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FROM THE REUNIONS OF RECONSTRUCTION TO THE RECONSTRUCTION OF
REUNIONS: EXTENDED AND ADOPTIVE KIN TRADITIONS AMONG LATE-
NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY AFRICAN AMERICANS

by

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

“From the Reunions of Reconstruction to the Reconstruction of Reunions:

Extended and Adoptive Kin Traditions among Late-Nineteenth and Twentieth Century
African Americans”

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Only in the last forty years have scholars begun to take seriously the expansive kinship networks often seen in African American families. Although African Americans have a longstanding history of maintaining extended kinship networks, which often also incorporated non-relatives as adoptive kin, the majority of scholars who have researched black kin systems are not historians. Such work has largely been taken up by sociologists and anthropologists. Moreover, few historians have researched black kin systems beyond the period of Reconstruction. This dissertation historicizes black family culture and its impact on political and economic history after Emancipation.

The dissertation uses a thematic and chronological approach to examine the ways in which traditions of familial flexibility, first developed under slavery, continued to shape African Americans’ conceptualizations of family and patterns of organizing

well into the Twentieth Century. Both the reunion movements of Reconstruction and the turn of the twenty-first century demonstrate the importance of familial networks to black communities. Chapters on black church families at the turn of the twentieth century, interdependent families affected by twentieth century war-time migration, and political kinship established by black families in the late-twentieth century Civil Rights Movement reveal the ways in which African Americans conceptions of family shaped their efforts to address poverty, racism, and familial dispersion.

The dissertation builds on historical work on the black family, as well sociological and anthropological theories to make several interventions. By using family as both a site for historical inquiry as well as an analytical framework for interpreting history, the dissertation introduces new methods of investigating the political and economic impact of black family culture. The project also sheds new light on old historiographical questions, including the ways in which the church became the most autonomous of black institutions in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as well as the impact of migration on the societies migrants leave behind, by examining them through the lens of family. Additionally, it contributes a historian's analysis to a growing and necessary literature on the characteristics and experiences of black families that advances scholarly discussions beyond pathology debates and monolithic depictions of black family life.

DEDICATION

This dissertation is dedicated to my delightful parents

Otis James and Wilma Wright Frazier

for introducing me to both my history and

the Ancient of Days.

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Introduction

“Making It What We Need It to Be”: Lessons from the Past and a Twentieth-Century African-American Familial Consciousness

“We don’t hold to the view that the nuclear family is the only kind of family that exists in America,” Dr. Dorothy I. Height told an interviewer when she launched the first annual National Council of Negro Women (NCNW) National Black Family Reunion Celebration (NBFRC) in 1986.¹ The thousands of African American family groups included distant relatives and fictive kin but all, gathered on the National Mall that September with “a true sense of unity and pride,” that provided a “momentum for dealing with our problems by building on the strengths of the Black family.”² Height imagined the NBFRC as an avenue through which young people could “take pride in their self-image, for people of all ages to speak up for the essence of Black heritage and pay tribute to the skills and the many ways Black people have not only survived but achieved.”³ She also hoped that the organization would help black communities mobilize to address under-employment, teenage pregnancy, substance abuse, educational deficiencies and other problems within black communities.⁴ Over the next twenty-three years the Council’s annual “reunion” celebrations grew to include hundreds of thousands of African American participants. The long and important history of extended and adoptive family as an organizing metaphor and actual source for addressing challenges in African American communities shaped the ways in which

¹ Gwen McKinney, “Reunion Seeks To Debunk Myths,” *Washington Informer* (17 September 1986, Vol. 22, Iss. 48), 1

² “Black Family Reunion Sets Records,” *The Skanner* (25 February 1987, Vol. 12, Iss. 21), 25

³ “Black Family Reunion Gala Comes To Georgia,” *Columbus Times* (29 May 1988, Vol. 27, Iss. 22), A1

⁴ “Black Family Reunion Gala Comes To Georgia,” A1

NBFRC's "family reunion celebration" resonated with millennial African Americans. Although the thousands of NBFRC conferees were not "relatives" in the traditional sense, their sense of community as Black Americans and their individual and historical connections to family groups of various kinds is integral to their overwhelmingly positive response to the NCNW's call to "reunion."

