overall, the findings suggest that Black youth development is most effectively supported when relational care, structural advocacy, and opportunity cultivation operate in concert, highlighting the need for integrated approaches that address both structural constraint and developmental support simultaneously. Practice landscapes may therefore need to shift from short-term program

funding logics toward long-term infrastructural investment that recognizes relational continuity as a developmental necessity rather than an optional enhancement.

Revisiting of Study Conceptual Framework

The findings from this study are best understood through the study's conceptual framework, which brings together critical race theory, the counterspaces framework, and life course theory to illuminate the structural, relational, and temporal dimensions of Black youths' transitions to adulthood. This integrated framework makes visible how these dimensions operate simultaneously within youths' lived experiences, offering a more cohesive account than any single perspective alone.

Across the findings, critical race theory foregrounds how racialized structures organize access to institutions, opportunity, and developmental pathways, shaping how youth experience adulthood. Life course theory extends this understanding by illuminating how these experiences unfold over time, particularly through disrupted, nonlinear, and institutionally mediated trajectories. At the same time, the counterspaces framework provides insight into how organizations like YES intervene within these conditions, offering relational care, material support, and opportunities that reshape how youth navigate and interpret their developmental pathways.

Together, this conceptual framework highlights Black youths' transitions to adulthood as simultaneously structured, relationally supported, and dynamically unfolding across time. It underscores how youth navigate constraint while engaging in meaning-making, resistance, and opportunity construction within and across contexts, offering a more comprehensive and interconnected understanding of Black adulthood transitions.

Study Considerations

As with all research, this study has important considerations that shape the scope of its claims. First, the findings were drawn from a specific group of Black youth affiliated with one community-based youth-serving organization. While the depth and richness of the narratives provide meaningful insights into Black adult transitions, the study did not claim representativeness for all Black youth or organizational contexts. The developmental experiences captured were situated within a particular institutional ecology and geographic context, and should be interpreted accordingly.

Second, the sample included youth who remained connected to YES into early adulthood. Their sustained engagement may reflect a level of relational continuity that differs from that of youth who disengaged earlier or did not maintain a connection. As such, the findings illuminate how adulthood transitions unfold in the presence of developmental infrastructure but may not fully capture the experiences of youth navigating these transitions without such relational anchoring.

Third, the study relied on retrospective narrative accounts. Participants reflected on their adolescence and early adulthood from their current vantage point, which may have influenced how they interpreted, emphasized, or reconstructed events, including the possibility of selective recall, omission of certain experiences, or reinterpretation of past events in ways that align with their present perspectives. Nonetheless, this aspect was also a methodological strength, as the study focused on meaning-making and interpretive processes rather than trying to reconstruct events as fixed or objective facts. In this sense, these narrative shifts are not understood solely as potential limitations, but also as reflective of how participants actively make sense of their developmental trajectories over time. Although the study highlighted race as a central analytical

lens, the findings make clear that gender and class also significantly shape Black youths' adulthood experiences. Although intersectionality was acknowledged and partially integrated, a more sustained intersectional analysis could further deepen understanding of how race, gender, and class operate simultaneously within adulthood transitions.

Finally, the researcher's close relationship to the organizational context may have shaped both data collection and interpretation. While reflexivity was practiced throughout the research process, including ongoing attention to positionality, analytic memoing, and the researcher's role in shaping interactions and interpretation, complete neutrality is neither possible nor desirable in qualitative inquiry. Instead, this embeddedness provided access, trust, and contextual insight that enriched the data, while also requiring ongoing attention to analytic rigor and transparency. This was particularly important when engaging participants' emotionally driven and, at times, trauma-related reflections, which were approached with care, relational sensitivity, and attention to participants' control over disclosure. These considerations do not diminish the study's contributions; rather, they clarify its boundaries, situate its claims appropriately, and illuminate important directions for continued scholarship.

Contributions to Theory and Methods

The findings of this study make several theoretical and methodological contributions to scholarship on Black youth development and adulthood transitions. Specifically, the study reconceptualized Black adulthood as a racialized social condition, extends counterspace scholarship by foregrounding opportunity cultivation and developmental infrastructure, and challenges linear milestone-based assumptions embedded within dominant life course frameworks. In addition, the study demonstrated the value of qualitative inquiry in illuminating the relational, institutional, and structural dynamics shaping Black youths' transitions to

adulthood. These contributions prompt developmental science to reconsider whose experiences define normative adulthood and whose have historically been mischaracterized as deviant, delayed, or deficient. Furthermore, they build directly on and extend the study's conceptual framework, which integrates critical race theory, the counterspaces framework, and life course theory. Rather than simply applying these perspectives, the findings push each framework in new directions, revealing the need to more fully account for the racialized, gendered, classed, and nonlinear dimensions of Black adulthood transitions.

Critical Race Theory and the Racialized Condition of Adulthood

CRT proved essential in making the structural dimensions of youths' narratives visible. The study shed light on how Black youth develop an understanding of the permanence of race in their daily lives. Across interviews, participants described how their adulthood journey underwent racialized processes of surveillance, constraints, and material consequences, articulating the embedded nature of racial hierarchies within institutional spaces (Bell, 1992). Concepts such as "Whiteness as property" were not abstract theoretical constructs; they were lived realities shaping access to credentials, mobility within professions, and credibility in institutional contexts (Harris, 1993). Youth recognized how particular forms of capital functioned as gatekeeping mechanisms and how racialized hierarchies structured professional and academic environments.

Simultaneously, the findings suggest that racialization does not simply frame isolated institutional encounters; it structures adulthood itself as a social condition for Black youth in YES. Adulthood, for these youth, became a stage where the stakes of race intensified rather than receded. In this way, the findings extend CRT by demonstrating how racialized structures are experienced not only through discrete events but also through developmental transitions

compounding over time. However, the study also revealed the need to foreground intersectionality more explicitly. Although race was central to youths' narratives, their experiences of adulthood were also shaped by gendered and classed relational processes (Crenshaw, 1989).

Regarding gender, Black youth explained navigating hegemonic cultural schemas surrounding Black masculinity and Black femininity. Black young men who were parents described trying to counteract negative cultural schemas of Black fathers as non-providers and emotionally unavailable. These cultural schemas manifested in institutional settings through surveillance, caregiving burdens, and credibility. In response, Black young men empowered themselves to construct new definitions of Black fathers as vulnerable, nurturing, and active contributors to their households. Additionally, Black young women navigated "strong Black women" cultural schemas, where Black women are expected to be powerful and over-give at the expense of themselves (Collins, 2004). Some young Black women who were parents described having to be sole providers and sacrificial lambs for their children and families. Simone for example reported seeking to empower herself through acts of rest and self-care to counteract racialized and gendered expectations.

Similarly, class operated alongside race and gender, shaping access to resources, buffering capacity, and exposure to institutional instability. Familial strain was often tied to structural and intergenerational exposure to racialized systems, complicating individual-level interpretations of harm in gendered ways. In some cases, youth were unable to attribute these familial experiences to structural inequities and instead placed blame on individuals. These classed conditions were also reflected in processes of adultification, where youth were forced to assume heightened responsibility, caregiving roles, and economic contribution, often in response

to material need. The need for YES to intervene through material support, advocacy, and opportunity cultivation further underscores how developmental experiences were shaped not only by relational dynamics but by structurally constrained economic conditions. These findings suggest that race, gender, and class were not additive layers, but simultaneous forces organizing youths' developmental realities.

Consistent with the core argument of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1989), these findings underscore that race cannot be analytically isolated from gender and class in understanding Black adulthood. CRT provided the analytic capacity to examine how these social constructs intersect to shape lived experience; however, this study's findings indicate that intersectionality must be more explicitly operationalized within developmental research to fully account for the gendered and classed dimensions of racialized adulthood. CRT's intersectional commitments must therefore be leveraged more deliberately when examining the developmental transitions of Black youth.

Counterspaces, Opportunity Cultivation, and Developmental Infrastructure

The counterspaces framework offered a powerful lens for understanding YES as a context of belonging, relational support, and identity affirmation. Consistent with the framework, narrative identity work and relational transactions were central to the youths' experiences (Case & Hunter, 2012). Staff actively engaged in reframing deficit narratives, articulating high expectations, and embodying alternative models of Black adulthood. These processes were not merely affirmational, as they reshaped youths' identity schemas and expanded their interpretive frameworks regarding possibility. Importantly, consistent with counterspace scholarship, YES also functioned as a site of racial refuge, buffering youths' exposure to racialized surveillance and institutional scrutiny by providing a context where they were not required to constantly

defend, explain, or regulate themselves in response to the White gaze (Case & Hunter, 2012). In this way, YES did not simply affirm identity; it created temporary relief from racialized stressors, allowing youth to recover, recalibrate, and reengage external institutions with greater stability.

The findings suggest that YES exceeds traditional conceptualizations of counterspaces. While existing scholarship often emphasizes psychological affirmation and belonging, this study demonstrated that YES also functions as an institutional actor that shifts youths' material and social conditions. Drawing on Visser's (2018) work, opportunity cultivation emerged as a core mechanism through which YES intervened against structural exclusion and opportunity constraints. Where institutional pathways were foreclosed, YES constructed alternative routes by facilitating internships, academic exposure, leadership experiences, and professional connections that materially altered trajectories.

In this way, YES operated not only as a counterspace but as developmental infrastructure. It stabilized youth during rupture, cultivated opportunity in the face of exclusion, and sustained relational continuity across the life course. Critical care undergirded each of these functions. Consistent with the current literature and theorization of critical care (Wilson, 2016), care was not limited to emotional affirmation; rather, it manifested as advocacy, institutional negotiation, and sustained commitment to youths' advancement. This study, therefore, extended the counterspaces framework by demonstrating that counterspaces can function simultaneously as relational sanctuaries, protective racial buffers, and structural disruptors.

Beyond reframing individual confidence, the narrative labor within YES can be understood as an intervention into hegemonic racialized scripts that shape how Black youth interpret themselves long before adulthood begins. Dominant societal narratives often construct

Black youth as deficient, hypervisible, irresponsible, or intellectually suspect (Collins, 1990, 2022). These narratives operate as hegemonic structures that regulate expectations and delimit perceived possibilities, influencing how youth evaluate themselves and their futures (Collins, 1990, 2022). While existing scholarship suggests that CBYSOs affirm youths' identities and nurture their possibilities, these findings indicate a more expansive role in reshaping how youth interpret their own capacities and futures (Clark et al., 2023; Gibbs Grey, 2018; Turner, 2022). YES disrupted not only individual doubt but also the broader ideological architecture that youth had internalized regarding what Black adulthood could look like.

Through sustained relational affirmation, institutional advocacy, and embodied modeling, YES functioned as a counter-hegemonic site. It offered alternative scripts of Black masculinity and femininity, redefined success beyond narrow productivity metrics, and normalized intellectual rigor, care, and communal accountability. In doing so, YES did not simply build young people's confidence; it reconfigured the interpretive schemas through which youth understood race, gender, time, and possibility. This suggests that developmental interventions must be understood not only as skill-building or support mechanisms, but also as sites of ideological contestation where dominant narratives are actively disrupted and re-authored.

Life Course Theory, Racialized Time, and the Limits of Milestone Frameworks

Life course theory provided a useful scaffold for understanding how youth narrated agency, linked lives, and developmental turning points (Elder, 1996). Participants described exercising agency in institutional decision-making, educational redirection, and relational boundary-setting. In other cases, they narrated feeling less agentic due to role adoption or structural and material constraints, resembling the concept of bounded agency, in which Clancy and Holford (2023) noted that structural and familial forces limit an individual's capacity to

shape their own trajectory. Linked lives were evident in how familial relationships shaped role acquisition, responsibility, and opportunity. Youth also described moments that served as turning points or ruptures, altering their trajectory and requiring recalibration.

However, the findings challenge core assumptions embedded within life course theory. Traditional formulations often presume linear sequencing and normative timing of adulthood transitions. For the youth in this study, development was marked not by orderly progression but by rupture, repair, acceleration, and recalibration. This finding directly challenges scholarship that suggests adulthood transitions unfold sequentially toward predictable endpoints (Furstenberg, 2013; Hogan & Astone, 1986; Wood et al., 2018). Instead, the data lend support to scholars who have emphasized the complexity of young people's transitions as they confront institutional entry, exit, and reentry, accelerated role accumulation, and housing reversibility (Settersten et al., 2015; Shanahan, 2000).

Additionally, for youth in this study, institutional termination, financial instability, caregiving burdens, and racialized exclusion disrupted trajectories in ways not fully accounted for by traditional models. Roy and Jones (2014) and Hendry and Kloep (2007) suggested that such instability is more normative than exceptional and broadens the scope of adulthood. While Graber and Brooks-Gunn (1996) and Elder (1996) theorized these experiences as turning points, this study's findings suggest they are more accurately understood as institutional severances requiring prolonged reconstruction, thereby expanding the conceptualization of turning points in the literature.

Research indicates that time itself operates as a racialized structure (Mahadeo, 2019, 2024). Participants described feeling pushed into adult responsibilities through caregiving, financial contributions, or early role acquisition, while simultaneously experiencing delayed

institutional recognition and opportunities despite their achievements. Others articulated feeling "behind" relative to dominant adulthood markers, even when their trajectories reflected structural constraints rather than individual deficiencies. Moments of disruption absorbed time, altered sequencing, and compressed opportunity horizons. While life course theory recognizes sociohistorical context, it does not fully address how racialized social structures alter developmental timing, access, and consequence. These findings align with Mahadeo's (2019, 2024) argument that time is not neutral but instead a racialized tool of inequality, producing temporal disadvantage for Black youth while affording temporal privilege to white individuals.

Consistent with this work, temporal disadvantage emerged not as a function of individual irresponsibility but as a result of systemic inequities that deny, steal, and compress time (Mahadeo, 2024). This study, therefore, advocated for a reconceptualization of life course processes that emphasizes racialized time, structural rupture, and nonlinear progression as normal features of Black adulthood transitions rather than exceptions to a presumed standard. It also called for reframing pathway deviance not as a deficiency but as an adaptive developmental response necessary within structurally constrained environments.

Beyond challenging linear sequencing, the findings question the legitimacy of traditional milestone frameworks as universal indicators of adulthood. Conventional models presume access to stable institutions, uninterrupted educational pathways, predictable economic mobility, and institutional responsiveness (Adams et al., 2021; Côté, 2002; Settersten et al., 2015). As scholars cautioned, these assumptions obscure how racialized social structures unevenly distribute opportunity, destabilize trajectories, and penalize deviation (Adams et al., 2021). For youth in this study, "falling behind" was not the result of personal failure but the predictable consequence of navigating fragile, exclusionary, or intermittently accessible institutions. Milestone

attainment, therefore, becomes an unstable metric when the structural conditions necessary for those milestones are unevenly available. Research that prioritizes milestones as core indicators of adulthood proves insufficient for understanding the experiences of Black youth navigating institutional instability and systemic barriers (Furstenberg, 2013; Mary, 2014). Adulthood metrics must therefore be reconsidered beyond traditional benchmarks when evaluating transitions within racialized social structures.

Emerging adulthood frameworks likewise warrant reconsideration in light of these findings (Arnett, 2000, 2004, 2008). The emphasis on prolonged exploration, delayed responsibility, and extended identity experimentation presumes economic and institutional security that many participants did not experience. Several youth were accelerated into adult roles through caregiving, financial responsibility, or parenthood. Others described limited space for experimentation due to structural uncertainty and racialized surveillance. Exploration, when it occurred, was often strategic and constrained rather than leisurely and expansive as Arnett (2004) conceptualized. In this way, emerging adulthood, as a universally exploratory phase, does not adequately capture the compressed, structurally mediated realities described by participants. Syed and Mitchell (2013) further suggested that emerging adulthood, as a period of expansive exploration, is most applicable to economically privileged, predominantly White populations with access to institutional affordances, a critique that aligns with the experiences reported in this study.

Additionally, neoliberal adulthood scripts that center independence, self-sufficiency, and individualized achievement were not fully reflected in youths' narratives. Although the literature suggests adulthood is becoming increasingly individualized (Côté, 2002; Furlong et al., 2011; Settersten et al., 2015; Schoon & Lyons-Amos, 2010), participants described adulthood as

relational, collective, and recursive. Generativity, reciprocity, communal accountability, and relational presence frequently superseded the attainment of individualized milestones. Youth articulated adulthood as a sustained responsibility to family, community, and future generations rather than measuring it solely by independence. Scholars, including Macmillan (2006) and Bea and Yi (2018), highlighted dominant paradigms that prioritize autonomy and self-sufficiency; however, findings from this study suggest the need for frameworks that more fully account for collective orientations within Black adulthood transitions. Overall, the study's findings demonstrate that dominant adulthood theories are implicitly racialized in their assumptions about time, access, sequencing, and independence. Developmental scholarship must therefore move beyond milestone-based and linear models toward frameworks that account for racialized opportunity structures, structural rupture, compressed timelines, and collective meaning-making as central features of Black adulthood.

Methodological Contributions

This study also makes methodological contributions to the developmental literature. Transitions to adulthood are frequently examined through survey data, longitudinal quantitative designs, or large-scale administrative datasets (Berzin, 2008; Norman et al., 2023). While these approaches offer breadth, they often struggle to capture the interpretive, relational, and structural dimensions through which youth make sense of their transitions (Hartman & Swartz, 2006). Sanders et al.'s (2024) qualitative study of Black emerging adults' protective community experiences similarly underscored the importance of qualitative approaches in investigating the complex mechanisms that support Black individuals' experiences of adulthood. In alignment with this work, employing a qualitative case study design allowed this research to foreground meaning-making processes, institutional ruptures, relational infrastructures, and temporal

disorientations that shape Black youths' adulthood trajectories in ways that standardized measures could not fully detect.

The depth of narrative data revealed the layered nature of disruption, repair, and identity reconstruction across time. Participants articulated how structural racialization unfolded simultaneously across educational, professional, and familial domains. Their reflections revealed nonlinear developmental processes that would be difficult to capture through milestone-based indicators alone. The qualitative approach also illuminated the informal, relational, and embodied aspects of YES' influence. As Roy and Jones (2014) noted, these dimensions are rarely operationalized within traditional developmental metrics, yet they emerged as central to youths' trajectories in this study. In this way, the study underscored the necessity of incorporating qualitative methodologies into research on adulthood transitions, particularly when examining populations whose developmental pathways are shaped by racialized social structures. Understanding Black youths' transitions requires not only measuring outcomes but also listening to how youth interpret rupture, possibility, time, and institutional navigation.

