

The Destruction of The Black Family as a Manifestation of Structural and Epistemic Antiracism

Undergraduate Research Thesis

By

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Introduction

During my grandmothers' lifetime, she fostered numerous children in her home and adopted five of her six children, including my mother. At my grandmothers' funeral, I was introduced to family members that she had become estranged from whom I had never met before. As I spoke to these individuals, they treated me as family but I realized that I did not feel kinship ties to them. It dawned on me for the first time that not only did these people not feel like family to me, I had no genetic relation to them. This realization quickly led me to acknowledge for the first time in my life that I had no genetic relation to my grandmother. Despite this, I felt more kin to my grandmother than I did to my biological parents since my grandmother nurtured me in lieu of my parents.

I began to analyze the bonds I had with people in my life and realized that I felt familial ties to many people whom I had no biological relation to. The same could be said about many others in my community also. All around me people had what were often called "play cousins." This term was used to denote relationships between people who claimed to be cousins but were not biologically or legally related to one another. People also called each other "brother" and "sister" despite being unrelated to one another. When questioned on whether they were biologically related a common response was often that they were "real" family, reaffirming that their relationship was legitimate. As a result of my experiences, I began to question the way the African American families function in ways that specifically depart from how family norms, echoed across American civil society for white and non-black people, are anchored to kin, gender, and generation. Such questions led to this research project.

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This thesis aims to analyze how the racialized power that has constituted blackness in the wake of the Middle Passage has violently destroyed the possibility of family as a condition of a black ontology that, in the making of America as a structurally antiblack society, has been rendered an oxymoron. In relation to that structural antiblack violence, African American practices of making family after abolition have been constitutively precarious, always exposed to the obliterating force of the state and civil society, and generally in need, for their very survival, to aim at a broader, collective reconstitution of communities as a radical project of black self-determination. Confronted with the structures owing their very social, epistemic, and psychic stability to its enforced impossibility, the black family is always already a radical practice of critique and fugitivity. This topic is significant because it intends to examine the way whiteness places pressure on blacks to assimilate to Western and Eurocentric values under slavery and after emancipation. It argues that the black family is not only shaped by structural forces but also epistemic violence which posits the white family as virtuous and the embodiment of civilization. The propagation of family values by the state served in fact to criminalize, pathologize, and ultimately destroy black families while hindering the upward mobility of blacks and at white family life as an object of emulation, which required internalized black self-punishment and self-deprecation. It is important to compare the familial values and practices of African-Americans to white Americans in order to understand how oppressive dominant family values may have been on African-Americans. By comparing these values, I intend to investigate the concept of family itself and whether the way white Americans have sought to structure their ideas of the black family according to concepts presented as natural while being shaped by racialized power and anti-black violence.

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This inquiry is significant to the discipline of African American studies because even though there are numerous studies which focus on the way white power and violence endangers black lives, the goal of this thesis is to specifically focus on how white America's concept of family was also weaponized as a way to oppress blacks. This oppression is not analyzed from a sociological approach but instead positions it as a question of theory that is concerned with anti-blackness and the denial of black humanity. This thesis can be used to examine how and to what extent the adoption of white cultural values into the African American family structure has been problematic. Equally as important is to explore the ways American civil societies have benefitted and continue to benefit from the destruction of the black family. By exploring the proposed topic, I hope that it will lead to a critical theory, grounded in the black experience, of the family and discover ways to cope with or overcome the challenges family values present to black communities.

Chapter one focuses on the impossibility of the existence of the black family in the wake of enslavement. This chapter analyzes the ways that slave owners sought to break apart African families and create fragmented relations between slaves. In this chapter I argue that the black family was made structurally impossible, regardless to the relative success of experiential practice. Therefore, the viability of those practices had ultimately to confront the precariousness, the lack of autonomy, and the suppression of agency determined by those structural forces, which manifested themselves as the slaveowner's disproportionate violence and gratuitous terror. I examine the ways slaves attempted to form meanings of community and the way slave owners sought to quell said communities and attempts at making black families.

The second chapter focuses on the way the idea of a black family was used to re-enslave blacks after emancipation. The goal of this chapter is to critique the way post-emancipation

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society gained coherence around the policing of black existence, which made families a crucial site of surveillance. I analyze ways that whites tried to force the nuclear family structure on to blacks and the ways that blacks tried to resist pressure to conform to white family values.

The goal of chapter three is to theorize black resistance to white family values. This chapter examines strategies employed by black communities when attempting to reinvent the family as an idea and practice. It interrogates the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement, analyzing the way activists sought to construct and protect the black family. There is also an examination of the way black communities sought to liberate themselves from oppression through self-determination.

The fourth and final chapter investigates the way the post-civil rights state and civil society sought to destroy attempts to reinvent the black family. This chapter examines the negative effects of government intervention in black communities in both the past and present to help the reader gain a better understanding of the ways antiblackness continues to shape black communities and families. It specifically interrogates the war on drugs, mass incarceration, welfare reform, the Moynihan report and attacks on black sexuality.

The conclusion of this thesis seeks to revisit the key points presented in chapters one through four. I will discuss what these findings mean for the black family in both the past and the present. I also hope to allow the reader to see how this theoretical work could practically influence change that would have a positive impact black families and communities. By doing so, I hope to encourage the reader to think about the black family in new ways.

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Chapter 1

The Impossibility of The Black Family

The Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade saw approximately 13 million Africans removed from the continent and transported to various countries around the Western hemisphere. Enslaved Africans were diverse in origin, descending from various ethnic groups. As a result, they possessed different value systems, beliefs, cultures, and religious practices. Historically, in Western countries, Africa and its inhabitants have been misrepresented as being culturally homogenous. The concept of racial homogeneity served as a tool for antiblackness (Mudimbe: 1988.) These narratives of homogeneity portrayed Africa as a place that is collectively derelict and inhabited by people without history or civilized values. As a result, slave traders and colonizers were able to justify their violence on African people because the entire continent had been “engulfed” by European humanistic and Enlightenment knowledge within a global racial hierarchy that purportedly manifested the self-making of the modern Western subject (Silva: 2007.) African concepts of family, community, and kinship differed greatly depending on ethnicity, religion, and location. At the point of capture and subsequent enslavement, whites attempted to strip Africans of their diverse cultural practices, African families ceased to exist, and became a legal impossibility for African beings turned to property.

Hortense Spillers analyzes the structural absence of the black family by evaluating the way black gendered and familial relationships were deconstructed by the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade. Spillers contends that when Africans were enslaved they were “...removed from the indigenous land and culture” although they were “not-yet ‘American’ either... (Spillers: 1982, 72)” The displacement of Africans from their identities and relations, indeed their very bodies, is a direct result of whites’ efforts to erase the identities of Africans starting at the point of capture.

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Captives were forced to accept new positionalities determined by their, in Spillers' words, "being for the captor". White terror positioned black women in multiple roles—sexual, productive, reproductive—often in contradiction with each other, leading Spillers to argue that, in white imagination, "1) the captive body becomes the source of an irresistible, destructive sensuality; 2) at the same time – in stunning contradiction -- the captive body is reduced to a thing (Spillers: 1987, 67)" Spillers argues that slaves were reduced to flesh and objectified as a "vestibular" gateway to a capitalist culture centered on exploitation and violence. This objectification resulted in the captives being stripped of their humanity. The outcome of this otherness is that the black captive was interdicted from having familial bonds. The captive's property status meant the denial of all claims to familial bonds as well as filiation. Black marriage and progeny were thus subordinated to the rules of property defining the captive's condition.