In 1886, a century before the National Council of Negro Women first launched their National Black Family Reunion Celebration, Peter Simms, who had been enslaved in Charles County, Maryland – only thirty-five miles south of the site of the NBFRC – continued to solicit information about the whereabouts of his family members. That year he posted several ads in *The Christian Recorder* requesting aid in finding his mother and siblings. Twenty years after emancipation, like thousands of others, he had not given up on the possibility of reuniting with his loved ones. NCNW's national "family reunion" of unrelated black people did not include the reclamation of lost family members that characterized the black family reunions of the late-nineteenth century. But, late-twentieth century mass black family reunion events and former slaves' desperate searches for loved ones are not unrelated activities. Rather, they represent two points on a historical trajectory that demonstrate the importance of extended and adoptive kin networks to African American life.

Family culture has always been central to African American social, economic, and political history, yet few historians have investigated the various ways in which African Americans have interpreted and expressed family. Many historians have analyzed the black family within certain periods, but few have historicized black family culture and how it shapes different aspects of history. Moreover, only in the last forty

years have scholars began to take seriously the expansive kinship networks often seen in African American families. Moreover, historical work on the black family still includes little analysis of extended or adoptive kin relations. Although African Americans have a longstanding history of maintaining extended kinship networks, which often also incorporated non-relatives as adoptive kin, the majority of scholars who have researched African American kin systems are not historians. Such work has largely been taken up by sociologists and anthropologists.

TRAPPED IN THE DISCOURSE OF INACCURATE COMPARISON: A HISTORY OF SCHOLARSHIP ON THE BLACK FAMILY

Writing at a time when many white scholars still saw the black family as an inferior product of an inferior race, W. E. B. Du Bois pioneered the research of black families by documenting African Americans' distinct social and economic conditions in *The Negro Family in America* (1908). He believed that the uniqueness of African American families was rooted in patterns of African heritage as well as American enslavement. Like Du Bois, Melville Herskovits argued for African American uniqueness and contended that Black Americans retained African cultural traits that shaped black family structures.⁵ Unlike Du Bois and Herskovits, sociologist E. Franklin Frazier was convinced that black family patterns, including female-headed households and groupings of extended relatives were products of enslavement, during which masters

⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Negro Family in America* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1908; Melville Herskovits, *The American Negro The Myth of the Negro Past* (New York, Harper and Row, 1941)

dominated slave access to familial stability, and American heritage, not cultural attachments to Africa, which slavery had obliterated.⁶

Frazier instituted a branch of sociological research now termed the “cultural ethnocentric school,” which argues that economic and social disadvantages have hindered African Americans from “striving toward assimilation into the dominant U.S. Eurocentric norm.”⁷ Scholars in the Frazier school described “family disorganization” among African American populations as a product of poverty, discrimination and lack of preparation for the industrial marketplace.⁸ They also identified negative behavioral patterns as part of the culture of poor black families that evolved from the dire living conditions of under-funded communities, rather than African biological traits. While they argued for “nurture” rather than “nature,” through the mid-1940s these sociologists also gave credence to a scholarly discourse that juxtaposed “the black family” against a middle-class white American standard that was itself an undiversified model.⁹

As Americans wrestled with the social and political turmoil of the 1960s, debates about the nature of the black family surged within social scientist circles. In 1965, Assistant Secretary in the Office of Policy Planning and Research of the US Department

⁶ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1932); E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in the United States* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1966)

⁷ Jualynne Elizabeth Dodson, “Conceptualization and Research of African American Family Life in the United States: Some Thoughts,” in Fourth Edition, Harriet Pipes McAdoo, ed., (Thousand Oaks, CA; London; New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2007), 55;

⁸ Walter R. Allen, “African American Family Life in Societal Context: Crisis and Hope,” *Sociological Forum* (Vol. 10, No. 4, 1995), 576. See also Charles S. Johnson, *Shadow of the Plantation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1934); Charles S. Johnson, *Growing up in the Black Belt: Negro Youth in the Rural South*, Prepared for the American Youth Commission (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1941); St. Clair Drake and Horace R. Cayton *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, with an introduction by Richard Wright (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Co., 1945); Ira Reid, *In a Minor Key: Negro Youth in Story and Fact*, Prepared for the American Youth Commission (Washington, DC: American Council on Education, 1940)