Study Significance

This study is significant because it reframes how Black youths' transitions to adulthood are understood within developmental science. The findings directly challenge the existing literature that conceptualizes adulthood as a neutral life stage marked by milestone attainment. These results demonstrated that Black youth experience adulthood as a racialized social condition shaped by structural constraint, institutional fragility, and cumulative exposure to racialized systems. This reframing disrupts dominant developmental models that assume linear progression, institutional stability, and individual independence as normative features of adulthood transitions. For Black youth in this study, adulthood was not merely achieving

milestones; it involved navigating rupture, renegotiating identity, and recalibrating expectations within structurally unequal systems.

The study is also significant in its illumination of how racialized time, as Mahadeo (2019; 2024) suggested, shapes developmental experience. Participants described nonlinearity, accelerated responsibility, stalled progression, and "moving goalposts" in ways that question traditional assumptions about "on-time" transitions. By centering youths' lived narratives, the study highlighted how time itself is structured by racialized opportunity constraints, institutional exclusion, and caregiving burdens. This contributes to a growing body of scholarship interrogating whose timelines are treated as normative within developmental theory and whose are rendered deviant, delayed, or deficient (Côté, 2014; Furstenberg, 2013; Settersten et al., 2015).

Additionally, this research is significant because it positions community-based Black youth-serving organizations not as supplemental supports but as developmental infrastructure. YES emerged in the findings as a stabilizing, opportunity-cultivating, relationally continuous presence that actively intervened in both the psychological and material conditions shaping youths' trajectories. In doing so, the study challenged deficit-oriented narratives that locate developmental responsibility primarily within families or individual effort. It demonstrated that, in racially stratified contexts, community institutions often carry the labor of stabilization, advocacy, and ideological reconstruction necessary for development to unfold.

Finally, the study has methodological significance. Using a qualitative case study revealed processes such as narrative labor, relational continuity, identity schema reconstruction, and institutional rupture that are often obscured in quantitative studies of adulthood transitions. The depth of youths' accounts revealed dimensions of development that could not be reduced to

survey measures of milestone attainment or economic status. In centering Black youths' own conceptualizations of adulthood, the study affirmed the necessity of narrative-based inquiry for understanding racially mediated developmental processes. Overall, these contributions underscored the need to rethink how adulthood transitions are theorized, studied, and supported for Black youth navigating structurally unequal environments. Their experiences were not deviations from normative development but rather reflections of structurally mediated processes requiring new conceptual and institutional frameworks.

Summary

The findings of this study challenged dominant developmental narratives that frame adulthood as a neutral, linear progression toward independence and stability. Instead, Black youths' transitions to adulthood emerged as structurally mediated, relationally negotiated, and temporally uneven processes shaped by racialized social systems. Additionally, the study illustrated how community-based organizations such as YES can intervene meaningfully within these constraints by providing relational continuity, cultivating opportunity, and reconstructing the narratives through which youth interpret their possibilities. By positioning YES as developmental infrastructure rather than supplemental programming, the findings expand how scholars and practitioners understand the key ecosystems supporting youth development. Centering Black youths' narratives unearthed important insights about navigating structural constraints, renegotiating identity, and sustaining possibilities across the life course.

Chapter 7

Conclusion

The empirical insights presented in earlier chapters offer several implications for developmental theory, youth-serving practice, and public policy. By centering Black youths' narratives of adulthood, this study illuminated how racialized social structures shape developmental experiences in ways that dominant frameworks often overlook. It also highlighted how community-based organizations such as YES can meaningfully intervene within these constraints by stabilizing trajectories, cultivating opportunities, and reshaping how young people interpret their futures. The following implications outline how these insights move existing theory, practice, and policy conversations toward more structurally grounded and relationally attuned understandings of Black youths' transitions into adulthood. The chapter concludes with considerations for future scholarship.

Implications

The findings of this study suggest several implications for developmental theory. First, theories of adulthood must more explicitly account for the structural racialization of developmental transitions. Adulthood cannot be treated as a universalized stage marked primarily by independence, employment, or family formation when access to these milestones is mediated by racialized opportunity structures. Developmental models should incorporate racialized visibility, institutional fragility, cumulative disruption, and structural precarity as core dimensions of adulthood for marginalized youth.

Second, life course theory requires further refinement to account for nonlinear, rupture-driven transitions shaped by structural inequality. While the theory acknowledges turning points and linked lives, it does not sufficiently theorize how racialized systems reorganize time, compress responsibility, or produce accelerated or stalled trajectories. A racialized life course perspective would more fully integrate structural constraint, intergenerational exposure, uneven access to institutional stability, and the normalization of rupture as a developmental feature rather than deviation.

Third, counterspace scholarship should extend beyond belonging and identity affirmation to include opportunity cultivation and material disruption. The findings indicate that counterspaces function most powerfully when relational care, narrative labor, and structural intervention operate together. Theoretical models of youth-serving contexts should therefore conceptualize such spaces as developmental infrastructure rather than ancillary supports, recognizing their dual role as psychological sanctuaries and structural actors.

For practitioners and community-based organizations, the findings underscore the importance of relational continuity, institutional advocacy, and narrative labor as core components of youth development work. Programs serving Black youth should recognize that development unfolds not only through formal curriculum, but also through sustained relational presence and strategic navigation of institutional barriers. Additionally, opportunity cultivation must be treated as an intentional practice rather than an incidental exposure. This includes building networks, facilitating access to otherwise restricted spaces, and actively intervening when institutional pathways become foreclosed.

The findings also suggest that organizations should not bear sole responsibility for compensating for structural inequity. Cross-sector partnerships between schools, community

organizations, higher education institutions, and employers are necessary to create coordinated developmental ecosystems that support Black youth beyond adolescence. Without such coordination, community-based organizations risk becoming overextended shock absorbers for systemic failure (Ginwright, 2010). This raises a broader question about how community-based youth-serving organizations might function not as isolated entities, but as coordinated networks of developmental infrastructure. Rather than positioning single organizations to absorb the cumulative weight of racialized structural inequality, there is potential value in cultivating regional or cross-sector systems of nonprofits that share resources, relationships, and advocacy capacity. A networked model could distribute developmental labor, extend relational continuity across contexts, and create more durable pathways for Black youth navigating educational, professional, and familial transitions.

At the policy level, this study highlighted the need for sustained investment in community-based Black youth-serving organizations as essential developmental infrastructure. Funding models that prioritize short-term outputs or narrowly defined performance metrics may fail to capture the relational and ideological labor that youth describe as most transformative (Ginwright, 2010; Noguera, 2003). Policymakers should consider long-term, flexible funding structures that support relational continuity, institutional advocacy, and opportunity cultivation.

The current policy climate further intensifies the urgency of these findings. As social safety nets are retracted and race-conscious initiatives face political resistance, vulnerable youth navigating adulthood may encounter even fewer institutional buffers against instability (Ray, 2022). In such a context, community-based organizations risk becoming default providers of stabilization without corresponding structural support. Policy approaches that reduce public investment in education, workforce access, housing, or family assistance may inadvertently

deepen the very developmental vulnerabilities this study documents. Sustained and equity-centered public investment is therefore not optional, but foundational to supporting Black youths' transitions into adulthood.

Further, policies addressing education, workforce development, and family support must acknowledge the racialized structural conditions shaping Black youths' adulthood transitions. Efforts to promote "college and career readiness" must be accompanied by structural reform that addresses exclusionary institutional practices and racialized opportunity gaps (Furstenberg, 2013; Settersten et al., 2015). Finally, this research suggests the importance of policy approaches that distribute responsibility for youth development across institutions rather than concentrating it within families or individual organizations. Developmental equity requires coordinated structural support, not isolated intervention; this is a shift from remediation toward systemic accountability.

Recommendations for Future Research

This study presented several avenues for continued inquiry into Black youths' adulthood transitions and the role of community-based developmental infrastructure. First, future research should examine Black youths' transitions across a broader range of organizational contexts. While this study centers on one community-based youth-serving organization, comparative work across multiple programs would deepen understanding of how different organizational models cultivate opportunity, sustain relational continuity, and intervene against institutional rupture. Such work could further refine and operationalize the developmental infrastructure framework advanced in this study.

Second, additional scholarship is needed to more fully theorize Black adulthood transitions as a distinct analytic category. Much of the existing adulthood literature relies on generalized milestone-based models that do not adequately account for racialized structural

conditions, nonlinear trajectories, or accelerated role acquisition (Dumas, 2016; Furstenberg, 2013; Settersten et al., 2015; Shanahan, 2000). Future research could continue developing a racialized life course perspective that integrates structural inequality, intergenerational exposure, temporal disorientation, and institutional fragility into theories of adulthood.

Third, deeper intersectional analyses are warranted. While this study identified gendered reorientations of Black masculinity and femininity, future research could more systematically explore how race, gender, class, and parental status interact in shaping adulthood transitions. Such work would further illuminate how structural constraints operate differently across intersecting identities and how adulthood is experienced unevenly within Black communities themselves.

Fourth, longitudinal research could extend the insights generated in this study by examining how developmental infrastructure functions across extended periods of adulthood. Understanding how relationships with youth-serving organizations evolve over decades, rather than years, could provide greater clarity on the long-term implications of relational continuity, narrative labor, and opportunity cultivation. Finally, future research should continue to prioritize qualitative and narrative-based methodologies when examining racially mediated developmental processes. Centering Black youths' own conceptualizations of adulthood remains critical for building a theory that reflects lived experience rather than reproducing externally derived developmental norms. These directions collectively suggest a broader research agenda that reconceptualizes the transitions to adulthood for Black individuals as processes that are influenced by structural factors, shaped by relationships, and contested within institutions. This perspective views the experiences of Black youth not as deviations from mainstream models but as valuable opportunities to rethink the theory of adulthood.

Summary

This study began with a central investigative aim: to examine how Black youth conceptualize and make sense of their transitions into adulthood, and how a community-based organization such as YES shapes that process. The findings show that, for the young people in this study, adulthood was not a neutral milestone to be reached, but rather a racialized condition to be navigated. It was experienced through heightened visibility, institutional fragility, cumulative disruption, identity renegotiation, and nonlinear time. Adulthood unfolded not in isolation, but in constant negotiation with racialized social structures that constrained, interrupted, and reshaped developmental pathways.

This study demonstrated that community-based developmental infrastructure matters. YES did not eliminate structural inequality, but it stabilized, cultivated, advocated, modeled, and re-narrated possibility. YES functioned as relational continuity across rupture, as an opportunity cultivator when pathways closed, and as a counter-hegemonic site where youth learned to see themselves beyond dominant scripts. Through these processes, YES did not simply support youth; it helped reorganize how youth understood adulthood itself, organizing their thinking around what it meant, what it required, and what was possible within it.

These findings indicate that the transitions to adulthood for Black individuals should be understood in a different context. It is important to consider factors such as racialized time, structural disruptions, shifts in gender roles, and the efforts required to rebuild. Additionally, development should not be viewed solely as an individual pursuit; it is also supported by relational networks and community institutions operating within systems of inequality. Failing to acknowledge these structural and relational realities can lead developmental theory to confuse constraints with failures and to treat rupture as deviance.

Ultimately, the findings call for a more racially explicit, structurally grounded, and relationally attuned understanding of adulthood. Black youths' journeys do not deviate from developmental theory; rather, they expose its limitations. By centering their narratives, this research offered a reframed lens for understanding adulthood. It further suggests that adulthood unfolds in constant negotiation with racialized social structures that constrain, interrupt, and reshape developmental pathways. Through the developmental infrastructure of CBYSOs, these conditions may be mediated, allowing young people's trajectories and transitions to stabilize and their future perspectives to expand.

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Appendix A

IRB Exemption



Health Sciences and Behavioral Sciences Institutional Review Board (IRB-HSBS) • 2800 Plymouth Rd., Building 520, Room 1170, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2800 • phone (734) 936-0933 • fax (734) 998-9171 • irbhsbs@umich.edu

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To: Denise Jones

From:

There are no items to display

Cc:

Denise	Jones
Zaida	Pearson
Barry	Fishman
Leslie	Herrenkohl

Subject: Notice of Exemption for [HUM00272448]

SUBMISSION INFORMATION:
Title: Understanding Black Youths' Developmental Experiences within One Community-Based Youth Serving Organization (CBYSO)
Full Study Title (if applicable):
Study eResearch ID: HUM00272448
Date of this Notification from IRB: 4/28/2025
Date of IRB Exempt Determination: 4/28/2025
UM Federalwide Assurance: FWA00004969 (For the current FWA expiration date, please visit the UM HRPP Webpage)
OHRP IRB Registration Number(s):

IRB EXEMPTION STATUS:
The IRB HSBS has reviewed the study referenced above and determined that, as currently described, it is exempt from ongoing IRB review, per the following federal exemption category:

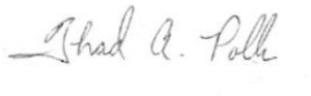
> **EXEMPTION 2(i) and/or 2(ii) at 45 CFR 46.104(d):**
>
> **Research that only includes interactions** involving educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures, or observation of public behavior (including visual or auditory recording) **if at least one of the following criteria is met**:
>
> **(i)** The information obtained is recorded by the investigator in such a manner that **the identity of the human subjects cannot readily be ascertained**, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects;
>
> **(ii)** Any disclosure of the **human subjects' responses** outside the research **would not reasonably place the subjects at risk** of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects' financial standing, employability, educational advancement, or reputation

Note that the study is considered exempt as long as any changes to the use of human subjects (including their data) remain within the scope of the exemption category above. Any proposed changes that may exceed the scope of this category, or the approval conditions of any other non-IRB reviewing committees, must be submitted as an amendment through eResearch.

Although an exemption determination eliminates the need for ongoing IRB review and approval, you still have an obligation to understand and abide by generally accepted principles of responsible and ethical conduct of research. Examples of these principles can be found in the Belmont Report as well as in guidance from professional societies and scientific organizations.

SUBMITTING AMENDMENTS VIA eRESEARCH:
You can access the online forms for amendments in the eResearch workspace for this exempt study, referenced above.

ACCESSING EXEMPT STUDIES IN eRESEARCH:
Click the "Exempt and Not Regulated" tab in your eResearch home workspace to access this exempt study.



Thad Polk
Chair, IRB HSBS

Appendix B

Recruitment Email – Students

To	Potential Dissertation Study Participants
Cc	Denise Jones
Subject	Dissertation Study Support

Good afternoon,

I hope this email finds you well and in good spirits. I am reaching out to inquire about your participation in my dissertation. The goal of my project is to understand how Black youth make sense of their developmental transitions and how community-based youth-serving organizations like YES create the supportive infrastructure to aid Black youth in their journeys to adulthood.

Participants in my study need to embody the following criteria: a) racially/ethnically identify as a Black individual, b) meet the criteria for age for youth (18-25), and c) have had at least two years of high school involvement in YES. Participants must have also received college and career support from YES and continued their engagement in YES post-high school.

I am hopeful you will consider participating. Participants will be compensated for their time and are expected to engage in at least two in-person, semi-structured interviews for roughly 60 minutes each.

I am attaching a flyer in case you need additional information or would like to send it to other interested students. Please send back a notice informing me of your willingness to participate.

Best wishes,

Denise

SEEKING YOUR PARTICIPATION

Dissertation Study Opportunity

ABOUT MY STUDY

I am interested in understanding how Black youth make sense of their developmental transitions and how community-based youth serving organizations like YES create supportive infrastructure to aid Black youth in their journeys to adulthood.

PARTICIPATION CRITERIA

- Identify as a Black Individual
- Age between 18-25
- High School Involvement in YES
- Received college and career preparation support from YES
- Engaged with YES post-high school

EXPECTATIONS & INCENTIVES

- Two interviews
- 60-90 minutes

- $50 gift card per interview



INTERESTED?

CONTACT: (412)401-9840 OR JONESDEE@UMICH.EDU

Appendix C

Pre-Survey Questions

Please provide your First and Last Name

Please provide your preferred First and Last Name for the Study Pseudonym

Please select options for the following demographic data

- Please select an option for your ethnic identity.
    - Hispanic or Latino or
    - Not Hispanic or Latino
- Please indicate one or more options for your racial identity.
    - American Indian or Alaska Native
    - Asian
    - Black or African American
    - Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
    - White
- Please select an option for your gender identity below.
    - Man
    - Woman
    - Non-binary
    - Other (please specify)
    - Prefer not to answer
- Please select an option for your preferred pronouns below.
    - She / They
    - He / They
    - They / Them / Theirs
    - He / Him / His
    - She / Her / Hers
    - Other
- How many people live in your household?
    - 1
    - 2
    - 3
    - 4
    - 5
    - 6
    - More than 6

- Which option best describes your current employment status?
    - Full-time employed (40 or more hours per week)
    - Part-time employed (fewer than 40 hours per week)
    - Self-employed
    - Unemployed and looking for work
    - Unemployed and not looking for work
    - Student (Graduate or Undergraduate)
    - Unable to work (e.g., disabled)
    - Military/Forces
    - Gig work, freelancer, or temporary work
- What option best describes your educational status?
    - High school diploma or equivalent (e.g., GED)
    - Some college, no degree
    - Associate's degree (e.g., AA, AS)
    - Bachelor's degree (e.g., BA, BS)
    - Master's degree (e.g., MA, MS, MEd)
    - Professional degree (e.g., MD, DDS, DVM)
    - Doctorate (e.g., PhD, EdD)
    - Trade/technical/vocational training
    - Currently enrolled in school (please indicate highest degree received)
    - Prefer not to say

Current role/ work

- What is your current work title?

Study Participation - Interview 1

- Select all the dates you are available for Interview 1
    - November 3
    - November 4
    - November 5
    - November 6
    - November 7
- Select all the times of Day you are most available
    - 9am - 11am
    - 12pm - 2pm
    - 3pm - 5pm
    - 6pm - 8pm
    - 9pm - 11pm
    - Other - additional times requested

Appendix D

YES Staff and Instructor Interview Protocols

Stakeholder Interview 1

Interview Description:
60-90-minute interviews will be conducted with program staff and administrators who have diverse expertise and support YES programming and functions in various ways. Participants will be those who have worked at YES for two years or more and who have had experiences or interactions with YES alumni.

Research Questions:
RQ1: How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions to adulthood?

RQ2: How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in shaping their developmental transitions?

Interview Purpose:
This interview is intended to understand the extent to which YES has shaped Black youths' developmental journeys and opportunity landscapes from the perspectives of YES staff. This interview will be used to frame and inform the questions included in the youth interview protocols.