Gender plays a unique role in the "thingification" of blacks. During slavery and after slavery, the black female was made sexually accessible to all whites, yet neither her femininity nor her womanhood were valued along the lines fixing the, still subordinate, position of white women. Spillers argues that this is made possible because in Western society the female gender is subject to white patriarchal authority, rather than racialized property relations. As a result, patriarchal gender combined with racist ideologies created a unique existence for the black woman. The female body became a site for sexual exploitation while being simultaneously robbed of its sexuality. Blacks were expected to conform to gendered morality, yet they were objectified and coerced into a position of otherness that denied them femininity and masculinity. Saidiya Hartman also discusses the objectification of slaves saying that "being an outsider

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permits the slave's uprooting and her "reduction from a person to a thing that can be owned (Hartman: 1997, 87)."

White concepts of black femininity and sexuality define how blacks are permitted to interact in white societies. The slave was subjected to racialized sexual expectations but prevented from performing gender roles or identities, the exercise of which was the target of further violence. The attempted erasure of African concepts of family from black lives and the differential production of gender within the structural workings of a racialized order made the very idea of a black family oxymoronic and pathological. De facto black families and affects were placed in an absolutely precarious position, since they were always and indefinitely vulnerable to white intrusion, violence, and legal dismemberment and separation. At a structural level, the black family was effectively an impossibility.

Upon these structural positionalities, institutional and historically contingent determinants prevented the formation of the black family. The inability of slaves to possess autonomy over their bodies resulted in their inability to lay claim to their children. The black children became the property of the master. Consequently, there was a coerced disconnect between parent and child. The emotional and often physical separation of parent from child results in the permanent likelihood of motherless and fatherless families. This disconnect seeks to eradicate the feeling of kinship between parent and child. Jennifer Morgan contends that:

"...becoming a slave takes place in the act of birth. For those who were transported to the colony as slaves, capture and transport had fixed their status. The need to further define those who were enslaved occurred only when Africans in the Americas began to have children (Morgan: 2004, 93.)"

The newborn slave inherited the slave status of their mother resulting in the slave child being denied familial ties upon birth.

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Though slaves faced many obstacles when attempting to develop families, they possessed the desire to do so. Jennifer Morgan writes:

“As slaveowners struggled to police the physical and political boundaries of their property and attach economic and social meaning to African women’s bodies, women and men engaged in their own efforts to inscribe meaning onto their new lives. They chose partners and lost them to sale and disease, made babies and lost many of them, too. In other words, they struggled to impose their own meaning on a process of family formation that colonial slaveowners defined only in terms of their own sense of familial and societal security (Morgan: 2004, 107)”

Slaves attempted to develop their own ideas of family within the confines of slavery despite the white power to criminalize and punish black agency. Hartman stated that “the slave and the ex-slave wanted what had been severed: kin (Hartman; 1997,6.)” Slaves desired to form families but were reminded that any concept family they formed could be stripped away from them gratuitously.

In the absence of parental relationships conforming to dominant family norms, and in response to the requisition of men for manual labor, women were often the authority figures in the lives of children. Black motherhood would then become the object of further demonization in dominant discourse regarding it as a “matriarchal” deviation from the idea of a family centered in the heterosexual couple. Angela Davis argues that this resulted in dominant discourses that made an imaginary black “matriarchy” responsible for black abjection and dereliction.

According to Davis, however, it was impossible for matriarchy to exist in slave communities because:

“In the most fundamental sense, the slave system did not -and could not - engender and recognize a matriarchal family structure. Inherent in the very concept of the matriarchy is "power." It would have been exceedingly risky for the slaveholding class to openly

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acknowledge symbols of authority – female symbols no less than male. Such legitimized concentrations of authority might eventually unleash their "power" against the slave system itself (Davis: 1972, 4.)”

Despite women providing care for their children, a matriarchal family fundamentally could not exist because it would have undermined the antiblack structure of slavery.

The ability of some women to parent their children during slavery did not come without costs. Morgan states that “those women who could and did keep their children close were involved in a series of negotiated relationships with slaveowners (Morgan: 2004, 132.)” These negotiated relationships between slaves and masters were sometimes sexual in nature. Women who did serve as a maternal figure in their children’s lives often found themselves being the care-taker of the children of other slaves and the children of their slave masters.

White masters often fathered slaves but denied any kinship ties to them. Genetic relations between white males and white children resulted in white children being actively parented by white men. On the contrary, the genetic relation of black children to white men effectively rendered them fatherless. This fact solidified the white family, since the power to not recognize black children sustained sexual violence on black women, while preserving and regulating the reproductive functions and normative gender roles of white marriages.

The typical example of a white slave master denying kinship ties to his black children can be found in the relationship between Thomas Jefferson and his slave Sally Hemings. Thomas Jefferson served as the third president of the United States and owned the 5,000-acres Monticello plantation, located in Virginia. Jefferson owned approximately 130 slaves working on the plantation, but his relationship with one slave, named Sally Hemings, has long captivated historians.

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It is thought that Jefferson's relationship with Hemings resulted in Jefferson fathering several of her children. This is not surprising as Hemings herself is reported to have been fathered by Jefferson's father-in-law, John Wayles. The relationship between Hemings and Jefferson has been portrayed by some as one that was romantic in nature, a falsified image to the extent a relationship between a slave and her owner structurally precludes intimacy and romance as relations presupposing consent. The power imbalance between slave and owner meant that Hemings was incapable of refusing a relationship with Jefferson. As a result, any sexual relationship initiated by the latter on the former was akin to rape.

Despite having children with Jefferson, Hemings was still not permitted to form a family with him. Jefferson was never documented to have formally admitted to fathering the children of Hemings. In his will, Jefferson stated that two of his children with Hemings, Eston and Madison, were to be freed from slavery when they reached twenty-one years of age. After requesting his children be freed in his will, Jefferson asked for permission for Eston and Madison "... to remain in this state where their families and connections are..." Jefferson refused to acknowledge any familial ties to his children. Hemings was to remain enslaved according to his will, reaffirming his possession of her. In regard to slave masters and their wills, Jennifer Morgan argues that:

"...these documents were also places where, through the whims or careful planning of an owner, an enslaved person could most certainly be made cognizant of her diminished power over her own self or children... (Morgan: 2004, 73)"

Despite birthing Jefferson's children, Hemings was reminded that Jefferson still viewed her as property.

When concluding his will, in reference to his enslaved children, Jefferson stated "...I now give them my last, solemn, and dutiful thanks." Jefferson left no words of endearment for

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his children. In contrast, Jefferson had fond words for his favorite slave, Burwell. Jefferson calls Burwell "...my good, affectionate, and faithful servant." He wills Burwell "...the sum of three hundred Dollars to buy necessaries to commence his trade of painter and glazier, or to use otherwise as he pleases." Additionally, he declares that Eston and Madison Hemings are to be the "apprentices" of Burwell until they come of age for freedom.