⁹ Dodson, 57

of Labor, Daniel Patrick Moynihan completed a government report in response to President Lyndon Johnson's interest in the underlying causes of unrest within urban black communities. Moynihan based his *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* on Frazier's findings. However, he deemphasized Frazier's arguments about institutional racism and located the creation of urban ills in the post-migration North within African Americans' "culture of poverty," characterizing "the African American community with such traits as broken families, illegitimacy, matriarchy, economic dependency, failure to pass armed forces entrance tests, delinquency, and crime."¹⁰ Rather than innate characteristics, in this model, the cultural patterns of the poor were learned and perpetuated through generations.

What became known as the "Moynihan Report" sparked rigorous scholarly debate on the structure of the black family.¹¹ Scholars wrote dozens of monographs arguing for and against black pathology in light of perceived white middle-class norms. In the late 1960s black sociologists began reevaluating the lens through which social scientists had studied black families. They dismissed white ethno-centric interpretations of black families that did not take seriously the impact of institutional racism on African American families and began to deconstruct earlier models of black pathology. They acknowledged that much of the scholarship produced by scholars lacked sensitivity to the black family experience, was focused on comparing black families with white families and lacked an analysis of black families in relation to themselves.

¹⁰ Dodson, 55; Allen, 577

¹¹ The "culture of poverty" thesis suggests that the lifestyles of poor people generationally perpetuate poverty to the exclusion of the impact of institutional racism or class prejudice. See chapter 6 "All the Folks You Love Together: New Identities, Black Family Reunions and Reclaiming the Extended African American Family in Recent History" for an extensive discussion of the thesis as it was used to describe African American communities in the post-desegregation communities of the urban North.

Several sociologists produced seminal works in this debate. In 1968, Andrew Billingsley, expanded aspects of Frazier's argument and contended that African Americans familial structures were adaptations to their economic situations and dependence on institutions within the dominant society.¹² In his classic 1972 assessment of *The Strengths of Black Families*, Robert B. Hill identified "flexible family roles" and "strong kinship" among African Americans' "most enduring" cultural strengths and argued that these characteristics have roots in Black America's West African heritage.¹³ This "strengths" paradigm helped to began a shift in sociological research away from methodologies of comparing black families to white families. Hill later urged other sociologists to study black families over time in order to gain a holistic perspective of the challenges facing them.¹⁴ In answer to that call, his colleagues have studied contemporary African American models of childcare, elder care, and support for single parents and rooted them in historical extended and adoptive kin systems.¹⁵

In addition to sociologists, historians were among the most prolific writers denouncing the Moynihan thesis, which is clearly evident in the 1970s literature

¹² Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, CA: Prentice-Hall, 1968); Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) and Joyce A. Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1971) were also among the scholars arguing that economic dependence on society is what makes black people rearrange their family systems in order to adjust to where they live.

¹³ Robert B. Hill, with a foreword by Andrew Billingsley *The Strengths of Black Families: Twenty-Five Years Later* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1999)

¹⁴ See Hill, "Understanding Black Family Functioning: A Holistic Perspective" *Journal of Comparative Family Studies* (Vol. 29, Iss. 1, Spring 1998), 15-25 for an extensive argument that black families cannot be understood without a systematic approach to analyzing the historical, cultural, political, and economic forces that impact them.