For Program Staff and Administrators:

Introduction

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. What is your role at YES? When did you get involved? What motivated/ informed your engagement?

Organizational Vision

1. What is the mission of YES, and how does it relate to supporting Black youth?
2. How does YES define opportunity? Support? Youth Voice? Relationships?

Strategies & Outcomes

1. What opportunities does YES provide Black youth transitioning from high school to post-high school?
2. What specific strategies or programs does YES use to support youth in their transition from high school to post-high school (e.g., college, workforce, civic life)?

3. What are some non-formal program practices that YES engages in to support Black youth in their transition from high school to post-high school?
4. How does YES measure program success?
5. How does YES define student success?

Structural & Social Context

1. What systemic barriers do you think Black youth in YES face when transitioning from high school to post-high school?
2. How does YES address these barriers?
3. How does YES respond to the changing societal context (i.e., social and cultural environment, historical landscape, economic conditions, political climate)?

Youth Needs & Organizational Responsiveness

1. How does YES stay informed about concerns Black youth confront or experience as they transition from high school to post-high school?
2. What has YES learned about the needs of Black youth as they transition from high school to post-high school?
3. How does YES address concerns that students share post-high school?
4. To what extent has YES evolved in response to the needs of Black youth? Can you provide some examples?
5. What, if any, programming has YES added over the years to support Black youths' needs?
6. How does YES fill the gaps in Black youths' and young adults' lives? [when parents are absent, or not equipped? Or when school systems fail, etc.?]
7. How would you define the role YES plays in supporting Black youth in their transition from high school to post-high school?

Challenges

1. What are the biggest challenges YES faces in supporting youth transitioning from high school to post-high school?
2. How does YES overcome the challenges it experiences when supporting youth post-high school?

Social Networks

1. How do YES staff leverage their personal social networks to provide support and opportunities for Black youth in YES, if at all?
2. Why do YES staff consult their personal social networks? (Feel free to reflect on why you personally do this)

Reflections

1. Would you like to share any final thoughts or comments about YES or your work within the organization?

Thank you for your time and contributions.

Instructor Interview 1

Interview Description:
60-90 minute interviews will be conducted with individuals who have served as YES instructors. These individuals will have supported YES programming and functions in a variety of ways. Participants will be those who have worked with YES programming for at least two years or more and who have had experiences or interactions with YES alumni.

Research Questions:
RQ1: How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions to adulthood?

RQ2: How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in shaping their developmental transitions?

Interview Purpose:
This interview is intended to develop a holistic depiction of YES staff's engagement in shaping Black youths' developmental journeys and opportunity landscapes. This interview will bring special focus to the programs and practices that helped to facilitate students' skill-building to support their development post-program engagement. This interview will be used to frame and inform the questions included on the youth interview protocols.

1. Tell me about yourself.
2. Tell me what your role is/ was at YES. (**Discuss multiple roles individuals held.**) When did you get involved? What motivated/ informed your engagement with YES?
3. Describe the work you currently engage in or previously engaged in with youth at YES.
4. What is/ was the goal for the work you conducted with YES youth?
5. What skills are/ were you hoping to develop within YES students?
6. How do/ did you see your work contributing to YES' mission of empowering youth to achieve success?
7. How do/ did you see your work impacting youth and their development in and post-high school?
8. Describe an activity that you thought was particularly meaningful for students, and that could benefit them post their time in YES.
9. Any other thoughts or comments about your work with YES?

Thank you for your time and for contributing your perspectives.

Appendix E

Recruitment Email – Stakeholders

To	operationsmanager@yespgh.org
Cc	Potential Dissertation Study Participants
Bcc	Denise Jones
Subject	Dissertation Study Support

Good afternoon, Operations Manager -

My name is Denise Jones, and I am sending this message to inquire about your willingness to share my message below regarding YES staff's willingness to participate in and contribute to my dissertation. Please share this with YES' personnel listserv if possible.

Best,

Denise

Message —----------

Hello YES personnel,

I hope this email finds you well and in good spirits. I am reaching out as I would love for you to participate in my dissertation. The goal of my project is to understand how Black youth conceptualize their developmental transitions and how community-based youth-serving organizations like YES create the supportive infrastructure to aid Black youth in their journeys to adulthood.

Participants in my study must meet the following inclusion criteria: a) be a YES employee with two or more years within the organization, b) have had experience contributing to youth programming, and 3) have the ability to recount interactions and experiences with YES alumni.

I am hopeful you will consider participating in my study. Participants will be compensated for their time and expected to engage in one in-person, semi-structured interview for roughly 90 minutes.

Please simply send me a message via email, jonesdee@umich.edu, expressing your willingness or unwillingness to participate, and I will share information regarding the next steps.

Best wishes,

Denise

Appendix F

Staff and Stakeholder Theme Analysis

Cluster Names and Mini Themes
Tools for Resistance and Understanding Systems
Mini Theme: Language Development as a Tool for Resisting Systems YES equips youth with the language needed to understand and challenge the systems they navigate as they approach adulthood. Beyond language development, YES strikes a balance between helping youth recognize their current realities and instilling hope, critical skills, and resources to empower them to create a chosen future rather than one prescribed to them.
Mini Theme: Youth visibility and skill showcasing YES supports youth in seeing themselves, recognizing their value, and creating opportunities to showcase their skills, leadership abilities, and currencies
Mini Theme: Narrators of their own stories as an act of resistance YES instills within students the value of seeing themselves and equips/ empowers them with the tools and agency to tell their own stories void of societal expectations and pressures
Benefits and Affordances of Youth Research
Mini Theme: Research as a tool to amplify youth voice Youth voice is central to the priorities at YES and are uplifted through student-led research projects where youth identify their own topics and leverage this mechanism to express what they find meaningful and important
Mini Theme: Research as a mechanism for youth voice and agency YES facilitates research experiences that privilege youth voice and student agency
Mini Theme: Research as a navigational tool YES teaches and equips youth with essential research skills such as collecting and leveraging data, learning how to ask and craft questions, investigating claims, and documenting evidence as a way to challenge systemic inequities and structural barriers they experience as racialized individuals preparing for adulthood
Mini Theme: Confidence to lead as change agents Youth leverage their confidence, voice, and power to lead the next generation of scholars as community change agents
Mini Theme: Research as a tool for peer led social change YES builds the capacity and expertise of youth to uncover and investigate systemic forces contributing to social problems through technical and research skill building as a means of social change
Mini Theme: Finding a voice through meaningful inquiry Students develop both an academic and personal voice by engaging in the investigative research process centered around meaningful inquiry connected to their lives and interests
Nurturing Internal Assets and Knowledge Building
Mini Theme: YES nurtures students' curiosity and builds within them the importance of knowledge building and learning YES' programming helps to nurture students curiosity, invest in their knowledge banks, and water their thirst for more learning
Mini Theme: Curiosity as a youth skill Students embody a natural investigative and curious spirit
Personal and Financial Empowerment
Mini Theme: Financial independence as empowerment and agency YES intentionally creates opportunities for youth to earn financial compensation through their program engagement and contributions. Earning money for youth becomes liberating and empowering for youth. Beyond learning to manage money, they open bank accounts and begin developing their long-term financial literacy.
Mini Theme: Ownership and agency YES develops within students a sense of ownership over their work, ideas, learning, and skill building that matters beyond the program cycle and helps to facilitate students' agency
Mini Theme: Agency as discovery YES facilitates space where youth have agency to guide their own discovery process
Professional Skill Building and Expanded Career Opportunities

Mini Theme: Diverse career pathways and expanded view of opportunities YES' program experiences help students explore a wide range of experiences and opportunities and exposes them to diverse, expanded careers; YES must continue evolving and broaden their career pathways for diverse learners
Mini Theme: Learning to become a professional YES' summer learning experiences are unique and offer students in the moment learning opportunities, but what these spaces simultaneously do is prepare youth to become skilled and valuable employees who learn positive work habits and behaviors, understand the value of hard work and how that relates to their pay and quality products, and conscious and aware.
Shifts in Motivational Factors
Mini Theme: Moving from externally regulated to internally regulated motivation YES students do not always understand why they are doing something; however, once they engage in the learning process they begin to see and develop confidence and intrinsic motivations centered around learning, thus further impacting their self-perceptions, self-beliefs, and self-efficacy
Mini Theme: Internalization of intrinsic motivation YES students' motivation shifted from external influences to internal ones - students buy-in and intrinsic investment grew as they became more efficacious and observed the tangibility of their advocacy and efforts
Mini Theme: Moving from externally regulated to internally regulated motivation YES students are often motivated by external factors however through formal and informal program efforts they move more internal toward internally regulated motivation
Relationships and Mentorship as Carework and Rapport Building
Mini Theme: Relationship building is central to carework as an educator and staff member at YES Having YES students' understand that someone cares about their physical and psychological safety along with their holistic development and success is a central part of being an educator and a core part of a staff member's work at YES
Mini Theme: Building relationships and providing support through organic and natural mentorship Students gravitate toward YES staff who they find natural and authentic connections with; these relationships flourish with trust, comfort, and openness - students are able to gain support and are empowered to grow
External and Internal Influences Shaping Behavior
Mini Theme: Influences Shaping Youth Decision-making YES youth navigate multiple influences that inform their decisions and life trajectories. They must balance the pressure of negative peer influences against the positive encouragement from YES. There is also tension between YES and youths' parents, as sometimes what parents want differs from what YES envisions for youth and their journeys. YES works extensively with youth to guide and prepare their paths, but sometimes the loudest voice in the room wins, and that is not always YES.
Mini Theme: Self-Regulation and Personal Accountability YES teaches youth to regulate and manage their behaviors and actions, including the ability to delay gratification when necessary, save money, make wise choices, etc.
Evolving Relational System Dynamics
Mini Theme: Evolving and Responsive Relationship between YES and Youth Students' relationships with YES change and transition over time. It is important that YES continually renegotiates the terms of these relationships to avoid engaging in ways that youth no longer find useful or necessary.
Mini Theme: Navigating Parent and Student Dynamics during Developmental Transitions Youth are often vulnerable to adultification and expected to embrace adult responsibilities. As youth progress in their development or return home from college, their relationships with parents can become more contentious. They may need to renegotiate expectations and navigate being seen as less independent. Additionally, students often feel pressure to codeswitch within their families to adjust to this new dynamic.
Benefits and Challenges with YES' Support Model
Mini Theme: Informal communication channel as YES' responsiveness to youth needs YES becomes privy to critical youth information through informal channels that allow YES to respond to youth needs post-high school and assist them with redirection and guidance

Mini Theme: YES as a critical support system in moments of crisis YES plays a critical role in connecting with youth during moments of crisis, intervening as needed, and guiding them through challenges toward stability.
Mini Theme: Limitations of mirroring YES' support network across post-high school contexts YES' support network is expansive; the comprehensive, holistic, and individually tailored support structure YES provides is not extended to other contexts that youth navigate post-YES
Mini Theme: Over-extending YES' support program model YES' program support model is extremely important for gap filling for students, but can have unintended consequences for young people as they may not understand when to seek help and resource support and when to rely on their own innate capabilities and strengths
Access and Opportunity through Social Networks
Mini Theme: Social networking as an informal gateway to student access YES leverages their social networks and organizational connections to support students in getting where they want and in gaining access to resources, experiences, opportunities, and spaces that are not designed for them or may otherwise reject them
Threats to Black Youth Development
Mini Theme: Political Climate and its Impact on Black Youth Development The current political climate, along with the derailing of social systems and safety nets, poses significant threats to youth, affecting their development and access to future opportunities and resources
Understanding Self through Historical Lens
Mini Theme: YES Students' perceptions of themselves are often linked to their own historical and contextual understanding One's historical and societal understanding are critical for how youth perceive themselves and their adulthood journeys
Post-High School YES Engagement
Mini Theme: Returning to YES as a marker of success, a place of safety and support, and an opportunity to give back Alumni come back to YES not only as a symbol of their success but also as a trusted place of safety and ongoing support. This reflects YES's mentor-mentee return model, where alumni see the organization as a continued source of guidance, healing from life's challenges, and a meaningful opportunity to give back to the community that helped shape them.
Family-Centered Space of Safety and Belonging
Mini Theme: Honoring Youths' Humanity and Mattering through Safe Physical Spaces YES creates a physical space that is safe and secure for youth. Within this space, YES recognizes youth's wholeness and total humanity. Youth are able to experience childhood free from adultist expectations. YES supports youth holistically and reinforces the importance of their mattering.
Mini Theme: YES fosters a family-like atmosphere that nurtures students' sense of belonging and facilities community YES serves as a family context for many youth, where they feel seen, heard, valued, and cared for

Appendix G

Staff and Stakeholder Theme Alignment

Cluster Names and Mini Themes	Interview 1 Protocol Inclusion (Y/ N)	Interview 2 Protocol Inclusion (Y/N)	Interview 1 Question Number(s)	Interview 2 Question Number(s)	Interview 1 Added Questions	Interview 2 Added Questions
Tools for Resistance and Understanding Systems	N	N	-			
Mini Theme: Language Development as a Tool for Resisting Systems YES equips youth with the language needed to understand and challenge the systems they navigate as they approach adulthood. Beyond language development, YES strikes a balance between helping youth recognize their current realities and instilling hope, critical skills, and resources to empower them to create a chosen future rather than one prescribed to them	N	N	- Racialized experiences transitioning in	- Identity, story and representation Q1 & Q3		
Mini Theme: Youth visibility and skill showcasing YES supports youth in seeing themselves, recognizing their value, and creating opportunities to showcase their skills, leadership abilities, and currencies	N	Y	- Racialized experiences transitioning in	Impact on Opportunites - Q2		
Mini Theme: Narrators of their own stories as an act of resistance YES instills within students the value of seeing themselves and equips/ empowers them with the tools and agency to tell their own stories void of societal expectations and pressures	N	N	- Racialized experiences transitioning in	- Identity, story, and representation Q1 & Q2 &Q3		
Benefits and Affordances of Youth Research	N	N				
Mini Theme: Research as a tool to amplify youth voice Youth voice is central to the priorities at YES and are uplifted through student-led research projects where youth identify their own topics and leverage this mechanism to express what they find meaningful and important	N	N	- Perceptions of adulthood Q3 [1]	- N		
Mini Theme: Research as a mechanism for youth voice and agency YES facilitates research experiences that privilege youth voice and student agency	N	N	N	-N		
Mini Theme: Research as a navigational tool YES teaches and equips youth with essential research skills such as collecting and leveraging data, learning how to ask and craft questions, investigating claims, and documenting evidence as a way to challenge systemic inequities and structural barriers they experience as racialized individuals preparing for adulthood	N	N	- Racialized experiences transitioning in	- Opportunities, skills & tools Q2		
Mini Theme: Confidence to lead as change agents Youth leverage their confidence, voice, and power to lead the next generation of scholars as community change agents	N	N	- Racialized experiences transitioning in	- Learning and growth moments Q1 & closing Q3		
Mini Theme: Research as a tool for peer led social change YES builds the capacity and expertise of youth to uncover and investigate systemic forces contributing to social problems through technical and research skill building as a means of social change	N	N	-Racialized experiences transitioning Q-	- identity, story and representation Q2		
Mini Theme: Finding a voice through meaningful inquiry Students develop both an academic and personal voice by engaging in the investigative research process centered around meaningful inquiry connected to their lives and interests	N	N	-Personal Adulthood Journey Reflection	-Closing Q1		
Nurturing Internal Assets and Knowledge Building	N	N				
Mini Theme: YES nurtures students' curiosity and builds within them the importance of knowledge building and learning YES' programming helps to nurture students curiosity, invest in their knowledge banks, and water their thirst for more learning	N	N	- Personal adulthood journey reflections	Opportunities, skills & tools Q3 & 4		
Mini Theme: Curiosity as a youth skill Students embody a natural investigative and curious spirit	N	N	-Racialized Experiences Transitioning into Adulthood Q3			
Personal and Financial Empowerment	N	N				
Mini Theme: Financial independence as empowerment and agency YES intentionally creates opportunities for youth to earn financial compensation through their program engagement and contributions. Earning money for youth becomes liberating and empowering for youth. Beyond learning to manage money, they open bank accounts and begin developing their long-term financial literacy	N	N	N	- N		
Mini Theme: Ownership and agency YES develops within students a sense of ownership over their work, ideas, learning, and skill building that matters beyond the program cycle and helps to facilitate students' agency	N	Y	N	- Learning and growth moments Q1 & support & help-seeking Q8		Agency and Choice - Q1
Mini Theme: Agency as discovery YES facilitates space where youth have agency to guide their own discovery process	N	Y	- Perceptions of adulthood journey refle	- Identity, story, representation Q1		Agency and Choice - Q1
Professional Skill Building and Expanded Career Opportunities	N	N				
Mini Theme: Diverse career pathways and expanded view of opportunities YES' program experiences help students explore a wide range of experiences and opportunities and exposes them to diverse, expanded careers; YES must continue evolving and broaden their career pathways for diverse learners	N	N	- Conclusion Q1	- Opportunities, skills, and tools Q2		
Mini Theme: Learning to become a professional YES' summer learning experiences are unique and offer students in the moment learning opportunities, but what these spaces simultaneously do is prepare youth to become skilled and valuable employees who learn positive work habits and behaviors, understand the value of hard work and how that relates to their pay and quality products, and conscious and aware.	N	N	- Personal Adulthood Journey Reflectior	- Opportunities, skills, and tools Q2 & Q4		
Shifts in Motivational Factors	N	N				
Mini Theme: Moving from externally regulated to internally regulated motivation Students do not always understand why they are doing something; however, once they engage in the learning process they begin to see and develop confidence and intrinsic motivations centered around learning, thus further impacting their self-perceptions, self-beliefs, and self-efficacy	N	N	- N	- Learning and growth moments Q3		

Appendix H

Dissertation Interview 1 Script

Dissertation Interview 1 Script **November 2025**

Interview Preface:
Thank you again for volunteering to participate in my dissertation study. I am grateful, in advance, for your intellectual contributions. Before we begin, I'd like to share more about the purpose and goals of my study, what I hope to learn from our conversation, and what to expect as a participant.

My study aims to better understand how Black youth make sense of their developmental transitions into adulthood. Through our conversation, I hope to learn more about (1) how you conceptualize adulthood, (2) how you understand your own transition into adulthood, (3) how your experiences as a Black person may shape your adulthood journey, and (4) how you envision your future.