Jefferson spoke more intimately of his slaves Burwell, John Hemings, and Joe Fosset than he did of his enslaved children. Jefferson also called slaves John Hemings and Joe Fosset his "good servants." He requested that they were to be freed one year after his death. Upon being freed they were to be given "all the tools of their respective shops or callings." In reference to Burwell, John Hemings, and Joe Fosset, Jefferson requested "a comfortable log house be built for each of the three servants so emancipated on some part of my lands convenient to them with respect to the residence of their wives." No similar gift was bequeathed to Eston or Madison Hemings and Jefferson did not detail why he chose to free Eston and Madison. Despite requesting that his slaves be permitted to remain near his family upon manumission, Jefferson consistently eschewed any recognition of, let alone affective investment in, the connection between "blackness" and "family". Moreover, by keeping Hemings captive, Jefferson solidified his unwillingness to allow her own black family to exist.

Enslaved women had no authority over their sexuality yet were still held socially and legally responsible for their sexual exploitation. It was impossible for the slave to charge a white man with rape because the slave, as legal property, had no capacity to revoke consent in regard to sexual intercourse. In Hartman's words, she was by definition "always willing", an image fortified by white tropes of Black female hyper-sexuality. As a result, it was slaves who were punished for resisting rape, which they were deemed to attract through "seducing" the master.

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Hartman therefore writes that the law selectively recognized the human agency of slaves only for the purpose of deeming them criminally culpable. While nullifying the captive's ability to "...give consent or act as agent," slave law "at the same time, acknowledged the intentionality and agency of the slave but only as it assumed the form of criminality (Hartman:1997, 80.)" Deprived of agency in establishing her own family, the slave was thus cast as the ultimate perpetrator of crimes (seduction and murder) against the white family. The absolute incompatibility between "blackness" and "family" was thus reinforced across the entire spectrum of coercion, violence, and desire suturing the social, symbolic, and libidinal space of antiblackness.

As mentioned earlier, white ideas of family not only prevented slaves from forming their own families but also forced them to adopt white family norms. Morgan asserts that:

"Slaveholdings balanced along gender lines meant that women enslaved in the new colony would find themselves, again or still, faced with the presumption or even expectation that they should create families (Morgan: 2004, 128.)"

Black women were not permitted to opt out of motherhood. The value of the female slave rested in her ability to reproduce. When auctioned and sold, owners noted how many children the female slave was expected to have. Slaves who were thought to be able to have children were valued at higher prices than those who could not. Morgan states that "even as her pregnancy took place outside sanctioned social norms, it would become transformed into an economic gain (Morgan: 2004, 76.)" Unwanted pregnancies were still seen as valuable because "...black women's bodies became the vessels in which slaveowners manifested their hopes for the future; they were, in effect, conduits of stability and wealth to the white community (Morgan: 2004,

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76.)” Through the birth of slave children, black bodies sustained white families while being interdicted from finding a “home” in their own.

Masters sought to maintain absolute control over their slaves. The development of family units could provide slaves with a sense of community and belonging. These ties were feared because it may have provided slaves with a sense of unity and importance. As a result, these family ties were prohibited and quelled at all costs. The black family did not fail to exist because blacks did not desire families, but because it was made into a structural impossibility. The entanglements of desire, practice, and structure that defined the status of the racially captive would only be amplified after abolition, as family norms were presented to the formerly enslaved as an ideal path to freedom and a material practice of renewed subjugation at the same time.

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Chapter 2

The Black Family as a Tool for Re-enslavement in the Regime of “Emancipation”

The American Civil War began in 1861 and ended in 1865. Some slaves attained freedom during the war and those who remained in slavery were set free as the war came to an end. People of all races and classes found themselves adjusting their lives in order to adapt to life after the war. Upon being released from slavery, former slaves confronted the task of securing their basic needs such as food, shelter and employment. Establishing economic and social security was of concern for newly freed slaves but rebuilding family ties and reuniting with lost kin was of great importance to them also.

Some blacks posted ads in newspapers in hopes of receiving information that would reunite them with their loved ones. On November 24th, 1866, a woman named Mary Bailey posted an ad in the Daily Dispatch newspaper in Richmond Virginia requesting information on the whereabouts of her children. The article read:

“WANTED, INFORMATION in relation to my children, NANCY, BEN, POLLY, TEMPA, and ISHAM BAILEY, who formerly belonged to Ben Prince, Sussex county. If any of them are living, or if any person can give me information of them, they will confer a great favor. Address me, in this city, care of Mr. George D. Fisher.

MARY BAILEY, colored.”

Ads like this, sometimes referred to as “last seen ads,” were not a rarity. Those who could afford to place these ads, provided as much detail as possible. Ad placers often cited the last time they saw the person they were looking for, information they heard about where they may be located, and sometimes included physical descriptions.

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Yet, while attempting to reunite and reconstruct families after emancipation, blacks found that desires to ground freedom in family life and economic autonomy were “untimely”, they arrived too late, as the terms of emancipation had already configured the black family as a site of renewed captivity. Michelle Alexander argues that:

“without the labor of former slaves, the region’s economy would surely collapse, and without the institution of slavery, there was no longer a formal mechanism for maintaining racial hierarchy and preventing “amalgamation” with a group of people considered intrinsically inferior and vile (Alexander; 2010,27.)”

Freed blacks were viewed as a potential threat to the social fabric of American society. Consequently, a series of laws referred to as “black codes” were created as whites fought to keep blacks in a subordinate position. These codes governed black bodies dictating what spaces they could occupy, whom they could interact with, and making vagrancy illegal. These were not the only methods employed to quell blacks’ attempts to reconstruct their lives according to their own desires. Subtler techniques were also used to keep blacks captive. Saidiya Hartman examines pamphlets that were distributed to newly freed slaves instructing them on proper decorum in their new lives. Hartman points at a pamphlet titled *Advice to Freedmen* that tells blacks how to best emulate white culture. One portion of the pamphlet under the section titled ‘Household Life’ reads:

"Heretofore, although father, mother and children have resided in the same cabin, yet to a great extent you have not lived as families. We hope that before long there will be a change for the better in this respect. And how pleasant, when returning from the day's toil in the field, to sit down in a neat room where all is in good order, the furniture free from dust, the floor and hearth well swept, and the ceiling and wall nicely white-washed. It is living together that defines the hearth, although these arrangements are threatened by dirt

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and disorder, which not only present physical dangers in the form of illness and pestilence but also are signs of immorality. Hygiene--such as the cleanliness of persons, the need of fresh air, the importance of bed linen, not sleeping in one's day clothes-is as important as taking meals together in "beget[ting] system and regularity in the management of household affairs" and "cultivating those graces of manners and habits which distinguish cultivated and refined society (cit. in Hartman, 1997: 33.)”

Isaac W. Brinckerhoff, who authored *Advice to Freedmen*, acknowledged the inability of black families to emulate the white family during slavery. The advice given by Brinckerhoff and others sought therefore to regulate the way blacks interacted in the privacy of their homes, framing “responsible” private behavior as a correlate to “freedom”, hence crucial to public acceptance.

For Hartman, “domestic disorder was held responsible for criminality and a range of other sins, from vanity and consumption of tobacco and liquor to stealing (Hartman: 1997, 159.)” Brinckerhoff and others viewed their advice as an attempt to save blacks from their inherent immorality, which was associated with the alleged lack of personal responsibility fostered by enslavement. White cultural norms were framed as the epitome of morality and black “worthiness” for freedom was predicated on the injunction to emulate such norms. White experts and social workers entered black homes and set standards for cleanliness and morality while simultaneously dictating the way the way the black family should function.