¹⁵ See Lynet Uttal, *Making Care Work: Employed Mothers in the New Childcare Market* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002); Vonnie C. McLoyd, Nancy E. Hill, and Kenneth A. Dodge, editors, *African American Family Life: Ecological and Cultural Diversity* (New York and London: The Guildford Press, 2005); Rukmalie Jayakofy and Linda M. Chatters, "Differences Among African American Single Mothers: Marital Status, Living Arrangements, and Family Support," in *Family Life in Black America*, Robert Joseph Taylor, James S. Jackson and Linda M. Chatters, editors (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1997), 167-84

emphasizing the endurance and stability of the black family under slavery as well as rooting the family as a site for black agency. In 1972, John Blassingame argued that “the Southern plantation was unique in the New World because it permitted the development of a monogamous slave family.”¹⁶ Among others, Blassingame contended that many planters encouraged familial bonds among slaves to discourage insubordination, believing, for example, that “a black man who loved his wife and his children was less likely to be rebellious or to run away than a ‘single’ slave,” and that morale was generally higher among slaves with agreeable domestic relationships.¹⁷ While the antebellum sex ratios he recovered support this assertion, other scholars contend that enslaved families were not as stable as “monogamous” might imply because the demands of the slave economy, more so than any other force, shaped slaves’ abilities to keep their families intact.¹⁸

In his landmark 1976 rebuttal to Moynihan, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom*, Herbert Gutman also championed the stable two-parent household among enslaved antebellum Americans and helped to refute negative images of black families. Gutman contended that “most slave children grew up in two parent homes” based on longstanding marital unions with mothers and fathers who were mutually active in raising children and argued that this pattern continued well into the twentieth century. Gutman’s narrative also highlighted internal slave community values about marriage, naming patterns, and community obligation, but it was most notable for refuting the idea that poverty among late-twentieth century northern migrant populations was a

¹⁶ John Blassingame, *Slave Community: The Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972), 149

¹⁷ Blassingame, 151-52

¹⁸ Blassingame, 149-150

long-term consequence of family patterns developed during slavery. However, Gutman gave little credence to the experiences of marital and parental separation brought on by abroad marriages, wherein husbands and wives resided on separate plantations, and in other domestic variations. Moreover, in emphasizing the presence of the nuclear family in slavery, Gutman largely ignored the significance of the extended and adoptive kin networks in enslaved and freed communities.

By the 1980s, shifts in analytical methodology, including the use of gender as a category analysis, opened new avenues through which historians could interpret black families. Gender-based analyses of black families broadened the basis upon which scholars could refute the Moynihan thesis and introduced new questions into an old debate that debunked matriarchal characterizations of the black family and further exposed the institutional racism that branded black families as dysfunctional.

Historian Deborah Gray White helped initiate a shift in 1985 by revisiting the historiography of the antebellum period to identify and analyze the enduring significance of black women's experiences within slave families. She noted that female slaves regularly worked in all-women labor gangs and "developed their own female culture" which enhanced their sense of feminine identity and strengthened their bonds of adoptive kinship.¹⁹ Subsequent work on slave women by scholars such as Brenda Stevenson, Wilma A. Dunaway, and Leslie Schwalm also challenged the emphasis on the nuclear family in earlier antebellum slavery studies and emphasized the abroad

¹⁹ Deborah Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman: Female Slaves in the Plantation South* (New York: Norton, 1988), 121, 133

marriages, varied household arrangements, and strong extended kin networks that were also common in the slave quarters.²⁰

These second generation scholars of antebellum slave families broadened the basis upon which scholars could refute the Moynihan thesis by examining the ways in which those slaves who were not part of two-parent households challenged slaveholders. They showed that earlier depictions of monogamous slave families may not have been the norm, but that varied households were also sites of consistent resistance to slaveholder domination. They argued that enslaved people in divided households manipulated their owners' investments in family stability by petitioning to visit displaced relatives, aggressively protesting separation, and punishing slaveholders with flight or other actions when they disturbed slave cabins.²¹ Debates about Reconstruction history also shifted with the introduction of gender as a category of analysis that differentiated the experiences of men and women and revealed the importance of the family as a site for political contestation, blurring lines of public and private.²²

²⁰ More recent histories like Brenda Stevenson *Life in Black and White: Family and Community in the Slave South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996) and Wilma A. Dunaway, *The Black Family in Slavery and Emancipation* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003) present more consummate portraits of the black family under slavery and less romantic assessments of the impact of separation on such families than did Blassingame or Gutman.