I am joining our conversation today as a researcher and not as a YES staff member or mentor. I hope that neither our personal relationship nor my position at YES limits what you choose to share. It is important to note that your responses will not affect your relationship with me or participation in YES. Given this, you are encouraged to respond openly and honestly, as there are no correct or incorrect answers. Parts of your story may appear in my dissertation; however, I will use a pseudonym to protect your confidentiality and ensure your ideas are not directly tied to you.

The interview will last approximately 60 - 90 minutes; please feel free to ask to pause, stop, or skip questions at any time. Please also feel free to ask for clarification when needed. Finally, I'd like to record this interview so that I can be present to talk with you without having to take notes. Do I have your approval to record? Great, let's begin our conversation.

Introduction:
I'd like to use the first section to gather general information about you.

1. Please state your name and age.
2. What is something currently bringing you joy?
3. What is one thing you are looking forward to right now?

Defining Adulthood:
In this section, I'd like to understand your perspective on what adulthood means. There are many ideas and definitions of adulthood; however, I am interested in how you personally think about it.

1. What does adulthood mean to you?
2. How has your definition of adulthood changed over time?
3. What do you think are the most important things someone needs to do or be to be considered an adult?
4. Who do you see as an adult in your life, and what qualities or characteristics do they have?

Pathways and Turning Points:
Now that I have a better understanding of how you view adulthood, I'd like to explore your journey since high school. This includes your experiences with education, work, skill-building, relationships, and major life decisions. I'm interested in how you see yourself and your life right now, as well as how your relationships and support systems have evolved as you have moved toward adulthood.

1. Tell me about your life since high school. What paths have you taken, and what moments stand out the most? *You might talk about things like continuing education, work, skill-building, or major milestones like living on your own, renting your first apartment, or purchasing property, among others.*
2. How would you define the stage of life you are currently in? Do you see yourself as an adult? Why or why not?
3. If you see yourself as an adult, when did you start to feel this way? If not, what else do you think you want to experience or navigate before you start seeing yourself as an adult?
4. Who and/or what has influenced major decisions or moments in your journey since high school? *(i.e., parents, friends, significant others, media).* What were those major decisions or moments?
5. What new roles or responsibilities have you taken on since high school?
6. How have your relationships changed as you entered into or transitioned toward adulthood, if at all? *(i.e., With Friends? Parents? Mentors?)*
7. How do you feel about where you are in life right now? What feels within your control, and what doesn't?

Racialized and Cultural Contexts:
As I mentioned previously, I am interested in how your experiences as a Black-identifying individual shape your transition into adulthood. In this section, I will ask you to think about your racial identity, broader racial dynamics in society, and to what extent your experiences as a Black person influence your adulthood journey.

1. What does being Black mean to you? Tell me a story about a time when you understood who you are as a Black person.
2. What kinds of challenges or opportunities have you encountered as a Black young adult?
3. In what ways does being a Black person in Pittsburgh shape your experience of being or becoming an adult, especially when it comes to opportunities, resources, or how you are perceived?
4. How does the broader Black American experience shape how you see yourself? How do you see your transition into adulthood?
5. How is the existing political climate - in terms of race, education, policing, or economic opportunity - impacting your adulthood journey as a Black person?

6. When does your identity as a Black person feel like a source of strength or pride on your journey to adulthood, and in what ways?

Future Vision and Advice:
As we wrap up, I'd like to ask you some final questions related to your plans for the future and any closing reflections on your journey into adulthood.

1. How do you envision your future, in terms of your hopes or plans for the next few years? In the longer term?
2. What does "living well" as an adult mean to you?
3. If you could give advice to someone younger about becoming or being an adult, what would you say?
4. Do you have any final thoughts or reflections you'd like to share?

Thank you again.

Appendix I

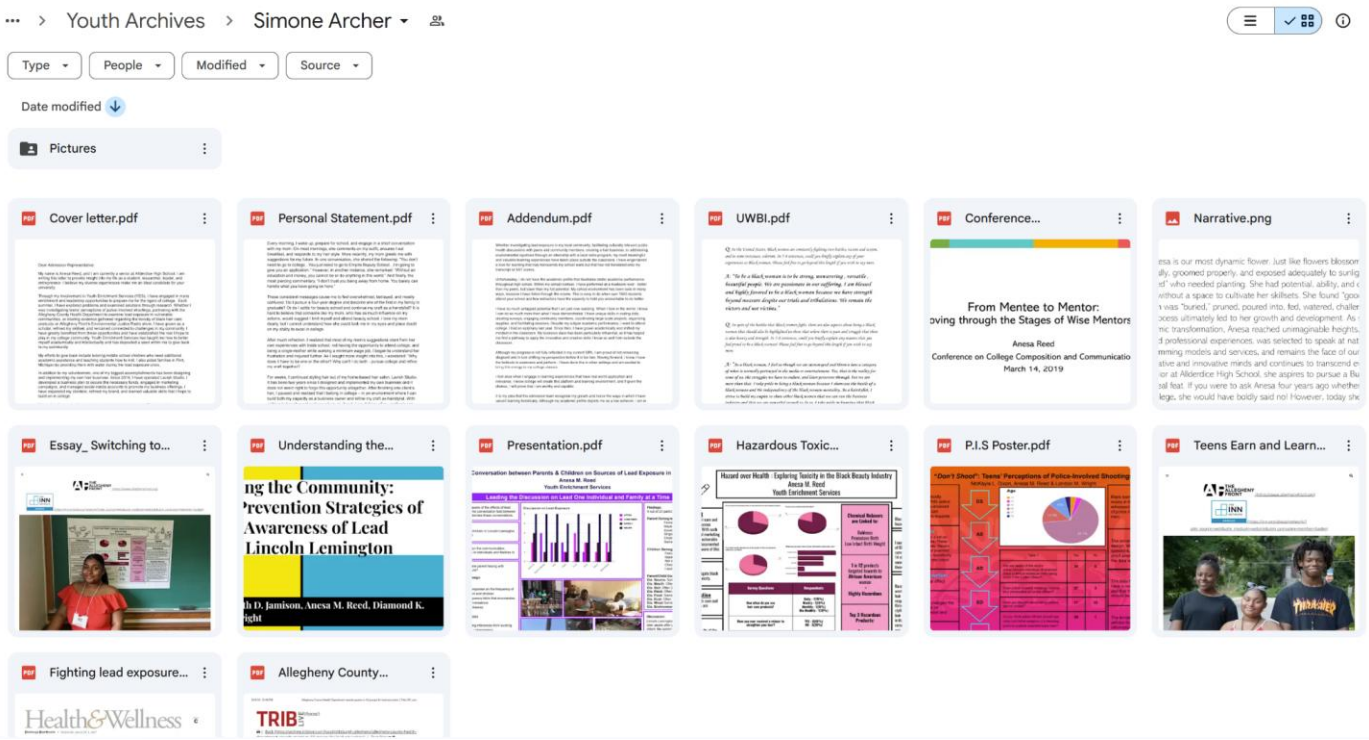
Youth Profile Example

YES Youth Profile		
SIMONE ARCHER		
Initial Year of Engagement	**Year:**	**2014**
Programs	**Year**	
Faith Ranch	2014 – 2019	
All About Me Program (Mentor)	2016	
Learn and Earn	2014 - 2019	
Female Empowerment and Wellness Initiative	2017 - 2019	
School Year Lead(Pb) Project	2017 - 2018	
School Year Tobacco Research Project	2018	
College and Career Preparation	2017 - 2019	
Alumni Support Program	2019 - 2021	

Services Received	**Services Received**	**Services Received**
Wellness Calls	Wellness Calls	Wellness Calls
Power Hour Tutoring	Social and Cultural Outings	School & Home Visits
Work Products		
Research Posters	Research Presentations	College Portfolio
Research Paper	Resume, Cover Letter, Addendum	Marketing Materials
Business Proposal	Survey Development	Oral Presentation
Events or Initiatives		
Research Symposiums		
Health Department Convenings		
30-Year Anniversary		
Learn and Earn Worksite		
South Fayette Exchange Day		
Conference on College Composition and Communication		

Appendix J

Artifact Elicitation Materials



Appendix K

Dissertation Interview 2 Script

Dissertation Interview 2 Script **November 2025**

Interview Preface:
Thank you again for your time last week - you have provided me with such rich and comprehensive insights. Our time spent together was extremely valuable and meaningful. I am excited to continue our discussion today and would like to prepare you again for the goals of our discussion, what I hope to learn, and what to expect as a participant.

As I mentioned previously, my study aims to better understand how Black youth navigate their developmental transitions from adolescence to adulthood, and how community-based youth-serving organizations such as YES help to support that developmental process. Through our conversation, I hope to take a few moments to reflect on interview 1 and learn more about your 1) engagement with YES, 2) your relationships and help-seeking practices within this context, 3) pursuit of opportunities, 4) building of skills and tools, and 5) identity development.

As a reminder, I am joining our conversation today as a researcher and not as a YES staff member or mentor. I hope you feel comfortable sharing openly and honestly, and that neither our personal relationship nor my position at YES limits your responses. Similarly, your insights from today will likely be highlighted in my dissertation, but, as stated previously, I will use a pseudonym to protect your confidentiality and ensure your ideas are not directly tied to you.

This interview will take approximately 60-90 minutes. As noted earlier, please feel free to pause, stop, or skip any question at any time. Please also feel free to ask any clarifying questions during our discussion. Finally, I'd like to record this interview so that I can be present to talk with you without having to take notes. Do I have your approval to record? Great, let's begin our conversation.

Introduction:
I'd like to use the first section to reflect on our conversation in Interview 1.

1. In reflecting on our first interview, is there anything on your mind that you'd like to share with me or discuss further?

We will now move into questions about your YES experience; to help facilitate our conversation, I'd like you to review your YES Youth Profile and program artifacts I shared last week. What initial thoughts, feelings, or ideas come up for you? (Allow youth to respond) We will continue exploring these documents in our discussion, so feel free to reference them at any time.

Initial Engagement and Early Expectations:
Let's now discuss your early involvement and participation in YES.

1. How did you first get involved with YES? What drew you in?
2. When you started attending YES, what were you hoping to gain from your involvement?
3. How did you decide which YES programs or activities to participate in at the beginning?
    a. Were there programs or activities you chose not to participate in? If so, why?

Motivation and Long-Term Engagement with YES:
Now that I have a better sense of your initial journey into YES, let's talk about your motivation for continuing and your continued engagement even post-high school.

1. Tell me about a memorable moment from YES? What made it stand out to you?
2. How long were you involved in YES? *(Consider your post-high school involvement, too)*
3. What motivated you to keep coming back to YES during high school and even after?
4. What did returning to YES after you graduated high school mean to you?
5. Can you describe your relationship with YES during high school? How, if at all, has it changed as you graduated from high school?

Relationships and Belonging:
I'd like to learn more about your relationships within YES and how you cultivated and sustained them over time.

1. What kinds of relationships did you develop at YES? (*For example, with other students, staff, or others?)*
2. How did these relationships form, and to what extent do you still rely on them as you transition into adulthood?
3. What does care mean to you, and how does it show up in your life?
4. Can you tell me about someone at YES who made you feel truly cared for, seen, or valued? Can you describe a specific moment when this happened?

Support and Help-Seeking:
In this section, I am interested in exploring your general help-seeking practices and how you have received and utilized support from YES.

1. How did YES support you during high school? How did that support continue or change after high school, and as you moved further into your post-high school journey?
2. In which parts of your life did you feel most supported by YES? Were there areas where you felt less supported?
3. How would you describe YES' role in your transition from high school to post-high school?
4. In general, how do you reach out for help when things get tough during your transition to adulthood?
5. Have you experienced times when you felt unsure about:
    a. Whether to ask for help or handle things on your own? Why or why not?
    b. Asking YES for help? Why or why not?
6. Do you feel that YES is still available to support you as you continue your transition into adulthood? Why or why not?
7. What are some ways YES could help students learn to balance asking for support with trusting themselves?

Opportunities, Skills, and Tools:
It is my hope that in this section, I will gain deeper insight into the skills and tools you have developed in YES, along with the opportunities you have pursued.

1. To what extent has YES opened up or shaped new opportunities or connections for you as you transitioned into adulthood?
2. How did YES influence your thinking about the kinds of jobs, careers, or opportunities you wanted to pursue?
3. What skills or tools did you develop through your involvement with YES? How have you used them since graduating high school?
4. Can you describe a skill or tool you did not expect to gain at YES but found especially valuable?

Learning and Growth Moments:
You have developed an extensive portfolio of work products at YES, as referenced by the sample artifacts. I would love to learn more about what you have produced and what you have learned.

1. Can you share a time at YES when you felt proud of something you created or worked on? What made that experience meaningful to you?
2. Tell me about a time at YES when you learned something that really excited or inspired you.
3. Have you ever done something at YES that you didn't want to do at first, but later grew to enjoy or appreciate? Can you describe that experience?

Identity, Story, and Representation:
As we approach this next section, I would like to better understand how you think about your identity and life story in relation to your current understandings of local and broader US contexts.

1. How have your experiences at YES shaped how you see yourself and your future?
2. In what ways has YES helped you reflect on your identity as a Black person? The social systems in Pittsburgh? The broader U.S. context?
3. How has YES influenced your understanding of stories or messages about who you are or about Black youths' transitions into adulthood?

Closing:
As we wrap up, I'd like to ask you some final questions related to reflections on your journey into adulthood.

1. Do you feel that what you want for your life aligns with what YES wants for you? What about your family and friends?
    a. If not, how have you navigated situations where YES, your family, or your friends wanted something different for your life than you did?
2. What lessons or values do you carry with you from your time at YES as you continue into adulthood?
3. Do you have any final thoughts or reflections you'd like to share?

Thank you again.

Appendix L

Archival Data

Raw Interviews

Curriculum

Program Brochures

Articles

Grants

Presentations

Assessments

Student Files

Media Files

Reports

Appendix M

Dissertation Codebook

Code Name	Description
Acts of Resistance	Any reference to practices or strategies that resist, challenge, or change dominant societal standards, cultural norms, or familal structures/ expectations
Adultification	Any reference to a youth who confronted the pressures, stresses, or responsibilities (financial, emotional, etc) of adulthood earlier than anticipated
Agency	Any reference to a youth's or other's self-directed decision making that contributes to their life or inability to make decisions based on constraints, systems, and structures
Characteristics of Adulthood	Any reference to characteristics youth use to describe adulthood traits
Condition / Wellbeing	Any reference to an individual's wellbeing, expected financial stability, relational and familial prospects, future living arrangements, happiness, and joy
Counterspace	Any reference to specific settings, systems, or environments (families, support/ natural networks, organizational entities, communities) that promote psychological well-being, belongingness, or resilience of individuals who experience oppression and marginalization
Counterstorytelling/ Counternarratives	Any reference to the use of storytelling or narratives to challenge dominant ideologies and expose systems of oppression
COVID	Any reference to the COVID-19 pandemic
Critical Care	Any reference to care that is enacted not just as emotion (empathy or compassion) but as values, dispositions, or behaviors that reflect one's commitment to justice, protection, and healing (i.e. systemic critique, advocacy, perseverance, calculated risk-taking)
Education	Any reference to a youth's educational status, institution, or schooling context
Employment / Workforce	Any reference to youths' current or future work or employment experiences or preparation for employment
Experience of Adulthood	Any reference to a youth's experience of adulthood
Gender	Any reference to a person's gender status or gendered experience
Identity Negotiation	Any reference to identity negotiation or how individuals or collectives give meaning to themselves, circumstances, and others through narratives
Important to Capture	Any reference to information that is important but may not be directly related to the study
Independence of Thought	Any reference to thinking independently or distancing one's thought process from others
Intra-Racial Discrimination	Any reference to discrimination within one's same racial group (i.e. colorism, hatred of others within group)
Linked Lives	Any reference to individuals living and engaging interdependently in the context of social networks and socio-historical factors/ influences; any reference to the ways that one's life is embedded in a large network of social relationships (i.e. parents, children, siblings, friends, colleagues, significant others, etc.)
Linked Lives - Family	Any reference to individuals living and engaging interdependently in the context of familal networks (i.e. parents, children, and siblings) and socio-historical factors/ influences
Linked Lives - Friends	Any reference to individuals living and engaging interdependently in the context of social networks and socio-historical factors/ influences; any reference to the ways that one's life is embedded in peer friendships
Linked Lives - Significant Others	Any reference to individuals living and engaging interdependently in the context of social networks (i.e. significant others) and socio-historical factors/ influences
Livelihood Strategy	Any reference to income strategies and support services used by young adults to ensure fulfillment of needs, specifically by: 1) augmenting existing social networks and familial provision and 2) providing key and missing resources which allow youth to transition successfully to adulthood (diversification, transformation, and last resort)
Marginalization	Any reference to social exclusion based on racial/ethnic or economic status or systemic ways individuals or communities are treated inferior to other groups
Narrative Identity Work	Any reference to challenging negative representations and notions concerning marginalized identities through written products, such as signs, blogs, and documents that highlight the YES program model, philosophy, mission, or vision or oral mantras or messages
Parenthood	Any reference to a youth's parenthood status and accompanying responsibilities
Perception of Adulthood	Any reference to a youth's perception of adulthood
Permanence of Race	Any reference to racism as an embedded and enduring feature of the U.S.
Program Strategy	Any reference to direct, indirect, and alternative strategies linked to formal or informal program processes at YES or other entities
Relational Transactions	Any reference to relationships, relationship building, social or relational support given to young people to overcome barriers or challenges
Self-Perception / Self-Worth	Any reference to a youth's perception of their own capacity to overcome/achieve or their sense of worth in relation to their identity and the world
Self-Reliance	Any reference to a youth's or other's reliance on self for resources, direction, or strength

Structural Racism	Any reference to practices within systems and structures designed to exploit individuals on the basis of race or harmful approaches that privilege one racial group, predominately White, while systemically disadvantaging others individuals by controlling social organizations
Substitution Function	Any reference to filling in gaps or operating like kin networks in the face of significant marginalization for youth
Support Structure	Any reference to human, material, financial, familal, or organizational support and resources provided to young people that helps one "get ahead," change one's opportunities for advancement, or helps one "get by" or cope
Systemic Inequities	Any reference to disparities in resources, opportunities, and outcomes within social, economic, and political systems, primarily affecting marginalized groups; these are not the result of individual prejudice but are rooted in institutional policies, historical contexts, and cultural norms that perpetuate disadvantage, leading to persistent differences in areas like wealth, education, healthcare, and housing
Time and/or Place	Any reference to a particular time (chrononlogical ordering of events or other) and/or place (physical or intangible location)
Transition	Any reference to entry points for new states or roles within trajectories that often come about due to gradual change linked to the acquisition or relinquishment of roles
Turning Point	Any reference to decisive moments at which significant change occurs; this may involve events, experiences, or awareness that result in redirected or detoured trajectories
Whiteness as Property	Any reference to whiteness as a form of access, privilege, and/or power
Racial Pride	Any reference to the celebration and appreciation of one's racial heritage and culture
Current Events	Any reference to the current political, technical, educational, economic, or environmental landscape
Respectability Practices	Any reference to members of marginalized communities adopting practices, behaviors, appearances, or values that align with the dominant culture's standards in hopes of acceptance, worthiness, or social mobility

Appendix N

Coding Memos

Coding Memo - Jasmine Jones - Interview 1

Section 1: Coder's Initial Thoughts, Perspectives, Reactions

In this section, reflect on initial thoughts, emotions, and reactions brewing from the initial read and coding process

- Respondent is keenly aware of the ways Blackness impacts them and their child, but is admirably committed to overcoming barriers, and cares deeply about the state of Black people.