The postwar state and civil society worked to convince blacks that conformity with white desires would lead to black social inclusion. Black failure to be included in society was viewed as a result of their own social deviance. Hartman contends that the “...free(d) individual was nothing if not burdened, responsible, and obligated (Hartman: 1997, 125.)” Hartman cites another passage from *Advice to Freedmen*:

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"With the enjoyment of a freedman's privileges, come also a freedman's duties. These are weighty. You cannot get rid of them. They must be met. And unless you are prepared to meet them with a proper spirit, and patiently and cheerfully fulfill these obligations, you are not worthy of being a freedman (cit. in Hartman, 1997: 125.)"

Whites treated the freedom of blacks as a gift, something former slaves should be appreciative of, a state of being that was not an inalienable right but a condition revocable in accordance with compliance with white power and sentiment.

For whites, a society in which blacks were not under white control was unfathomable. Notions of black inferiority meant that many whites believed that blacks would not be able to properly navigate society without guidance. Additionally, blacks were still seen as an essential source of labor. Capital saw an opportunity to manipulate black labor by promoting docile behavior. Hartman argues that commentaries like those found in *Advice to Freedmen* "...emphasized duty, morality, and cleanliness, and, above all else, they represented the family as a laboring unit (Hartman: 1997, 159)."

The expectation for blacks to readily adopt white family practices after slavery is puzzling considering how Black disadvantage was seen as a matter of past personal irresponsibility and present failure to adjust, while no comparable attention was paid to structurally redressing the material conditions and social practices determined by slavery. When narrating his life during slavery, Booker T. Washington stated that he could not "remember having slept in a bed until after our family was declared free by the Emancipation Proclamation (Washington: 1901, 5.)" He continued, in reference to his life during slavery: "I cannot remember a single instance during my childhood or early boyhood when our entire family sat down to the table together, and God's blessing was asked, and the family ate a meal in a civilized manner (Washington: 1901, 9.)"

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Frederick Douglass criticized the hypocrisy of whites who owned slaves and claimed to value families saying that:

“He who is the religious advocate of marriage robs whole millions of its sacred influence, and leaves them to the ravages of wholesale pollution. The warm defender of the sacredness of the family relation is the same that scatters whole families, — sundering husbands and wives, parents and children, sisters and brothers, —leaving the hut vacant, and the hearth desolate (Douglass: 1845, 102.)”

This excerpt is important because it highlights the way whites failed to conform to their own standards of morality yet yearned for blacks to adopt practices that whites claimed were important for survival. Even if blacks had desired to embrace white values of family during slavery, whites actively worked against the ability of blacks to do so. Despite official professions to the contrary, the family was not intended to function, for blacks, as a condition of autonomy and subjectivity.

Christina Sharpe calls the post-slavery period a time in which blacks were living in “the afterlife of property (Sharpe; 2016, 15),” or in the “wake” Of slavery. Sharpe states that “living in the wake means living in the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday black existence” (Sharpe: 2016, 15.) The afterlife of slavery is haunted by the paradigm of slavery, which impinged upon. black desires to purposefully reframe existence. Despite being free and desiring to redefine themselves, blacks were not ignorant to the fact that they remained in a white dominated world that devalued blackness.

Though existing within white spaces, blacks still resisted embracing white values. Hartman states that “the emancipated insisted that freedom was a departure, literally and figuratively, from their former condition (Hartman; 1997, 125.)” Yet, she continues, “the journey from chattel to man entailed a movement from subjection to self-possession, dependency to

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responsibility, and coercion to contract (Hartman: 1997, 132.)” Whites no longer owned blacks, but they developed methods to pressure blacks into submitting to white values making it impossible for blacks do define freedom for themselves.

Black efforts at community formation sought self-determination in a white society. One example was a neighborhood named Seneca Village which was founded in Manhattan during the 1820s. Blacks in this community were typically landowners with both homes, churches, a school, and a cemetery. By the 1850s, there were more than 260 residents in Seneca Village, two-thirds of whom were black (Wall; 2008, 98.) During this same time period, New York City developed the idea to create a large public park. Eventually, Seneca Village was chosen as the location for what is now known as Central Park. Politicians utilized eminent domain to seize the land, evicting the residents, and demolishing the village, dislocating the black residents, and effectively destroying a black community.

Seneca Village is not the only example of a once prosperous black community being destroyed. Rosewood was a predominately black community of approximately 342 blacks located in Florida that was destroyed in 1923 (Jones; 1997, 194.) The black residents in Rosewood built businesses and owned property. The occupations of residents varied from teachers and musicians to maids and farmers. The community grew with new residents steadily moving in and efforts to improve the infrastructure of the area. Maxine Jones states that “Rosewood's black residents no doubt considered themselves fortunate... (Jones; 1997, 193)” compared to other counties nearby. This feeling did not last long. In January of 1923, a white woman named Fannie Taylor accused a black resident of Rosewood of sexual assault. The following events resulted in what is now known as the Rosewood Massacre.

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One January 1st, 1923, white residents of Rosewood began to search the city for Taylor's accused attacker, Jessie Hunter (Jones; 1997, 194.) In the midst of the search for Hunter a black man named Sam Carter was killed and other residents were attacked. Three days passed without another attack taking place, when a mob of white men approached a home occupied by the Carrier family. The men demanded that the Carriers exit their home and when they refused, a shootout occurred resulting in fatalities on both sides (Jones; 1997, 195.). Violent attacks against black residents spread throughout the community with black residents being both injured and murdered or fleeing into the woods for refuge. Jones argues that this attack was not merely retaliation for the alleged attack of Taylor. A resident named Minnie Lee said that in addition to burning down the homes of black residents, members of the mob also stole their chickens, cows, and material possessions. Jones argues that the lives of Rosewood residents were transformed by the massacre claiming that it resulted in the inability of residents to inherit the families' businesses and properties and denying them:

“...the positive role models that had been abundant in their community. Instead of fulfilling their dreams of becoming entrepreneurs, landowners, teachers and musicians, they became maids, and cooks and boot blacks. They were unable to pass the proud tradition of Rosewood on to their children (Jones; 1997, 207.)”

Attempts by black Rosewood residents to create a prosperous black community and generational wealth were quelled. The community and the families within it were torn apart.

Neighborhoods like Seneca Village and Rosewood allowed blacks to come together and begin to construct new lives for themselves. A similar community known as Greenwood was formed in Tulsa, Oklahoma. One of the key developers of the community, John the Baptist Stradford believed that “...blacks had the best chance for success by pooling their resources, working together, and supporting one another's businesses (Hirsch; 2002, 30.)” A neighborhood

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developed that included blacks of all walks of life including doctors, grocers, real estate agents, prostitutes, and gamblers. White citizens of Tulsa patronized black merchants as well as black residents, aiding the economic growth of the community. Stradford and other blacks worked together to build an environment that promoted economic and social prosperity amongst blacks. Eventually, an allegation that a black Greenwood resident raped a white woman resulted in a white mob attacking the Greenwood community, looting homes and businesses. Looting served racial purposes in excess of its economic gains. According to Hirsch, whites feared the prosperity of blacks supposed to be racially inferior to whites. Hirsch states that:

“black success was an intolerable affront to the social order of white supremacy, so taking their possessions not only stripped blacks of their marital status but also tipped the social scales back to their proper alignment. This reassertion of authority, expressed through ransacked homes, was cause for celebration (Hirsch; 2002,105.)”

