

Family

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Scholars of black life and culture have taken an interest in the notion of “family” from at least the turn of the twentieth century; W. E. B. Du Bois’s groundbreaking sociological study *The Philadelphia Negro* (1899) devoted a chapter to “the Negro Family,” which explored everything from typical urban family size (significantly smaller than families in rural areas), variations in family income and expenditures across classes, and details of family life, including various types of cohabitation and child rearing. Notes Du Bois, “The home was destroyed by slavery, struggled up after emancipation, and is again not exactly threatened, but neglected in the life of city Negroes” ([1899] 1996, 196). This emphasis on the deleterious consequences of slavery and plantation life for the black family forms a through line from Du Bois to later sociological and historical studies, perhaps most famously E. Franklin Frazier’s comprehensive *The Negro Family in the United States* (1939), which argued that black family life had been deeply affected by slavery’s abuses and that the resultant fracturing of the nuclear family structure continued to reverberate in the black community of the early twentieth century.

Twenty-five years later, the sociologist, senator, and assistant secretary of labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan relied heavily on Frazier’s work when drawing up the report, commissioned by President Lyndon B. Johnson, that became *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965). Moynihan’s report, which detailed what he called the “tangle of pathology” of black family life, argued that African American communities “ha[ve] been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is so out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole” (29). Moynihan’s report generated significant controversy not simply because of this claim



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about black matriarchy, which echoed the work of Frazier and other black sociologists and pundits writing in the 1960s, such as Kenneth Clark and Whitney Young, but because his work appeared to emphasize not structural racism and socioeconomic disadvantage as the cause of these issues within the black family but rather something dysfunctional inherent to black culture itself. Feminist critics of the report and of the controversy surrounding it have since pointed out the masculinist emphasis of much of the critique of Moynihan; most of Moynihan's critics agreed with his assessment of black women as overly dominant within black households, as well as his argument that black families “reversed [the] roles of husband and wife” and thereby emasculated the black man (30). Where such critics disagreed with Moynihan was on causes of and solutions to this issue: Moynihan's work was repeatedly interpreted, precisely because of its emphasis on the “tangle of pathology,” as victim blaming (see, for instance, William J. Ryan's 1971 response to Moynihan, *Blaming the Victim*) and as insufficiently attentive to the importance of jobs and other structural changes in potentially transforming black family life.

The Moynihan report's continued influence in the latter years of the twentieth century, and even into the twenty-first, is undeniable; the trope of black family “pathology” popularized by Moynihan continues to circulate in the United States, particularly in political commentary about black families from both ends of the political spectrum. If such commentary, divorced even from Moynihan's research into the causes of such assumed “pathology,” rarely looked to the slave past to justify present-day black struggles, research on the antebellum period that emerged in the years immediately following the civil rights era, including John W. Blassingame's *The Slave Community* (1972), Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made* (1974), and Herbert G. Gutman's *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom* (1977), actually questioned conventional wisdom about the fractured and fragile black family structure under slavery, instead emphasizing the way that enslaved blacks had formed crucial bonds on the plantation. These studies—along with work such as Angela Davis's “Reflections on the Black Woman's Role in the Community of Slaves” (1972), which explicitly countered the lingering belief in black “matriarchy” under conditions of



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enslavement, instead focusing on black women's forced equality with their male counterparts, as well as their insurgent resistance—opened a critical space for scholars of African American history and culture to attend to different forms of “family” and kinship structure than the heteropatriarchal *nuclear* family. The anthropologist Carol Stack's *All Our Kin* (1974) is a notable example of this sort of critical reframing of notions of “family” and attention to how impoverished blacks nonetheless found ways to share resources and create lasting kinship bonds even under difficult material circumstances.

The nuclear “family,” which, as the feminist literary scholar Hortense Spillers famously argued in her groundbreaking 1987 essay “Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book,” is a discursive and ideological institution deeply implicated by histories of white supremacy and racist violence, has also and as a result been a central means by which captive black bodies had been excluded from “Western” conceptions of gender and culture: “It seems clear, however, that ‘Family,’ as we practice and understand it ‘in the West’—the *vertical* transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements . . .—becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community” (74). Spillers's work spoke back to and paved the way for other black women's writing on “family” that highlighted the institution's fraught history and the ways that the word “family,” particularly in its narrowest senses, has operated as a disciplinary term—with those who are disciplined *by* the concept overwhelmingly black women, the mothers, sisters, daughters, and wives whose behavior within the embattled black family unit has so often been scrutinized and found wanting. A great deal of this writing has taken place not in the sphere of scholarship and analysis but in that of fiction.

Published in the same year as Spillers's essay, Toni Morrison's Pulitzer Prize-winning novel *Beloved* (1987) explores both the traumatic mechanics of slavery's decimation of black patriarchal “family”—husbands and wives, parents and children separated; intrafamilial violence; the haunting presence of those who are lost—as well as the less conventional “family” bonds that the enslaved nonetheless forged and the ways that such bonds sustained and fortified slavery's victims and survivors.