²¹ Leslie Schwalm *Hard Fight for We: African American Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997), 48 argues that slaves' "deep investment in consanguineous relationships and extended kin networks, and the relationship of these social ties to their experience of and resistance to slavery are topics that fall outside of a narrow focus on nuclear or conjugal families; See also Schwalm, 66-67. Of the three scholars listed Stevenson provides the most extensive discussion of abroad marriages.

²² For an example of such scholarship see Laura F. Edwards, *Laura Gendered Strife and Confusion: The Political Culture of Reconstruction* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1997); Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999); Tera W. Hunter, *To 'Joy My Freedom: Southern Black Women's Lives and Labors After the Civil War* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1997)

Amid continuing public policy debates about how to address urban ills, historians of the Great Migration also rigorously debated the nature of post-migration black communities and the political implications of black family life in the north. Throughout the 1970s and mid-1980s scholars traced a culture of poverty from southern fields to northern metropolises, arguing that deficient sharecropping families transferred poor familial patterns to the North via the Great Migration, creating the “rise of the northern ghetto.”²³ Throughout the late 1980s and mid-1990s, migration historians began to interrogate the meaning of migration to African Americans and developed a model of the migration as black agency and the family as an important mechanism for helping facilitate the movement. James Grossman argued that the “black family structure was not a victim of the Great Migration; rather its flexibility and strength anchored the movement.”²⁴ Influenced by the use of gender as an analytical category, subsequent migration scholarship has taken this approach and researched the various ways in which black family malleability facilitated migrants’ success particularly in reestablishing community in new locales.²⁵ Darlene Clark Hine initiated a new discussion on migrants’ motivations for leaving the South by addressing the various reasons black women decided to venture north as well as the role of extended family

²³ See Lee Rainwater, *Behind Ghetto Walls* (Chicago: Aldine, 1970); David Schultz, *Coming Up Black* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969); Nicolas Lemann, *Black Chicago Black Southerners and the Great Migration* (New York: Vintage Books, 1991)

²⁴ James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 106-107

²⁵ See Kimberley L. Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999); Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991); Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill and London: University of Chapel Hill Press, 1996); Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001)

members in assisting women migrants.²⁶ As Kimberley Phillips argues many migrants “turned to family and friends for help and guidance in choosing places to live and reestablishing networks of emotional and economic support. Many hoped that the social relations they created in their new households and links to kin households in the South would enable them to escape poverty and segregation in the South and serve as bulwarks against the continued economic precariousness and segregation they faced in the North.”²⁷ In his synthesis of the migration of black and white southerners, historian James Gregory argues that “migrants became historical actors because they participated in or enabled certain activities, organizations, movements, or cultural formations that had the capacity to exert influence on the larger society.”²⁸

Recent historical work on the history of black family sets an important foundation for understanding the extended and adoptive networks that remain integral to African American families even today. Historians have firmly established the centrality of the family to African Americans surviving slavery. Scholars have also explicated the importance of familial autonomy to shaping former slaves’ responses to emancipation and their work in establishing free black communities and institutions. A much smaller body of historical literature exists on the black family after the first Great Migration. However, given the role of the black family in African American political and economic life in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, it is highly plausible

²⁶ Darlene Clark Hine was among the first to add sexual exploitation and reproductively concerns to this traditional list of “push-pull” factors describing why black southerners chose to migrate. Darlene Clark Hine, “Black Migration to the Urban Midwest,” in Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, with foreword by John Hope Franklin (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 91

²⁷ Phillips, 128,

²⁸ Gregory, 326

that the family continued to play an important role in African American political and economic life well into the twentieth century.

Since few historians have investigated the ways in which black people have imagined and performed family outside of nuclear constructions, little research has been conducted on the role of the post-Reconstruction role of the family in African American political and economic history. By examining African American history with a focus on extended and adoptive kin networks this dissertation begins to correct the historical record by addressing several important ways in which the family has continued to serve black communities into the twenty-first century as a resource for fighting poverty, racism, and familial dispersion, three historic arenas of great trauma for black families in the United States.