Looting in Greenwood was followed by fire and bombings that sought to completely obliterate the town and make it difficult for former residents to rebuild their lives. Whites felt threatened by any semblance of power or prosperity in black communities. As blacks worked together to build meaningful lives for themselves, whites plotted ways to keep themselves in a superior position in society. Regardless to whether blacks modelled their lives in accordance to suggestions such as those found in *Advice to Freedman*, white violence expressed the mandate to build white social life upon black social and physical death, as evident in the destruction of communities such as Seneca Village, Rosewood, and Greenwood. Despite being met with violence, blacks continuously attempted to build communities that would allow families to thrive through self-reliance and independence. Initially influenced by the purported universalism of the post-emancipation ethics of work, propriety, respectability, and responsibility, such strategies would become more politicized and radicalized once the antiblackness of that very universalism was

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exposed by black critique. The family-community nexus would then become a site both for black political reinvention and civil society's antiblack fear and violence.

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Chapter 3

The Black Family and the Utopia of Self-Determination

Ideas of how to best reinvent the black family have varied throughout time. For whites, the black family served as a tool to subjugate black bodies. Blacks viewed the liberation of the black family to be essential to the self-determination of the black population against white oppression. Throughout the twentieth century, in an attempt to liberate the black family, blacks sought in turns to use political reform, community building, and revolutionary organizations. Protecting and reinventing the black family became priorities to those in the fight for black liberation.

In *Freedom Dreams*, Robin Kelley analyzes ways blacks have sought to liberate themselves through social, political, and cultural change. It was not uncommon for blacks to view the maintenance and adoption of traditional African practices to be the key to their liberation. Edward Wilmot Blyden was one of the first black intellectuals in the 19th century to suggest that blacks developed an “African personality.” Blyden argued that emulating African societal structures could help to liberate members of the African Diaspora. Blyden’s reasoning was based on his assertion that

“African cultures were naturally communal and did not allow private ownership of land, and that their emphasis on collective responsibility for the entire community rendered homelessness, poverty, and crime nonexistent. And because all adult women were in marital relationships, he argued, there were no ‘spinsters’ or prostitutes (Kelley:2002,22.)”

Blyden contended that “indigenous African culture” and “traditional family practices” should be adopted by blacks. Kelley finds it important to note that not all African societies functioned in

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this manner as many had severe hierarchies. Kelley also notes that Blyden and others imagined Africa as a place “free of exploitation” when in reality, colonialism and imperialism had ravaged Africa, usually with the active collaboration of local intermediaries, deepening the absolute and irrecoverable loss determined at the “Door of No Return” (Brand: 2003.)

Paul Gilroy argues that Africa began to be viewed through a cultural lens as a place that would help blacks authenticate their racial identity. This view of Africa was held by many proponents of black Nationalism. Gilroy argues that views of racial solidarity and black nationalism have impacted the formation of the black family. Gilroy contends that the cultural-centered approach of black nationalism has resulted in “race” being viewed as kinship and “the family is the approved, natural site where ethnicity and racial culture are reproduced (Gilroy:1993, 197.)”

One crucial critique that Gilroy has of black nationalism is that its proponents often supported “fixed gender roles and generational responsibilities (Gilroy: 1993, 197.)” When defining the black family, gendered restrictions were placed on how it should and should not function, Gilroy contends that:

“What is racially and ethnically authentic is frequently defined by ideas about sexuality and distinctive patterns of interaction between men and women, which are taken to be expressive of essential difference. This authenticity is inseparable from talk about the conduct and the management of bitter gender based conflicts which are now recognized as essential to familial, racial and communal health (Gilroy:1993, 197.)”

In the reimagined black family, the black woman was viewed a nurturer, a means of reproduction for the black family. Useful as it is in emphasizing the need for challenging gender relations in order to liberate the black family, Gilroy’s analysis maintains a cultural, not structural, approach to race, one, that is, where gender is criticized and renegotiated in terms of “roles”, “norms”, and

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the symbolic order. A structural knowledge of race, along the lines indicated by Spillers, indicates, however, that the symbolic order of gender as the condition for negotiations involving human subjects was first and foremost made inaccessible to blacks by the very conditions of captivity that brought blackness as objecthood into the modern world.

For black feminist Evelyn Hammonds, therefore, gender norms concerning female sexuality and respectability were not so much part of symbolic and political machinations ordained along ideological lines, like nationalism for Gilroy, but rather derived their strength from the racial violence with which the black woman's sexuality is silenced. The fact that white norms defined the place of black women as family objects also by delegating some "patriarchal" power to black males does not diminish the salience of objecthood itself as the defining characteristic of the black female sexuality in opposition to the white female's gendered and subaltern subjecthood. The role of the black woman both in and outside of the black family was defined through a racial lens that positions the black female as subordinate to the white female's responsibility for human procreation of future inheritance and kin relations. For Hammonds, differently from Gilroy, the sexuality of the black female must thus be reclaimed outside the symbolic conflicts of gender, as a way for disreputable, disrespectful, or scandalous black female sexuality to make the black family a possible space of liberation.

The Civil Rights Movement (1954-1968) stood in a contradictory relationship to these aspirations, foregrounding black self-determination while at the same time focusing its achievements on the ground of legal and institutional protections. Securing the right to vote was of great importance to activists of the Civil Right Movement. Voting barriers had been in place for decades to prevent blacks from participating in the American political system. These barriers included poll taxes, literacy tests, and grandfather clauses which excluded a large portion of

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blacks from the political process. Voting was viewed as a way for blacks to gain autonomy and help bring an end to the mistreatment of blacks.

There was also a call to end the physical and sexual abuse of blacks. David Marriott writes of the lynching of blacks as a “spectacle, and gallery, both: a consolidation of racist community and a posture of whiteness (Marriot: 2000, 5.)” Lynching was a public event that evoked fear in blacks and pleasure in whites. Marriot calls lynching “a memory, an imago, that will not go away. Not only the body, burned and stinking in the trees, but black men, women and children looking, and then looking away, from what the white men have done (Marriot: 2000, 14.)” Lynching served as a tool of racial control that permitted whites to terrorize black communities. Though black women were lynched, black men were often the victims as they were treated as hypersexual, aggressive beings whom posed a threat to white women and the moral order of society. Pictures were taken of hanging black bodies, and souvenirs from the lynching were taken as well. These mementos allowed whites to revel in the pleasure of their acts long after the event had cumulated. Civil Rights activists advocated for this type of sexual and racialized terror to be brought to an end as it wreaked havoc on black families and communities.