Section 2: Early patterns or emerging ideas

In this section, write down patterns and ideas emerging from the coding process

- Value of community as it relates to feeling whole and serving others
- Condition and wellness impacted by community, namely safety in Black spaces and with the support of YES
- Parenthood as it relates to agency; parenthood being foremost in decision-making

Section 3: Connections to study

In this section, narrate how the interview is connecting to the study goals, objectives, and questions

- Respondent answers addressed some elements of the theoretical tenets of CRT, counterspace, and life course theories.
- Respondent shared the experiences, perceptions, and other related anecdotal and theoretical information around adulthood.

Coding Memo - Jasmine Jones - Interview 2

Section 1: Coder's Initial Thoughts, Perspectives, and Reactions

- In this section, reflect on initial thoughts, emotions, and reactions brewing from the initial read and coding process

Though self-reliance was not expanded upon greatly, reference was made to the respondent's family's lack of ability to adequately offer guidance. This appears to contribute to the YES program's value in the respondent's life, potentially as a substitute function.

Section 2: Early patterns or emerging ideas

- In this section, write down patterns and ideas emerging from the coding process

The predominant recurring theme is that the participant deeply values the program and is committed to contributing similarly to members of her community through her own nonprofit.

Related to this premise are the deep relational transactions and critical care received, which are described as even more substantial than the programming itself.

Section 3: Connections to study

- In this section, narrate how the interview is connecting to the study goals, objectives, and questions

Micro, macro, and meso theories all addressed in participant's responses.

Appendix O

Codes Across Research Question and Developmental Phase

Codes	**Time Period**	**Research Question 1 Connection** How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions to adulthood?	**Research Question 2 Connection** How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in shaping their developmental transitions to adulthood?
Turning Point	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's familial and external relationships facilitate critical turning point moments (changes in perceptions of self, academic capacity, parenting practices) -Jasmine's adoption of new roles creates new responsibilities and expectations, and impacts her adulthood perception	

Transition	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine believes embracing new roles is an indicator and marker of adulthood	
Systemic Inequities	Before YES	-Jasmine's mom's exposure to systemic inequities with her employment drew Jasmine to locate programs like YES to fill resource voids	
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine identifies systemic inequities within educational and employment contexts -Jasmine understands that she lives in a racialized society -Jasmine understands that opportunities are racialized, systematically structured, and selective in adulthood -Jasmine discusses how opportunities shape the developmental trajectories of her peers -Jasmine is aware that systemic inequities constrain opportunity structures in	

		adulthood	
Structural Racism	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's exposure to discriminatory practices as a result of structural racism shapes her language use, appearance, and performativity in adulthood -Jasmine understands that opportunities in adulthood are geographically situated and racially structured -Jasmine notes that employment challenges are a byproduct of structural racism -Jasmine understands that the current approach to addressing structural racism is a colorblindness that denounces racism and creates ill-treatment for Black people; this denial invisiblizes she and other Black people's experiences	
Time and Place	Before YES	-Jasmine's relocation created newfound insights and perspectives on resources, opportunities, and challenges for Black people	
	During YES	-Jasmine's experiences in P-20 educational settings foster her personal and professional development as she moves through adolescence and transitions into adulthood	
	After YES		

Marginalization	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's intellectual contributions are dismissed and discounted in academic settings post-high school -Jasmine's race and systems consciousness impacts her parenting practices in adulthood -Jasmine engages in protective parenting measures to avoid intergenerational marginalization	-YES created opportunities for Jasmine to partner with them in their responsiveness to educational inequities during COVID largely impacting the learning experiences of marginalized youth -Jasmine engaged in YES opportunities to support youths' learning experiences
COVID	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES		-YES is responsive to Jasmine's needs through programming and initiatives
Perception of Adulthood	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine sees adulthood as separating from parental practices and processes and creating personal independence -Jasmine sees adulthood as creating intellectual distance from parents -Jasmine understands her adulthood journey through motherhood -Jasmine's adulthood perceptions are	

		shaped by external forces -Jasmine believes that adulthood is time-bound -Jasmine understands that healing, restoration, and self-improvement are critical aspects of adulthood	
Experience of Adulthood	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine relies on herself to navigate challenges and circumstances in adulthood -Jasmine's relational changes are a natural part of her adulthood journey -Relationship development is challenging for Jasmine in adulthood -Jasmine sees role enactment, role balancing, and responsibility fulfillment as core adulthood features -Jasmine's new roles are a jumpstart to her adulthood journey -Jasmine's adulthood experience is about caring selflessly for others	
Employment	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-External forces and Jasmine's racial identity shape her career decision-making and professional interests in adulthood -Jasmine aspires for meaningful and	

		intentionally crafted employment that is linked to purpose and internal attributes in adulthood	
Education	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine believes access to advanced education will change her social and material conditions in adulthood -Jasmine's college context provides entry into adulthood with built-in scaffolds and supports	-Jasmine's exposure to mentorship and advocacy support through YES helped to shift her educational possibilities, experiences, and resources -Exposure to YES professionals influenced Jasmine's academic self-concept
Permanence of Race	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's racial consciousness and constant racial reminders reflect the racialized systems she has to navigate in adulthood -Jasmine's workplace challenges point to the negative and historical impact of racism -Jasmine has an understanding of the long-lasting nature of racism in US systems	
Whiteness as	Before YES		

Property	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine understands that access to education is a vehicle to social mobility in adulthood -Jasmine recognizes that Whiteness shapes her livelihood and access to employment and resources in adulthood	
Gender	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine sees her racial identity as more salient than her gender identity in adulthood -Jasmine sees her status as a Black woman as isolating in academic spaces	
Self-perception	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Exposure to external influences in adulthood shape Jasmine's view of self	-YES has nurtured and affirmed Jasmine's intellectual capabilities and influenced her self-perception and desire to further her education -Jasmine changed her self-perception once she began engaging with YES professionals and students post-high school
Parenthood	Before YES		

	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's adulthood status began as she became a mother -Jasmine's parenting is an on-ramp into adulthood -Jasmine is dually navigating parenthood alongside adulthood transition -Jasmine's agency as a parent in adulthood is both restrictive and unrestrictive -Jasmine's reimagining her own parenting practices to be vastly different than her parents as she navigates adulthood -Jasmine struggles to balance her parenthood tasks with her other adulthood responsibilities	
Self-reliance	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine relies on herself for strength, decision-making, navigational support, and resource attainment during adulthood -Jasmine sees adulthood is about responsibility and accountability	
Linked Lives	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's parental responsibilities shift as	-Jasmine's degree pursuit and degree

		she transitions to adulthood -Jasmine determines her relational proximity in adulthood -Jasmine's son influences her adulthood decision-making -Jasmine is navigating dependency within her parent-child dynamics -Jasmine still relies on her parents for her basic needs and guidance in adulthood	attainment is largely influenced by YES' post-secondary involvement
Agency	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's racial identity influences her choice-making in adulthood -Jasmine's agency changes as she shifts from adolescence to adulthood -Jasmine's adulthood transition brought about more intentional choice-making about schooling, children, and resources	
Counterspaces	Before YES		
	During YES		-Jasmine found belongingness and feelings of home at YES -Jasmine sees YES as a supportive space for her growth and development
	After YES		-Jasmine sees YES as a place for peer and adult mentor connection during her adulthood transition -YES serves as a reminder of Jasmine's identity, purpose, and internal strength

			throughout her adulthood transition -Jasmine developed research skills to address systemic inequities -YES supports Jasmine through her post-secondary transition
Characteristics of Adulthood	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine sees help-seeking as an important skill for her adulthood navigation -Jasmine sees self-sufficiency and independence as important adulthood characteristics -Jasmine manages her time, behavioral response, and responsibilities in adulthood	
Racial Pride	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine sees her racial identity as life-giving -Jasmine places her Blackness above everything in her adulthood journey -Jasmine sees Blackness as a source of pride and purpose along her adulthood journey	
Current Events	Before YES		
	During YES		

	After YES	-The current economic barriers further exacerbate Jasmine's adverse employment conditions, and seeking -Jasmine is aware of how the current economic landscape is shaping her opportunities in adulthood	
Support Structure	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine's parental support structure shifts during her adulthood transition -Jasmine needs change during her adulthood transition -Jasmine's parents continue to provide financial support in college but are less present	-YES provides Jasmine with tailored and holistic support post-high school
Program Strategy	Before YES		
	During YES		-Jasmine suggests that YES is a place of refuge, belonging, and safety, as she experienced marginalization and resource voids -YES provides Jasmine with critical developmental support
	After YES		-YES creates exposure and programming opportunities that are useful to Jasmine in her adulthood journey -YES challenged systems, advocated for Jasmine's college needs, and

			augmented her trajectory with important resources -YES' expectations of Jasmine help her thrive to achieve greater
Narrative Identity Work	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES		-YES shaped Jasmine's beliefs about her educational possibilities -YES helped Jasmine redefine her possibilities -YES provided Jasmine with messages about Black livingness and thriving -Jasmine developed research skills from YES to challenge conventional narratives and representations of marginalized individuals
Acts of Resistance	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES		-Jasmine pursuit of advanced education helped to redefine her possibilities -Jasmine's exposure to financial empowerment practices helped to break financial chains and liberate her from her family's poor management practices -Jasmine leveraged research as a critical awareness tool to break cycles and challenge systemic inequities -Jasmine enacts her Blackness

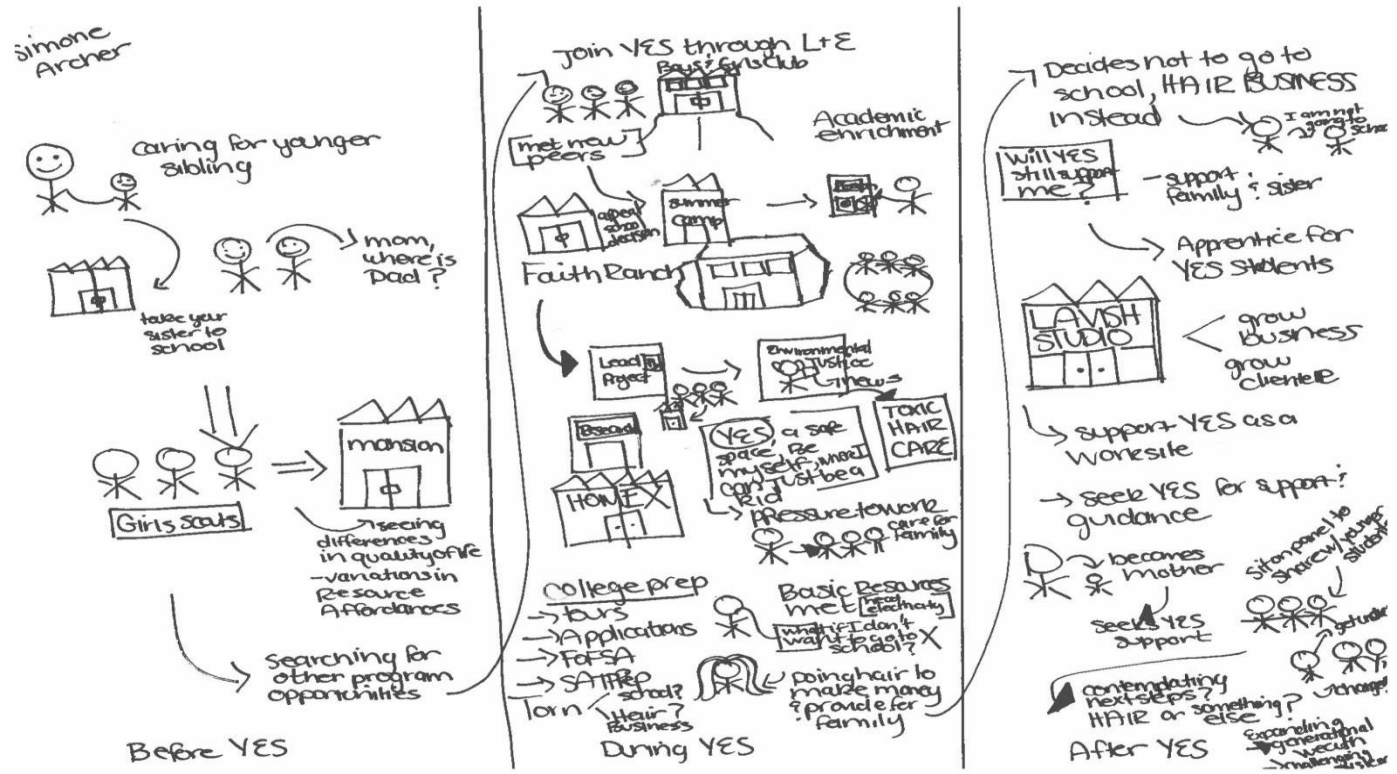
			unashamedly -Jasmine distances herself from her parents' practices and is on a healing journey to disband intergenerational trauma
Critical Care	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine understands accountability in adulthood as care -Jasmine has a deeply rooted commitment to improving communities, addressing inequities, and giving back her time and financial resources in her adulthood journey -Jasmine's protective parenting practices illustrate her care system	YES demonstrated care for Jasmine through advocacy and willingness to support her in pursuing her post-secondary desires
Relational Transactions	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine relational needs and dynamics changed from adolescence to adulthood -Jasmine's parents show up differently as she moves further into her adulthood journey	-YES staff provided Jasmine with identity reinforcement, possibility redefinement, and self-belief empowerment -YES was intentional and targeted in their support of Jasmine's development
Independence	Before YES		

of Thought	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine redefined her value system in adulthood -Jasmine separated from her parents' thinking and perspectives to form her own thoughts -Jasmine is unlearning, shedding unhelpful practices, and adopting healthier approaches in her adulthood transition	
Important to Capture	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Media influences shape how Jasmine perceives adulthood and herself	
Condition/ Well-being	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine recognizes she her progress but as well as her need to continue developing as she moves through adulthood -Jasmine desires to gain meaningful employment in adulthood -Jasmine desires to improve her quality of life and find a better rhythm and cadence in adulthood -Jasmine experiences joy in Black curated spaces in her adulthood journey -Jasmine's joy of learning and pursuing	

		education is apparent in her adulthood journey	
Livelihood Strategy	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES	-Jasmine sees resource navigation as an adulthood skill -Jasmine fills her resource gaps with external resource support in adulthood	
Paying it Forward	Before YES		
	During YES		
	After YES		-YES has helped Jasmine cultivate a desire to give back her time and resources to vulnerable communities negatively impacted by systemic inequities -Jasmine wants to support organizations like YES that have facilitated her developmental growth -Jasmine finds that paying it forward at YES gives her a sense of purpose and direction

Appendix P

Developmental Sketch



Appendix Q

Sage A_Interview: Theory Alignment

Critical Race Theory	
To what extent are the tenets of CRT present in the youth's narrative?	All Tenets Present Permanence of Race Whiteness as Property Counterstorytelling/Counternarratives
Overarching Question: How does this youth understand their racialized experiences (systemically, interpersonally, relationally)?	
Sage understands racialized experiences systematically, interpersonally, and relationally, and has an extensive academic understanding of race; he is pursuing a doctorate in Africana Studies.	
Theoretical Tenet	**Evidence of Theoretical Tenet**
Permanence of Race	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Extensive Evidence
How does the permanence of race tenet show up in this youth's developmental narrative?	

Sage has clear, research- based examples of anti-Black racism throughout history and understands its impact on his life. He sees much of the world through the lens of equality or lack thereof. In the “Africana Studies Department, you realize that there is nothing new under the sun. The same things that we're experiencing is, for example, like in freaking Britain in the 1970s and 80s, when Margaret Thatcher became president, there was all these right-wing political ideologies being professed there.” He likens this to current-day rhetoric and its negative impact on funding for programs about which he cares and is a part. Sage recognizes the indicators and dog whistles in politics and in his interpersonal interactions. …” the same thing that happened with Haiti when Haiti became the first Black sovereign nation. White people were terrified of, like, we can't let Black people know about this because if they – if and when they found out, there's going to be a mentality shift. They're completely undergirding the institution of slavery, which built America.”
How does this youth narrate their experiences with the permanence of race?
Sage speaks about race from a largely philosophical lens, rather than sharing multiple personal experiences. But, because Sage recognizes the permanence of race in society (“It may look new, it may feel new, but so many of our ancestors and elders have also had to navigate the terrain”), he mentions that he tries to look for “some source of inspiration” whenever possible. He also focuses on his pride. Pursuing a PhD in Africana Studies, embracing Black culture, including “music… clothing, food.” Sage recognizes that “even in spaces where sometimes my Blackness isn't valued, it doesn't make it any less valuable.”
How does structural racism inform this youth’s transition to adulthood? What are the specific practices within systems and structures influencing this youth’s trajectory?
Structural racism informed Sage’s transition to adulthood because he has been impacted by segregation and marginalization in housing and education since childhood. His neighborhood growing up was segregated. In higher ed, he attended a PWI where he constantly encountered the “preconceived notions that people have of you because you are Black.” Even his professors “don't have this understanding of Blackness or knowing how to interact or engage with students who are Black.”