Anthropologists have pioneered the use of family as an analytical framework for understanding African American life. As early as 1978, anthropologists identified the extended family as “a widespread and, indeed, fundamental institution of Afro-American peoples in the United States, the Caribbean and Latin America, and Africa.”²⁹ They describe diasporic black families as typically forming “multi-generational household descent group[s],” which serve as the “carrier[s] of values, emotional closeness, economic cooperation, childcare, social regulation and other functions in Black communities.”³⁰ Anthropologists have also pioneered research on familial patterns among African Americans who are neither biological nor legal relatives. In such African American communities, family ties are defined by role performance, which

²⁹ Demitri B. Shimkin, Edith M. Shimkin, and Dennis A. Frate, *The Extended Family in Black Societies* (The Hague; Paris: Mouton Publishers, 1978), xv

³⁰ Shimkin, Shimkin, and Frate, xv

create what anthropologist Carol Stack termed “fictive kin.” Adoptive kin systems like those Stack identified in her research often emerge from economic need and develop as individuals assign and perform the responsibilities and thereby earn the privileges of family within reciprocal relationships.³¹ The work of anthropologist Carol Stack has significantly shaped the theoretical grounding of this dissertation. In the discussions that follow I use the term “adoptive kin” as a general category describing the family-like linkages African Americans formed with individuals who were neither blood nor legal relatives. This concept differs from the “fictive kinship” described by Carol Stack in that it is more inclusive. In addition to fictive kin as defined by Stack, adoptive kin includes categories of relationships that were not necessarily based on the reciprocity of behaviors associated with traditional familial roles. For example, adoptive kin is present in my discussion of “political kinship” among African Americans who extended family-like status to those non-relatives who committed themselves to political causes in the best interest of black family groups. What I am classifying as “spiritual kinship” for example, describes some of the ways in which black people interacted with members of their church families, within which I identify three practical manifestations of spiritual kinship.³²

Theories and concepts from various other social scientists inform my historical narrative of African American kinship patterns. My methodology takes seriously the

³¹ As an attempt to address the areas of anthropological study that were previously dominated by Eurocentrism, the International congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences produced a “World Anthropology” series, of which *The Extended Family in Black Societies* is part.; See Carol Stack *All Our Kin: Survival Strategies in a Black Community* (New York: 1972), 58-60 for a description non-relatives who participated in extended kin survival networks among urban African Americans. Theodore Kennedy, *You Gotta Deal With It: Black Family Relationships in a Southern Community* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980) explores fictive kin networks in a 1970s black southern town that has vestiges of segregation that continue to shape kinship alliances within the community.

³² Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 77

reminder of anthropologist Janet Carsten, who, in describing trends in new kinship studies, warns, “Kinship is far from being simply a realm of the ‘given’ [biological kin] as opposed to the ‘made’ [cultural kin]. It is, among other things, an area of life in which people invest their emotions, their creative energy, and their new meanings.”³³ I also recognize that African Americans’ practices of extended and adoptive kinship were all undergirded by what political scientist Michael Dawson identifies as a sense of “linked fate” – an understanding that what happened to one could affect all.³⁴ Indeed, the shared legacy of enslavement and the sensibility that African Americans’ challenges were one, shaped black people’s decisions to operate in extended and adoptive kin groups throughout the twentieth century.

The dissertation builds on historical work on the black family, as well as a long tradition of black family analysis within sociology, and recent shifts in the anthropological analysis of kinship to make several interventions. In combining methodologies from various social sciences, my project recognizes the ways in which African Americans’ systems of extended and adoptive kin have shaped creative modes of thinking about family that help them to navigate life in the United States. Moreover, in using family as an analytical framework to understand African American organizing at the turn of the twentieth century, during the mid-century civil rights struggle and at the millennium, I also introduce a new way of thinking about the political and economic impact of African American family culture, I shed new light on old historiographical questions, including the ways in which the church became the most autonomous of

³³ Janet Carsten, *After Kinship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 9

³⁴ Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 77

African American institutions in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries as well as the impact of migration on the societies they leave behind, by examining them through the lens of family. Additionally, I contribute a historian's analysis to a growing and necessary literature on the characteristics and experiences of black families that advances scholarly discussions beyond pathology debates and monolithic depictions of black family life.