From the Civil Rights Movement, the black power movement (BPM) was born. Members of this movement still largely found voting, equity in education, and freedom from assault by whites’ essential to the liberation of blacks but they also often differed in their views from the Civil Rights Movement. Civil rights organizations largely sought to work through existing sociopolitical channels to ignite change. BPM organizations often differed from civil rights activists in their response to violence, methods for evoking change, and political and social ideologies. Several BPM organizations thought self-determination, rather than demands for legal

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improvements, to be essential to the liberation of blacks. Kelley argues that “self-determination was understood to mean community control within the urban environment, not necessarily the establishment of a black nation (Kelley; 2002, 95.)” Though the BPM was composed of a sizeable amount of organizations, for the purpose of this discussion I will focus on the Black Panther Party as the organization that most clearly related self-determination to a critical reflection on reinventing black communities and families.

The Black Panther Party (BPP) was founded in October of 1966 by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale. Also known as the black Panther Party for Self-Defense, the BPP was one of the most prominent organizations during the BPM. The BPP “urged blacks to build their own communities and institutions and to control their own destiny (Jefferies: 2006, 185.)” The BPP advocated for a redistribution of wealth and resources and were followers of popular communist leaders Fidel Castro and Mao Zedong. BPP members advocated for socialist policies, frequently implementing social programs in black communities. For members of the BPP, unifying the black community was seen as a way to help uplift black families by providing a support system. Community programs were set up to provide health services and education to black communities.

The BPP’s Free Breakfast for Children program was implemented in order to provide free food to children and families in the community that were food insecure. Black Panther member Assata Shakur described the Free Breakfast for Children Program in Harlem as one of the most destitute claiming:

“The breakfast program in East Harlem was the poorest. In the middle of winter some of the kids were without hats, gloves, scarves, and boots and wore just some skimpy coats or jackets. When it was possible, we tried to hook them up with something from the free

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clothing drive. Only once in a while, when everything went smoothly and we were through early, did we get a chance to spend some time with the children. Usually we were in a rush making sure they got out to school on time (Shakur: 1987, 220.)”

Shakur notes that BPP often had limited interaction with the parents of this children. Despite this, the BPP took a communal approach when caring for the children. They fed, clothed, and educated the children, acting a support system for the parents of the children.

Women in the BPM found themselves with greater power than in the Civil Rights generation. Black women in these organizations fought for both their sexual and racial liberation. Assata Shakur stated that the “...revolutionary struggle of black people had to be against racism, capitalism, imperialism, and sexism and for real freedom under a socialist government (Shakur: 1987, 197.)” The social and political awareness of the BPP in addition to their community involvement made them targets for the government.

Government repression was a key contributor to the downfall of the BPP. Arrests, targeted assassination, infiltration and infights under the infamous COINTELPRO program devastated the party’s ability to conduct community initiatives. It was not uncommon for BPP chapters to be infiltrated by spies of the government who posed as allies. BPP offices were raided and BPP members and allies regularly harassed. Jefferies also argues that the government was strategic in assassinating key leaders of the BPP and supportive of the media’s negative portrayal of the BPP (Jefferies, 2007, 213.) The eradication of Black revolutionary organizations paved the road for the following decades’ intensified surveillance of black communities and families in the context of the “War on Drugs,” which will be further discussed in the next chapter, as black youth perceived to be unruly and black women thought to be lazy an immoral came to reconstitute civil society’s phobic objects.

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Alexis Gumbs has written of how black mothering and the politics (and policing) of black families derive their salience as objects of social concern from how they politically and existentially threaten an order where blacks are not, in Audre Lorde's words, "meant to survive" (Gumbs2016.) For Gumbs, mutual support by black women is in itself a tool for resistance against white oppression, resistance that is all the more frightening to the extent it defies the very coordinates of gendered claims from a place of structural ungendering and black "queerness". Reconnecting to generations of variously politicized community care for children in the absence of stable family roles, Gumbs reclaims the insurgent queerness of black motherhood:

"Those of us who nurture the lives of those children who are not supposed to exist, who are not supposed to grow up, who are revolutionary in their very beings are doing some of the most subversive work in the world. If we don't know it the establishment does (Gumbs et al: 2016, 20)."

The ability of the black woman to raise a child when historically being prevented to do so is in fact an act of resistance. Gumbs argues that support of the role of child-raising is essential to creating "the movement we need and the world we deserve (Gumbs: 2016, 26.)"

Uniting the black community is essential, across diverse trajectories of black politics, to liberating the black family. Activists in the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Power Movement varied in their approaches and ideologies, as were strategies pointing at legal protections grounded in gender as opposed to practices of queer mothering proceeding from structural black ungendering. Despite their diversity in methods and ideologies, these experiences saw the black family as an integral part of the black community that needed to be emancipated and protected. As my final chapter will show, the connection between black family and black community was not missed by institutional and societal interventions that, by criminalizing and pathologizing the former, sought to reestablish the subjugation of the latter.

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Chapter 4

The Criminalization of the Black Family: From Moynihan to Mass Incarceration

The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, often referred to as the Moynihan Report, was a controversial document authored by Daniel Patrick Moynihan and released to the public in 1965. The report sought to advise then president Lyndon B. Johnson on the state of the African American family. Moynihan argued that the black family in America was failing and the nation should attempt to rescue it from itself. According to Moynihan, black families suffered socially and economically to a greater extent than white families because their structure was inadequate for success in America. Moynihan attributed these failures to America's slave past which encouraged mother-centered families. As a result, Moynihan believed that it is the responsibility of the nation to "strengthen" the black family in order "to enable it to raise and support its members as do other families."

Moynihan's presentation of the black woman as a threat to the black family was not surprising, since black women were actively involved in both the Civil Rights Movement and feminist movements, fighting against antiblackness and sexism simultaneously. Black women during this era were neglected by white liberalism and excluded from feminist movements.

Kimberle Crenshaw states that:

"feminist and civil rights thinkers as well have treated black women in ways that deny both the unique compoundedness of their situation and the centrality of their experiences to the larger classes of women and blacks. Black women are regarded either as too much like women or blacks and the compounded nature of their experience is absorbed into the collective experiences of either group or as too different, in which case black Women's

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blackness or femaleness sometimes has placed their needs and perspectives at the margin of the feminist and black liberationist agendas (Crenshaw; 1998, 323.”)

Women found themselves fighting against black male activists to have their battle against sexism acknowledged and against white women to have their racial oppression be acknowledged in the feminist movement.

Wini Breines analyzes one prominent civil rights group, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC,) and its treatment of women. Breines notes that many women involved in the SNCC were not only crucial to the functioning of the organization but also often respected by their male-counterparts. Breines cites numerous black women in the movement arguing that, while they did not feel the effects of sexism, they “often were expected to fulfill traditional female roles and defer to men in final decision making (Breines; 2007, 23.)” Black women critiqued the monopoly men had over decision making in SNCC and raised concerns over black male leader’s failure to view the liberation of black female sexuality essential to the progress of the movement.

Breines argues that the lack of acknowledgement of the black woman’s plight in civil rights organizations foreshadowed problems that the black woman would face in feminist movements (Breines; 2007,21.) White feminism did not address the plight of the black woman, although using that plight as a reservoir for rhetorical argument based on emotional analogy. Angela Davis argues that white feminists often alluded to marriage being like slavery but by doing so they:

“...seem to have ignored, however, the fact that their identification of the two institutions also implied that slavery was really no worse than marriage. But even so, the most important implication of this comparison was that white middle-class women felt a

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certain affinity with black women and men, for whom slavery meant whips and chains (Davis;1981,25)”

The plight of the black woman differed from that of the white woman because of the privileges white women were afforded due to their race. This led Frances Beal to say that:

“the white women's movement is far from being monolithic. Any white group that does not have an anti-imperialist and anti-racist ideology has absolutely nothing in common with the black women's struggle (Beal; 1969,8.)”