Theoretical Tenet	**Evidence of Theoretical Tenet**
Whiteness as Property	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Sufficient Evidence
How does whiteness as property show up in this youth's developmental account?	
As an undergraduate student, he saw "people being called racial slurs… found out there was like an active, like KKK chapter" in the area, which he had to navigate while focusing on his academic pursuits. "For Black students, it was a joke that don't go to Walmart after a certain time by yourself, which is just terrifying."	
In what ways has whiteness structured, informed, and impacted this youth's transition to adulthood (i.e., employment, education, home ownership; think about credentials, access, power structures, etc.)?	
His area of study is in a department that is often the subject of negative conversation. His educational endeavors and future employment plans often feel in jeopardy because the department can experience substantial reductions in funding due to this rhetoric.	
How does a youth respond to/ cope with the idea that whiteness is the prevailing and dominant social structure and primary mechanism of access, privilege, and power (assimilative/respectability practices, etc.)?	
He responds through education and learning more and more about his identity as a source of information and pride. He also copes by embedding himself in the culture and building community. "That's something that helps me a lot is just learning the history and also surrounding yourself with other Black people, I think, is a huge, huge part of it… When someone understands you, understands your experiences, that's important."	
Theoretical Tenet	**Evidence of Theoretical Tenet**
Counterstorytelling/Counternarratives	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet

	in the youth's narrative? Sufficient Evidence
What is this youth's counterstory/counternarrative?	
His counterstory is being a present father despite the dominant idea that Black fathers are not present.	
What counterstories/counternarratives does this youth reference in their developmental narrative?	
Sage references media "doing a really, really good job at painting this narrative that Black fathers are absent and disengaged from the family, and so challenging that by surrounding myself with other Black men who are fathers and learning from them, I think that's super important for me now because, like I said, the bar is so low for Black fathers. So just that's been helpful, just seeing other Black men, their relationship with their family and their children, and just trying to emulate that and implement some of their principles into my daily life has been helpful for my transition into adulthood."	
How does this youth use counterstorytelling to expose, analyze, and challenge dominant societal narratives?	
When he applied his academic lens to the history of his own counterstory, he discovered the ways media created "this narrative of Black households and the absence of the Black father and how that really played into the whole development of that narrative in the 1970s and onward."	
Counterspaces Framework	
To what extent are the tenets of the Counterspaces Framework present in the youth's narrative?	Select Option Counterspace Critical Care Narrative Identity Work

	Identity Negotiation Acts of Resistance Relational Transactions Program Strategy Support Strategy Livelihood Strategies Paying-it-forward
Overarching Question: How does YES operate as a counterspace for this youth's transition to adulthood?	
YES offered Sage a network of support and guidance that enabled him to pursue an advanced degree and have a group of like-minded friends and mentors. "YES has just helped me. I guess some of the stories I hear about people who come from the communities that we come from. You don't typically hear or see messages regarding people going to college, again, PhDs or whatever the case may be. So just understanding that there's opportunities outside of what had been presented to me throughout my entire life, I think it's just the main thing, honestly."	
Overarching Question: How does this youth narrate the critical care they received from YES?	
He was offered customized advice and programming right when he joined YES and he was always encouraged by YES staff to strive for greatness. "Right off the bat, coming in and just there was a lot of like, oh wait, you're doing this, you're doing this, you're doing this. No, you got to shoot for the stars. You're selling yourself short." He also felt mentored and emotionally cared for because with YES staff he has "the space to open up and talk about some of the things I'm experiencing and if I need help with something to be a helping hand in that regard."	
Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Narrative Identity Work	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Sufficient Evidence
What narratives, symbols, written products, or oral/silent messages does this youth receive from YES? How do these	

influence their developmental trajectories?	
YES staff remind him to aim higher and remind him that he's capable of greatness. This led to him pursuing an advanced degree, which he describes as uncommon in his family and community.	
To what extent does this youth negotiate their identities in their transitions to adulthood?	
Sage gives meaning to his identity by considering who he wants to be as a father: "But I also think having a son is changing a lot of the ways in which I want to go about that because I don't want my own son to grow up feeling as if he can't ask for help or can't be vulnerable or express how he feels. Knowing that he's going to emulate what he sees in me, just making sure that I'm the man that I want him to be."	
What identities are the youth negotiating, if any, during their transitions to adulthood? In what settings/ environments is the youth negotiating their identities?	
In academic and familial settings, he's negotiating being a Black man and being a father, respectively.	
Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Acts of Resistance	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Sufficient Evidence
What acts of resistance are present in the youth's narration of their developmental experiences?	
Sage thinks deeply about mental health among Black men, and is interested in "deconstructing the mindset around health" and dismantling the notion that asking for help indicates weakness.	

How does this youth leverage these acts of resistance?
He and two friends from YES, Keith and Selena, started a podcast called Deconstructing Male Fragility in order to interrogate “some of the ways in which patriarchy informs sexism and just informs some of the ways in which we think, and some of the ways in which we view the world and wanting to deconstruct some of those narratives. We started a podcast where we would bring a Black woman on set every episode, and we would discuss a piece of media that helped them identify with their Black womanhood.”
What dominant standards, cultural norms, or familial structures/expectations is this youth resisting, challenging, or seeking to change? And why?
He is resisting the notion that requesting assistance is an indicator of weakness, and he is resisting the patriarchy more broadly.

Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Relational Transactions	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth’s narrative? Sufficient Evidence

What YES relationships does this youth mention in their narratives? What roles do these individuals play in their development (social support, relational guidance, organic mentorship)? To what extent does this youth describe the relational assets in YES?
- Allen - Nash - True

- Keith and Selena started a podcast with him. Keith introduced Sage to YES and was mentioned several times.
- “There's a lot of people who I've met at YES who I did not know beforehand, who now are still central to my life, I still communicate with. A lot of the staff at YES throughout when I would come back during my college years. There'll be a lot of similar faces that I've seen, so I've developed a lot of mentors in that space. I've connected with stakeholders more as a worker, so post graduating college, just connecting with some of the board members and stuff like that.

- Eric- tech support for podcast

- Miss Denise “A lot of it was seeing you, I guess. I spoke to it a little bit in the first interview we had, but just how our lives weirdly just mirror each other's in this weird way. I don't know how to explain it. Still trying to make sense of it, but I think seeing you at YES and working under you and you just mentoring me through the years, I think just gave me a blueprint on some things that were possible that I didn't consider beforehand. That to me is one of the most important things that I can – that I take from YES is just being able to work under someone who I want to emulate in a sense.”

- Dr. Jones “... seeing how he navigates being this Black man who has this nonprofit business that is tailored for Black youth and the challenges that come with that, and seeing the ways in which he has to navigate those challenges. I think it's just important to find those models of Black men and Black women in Pittsburgh that can just help you kind of shape your approach to it. I've been lucky to have a lot of people in my corner in that regard.”

- Ms. Lori He used to share “some things that are going on in my life and what I'm thinking about and what I want to do and goals that I have.”

How do kinship networks in YES show up in this youth’s narrative?

From launching the podcast to having in-depth conversations or getting advice, Sage has a solid kinship network through YES.

How is YES operating as a substitution function for this youth’s transition to adulthood?

YES offered Sage guidance through all of his adulthood transitions. “We always say YES, it's like a home away from home.“
How does this youth narrate the change, if any, in their relationship with YES during their transition to adulthood? In what ways does the youth see opportunities for reciprocity in the YES context?
One way his relationship with the organization changed is that he now works at YES. He’s interested in paying it forward at YES and the community. “...I can be still involved in the community… I think is a huge thing for me… I'm seeing more the importance of engaging with your community, engaging in some type of communal work. I think a benefit with me right now in working with the YES board is that some people are retired on the board. And one thing I hear is that once they retire, there was this passion to immerse themselves back in their community and to give back in some way, shape, or form, and so I think that could look a million different ways. It doesn't have to be volunteering or whatever the case may be. I think it could look however you want it to look, but I do think there's an element of realizing the role that adults have played in your life, and then also giving that back in some way, shape, or form. So, just some type of engagement with your wider community. That could be at church, it could be through sports, it could be through community organizing.“ He values being able to work for YES, and credits YES staff with his academic achievements. Being responsible for planning and co-facilitating YES Writers helped him recognize that there was an elevated level of trust in him and his competency. He is trusted to guide students as he was once guided. “... it also felt good to be in a position where you and YES trusted me to run this particular program…Now, I'm shifting into a mentor-type role. When some of these – when some of the high school students, they come up to me and they're sharing things… it gives me the feeling of how I felt coming to the office as a high school student, seeing something like the Ms. Loris and stuff that and talking with them and just sharing about some things that are going on in my life and what I'm thinking about and what I want to do and goals that I have.” Sage always worked at YES over the summer during undergrad years and never considered otherwise. “...it was just always important to go and get some of those experiences, make some connections, but also do it in a place that you view as family and community.”

Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Opportunity Cultivation and Resource Utilization	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet

	in the youth's narrative? Extensive Evidence
What program opportunities or resources is YES providing to this youth throughout their developmental transitions?	
Harlem trip help with the college process summer program research projects partnering with Pitt with the health department going to Flint (unclear whether he participated) learn and earn program.	
In what ways does this youth rely on YES post-high school (**Last resort** - sustenance/necessities, **diversification** - YES and other resources, **transformation** - looking to YES to reconstruct constrained opportunity spaces)?	
Transformation	

What resources and supports does this youth utilize from YES during their adulthood transitions?
Sage turns to YES staff for advice, especially when presented with big life choices, like whether to relocate to North Carolina as a Teach for America teacher. He still feels supported, but is impacted by physical distance, since he wasn't in Pittsburgh during or after college. But during college, he benefitted from research opportunities and other resources at YES.

Life Course Theory

To what extent are the tenets of Life Course Theory present in the youth's narrative?	Select Option Characteristics of Adulthood Perception of Adulthood Time and/or Place Agency Linked Lives (Linked Lives - Significant, Linked Lives - Family, Linked Lives - Friends) Transition Turning Point Employment Education Condition/ Wellbeing Self-Perception/ Self-worth Parenthood Gender Systemic Inequities Marginalization
Overarching Question: How does this youth perceive and experience their adulthood transition?	
Sage describes his adult life as "scattered" because it is ever-changing and involves some uncertainty. "I think I'm still in	

some type of transition. I don't know where I'm transitioning to. I don't know what I'm transitioning from, but I feel like things are moving so fast that sometimes I don't have the time to just sit down and think and reflect on what's going on, but I know that things are constantly evolving, constantly changing." This is exacerbated by becoming a parent so soon after completing his undergraduate studies, because he couldn't focus on himself the same way. "I feel very much conflicted being in a PhD program, because it's like, you're in a PhD program, and people think that you have it figured out because you're in a PhD program, [because] perception-wise…this guy has it figured out. He's a dad, he's in a PhD program. He's working… But it's like, I'm literally, like, falling apart."	
Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Time and Place	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Sufficient Evidence
What are the major times and places emphasized in this youth's narrative? How do they influence this youth's trajectory?	
Allegheny College 2018 North Carolina, teaching University of Pittsburgh PhD program in Africana Studies	
Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Timing	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Some Evidence
How does this youth think about time during their transition to adulthood?	

Entering parenthood right after completing college is the primary reference to timing in this interview.	
Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Agency	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Sufficient Evidence
What is the youth's experience with agency? To what extent does this youth have agency in adulthood (bounded agency, unrestricted agency, semi-constrained)?	
Semi- constrained by parenthood.	
Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Lifespan Development	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Extensive Evidence
How is this youth's circumstances in adulthood shaped by earlier experiences and their attached meanings?	
As a child, his dad encouraged him to figure things out for himself, which led to his current struggle with skiing for help. "Dad was just a figure it out and not in a bad way, not that I couldn't go and ask my parents for help, but it was very much instilled in me to make sure that I can handle things on my own." He views this as part of the patriarchal thinking that he seeks to dismantle. "... but now transitioning into adulthood, you realize…sometimes you really do need to ask some people for help because, call them expensive mistakes and not expensive in terms of monetary value… when you make a mistake in adulthood, it can really set you back a lot in a lot of different ways.	

Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Linked Lives	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth's narrative? Select Option
How is the youth's developmental trajectory shaped by their family, friends, schools, work, and other social institutions?	
Family- - Instilled harmful self-reliance in a way that Sage is now trying to undo - Extended family was very helpful with his kids and with helping him relocate. - "Sometimes it feels like a disconnect because… I'm a first gen student, so there's not that connection in that regard. Yeah, they're just happy that I'm doing what I want to do, doing something I don't want to do, and excelling in it, whatever that looks like." - Grandfather and uncle are especially helpful in offering guidance Friends- He has deep and meaningful friendships He and his best friend participated in YES together and attended college together. Work-. "I received a lot of support around not just teaching, but also, like when I had my first child, they had a baby shower for me after school, so just like small stuff like that, were just showing me what community actually was. I think that was important for me to learn in coming into different spaces that I want to navigate throughout adulthood…being immersed in that community made it so much easier. There was something that I needed – my car needed fixed; someone knew this person who I can go to, or just small stuff like that where it was just you gain access to some of these resources by virtue of just being in community with these people and noticing the benefits. Not only are you gaining things, but you're also giving. I'm sharing my experiences with the students; I'm building connections. I think it was just that give and take of the community that was just an experience that was good for me."	
What roles does this youth take on, and how do they influence their adulthood trajectory?	

Uncle

Teacher

PhD student

Parent of two - His adulthood experience started with his parenting experience. He did not have time after college to experience single adulthood with less constrained agency

“I had my first child right after completing undergraduate school. So I feel like my idea and perception of adulthood has been completely intertwined with also fatherhood …the pressures with parenthood combined with everything else. It's challenging. Yeah, like, it's super challenging.”

What systemic inequities does this youth experience during their developmental trajectories?

- He lived in a fully segregated community.
- His school was not offering adequate information about college. “I wasn't being pushed in that way and my high school was just like, okay, yeah, apply to college. Here's a little letter of recommendation and here you go… Like I say, YES became this place where it was filling the gaps in my own education that I was getting at the time. I knew that going back there, I was going to gain experiences that I would eventually take back to school the next year or even set me up for where I am today.”

Theory/ Tenet	**Evidence of Theory/ Tenet**
Turning Points	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth’s narrative? Extensive Evidence
Transitions	To what extent does evidence exist for this theoretical tenet in the youth’s narrative?

	Extensive Evidence
What are the turning points highlighted in this youth's developmental trajectory?	
- Joining YES - Becoming a parent	
What are the transition moments identified in this youth's developmental trajectory?	
- Attending Allegheny College - Becoming a parent of two kids - Relocating to Greensboro, North Carolina - Being a fifth grade science and math teacher. - Entering PhD program - Launching a podcast "It helped me think about some of the things I thought to be true and how I came to believe certain things. I think for me personally, because Keith was already engaged in some of that work, so from – and Selena was also already just hip to some of that stuff. So for me, it was a lot of oh, a lot of reframing I had to do, and a lot of the conversations and topics that we talked about really challenged me in ways that I did not think would be the case. Especially at that age and during that time, it was just helpful for me to be in a space where some of my ideas were being challenged. I had to hold myself accountable because I'm talking on a mic and the stuff was going out."	

Appendix R

Theory Mapping Narrative Template

Critical Race Theory

Understanding of racialized experiences

Sage is a dark-skinned Black man who has been subjected to anti-Black racism and colorism since his primary schooling experiences. His early navigation of his racial identity and complexion, and his new role as a Black father, inform how he currently understands his racialized experiences in adulthood. While many of his racialized experiences are deeply interpersonal and relational, Sage has a firm systemic understanding of his racialized experiences. His doctoral work in Africana Studies gives him a platform to further understand and investigate his racialized experiences philosophically and intellectually. These affordances add nuance and complexity to his overall understanding.

Permanence of Race

Sage articulates research examples of anti-Black racism throughout history and narrates its impact on his developmental trajectory and doctoral work. The current weaponization of race in higher education directly impacts the stability and direction of his Africana studies program. Sage does not see the current undermining of his academic discipline as surprising or new, but rather familiar and similar to former practices. He notes, “In the Africana Studies Department, you realize that there is nothing new under the sun. The same things that we're experiencing is, for example, like in freaking Britain in the 1970s and 80s, when Margaret Thatcher became president, there was all these right wing political ideologies being professed there.” He likens this to current day rhetoric and its negative impact on funding for programs about which he cares and is a part. Beyond this historical example, Sage demystifyies racial progress as he articulates, “It may look new, it may feel new, but so many of our ancestors and elders have also had to navigate the terrain.” Furthermore, Sage recognizes the indicators and dog whistles in politics and in his interpersonal interactions that lead to his deep understanding of the permanency of race. He extends his understanding of this concept outside of the US context when he states, …” the same thing that happened with Haiti when Haiti became the first Black sovereign nation.

White people were terrified of like, we can't let Black people know about this because if they – if and when they found out, there's going to be a mentality shift. They're completely undergirding the institution of slavery, which built America." Sage narrates more direct examples of the permanence of race and structural racism in his transition to adulthood as he reflects on his segregated and marginalized housing and secondary and post-secondary schooling experiences. He specifically references encounters with "preconceived notions that people have of you because you are Black." Sage notes that even his professors "don't have an understanding of Blackness or know how to interact or engage with students who are Black."

Whiteness as Property

Sage narrates several instances where whiteness as property influences his developmental trajectory. Sage reflects on his inability to navigate similar spaces as his white peers in college due to an active KKK chapter in the community and safety concerns regarding his exposure to racial slurs and racial terror if traveling after specified times. He is not afforded similar access to spaces that his white peers can freely enjoy in their college experience, such as store runs to Walmart, for example. He also experiences epistemic injustice as a form of whiteness as property. The validity and legitimacy of his Africana studies doctoral degree are questioned and challenged, given its connection to race. His academic discourse and research program are troubled by those who deem them unacceptable or lacking merit. Given the department's and field's subjection to epistemic oppression, Sage narrates how unstable and uncertain his future plans in academia are, given the volatile funding climate and higher ed staffing reductions. Sage copes with this reality by learning more and uplifting his identity as a source of pride and value. He embeds himself in culture and community building irrespective of others' views of his program - he notes that engaging in such activities is: "something that helps me a lot is just learning the history and also surrounding [my]self with other Black people, I think, is a huge, huge part of it… When someone understands you, understands your experiences, that's important."

Counterstorytelling/ Counternarrative

Sage references his own counterstory and those of others. Sage actively rejects the negative societal narratives and perspectives on Black fathers. Despite the dominant messaging about absent Black fathers, Sage counteracts this notion with being present and active in his children's lives. He engages in practices that build his fatherhood toolkit and keep him equipped to show up as his best and most authentic self.