The chapters that follow demonstrate the importance of taking into account the ways in which distinctive kinship networks shape African American family history. Examining black kinship structures and using family as an analytical framework aids investigation of African Americans' various patterns of recruiting, organizing, and managing familial resources in their struggles against racism, poverty, and familial dispersion, patterns that have historically plagued African American communities. African Americans' understandings of family as an important resource first took shape under slavery and have endured since.

"MAKING IT WHAT WE NEED IT TO BE": TOWARD A TWENTIETH- CENTURY AFRICAN-AMERICAN FAMILIAL CONSCIOUSNESS

Even as they continued to believe in America's potential to live up to its ideals, African Americans approached the twentieth century aware that their country did not value them as full citizens. In 1877, they witnessed the removal of the federal troops that had helped to protect them in the aftermath of the war and saw the federal government reinstate unrepentant Confederate states with only slight reparations. And as the nineteenth century drew to a close and state legislatures repealed progressive Reconstruction legislation, their second-class status became increasingly clear. African

Americans would have to take care of themselves to make a life in the United States. Just as they had in slavery, black people's expansive familial systems remained important resources for navigating American life throughout the twentieth century. The new century would continue to see African Americans face racism and poverty, so much so that many would leave the South as a result, including 1.2 million around the First World War. Yet even as southern black families dispersed in search of better economic opportunities in northern states, their adaptive forms of family would continue to help them navigate life in America.

At first glance, it may seem counterintuitive for late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century African American families to support an extended network of relatives and even incorporate people who were neither blood nor legal relations. In this era, most African Americans were very poor. Jacqueline Jones has argued that sharecroppers' "material standard of living was considerably lower than that of mid [nineteenth] century western pioneer families." Most grew cotton, a labor intensive crop that often left them with no time to supplement their protein poor diets with hunting and fishing. Since they lacked the necessary equipment to construct clothing, like the looms to which their foremothers would have had access, most turn-of-the-century tenants were also dependent on white storeowners to purchase garments.

By extending care to extra-nuclear and adoptive kin members, black families expanded their resource bases and strengthened familial autonomy. Recognizing that they shared similar hardships, families came to the aid of other families. Neighbors helped one another to plow fields, reap crops, and negotiate contracts. Some widows even consolidated their households with neighbors or kin to share the load after the

death of their husbands and in the absence of other males to help negotiate their dealings with white landowners and other farming responsibilities. The labor of every family member was valuable to the family, including the work children contributed.³⁵

Indeed, the challenges of surviving the late-nineteenth century American South made the project of reconnecting with family and forming kin groups an economic imperative. Brutally exploitative, the sharecropping system forced black families to rely on the labor of even the youngest among them to survive the postwar economy with their families intact. The evolution of the family of former Alabama slave. Sarah Fitzpatrick. demonstrates the importance of familial autonomy to farming families in the post-bellum South. Sarah depended on the collective efforts of her blended family to keep her children in an economically viable position. She separated from her first husband, had a son Jesse with another man who died and then went to work the property of Lige Johnson, "a big 'Nigger' landowner," who "run a big plan'ation, jes lack white fo'ks, had a sto'e an' ever'thing."³⁶ Fitzpatrick had twelve children with Johnson who never fulfilled his promise to marry her. Johnson was enraged when Fitzpatrick's eldest son, nineteen-year-old Jesse who "wuzn't sad'esfied wid de way we wuz livin,'" married, and began renting on another farm. Jesse Fitzpatrick's anger reached a peak when Lige Johnson and his brother retaliated by refusing to allow the cotton the Fitzpatrick family had harvested to remain in the Johnson warehouse to accrue value. Jesse enlisted the aid of "Lawyer P." who promised to jail the two men if they tried to sell the cotton. Jesse moved the rest of his family, including his mother, from Johnson's plantation into the care of himself and his wife.

³⁵ Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 86-88

³⁶ Blassingame, 645

The Fitzpatrick case clearly demonstrates the necessity of a family wage to survival and economic vitality in the post-war South. In the difficult economic and political climate of Reconstruction, Sarah Fitzpatrick found: "Ma' 'sperience is dat 'Niggers' take 'vantage uv'ya jes' lack white fo'ks, ef you let'um."³⁷ Although he was not willing to marry the mother of his twelve children Lige Johnson wanted to capitalize on their labor. Meanwhile, even though he and his wife had moved from Johnson's plantation, Jesse was still working with his family on Johnson's property and having to protect them from exploitation.