Davis argues that, while liberation from being relegated to the position of housewife was important to white women, black women had been interdicted from both having “houses” or being “wives” or “mothers”. Beal echoes this stating that it is “idle dreaming to think of black women simply caring for their homes and children like the middle class white model (Beal; 1969, 2.)” The nature of relationships between black men and black women leads Davis to firmly reject Moynihan stereotypical construction of a “black matriarchy”.

As previously mentioned, during slavery the black body was objectified and became a thing to be owned (Spillers; 1987.) The power that whites held which permitted them to govern black bodies was never truly relinquished and in fact other methods were employed to retain it. As a result, Spillers argues that it is a “fatal misunderstanding” to position the black woman as a matriarch when historically the black woman could not even lay claim to her own child.

As black women resisted pathologizing narratives that placed them at the root of the perceived problems of the black family, they were not only met with resistance from civil society but the government as well. Davis writes, “the matriarchal black woman has been repeatedly invoked as one of the fatal by-products of slavery” and “when the Moynihan Report consecrated this myth with Washington's stamp of approval, its spurious content and propagandistic mission should have become apparent (Davis; 1972, 4.)” Moynihan presented the black woman as a

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threat to the black family and the black man, whom black males needed to assert dominance over by helping the state subdue them.

Moynihan argued that "...many slaveowners neither fostered Christian marriage among their slave couples nor hesitated to separate them on the auction block, the slave household often developed a fatherless matrifocal (mother-centered) pattern (Moynihan.1965, 15.)". He contended that blacks needed to break the cycle of mother-centered families because America is a patriarchal society and "... it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another (Moynihan; 1965.)" For Moynihan, there was no good reason for blacks in America to not practice patriarchy in their household as failure to conform to the culture of the dominant group hindered social mobility. One solution Moynihan had for the plight of the black family was to place women in a subordinate position to man, as was perceived common practice in white families.

Tiffany King criticizes Moynihan's attack on the black woman writing that it "vilifies black single female sexual autonomy" and "disavows structural inequality." Her point recalls Hartman's analysis of the racialized production of limited black female autonomy as a "simulated" humanity geared to criminal culpability. Hartman refers to the case *State of Missouri v. Celia, a Slave* (1855). A slave named Celia was sentenced to be hung for killing her owner, who raped her for four years prior to meeting his fate. Celia, legally defined as property, should have been logically incapable of criminal responsibility, which was nonetheless attributed to her on account of her alleged female sexual power. Her ability to "seduce" her owner established the legal fiction of a putative "romance" as a specific mode of enjoyment of black bodies, one in which limited humanity could be imputed to rebellious property for the purpose of criminal

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punishment. For Hartman, it was essentially for such criminalizing purposes that a simulated humanity was allowed to enslaved black women. (Hartman; 1996, 539). Similarly, by vilifying the black woman on account of her alleged sexual power, Moynihan decentered racism and inequality as key manifestations of black oppression and forces devastating the black family. Instead Moynihan made the black woman responsible for the state of the black family, on account of his notion of “black matriarchy”, which he, similarly to the State of Missouri which had sentenced the slave Celia to death, viewed in almost demonic terms as a force capable of destroying not only African American communities, but normative notions of the family as sustaining white Western modernity. Moynihan released his report during the 1960s as black women fought for gender equality in Civil Rights Movement and critiqued a feminist movement that excluded them. The time that Moynihan published the report attacking the black matriarch is important because, as King writes:

“the black matriarch as a trope for disorganization also threatens heteronormative gender, sexuality, family and property formations. The black matriarch is imagined as causing chaos both at the level of the household and on the actual landscape of the city (King; 2018. 81.)”

The black female was viewed as a menace to be quelled. The suppression of the black female was important because for whites the “black female flesh in the form of the black matriarch disfigures the institution of the family and renders it a site of rebellion where the orders of property and space implode (King; 2018,80.)” Conforming to a patriarchal family unit as Moynihan suggested served a greater purpose than forcing black families to fit into the norm; it reinforced the white family as legitimate.

Moynihan’s report is a historical example of the ways in which whites sought to govern black families. King argues that the Moynihan report shows that:

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“white families are constructed as private and impenetrable spaces that protect white people—specifically, white patriarchal domination—from the excesses of state power. However, black matriarchal households in *The Report* are porous spaces that the state enters obliterating any possibility of private space. In this way, black households in *The Report* fall outside of liberal humanist discourses that posit humans (and human families) as self-contained and inviolable, particularly from state abuses (black; 2018. 28)”

The black family has never been afforded the same privacy as the white family which is viewed as inviolable. Instead the black family has always been positioned as infinitely penetrable by forces pertaining to the social, political, and economic (social work, state surveillance, forced sterilization) as well as the libidinal (the image of black women as demonic and sexually perverse, which legitimized and routinized generalized violence on black female bodies while shoring up Human, meaning non-black, family values).

In the footsteps of Moynihan and in the aftermath of the violent destruction of black revolutionary organizations by the state, welfare policies have become the new terrain on which the government and both political parties aimed to roll back the alleged “power” of black women and its capacity to twist the morality of public expenditure. Michelle Alexander notes that around the 1980s conservatives and liberals alike began to frame welfare as:

“a contest between hardworking, blue collar whites and poor blacks who refused to work. The not-so-subtle message to working-class whites was that their tax dollars were going to support special programs for blacks who most certainly did not deserve them (Alexander; 2010, 47.)”

Ange-Marie Hancock writes that black women were demonized for pursuing resources that were constitutionally guaranteed to them (2004, 25.) Hancock claims that the “welfare queen” label “has two organizing dimensions: hyperfertility and laziness (2004, 25.)” Black females were attacked with terms such as “welfare queen” and “single mothers” who, after having damaged

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African American communities and respectable family morality were now bent on cajoling the state and white taxpayers to fund their lifestyles.

Negative stereotypes such as those aforementioned had more than the effect of public scorn on the black welfare recipient; they eventually resulted in serious consequences for the black community. Presidents such as Ronald Reagan and Bill Clinton used these narratives in their presidential campaigns, promising voters they would put an end to perceived welfare abuse. Under the Clinton administration (1993-2001,) impactful changes were made to government welfare programs. Clinton created the Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) program which prescribed that welfare recipients could not receive welfare for more than a total of five years in their lifetime (Edelman; 2013.) Those who did not achieve financial security after reaching their lifetime limit, would have to find alternative means of obtaining income. The TANF also “imposed a five-year lifetime limit on welfare assistance, as well as a permanent, lifetime ban on eligibility for welfare and food stamps for anyone convicted of a felony drug offense—including simple possession of marijuana (Alexander; 2010, 56,)” making it increasingly difficult for those who need financial assistance upon being released from prison to attain it. In regard to public housing, Clinton created the “One Strike and You’re Out” rule which banned ex-convicts from living in public housing. The changes that Clinton made to welfare and public housing led Alexander to say that “Clinton—more than any other president—created the current racial undercaste (Alexander; 2010, 56.)”