Sage alludes to the media "doing a really, really good job at painting this narrative that Black fathers are absent and disengaged from the family and so challenging that by surrounding myself with other Black men who are fathers and learning from them I think that's super important for me now because, like I said, the bar is so low for Black

fathers. So just that's been helpful, just seeing other Black men, their relationship with their family and their children, and just trying to emulate that and implement some of their principles into my daily life has been helpful for my transition into adulthood."

When he applies his academic lens to the history of his own counterstory, he discovers the ways media created "this narrative of Black households and the absence of the Black father and how that really played into the whole development of that narrative in the 1970s and onward."

Counterspaces Framework

Function of Counterspace

Sage narrates YES' role as a counterspace in his developmental transition. He notes that YES created a loving and nurturing space that cultivated his potential. Sage describes YES as a place that challenged his self-beliefs, redefined his educational possibilities, and pushed him beyond his known capacities. Sage expresses the importance of his relational network YES of like-minded friends and mentors from which he could gain encouragement and draw inspiration. Sage notes that YES introduced him to a welcoming environment that allowed him to feel a sense of belonging and care. Sage further notes that YES offered him support, guidance, and opportunities that enabled his current pursuit of an advanced degree.

Critical Care

Sage reflects on the care he received from YES through individualized support and tailored mentorship and guidance. Sage notes that YES' immediate responsiveness to his needs illustrated their sincere commitment to and care for his success. He expresses this here, "Right off the bat, coming in and just there was a lot of like, oh wait, you're doing this, you're doing this, you're doing this. No, you got to shoot for the stars. You're selling yourself short." Sage describes being initially frustrated by how YES challenged his ideas and perspectives about his future but came to deeply appreciate their pushing and advocacy as care. Sage recognizes how much they cared about him reaching high levels of success and being positioned in a context where he could maximize his talent and capacity and thrive. Sage notes how meaningful it was for YES to not let him settle and push him toward more fitting options that would allow him to compete with likeminded peers and showcase his skills. Beyond this, Sage expresses feeling mentored and emotionally cared for. According to Sage, YES staff he has "the space to open up and talk about some of the things [he's] experiencing and if [he] need[s] help with something [YES] is a helping hand in that regard."

Narrative Identity Work

Sage reflects on messages he receives from YES that have shaped his self-perception and self-efficacy. He references both the direct and silent messages YES provided to

influence his self-beliefs. Sages notes that many of these messages were specifically about educational possibilities and tailored toward reminding him of his capacity for greatness and ultimate ability to pursue advanced education. He suggests that these messages were helpful as obtaining a degree is uncommon in both his family and community. Sage notes that, “YES has just helped me. I guess some of the stories I hear about people who come from the communities that we come from. You don't typically hear or see messages regarding people going to college, again, PhDs or whatever the case may be. So just understanding that there's opportunities outside of what had been presented to me throughout my entire life, I think it's just the main thing, honestly.”

Sages negotiates his identity primarily in academic and familial settings; he wrestles with his identity as a Black man and being father. Sage gives meaning to his identity by considering how to show up as a present father. It is critical to him that he counters previous examples of Black fatherhood and shows up meaningfully and intentionally with his children; he narrates this point extensively as well as here: “But I also think having a son is changing a lot of the ways in which I want to go about that because I don't want my own son to grow up feeling as if he can't ask for help or can't be vulnerable or express how he feels. Knowing that he's going to emulate what he sees in me, just making sure that I'm the man that I want him to be.”

Acts of Resistance

Sage engages in several acts of resistance - first he embodies a commitment to racial pride that resists against the narratives surrounding his academic program. He resists negative messages by boldly representing and celebrating his racial and cultural identity. He embraces Black culture proudly including “music… clothing, food.” Sage recognizes that “even in spaces where sometimes [his] Blackness isn't valued, it doesn't make it any less valuable.” Sage also thinks deeply about mental health among Black men. He is interested in “deconstructing the mindset around health” and dismantling the notion that help-seeking indicates weakness. Sage leverages these acts of resistance through a podcast with he and two YES peers, called Deconstructing Male Fragility. They did so in order to interrogate “some of the ways in which patriarchy informs sexism and just informs some of the ways in which we think, and some of the ways in which we view the world and wanting to deconstruct some of those narratives. We started a podcast where we would bring a Black woman on set every episode, and we would discuss a piece of media that helped them identify with their Black womanhood.” This was an exploratory context for Sage - and his peers - to assess his own identity development but also to better understand how Black masculinity shapes Black womanhood. He endeavours to resist patriarchy more broadly and this YES afforded opportunity gave him the medium to do the internal work he sought.

Direct Relational Transactions

Sage values the relational network he built as a YES participant - he has sustained many of these peer and staff relationships and leverages them as he moves into adulthood. Sage's closest friends introduced him to YES and were a critical reason he initially got involved and remained connected. These individuals have supported his journey and continue to be instrumental in his development post-high school. He shares, "There's a lot of people who I've met at YES who I did not know beforehand, who now are still central to my life, I still communicate with." He expresses that he would reconnect with YES staff when returned to YES during his college breaks. He notes that "There would be a lot of similar faces that I've seen, so I've developed a lot of mentors in that space." He further highlights special relationships with YES staff who he endeavours to emulate and model his adulthood journey after. He narrates the nature and impact of this relationship here:

"A lot of it was seeing you, I guess. I spoke to it a little bit in the first interview we had, but just how our lives weirdly just mirror each other's in this weird way. I don't know how to explain it. Still trying to make sense of it, but I think seeing you at YES and working under you and you just mentoring me through the years, I think just gave me a blueprint on some things that were possible that I didn't consider beforehand. That to me is one of the most important things that I can – that I take from YES is just being able to work under someone who I want to emulate in a sense."

Sage's interactions with the executive director are equally as instrumental as he navigates his adulthood journey as a Black man:

"... seeing how he navigates being this Black man who has this nonprofit business that is tailored for Black youth and the challenges that come with that, and seeing the ways in which he has to navigate those challenges. I think it's just important to find those models of Black men and Black women in Pittsburgh that can just help you kind of shape your approach to it. I've been lucky to have a lot of people in my corner in that regard."

Sage embodies the return to YES model that the organization seeks - he was a student, left to enhance his academic and professional endeavours and now comes back as a mentor seeking to give back to the agency. Sage now works at YES and is interested in paying it forward at YES and in the community YES serves. He narrates this interest below:

"...I can be still involved in the community… I think it is a huge thing for me… I'm seeing more the importance of engaging with [my] community, engaging in some type of communal work. I think a benefit with me right now in working with the YES board is that some people are retired on the board. And one thing I hear is that once they retire, there

was this passion to immerse themselves back in their community and to give back in some way, shape or form and so I think that could look a million different ways. It doesn't have to be volunteering or whatever the case may be. I think it could look however you want it to look, but I do think there's an element of realizing the role that adults have played in your life, and then also giving that back in some way, shape or form. So just some type of engagement with your wider community. That could be at church, it could be through sports, it could be through community organizing.“

He values being able to work for YES, and credits YES staff with his academic achievements.

Sage reflects on an experience YES offered him to be responsible for planning and co-facilitating YES Writers. That helped him recognize that there was an elevated level of trust in him and his competency. He was trusted to guide students as he was once guided and reflects on this here:

“... it also felt good to be in a position where you and YES trusted me to run this particular program…Now, I'm shifting into a mentor type role. When some of these – when some of the high school students, they come up to me and they're sharing things… it gives me the feeling of how I felt coming to the office as a high school student, seeing something like the Ms. Loris and stuff that and talking with them and just sharing about some things that are going on in my life and what I'm thinking about and what I want to do and goals that I have.”

Overall, Sage notes that, “We always say YES, it's like a home away from home.“

Opportunity Cultivation and Resource Utilization

Sage participated in a plethora of YES related programming and opportunities. Sage mostly engaged in employment, enrichment, and college and career programming, given his later start in YES. Sage reflects on opportunities YES made available to him such as social and cultural outings through the YES Writers program and as well as research intensives in which he engaged. Sage narrates how YES created research opportunities due to his inability to get into University related programs. Sage reflects on how YES crafted unique research experiences so that he could build his research skills and gain the experience to still be considered for future PhD programs. Although discouraging, YES designed opportunities that allowed him to participate in similar opportunities as his peers. Much of the reason he was unable to get into his program was because no faculty members had expertise to support his interest in the philosophy of colorism and other Africana related research topics. Given the lack of faculty support, he was inadvertently denied admission. He describes YES’ work to create alternative opportunities to fill this gap and express his gratitude for such a gesture.

Sage saw his relationship with YES grow post-high school. He remained engaged and

always worked at YES over the summer during undergrad years and never considered otherwise. To him, "...it was just always important to go and get some of those experiences, make some connections but also do it in a place that you view as family and community."

Sage utilizes YES through a transformational strategy, where YES reconstructs constrained opportunity spaces. As he continues to utilize YES for support during his adulthood transition, he turns to YES staff for advice, especially when presented with big life choices, like whether to relocate to North Carolina as a Teach for America teacher.

He still feels supported, but was at one point impacted by physical distance, since he was not in Pittsburgh during or immediately after college. But during college, he benefitted from research opportunities, and other resources at YES.

Life Course Theory

Perception and Experience of Adulthood

Sage describes his adult life as "scattered" because it is ever changing and involves some uncertainty. His current experiences with adulthood have been ones of transitions - transitions into parenthood, academia, and work. All of these roles come with unique pressures that cause him to feel in a constant state of transition and movement.

"I think I'm still in some type of transition. I don't know where I'm transitioning to. I don't know what I'm transitioning from, but I feel like things are moving so fast that sometimes I don't have the time to just sit down and think and reflect on what's going on, but I know that things are constantly evolving, constantly changing."

Sage narrates his adulthood journey as one that is parallel to his parenthood journey given he became a parent soon after completing his undergraduate studies. In turn, he was unable to focus on himself in the same way. While Sage feels somewhat overwhelmed by all the things going on, he has created a structured approach to adulthood and narrates the way he meticulously uses and manages his time, birthing extreme discipline and boundary setting.

He suggests that this could falsely communicate to others that he has it all together even though he still needs support and help. His outside appearance may disqualify him for the support he seeks and get overlooked. He notes, "I feel very much conflicted being in a PhD program, because it's like, you're in a PhD program and people think that you have it figured out because you're in a PhD program, [because] perception wise…this guy has it figured out. He's a dad, he's in a PhD program. He's working… But it's like, I'm literally, like, falling apart."

Time and Place
Sage references several places and times that are instrumental to his adulthood transition. He mentions his time at Allegheny College starting in 2018 - this was a space and time that he can grow and develop with one of his dearest friends. This environment challenged him, affirmed him academically, but also exposed him to vile forms of racism. This space was one of affordances and limitations. Sage also spent time in Greensboro, North Carolina where he spent time teaching and facilitating the learning of his youngest scholars. He built a loving and extended community there and developed relationships with individuals who mentored him and supported him as he transitioned into his fatherhood role. He talks about Pittsburgh and the segregated nature of the city but also a place where loving family relationships exist. Sage moved back to Pittsburgh to pursue his PhD in Africana Studies at Pitt and to gain more familial support in raising his children.

Timing
Sage's adoption of his parenthood role forced him to think differently about time and to manage it more productively given that it exists as a limited resource.

Agency
Given all the roles Sage is wearing, he is unable to demonstrate agency or to make choices that just consider himself. He is constrained by his roles and their associated responsibilities.

Lifespan development
Sage has interesting earlier experiences that shape how he navigates his current adulthood transition. His earlier exposure to colorism and anti-Black racism in his primary school settings. This was a formative experience that remained in the shadow of his developmental transitions. He also narrates an interesting relationship with help-seeking. As a child, Sage reflects on how his dad encouraged him to figure things out for himself, which led to his current struggle with asking for help.

"Dad was just a figure it out and not in a bad way, not that I couldn't go and ask my parents for help, but it was very much instilled in me to make sure that I can handle things on my own."

He views this as part of the patriarchal thinking that he seeks to dismantle. He further notes, "... but now transitioning into adulthood, you realize…sometimes you really do need to ask some people for help because, call them expensive mistakes and not expensive in terms of monetary value… when you make a mistake in adulthood, it can really set you back a lot in a lot of different ways.

Linked Lives

Sage's developmental journey is largely shaped by the lives and institutions he is most connected to. Sage's family is supportive, nurturing, and loving, and in some ways pushed him to be the self-reliant individual he is today and now trying to undo. His extended family is supportive with sharing parental duties and assisting him in relocating and making his new space functional. While he appreciates his family, he recognizes that his current work and endeavors may be unfamiliar to them. According to Sage, "Sometimes it feels like a disconnect because… I'm a first gen student, so there's not that connection in that regard. Yeah, they're just happy that I'm doing what I want to do, doing something I don't want to do, and excelling in it, whatever that looks like."

Sage has had deeply meaningful friendships that operate as a supportive structure in his transition to adulthood. He has leveraged his friendships to navigate the challenges he has faced in adulthood. These friendships are critical to the way he views himself as scholar, father, and adult. He notes how important it was to attend college with his best friend and how that provided the continued reminder to keep persevering and that he could do it, even when the journey became difficult.

Work is incredibly important to him, especially the time he spent working in North Carolina and building meaningful student and teacher relationships. There, he was fully immersed and embraced in the community. His work community now that he has returned to YES has been equally as valuable and important to his adulthood transition. Reconnecting with his staff mentors in a place that largely shaped him continues to ground him in adulthood.

"I received a lot of support around not just teaching, but also, like when I had my first child, they had a baby shower for me after school, so just like small stuff like that, were just showing me what community actually was. I think that was important for me to learn in coming into different spaces that I want to navigate throughout adulthood…being immersed in that community made it so much easier. There was something that I needed – my car needed fixed; someone knew this person who I can go to, or just small stuff like that where it was just you gain access to some of these resources by virtue of just being in community with these people and noticing the benefits. Not only are you gaining things, but you're also giving. I'm sharing my experiences with the students; I'm building connections. I think it was just that give and take of the community that was just an experience that was good for me."

Turning Points

Sage narrates his turning points as the time he joined YES and was engaged in the community - not only did it shift his post-secondary trajectory but it became a family he cannot see himself not being part of - YES continues to be important in his developmental experience. Sage notes that embracing his role as a parent is a point at

which his life turned and required him to show up differently and become a more mature and focused individual ready to take on the associated responsibilities. He discusses this as a painful process but one he has embraced.

Transitions

Sage mentions several transitional moments in his narrative including attending Allegheny College, becoming a parent of two children, relocating to Greensboro, North Carolina, and becoming a fifth grade science and math teacher. He narrates additional transitions including his entry into a PhD program and his mindset shift as he launched and engaged in the podcast with his YES peers.

“It helped me think about some of the things I thought to be true and how I came to believe certain things. I think for me personally – because Keith was already engaged in some of that work, so from – and Selena was also already just hip to some of that stuff. So for me it was a lot of oh, a lot of reframing I had to do and a lot of the conversations and topics that we talked about really challenged me in ways that I did not think would be the case. Especially at that age and during that time, it was just helpful for me to be in a space where some of my ideas were being challenged. I had to hold myself accountable because I'm talking on a mic and the stuff was going out.”

Appendix S

Sage Anderson: Case Narrative

Situating Sage in Adulthood

Sage describes adulthood as “scattered.” He labels it as such based on his current experience balancing multiple transitions, expectations, and overlapping roles. During the study, Sage is simultaneously navigating fatherhood, his doctoral studies at the University of Pittsburgh, and his employment as an executive assistant at Youth Enrichment Services (YES). These roles each have unique pressures that cause him to feel like he is constantly transitioning and moving, with minimal opportunity to pause or reflect. In Sage’s case, adulthood is not a stable or settled period; instead, it is a series of rapid and unpredictable transitions without clear endpoints. He narrates this experience here:

> “I think I'm still in some type of transition. I don't know where I'm transitioning to. I don’t know what I'm transitioning from, but I feel like things are moving so fast that sometimes I don't have the time to just sit down and think and reflect on what's going on, but I know that things are constantly evolving, constantly changing.”

Sage understands adulthood through this constant motion. His transition does not follow a linear or sequential pathway; instead, it is informed by simultaneous role acquisition that requires his adaptation to continuously shifting demands. Sage became a parent shortly after completing his undergraduate degree which further intensified his adulthood transition. Parenthood introduced new responsibilities that restructured how Sage allocates time, makes decisions, and prioritizes his own needs. In turn, Sage is left with limited opportunity to focus solely on himself, as his roles as a father, scholar, and employee push him to be in constant negotiation.

To manage these demands, Sage has developed a highly disciplined and structured approach to adulthood. He is intentional about time management, boundary setting, and routine, recognizing that without such strategies, the competing pressures of his roles would become overwhelming. While these approaches help Sage organize his tasks and function more effectively in adulthood, they communicate a false message about areas where Sage could need support. Sage is aware that his meticulous use and management of time can conceal the instability and uncertainty he continues to experience internally.

> “I feel very much conflicted being in a PhD program, because it's like, you're in a PhD program and people think that you have it figured out because you're in a PhD program, [because] perception wise…this guy has it figured out. He's a dad, he's in a PhD program. He's working… But it's like, I'm literally, like, falling apart.”

Sage’s reflections reveal important insight into the difference between how adulthood is perceived and how it is experienced. His visible achievements - advanced education, employment, and fatherhood - signal his stability and successes, however, these same markers hide his need for support in adulthood. This creates dissonance for Sage - where he feels both accomplished and vulnerable. He is negatively impacted by people’s assumptions about his self-sufficiency and resilience which can cause unintended consequences such as unmet care, guidance, and resources.

Sage’s narrative suggests that adulthood status is not a fixed status achieved through milestones but rather an ongoing process shaped by responsibility, constraint, and adaptation. His narrative highlights adulthood as a lived experience marked by endurance and strategy rather than certainty. His understanding of race, relationships, and community-based support continue to shape his developmental trajectory.

Early Racialized Experiences and the Permanence of Race

Sage’s adulthood trajectory cannot be separated from his lifelong navigation of race. As a dark-skinned Black man, Sage has been subjected to anti-Black racism and intra-racial discrimination since his early schooling experiences. These encounters shaped how he came to understand himself in relation to his white and Black peers and the social contexts he moved through, influencing his self-perception, academic pursuits, and broader worldview. Sage narrates this in the following quotes:

> “I would say my first experience of realizing what my race was for sure in school. I can't recall, like my very first experience where it was kind of like named, but skin color was always a huge thing for me, being darker skin and so not only having this like difference with white people, but also being like, very pigmented in terms of the range of colors for Black people.”