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Other critically acclaimed works by black women, such as Alice Walker's *The Color Purple* (1982), also a Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Ntozake Shange's *For Colored Girls Who Have Considered Suicide / When the Rainbow Is Enuf* (1975), and Gloria Naylor's *The Women of Brewster Place* (1982), not only questioned the restrictive definitions of "family" that continued to be applied to black Americans, portraying a number of alternative forms of kinship and familial connection, including same-gender relationships, but also examined the ways that domestic violence and other intimate abuses by African American men disrupted the black heteropatriarchal "family" from within.

The hostile response to these works by some black male reviewers and critics—see, for instance, the sociologist Robert Staples's "The Myth of the Black Macho: A Response to Angry Black Feminists" (1979)—led the scholar Deborah McDowell to pen the essay "Reading Family Matters" (1989), in which she calls such figures' critical reliance on a "totalizing fiction" of African American community wholeness, a story of "the Black Family cum Black Community headed by the Black Male who does battle with an oppressive White world," a black "family romance" (78). In the world of media, this black family romance found expression in television via a number of popular series depicting African American family life, including *Good Times* (1974–79), *The Jeffersons* (1975–85), *227* (1985–90), *Family Matters* (1989–98), *Roc* (1991–94), and, perhaps best known and most influential, *The Cosby Show*, which ran from 1984 to 1992 and depicted a wealthy professional black couple and their five children. Experts disagree about the ultimate value of the "positive image" of the black family that Cosby portrayed, with the sociologist Herman Gray arguing in 1995, for instance, that despite the show's groundbreaking exploration of diversity *within* blackness, with its specific focus on the black upper middle class, the show "seemed unable, or unwilling, to negotiate its universal appeals to family, the middle class, mobility, and individualism on the one hand and the particularities of black social, cultural, political, and economic realities on the other" (81–82). Yet the show's meaning and legacy as a powerful cultural image of "family" has perhaps been troubled most by the long list of sexual-assault allegations leveled against an aging Bill Cosby, which ultimately challenge the show's validity



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as an idealized black household that purportedly was based on Cosby's own equally ideal family life.

McDowell's work on the family romance highlights another common but contested use of the word "family" in African American communities, as a marker of *racial* belonging; understanding the larger black community as a "family" has been signaled, historically, by linguistic and discursive gestures such as the "brothers and sisters" of the civil rights and Black Power movements, a form of address that grows out of similar language common to the black church. And while the more inclusive term "sibling" is growing in popularity as African Americans who identify as transgender become more visible and vocal about the ways that words such as "brothers" and "sisters" can be exclusionary, the very language of "family" as a metaphor for black community has also been questioned in some quarters, most notably by the black British scholar Paul Gilroy. Gilroy, in his 1991 essay "'It's a Family Affair': Black Culture and the Trope of Kinship," critiqued the way that the metaphor of "family" reduced "the crisis of black politics and social life" to "a crisis of black masculinity alone" (204) and predicted that "disastrous consequences follow when the family supplies the only symbols of political agency we can find in the culture and the only object upon which that agency can be seen to operate" (207). Ultimately a critique of U.S.-centric racial politics, Gilroy's analysis emphasized that alternative forms of community building, such as those found in transnational or global diasporic contexts, might prove a more fruitful and inclusive way of conceptualizing community.

The word "family" as a signal of membership has also circulated within black queer and LGBT (lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender) communities, as a means of recognizing and embracing those who are open or closeted members. The sociologist Mignon Moore is one of few scholars who have examined how conventional notions of "family" are embraced and also contested by black LGBT subjects; her book *Invisible Families: Gay Identities, Relationships, and Motherhood among Black Women* (2011) argues that "the family life of gay women of color has for many years been largely invisible to African Americans" (2) and uses ethnography to explore "how Black lesbians'



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participation in and enactment of their intersecting identities as Black, as women, and as gay people influence family formation, mate selection, expectations for partners in intimate relationships, and other aspects of family life” (3). Notably, with the landmark 2015 U.S. Supreme Court ruling *Obergefell v. Hodges*, same-sex marriage became legal in all fifty states, making it possible for existing LGBT families to seek legal protections from the state that had previously been denied.

While stereotypes about the brokenness or pathology of the black family continue to circulate in the twenty-first century, recent scholarship continues to refute such perceptions; a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) report from 2013 for instance, details how black fathers are actually as involved, if not more involved, with child rearing as white or Latino fathers in similar living situations, debunking the persistent myth of the “absent” black father (Jones and Mosher 2013). That this myth persists—alongside other oft-repeated narratives about the black family in “crisis”—may explain why African American families continue to face higher levels of scrutiny from the state. One result is that black children are overrepresented in foster care, despite statistics that indicate that “children of all races are equally as likely to suffer from abuse and neglect” (see the U.S. Government Accountability Office’s 2007 report, *African American Children in Foster Care*). As African American studies continues its work in the twenty-first century, “family” is sure to continue as a complex and contested term, with an array of meanings that are shaped by, but strive to move beyond, black history in the U.S. and around the globe.



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