The banning of convicted felons from receiving welfare benefits is problematic. Mass incarceration in the United States has resulted in a large amount of blacks being imprisoned at disproportionate rates compared to their peers, making the ban of felons from certain government assistance a critical point of concern for the black community. The “war on drugs” was declared

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by President Ronald Reagan in 1982 at time when illegal drug use was actually on the decline. The Reagan administration “hired staff to publicize the emergence of crack cocaine in 1985 as part of a strategic effort to build public and legislative support for the war (Alexander; 2010, 5.)” This is important because the War on Drugs has been claimed to have been launched as a result of a crack epidemic in poor communities, a narrative Alexander convincingly refutes.

The war on drugs has had a profound impact on the black community. Alexander notes that incarceration rates sharply increased amongst minorities when the war on drugs was launched:

“In less than thirty years, the U.S penal population exploded from around 300,000 to more than 2 million, with drug convictions accounting for the majority of the increase. The United States now has the highest rate of incarceration in the world, dwarfing the rates of nearly every developed country, even surpassing those in highly repressive regimes like Russia, China, and Iran. In Germany, 93 people are in prison for every 100,000 adults and children. In the United States, the rate is roughly eight times that, or 750 per 100,000 (Alexander; 2010, 6.)”

Alexander argues that as incarceration rates increased, blacks became overrepresented in the prison population:

“No other country in the world imprisons so many of its racial or ethnic minorities. The United States imprisons a larger percentage of its black population than South Africa did at the height of apartheid. In Washington, D.C., our nation’s capital, it is estimated that three out of four young black men (and nearly all those in the poorest neighborhoods) can expect to serve time in prison.⁹ Similar rates of incarceration can be found in black communities across America. (Alexander; 2010, 6.)”

Alexander asserts that the overrepresentation of blacks in prison cannot be explained by the rates of drug-related crime. In fact, Alexander says that “people of all colors use and sell illegal drugs at remarkably similar rates” and that research actually shows that whites are more likely to

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participate in drug-related crimes that people of color. Despite this, people of color not only are incarcerated at higher rates than whites but they also receive inordinately heavy sentences.

One explanation for the disproportionate amount of blacks incarcerated is that it is a tool for social control. Alexander argues that sociologists have observed that social control has frequently driven government punishment systems and as a result, “the extent or severity of the punishment is often unrelated to actual crime patterns (Alexander; 2010, 7.)” As with the convict leasing system, the imprisonment of blacks allows whites to maintain control over “unruly” blacks.

The disproportionate imprisonment of blacks has a harsh effect on the black family. Parents are separated from children and relationships are torn apart. Mary Pattillo says that research shows that “children of incarcerated parents suggest that parental incarceration is associated with poorer emotional, behavioral and psychological development of children (Pattillo; 2006, 98.)” Pattillo also argues that incarceration has been proven to dissolve previously intact relationships claiming that “the experience of imprisonment can produce strong feelings of shame and anger, both for inmates and their families, providing a source of marital stress after release (Pattillo;2006,23.)”

Upon being released from prison, ex-convicts face grim prospects. It is difficult for them to find housing as they are excluded from many welfare programs, making it challenging for them to provide for themselves and others. As a result of being banned from public housing, convicts cannot live with friends or family members who receive said assistance making it difficult for families to stay together. Gaining meaningful employment is also challenging for ex-convicts, making it difficult for them to meet their basic necessities. Employers are allowed to discriminate against employees as a result of their criminal past. This leads Alexander to argue

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that criminals “are the one social group in America we have permission to hate” as they are “entitled to no respect and little moral concern (2010; 141.)”

Moynihan’s critique of the Black family provides ideological grounds to welfare reform and mass incarceration to the extent that across this entire arc blacks are “shamed and condemned for failing to hold their families together (Alexander; 2010, 175.)” Though rhetoric placing blacks in subordinate positions has shifted over time, the need for whites to maintain social control over black bodies and black families has remained consistent. The blame for the plight of the black family in America has continuously been shifted from the oppressor to the oppressed resulting in unjustified attacks on the black family under the ruse of saving it.

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Conclusion

In this thesis, I argue that in an antiblack world, the black family cannot ultimately exist, or the structural logic of such a world is incompatible with the black family as an ontological descriptor of autonomy, self-determination, and relationality. The social and structural forces of an antiblack society render the idea of the black family an oxymoron. It is impossible for a black family to exist in an antiblack world because its existence would deny its deployment as a key device of black subjugation and social death upon which the stability of civil society rests. When constructing ways of legitimizing the existence of the black family, it is important to understand the way white Americans have historically used the black family as a tool to oppress black people.

In order to surmount the challenges that black families are face with, I find it important to analyze the way antiblack forces have shaped black families as a starting point for reimagining black communities. In a country where white familial values that center a nuclear family structure are considered the norm, the black family is viewed as a deviant. This deviance has been perceived as a threat that has led to non-normative strategies of black family-making to being criminalized. Much criminalization has verged on representations of the black female as a threateningly illegible entity, hypersexual and lacking sexuality simultaneously. The black female has also been depicted as a matriarch who emasculates black men and abuses white benevolence. Consequently, black men have been portrayed as lazy, sexually frustrated, abnormally violent beings, whose masculinity needs to be channeled and tamed by that very white family values that enlist black men in the labor of reestablishing patriarchal power over black women.

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These false narratives about the characteristics of blacks have been used to justify the violation of black bodies, families, and communities. Whites have depicted themselves as saviors to the black community who seek to rescue blacks from immoral character traits that are a byproduct of, alternatively, black culture or black history. Since slavery, the black family has been demonized. The black family has been a source of white oppression not only because it has deviated from white familial norms but because it threatened the legitimacy of white racial and cultural superiority.

When black families dared to exist outside white cultural values and gender norms, they performed a revolutionary act. Since the capturing of African slaves, whites have argued that blacks need whites to save them from their disreputable essence. When blacks formed communities such as Rosewood and Seneca Village, practiced communalism, and deviated from the nuclear family structure, they dared to define family according to their own terms while challenging the legitimacy of white familial values.

Blacks must continue to resist white oppression and construct their own ideas of black existence. Self-determination is essential to the liberation of the black family. In 1960 the United Nations General Assembly declared that “All peoples have the right to self-determination; by virtue of that right they freely determine their political status and freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development.” So long as whites police black bodies, blacks are unable to fully pursue the black family unrestrained. It is also important to reconfigure the image of the black female and black male in regard to white gender norms. The demonization of both the black female and black male is used as a tool to justify invading black families. It is crucial that blacks gain autonomy over their lives

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I encourage one to analyze the way the black family has defined itself in opposition to white familial norms. This inquiry will allow one to begin to investigate the existence of the black family as defined by blacks. The black family should not only be studied from a purportedly universal yet deeply racialized viewpoint, but also from the perspective of blacks who seek to establish black families as legitimate. Nonetheless, when reimagining the idea of the black family, the impact of white oppression should not be ignored as it has undoubtedly had an effect on its existence. As discussed in previous chapters, whites have had a considerable impact on black families and community. It is crucial to start questioning the legitimacy of white cultural norms and their place in society. Once we began to question and challenge white cultural norms and deconstruct false narratives of black existence, we can then work to liberate the black family and create a world where its existence is legitimate.

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