> "I was the butt of my classmates’ jokes... With comments like ‘I’d like you more if you were lighter’ and ‘you’re too dark’ piercing me, I had no choice but to question my dark skin."

Sage does not frame these experiences as isolated incidents; instead, he understands them as part of a recurring and predictable pattern that has followed him across educational, housing, and institutional settings.

> “It may look new, it may feel new, but so many of our ancestors and elders have also had to navigate the terrain.”

His undergraduate and doctoral training in Africana Studies provides Sage with the language to name and contextualize what he has long experienced. Through this

intellectual lens, he situates contemporary racial dynamics within a broader historical context. Sage recognizes how his present-day challenges echo earlier moments of racial marginalization and exclusion.

> “In the African Studies Department, you realize that there is nothing new under the Sun…the same things that we’re experiencing...happened in Britain in the 1970s and 80s…the rhetoric just shifts.”

Sage extends this understanding beyond the U.S. context, drawing connections between global histories of Black resistance and repression. He rejects narratives of racial progress that suggest racism is diminishing, instead emphasizing its persistence across time and place.

> “I mean, the same thing that happened with Haiti when Haiti became the first Black sovereign nation. White people were terrified of, like, we can't let Black people know about this because if they – if and when they found out, there's going to be a mentality shift. They're completely undergirding the institution of slavery, which built America.”

These insights inform how Sage navigates adulthood, shaping his expectations of institutions and his understanding of structural constraint and racialized conditions.

In his own life, this permanence of race has material consequences. Sage recounts experiences of segregated and marginalized housing, racialized schooling environments, and interactions with educators who lacked understanding of Blackness or how to engage Black students. Sage reflects on this as he notes, “My professor don't have an understanding of Blackness or know how to interact or engage with students who are Black.” His college classroom experiences were coupled with racial marginalization and discrimination in his local college community, where he was exposed to racial slurs and unsafe to travel to local stores. These conditions shaped the opportunities available to him and required ongoing vigilance as he moved into adulthood.

Fatherhood and Reconstructing Black Masculinity

Fatherhood represents a central turning point in Sage’s adulthood journey. Becoming a parent shortly after college forced him to reconsider what it means to be an adult, particularly as a Black man navigating dominant narratives about Black fatherhood. Sage is keenly aware of the pervasive portrayal of Black fathers as absent or disengaged. He recognizes that “the bar is so low for Black fathers.” He actively resists these narratives through his own parenting practices.

> “I surround myself with other Black men who are fathers and learn from them…just seeing other Black men, their relationship with their family and their children, and just trying to emulate that and implement some of their principles into my daily life has been helpful for my transition into adulthood.”

Sage applies his academic lens to the history of his own counterstory and discovers the ways media created “this narrative of Black households and the absence of the Black fathers and how that really played into the whole development of that narrative in the 1970s and onward.”

Given this, Sage approaches fatherhood with intentionality, viewing it as both a responsibility and a site of resistance. He is committed to being emotionally present for his children, particularly his son, whom he sees as learning what it means to be a man by observing him. This awareness shapes how Sage thinks about vulnerability, emotional expression, and care. These are qualities he believes are often denied to Black men.

> “I don’t want my son to grow up feeling like he can’t ask for help or be vulnerable…knowing he’s going to emulate what he sees in me.”

Fatherhood also reorients Sage’s relationship to time and agency. Decisions can no longer be made solely with his own needs in mind, and the consequences of mistakes feel amplified. According to Sage, he no longer has room for:

> “expensive mistakes and not expensive in terms of monetary value but in terms of like, oh, when you make a mistake in adulthood, it can really set you back a lot in a lot of different ways.”

While this responsibility can be overwhelming, Sage embraces it as part of his growth, recognizing that adulthood now requires him to show up differently and more deliberately.

YES as a Relational and Developmental Anchor

Sage’s relationship with YES emerges as a critical source of continuity across his developmental journey. Introduced to the organization by close friends, Sage describes YES as a “home away from home,” a space that provided care, challenge, and belonging during pivotal life moments. Rather than functioning solely as programmatic support, YES became a relational anchor that shaped Sage’s sense of possibility.

At YES, Sage encountered mentors and peers who challenged his self-perceptions and expanded his educational aspirations. Staff encouraged him to “shoot for the stars,” pushing him beyond what he initially believed was possible. Although the pressure was frustrating at first, Sage came to understand it as a form of care rooted in belief in his potential.

> “There was a lot of…you’re selling yourself short…they really cared about me reaching high levels of success.”

> “It was challenging at first because your ideas are being challenged, which is always an uncomfortable feeling or something you have to get used to. So yeah, at first it was very challenging for me to be like, oh, well, what else do I have to

> do? I'm going to school. I'm getting good grades. It ended up just being helpful, thinking back on how helpful it was to just think beyond some of the ways in which I've been programmed to think about how I'm going to go about things."

YES also offered Sage emotional support, providing space for him to talk openly about his experiences and seek guidance during moments of uncertainty. These relationships persisted beyond high school, grounding Sage as he navigated college, work, and parenthood.

> "We always say YES is like a home away from home. And so whenever I would come back home over the summer during the school, it was always just guaranteed that you were going back to YES. It wasn't even a thought in my mind. Even while working other jobs, I'm like, oh, I'm still going to make time for YES."

Sage reflects on how these relationships served as blueprints and role models for his life and continued to show him what was possible.

> "A lot of it was seeing [Ms. Denise], I guess. I spoke to it a little bit in the first interview we had, but just how our lives weirdly just mirror each other's in this weird way. I don't know how to explain it. Still trying to make sense of it, but I think seeing [Ms. Denise] at YES and working under [Ms. Denise] and she just mentoring me through the years, I think just gave me a blueprint on some things that were possible that I didn't consider beforehand. That to me is one of the most important things that I can – that I take from YES is just being able to work under someone who I want to emulate in a sense."

Sage's interactions with the executive director are equally as instrumental as he navigates his adulthood journey as a Black man:

> "... seeing how [Dr. Jones] navigates being this Black man who has this nonprofit business that is tailored for Black youth and the challenges that come with that, and seeing the ways in which he has to navigate those challenges. I think it's just important to find those models of Black men and Black women in Pittsburgh that can just help you kind of shape your approach to it. I've been lucky to have a lot of people in my corner in that regard."

Cultivating Opportunity Amid Structural Barriers

Sage's engagement with YES extended beyond emotional support. It transformed into a space actively cultivating opportunity. When institutional pathways elsewhere were blocked - particularly in summer research institutes or within higher education - YES intervened to create alternative routes for growth. Sage recounts being denied access to university research opportunities due to a lack of faculty expertise in Africana and colorism-related topics.

> "I wasn't getting those experiences throughout my college experience. Like I said,

> YES became this place where it was filling the gaps in my own education that I was getting at the time. I knew that going back there, I was going to gain experiences that I would eventually take back to school the next year or even set me up for where I am today."

In response, YES designed research experiences that allowed him to build skills and remain competitive for doctoral programs. One particular example is included below:

> "It was a program, [YES Writers] that focused on African-American literature. We specifically tailored it to the Harlem Renaissance and the Chicago Renaissance. It was an eight-week program where we had to develop the syllabus that was focused on African-American literature, talk about some of the prevalent themes throughout the literature and connect with some of the stuff that some of the students were experiencing or thinking about at the time."

These opportunities were not simply supplemental; they reconstructed constrained pathways and enabled Sage to pursue academic goals that might otherwise have been inaccessible. Sage continued working at YES during summers throughout his undergraduate years, valuing the organization as both a professional and communal space.

> "It was always important to do it in a place that you view as family and community."

The organization also curated opportunities for Sage and his peers to further explore their intellectual curiosities and identities and to take collective action to resist destructive narratives about Black masculinity through a podcast titled, Black Male Fragility. In doing so, they interrogated:

> "some of the ways in which patriarchy informs sexism and just informs some of the ways in which we think, and some of the ways in which we view the world and wanting to deconstruct some of those narratives. We started a podcast where we would bring a Black woman on set every episode, and we would discuss a piece of media that helped them identify with their Black womanhood."

This exploratory context for Sage allowed him to assess his own identity and also to better understand how Black masculinity shapes Black womanhood, especially given his interest in resisting patriarchy.

YES remained a point of reference and opportunity cultivator even as Sage's life took him beyond Pittsburgh. He continued to seek advice from staff when faced with major decisions. The same is true for Sage's return to Pittsburgh where he reconnected with YES and the organization created an employment experience to supplement his doctoral studies, given his schedule limitations.

This further illustrated how he strategically mobilized organizational resources during adulthood transitions.

Adulthood as Ongoing Negotiation

As Sage moves deeper into adulthood, his narrative underscores the ongoing negotiation required to balance ambition, responsibility, and support. Despite his achievements, Sage continues to struggle with asking for help - a pattern rooted in early socialization that emphasized self-reliance.

> "Yeah, I think it was just how I always was, how I grew up…My dad was just a figure it out parent and not in a bad way, not that I couldn't go and ask my parents for help, but it was very much instilled in me to make sure that I can handle things on my own. I feel it's very rooted in a lot of maybe patriarchy, maybe but yeah."

He now recognizes how this mindset can be limiting, particularly when mistakes in adulthood carry higher stakes.

> "Sometimes you really do need to ask some people for help…mistakes in adulthood can really set you back."

Sage's story reveals how assumptions about independence and competence can blur the need for care, especially individuals who appear outwardly successful. His experience highlights adulthood as a resource-dependent process, one that requires relational and institutional support even as expectations of autonomy and agency intensify.

Linked Lives and Giving Back

Sage's adulthood journey is deeply shaped by his relationships. Family members provide practical and emotional support, particularly in parenting, while friendships serve as critical sources of encouragement, resistance, collective action, and accountability. HIs work communities - both in North Carolina and upon returning to YES - offer models of care, reciprocity, and collective responsibility.

Returning to YES as a staff member and mentor represents a meaningful extension of Sage's adulthood transition. He embodies the organization's model of return, seeking to give back to a community that shaped him. Facilitating programs and mentoring younger participants allows Sage to reflect on his own growth and recognize that trust placed in him.

> "Now I'm shifting into a mentor role…it gives me the feeling of how I felt coming to the office as a high school student."

Through this work, Sage articulates a vision of adulthood grounded in community engagement and reciprocity. He understands adulthood not only as personal achievement but as responsibility to others - a commitment to sustaining the relational networks that made his own development possible.

Closing Reflection

Sage's case illustrates adulthood as an ongoing, relational, and racialized process rather than a fixed developmental endpoint. His transition is shaped by overlapping roles, structural constraints, and sustained community-based support. Through fatherhood, scholarship, and engagement with YES, Sage navigates adulthood as a site of both pressure and possibility, revealing the limits of dominant adulthood frameworks and the importance of relational infrastructure in supporting Black youths' transitions into adulthood.

Appendix T

Research Question Mapping: Sage Anderson

Research Question 1

How does Sage conceptualize and make sense of his transition to adulthood?

Sage conceptualizes adulthood not as arrival or stability, but as ongoing transition, simultaneity, and fragmentation. He repeatedly frames adulthood as feeling "scattered," marked by constant motion rather than coherence. For Sage, adulthood is not defined by the achievement of conventional milestones (fatherhood, doctoral study, employment), but by the strain of holding these roles simultaneously without adequate time to pause, reflect, or recover. His adulthood is experienced as endurance under acceleration, where responsibility accumulates faster than clarity.

A central feature of Sage's adulthood meaning-making is the dissonance between external perceptions of success and his internal experience of precarity. Although others read his status as a PhD student, employee, and father as evidence that he "has it figured out," Sage narrates adulthood as emotionally unstable and internally overwhelming. This gap between perception and lived experience shapes how Sage understands adulthood as a stage where vulnerability is hidden rather than supported. Adulthood, for Sage, is therefore not synonymous with self-sufficiency, but with managing the appearance of self-sufficiency while struggling privately.

Race is inseparable from Sage's conceptualization of adulthood. As a dark-skinned Black man, Sage understands adulthood as a racialized condition requiring vigilance, interpretation, and historical awareness. His early experiences with colorism, racialized schooling, and institutional marginalization inform a view of adulthood in which racial inequality is not episodic but permanent and predictable. Through his academic training in Africana Studies, Sage situates his own experiences within broader Black diasporic histories, reinforcing the idea that adulthood for Black men unfolds within long-standing systems of racial constraint rather than progressive inclusion.

Fatherhood serves as a major interpretive lens through which Sage understands adulthood. Becoming a parent immediately following undergraduate education accelerates his transition and intensifies its stakes. Sage conceptualizes adulthood through responsibility to others, particularly his children, and through a deliberate rejection of dominant narratives that frame Black fathers as absent or disengaged. His adulthood meaning-making is therefore deeply relational and future-oriented: decisions are evaluated not only for personal impact but for how they shape his children's sense of possibility, safety, and masculinity.

Finally, Sage understands adulthood as a process of negotiation rather than resolution. He grapples with internalized expectations of independence and self-reliance, recognizing that these beliefs - rooted in patriarchy and early socialization - limit his willingness to seek help even as the costs of mistakes increase. Adulthood, in Sage's account, is a stage where agency exists alongside constraint, and where learning to ask for support becomes as critical as demonstrating competence.

Research Question 2

How does Sage narrate YES' role in shaping his developmental transition to adulthood?

Sage narrates YES as a relational and developmental infrastructure that shapes his adulthood transition by filling institutional gaps, cultivating opportunity, and sustaining continuity across life stages. Rather than functioning as a temporary youth program, YES operates in Sage's narrative as a long-term anchor that supports his intellectual, emotional, and professional development before, during, and after adolescence.

YES plays a central role in countering institutional exclusion, particularly within higher education. When Sage encounters barriers to research opportunities due to the absence of Africana-focused faculty and limited institutional support, YES intervenes by creating alternative research pathways. Through programs such as YES Writers and independently designed curricula centered on Black literature and history, YES enables Sage to develop scholarly skills, sustain academic momentum, and remain competitive for doctoral study. In this way, YES does not merely supplement Sage's education; it actively reconstructs constrained opportunity structures.

Sage also narrates YES as a site of critical care and high expectation. Staff challenged him to "shoot for the stars," pushing him beyond what he initially imagined for himself. Although this pressure was uncomfortable at first, Sage came to understand it as care rooted in belief rather than surveillance. YES staff provided consistent emotional support, offered space for reflection, and remained accessible during periods of uncertainty. This sustained relational presence helped Sage weather transitions into college, parenthood, and graduate study.

Importantly, YES functions as a modeling space for Black adulthood. Through relationships with staff such as Ms. Denise and Dr. Jones, Sage encountered examples of Black professionals navigating leadership, scholarship, and community accountability. These relationships provided blueprints for adulthood that counter dominant narratives of Black masculinity, offering Sage alternative ways to imagine himself as a scholar, father, and community member.

As Sage transitions into adulthood, his relationship with YES evolves from participant to collaborator. Returning to YES as a staff member and mentor represents a critical shift from recipient to contributor. Sage frames this return as an extension of his adulthood, grounded in reciprocity and collective responsibility. Giving back to YES allows him to enact an adulthood defined not solely by individual achievement, but by sustaining the relational networks that made his own development possible.

Overall, Sage narrates YES as essential to his transition to adulthood - not because it eliminated struggle, but because it provided relational stability, opportunity cultivation, and affirmation within a racialized and institutionally constrained adulthood landscape. YES enables Sage to navigate adulthood with support rather than isolation, and to imagine adulthood as both personally meaningful and collectively accountable.

Appendix U

Participant - Theme: Theory Analysis

Research Question 1: How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions to adulthood?											
Themes	**Sage**	**Nelson**	**Simone**	**Ryan**	**Mary**	**Jasmine**	**Diamond**	**Kacey**	**Omavi**	**Renee**	**Maurice**
Theme 1: Adulthood as a Racialized Condition	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 2: Racialized Adulthood Across Contexts	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 3: Racialized Adulthood as Disruption for Black Youth				X	X				X	X	X
Theme 4: Racialized Adulthood as a Reorientation to Black Masculinity and Femininity	X		X	X		X			X	X	X
Theme 5: Racialized Adulthood as a Disorientation to Time and Progress	X	X	X	X	X	X			X	X	X

Research Question 2: How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in shaping their developmental transitions to adulthood?											
Themes	**Sage**	**Nelson**	**Simone**	**Ryan**	**Mary**	**Jasmine**	**Diamond**	**Kacey**	**Omavi**	**Renee**	**Maurice**
Theme 1: YES as an Intervention Against Harm			X				X	X		X	X
Theme 2: YES as an Opportunity Cultivator	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 3: YES as Protection from Racial Pressure, Surveillance, and Racialized Responsibility	X	X	X	X		X	X			X	X
Theme 4: YES as Relational Care Infrastructure	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Themes 5: YES as Black Social Belonging and Collective Ease	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Themes 6: YES as a Developmental Bridge Across Time	X	X	X	X		X	X		X	X	X
Theme 7: YES as Narrative Labor and Identity Schema Formation	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Theme 8: YES as a Model for Black Adulthood	X			X		X	X		X		X

Research Question 1: How do Black youth in YES conceptualize and make sense of their transitions to adulthood?													
Theme Information		**Place an X in theory column represented in the theme**											
Theme #	Theme	**Critical Race Theory**			**Counterspaces**				**Life Course Perspective**				
		POR	WAP	CST	NIW	AOR	DRT	OCRU	T&P	A	LL	T	LD
Theme 1: Adulthood as a Racialized Condition		X	X										
Theme 2: Racialized Adulthood Across Contexts		X	X						X				
Theme 3: Racialized Adulthood as Disruption for Black Youth		X	X						X				
Theme 4: Racialized Adulthood as a Reorientation to Black Masculinity and Femininity		X		X		X				X			X
Theme 5: Racialized Adulthood as a Disorientation to Time and Progress		X	X									X	
Research Question 2: How do Black youth in YES narrate YES' role in shaping their developmental transitions to adulthood?													
Theme 1: YES as an Intervention Against Harm		X				X		X				X	X
Theme 2: YES as an Opportunity Cultivator								X					
Theme 3: YES as Protection from Racial Pressure, Surveillance, and Racialized Responsibility		X			X	X	X	X		X		X	
Theme 4: YES as Relational Care Infrastructure							X				X		

Themes 5: YES as Black Social Belonging and Collective Ease	X			X	X	X	X			X		
Themes 6: YES as a Developmental Bridge Across Time								X				
Theme 7: YES as Narrative Labor and Identity Schema Formation				X	X	X	X					
Theme 8: YES as a Model for Black Adulthood				X	X	X	X					