Moreover, in order to establish their own independence, Jesse and his wife eventually had to incorporate his mother, siblings and step-siblings into their new home. She recalled that her new daughter-in-law "and my chillum got 'long jes' lack brudders and sisters," as they all worked and lived together. Jesse began attending the "'Bible School' at Tuskegee," but his familial responsibilities seem to have precluded him from completing the program. Instead of continuing his studies, he purchased property near a school and "built dis house on it an' moved us all here so he could ed'jucate de chillum," his mother confirmed. Jesse had seven children by his first wife, who later died. He married again and had one additional child, which gave him charge over eight of his own children in addition to twelve younger step-siblings. "He had a big fambly on his han's till ma' chillum commence to grow up an' scatter out, dat made it easy on him," his mother remembered.³⁸ Ransom Johnson, the next oldest son, took over the family after Jesse died and educated several of the children. With her husband deceased and her landowner refusing to take her as his legal wife, Fitzpatrick's sons performed the

³⁷ Blassingame, 646

³⁸ Blassingame, 646

role of the family patriarch. Through their positioning, the family was able to acquire a lawyer, keep their family together on workable land and provide educations for several of the children. The challenges of post-war life that characterized the experiences of the Fitzpatrick family ensured that the family structure Brenda Stevenson identified as a “malleable extended family,” which first developed under slavery, continued to shape African American family life after emancipation.³⁹

Extended kin households like the Fitzgeralds’ often helped young couples launch their own households, even as such couples contributed to the extended networks from which they sprung. Jacqueline Jones has argued that the older a couple, the more likely they were to have integrated extended family members in their household, which often included younger couples who “might have needed the care and assistance that only a mature household could provide.”⁴⁰ With this kind of family flexibility “the boundaries of a household could expand or contract to fill both economic and social-welfare functions within the black community.”⁴¹ Jones also notes:

It is clear that, in rural southern society, the nuclear family (consisting of two parents and their children) frequently cohabitated within a larger, rather flexible household. Moreover, neighboring households were often linked by ties of kinship. These linkages helped to determine very specific (but by no means static) patterns of reciprocal duties among household members, indicating that kinship clusters, rather than nuclear families, defined women’s and men’s daily labor.⁴²

Accordingly, by the turn of the twentieth century black family culture included several components that would secure its position as a formidable resource for

³⁹ Stevenson, 160

⁴⁰ Jones, 85

⁴¹ Jones, 85

⁴² Jones, 84

navigating life in the United States throughout the next ten decades.⁴³ First, for Black Americans, “family” did not exclude blood and legal relatives outside of the nuclear unit. Black families had a long tradition of caring for and living among extended groups that helped them identify the family’s basic economic unit as including all contributors and beneficiaries. Aged elders remained in the care of younger adults. Likewise, children without parents could expect to be taken in by relatives or family friends in African American communities. Unmarried adults might share space with married siblings and their immediate families. For example, black writer Angelo Herndon, who was born in 1913, was reared in a family in which his parents, aunts and uncles collectively cared for his grandmother, Mariah Evelyn Herndon. He wrote:

All in all, she was an exceptionally well-preserved woman, what with having been born and raised as a slave in the State of Virginia and having given birth to fourteen children. Unable to stand the solitude of her life, she would stay in rotation from six months to a year with each of her fourteen children. Most of the time she lived with my family because she was particularly fond of us.⁴⁴

Although African Americans were not the only early-twentieth century Americans to live in large extended families, the legacies of slavery, the realities of Jim Crow and the racial discrimination they often faced, even in the North, made such practices especially crucial to black families. Impoverished African Americans often had to pool both their labor and their resources with those of others, as well as share space in racially discriminatory housing markets, and support each other in hard times. Even among black families who were not especially poor, living in large groups instilled family pride and identity, which helped to combat the psychological damage of racial discrimination.

⁴³ Sociologists Peggy Dilworth-Anderson and Paula Y. Goodwin, “A Model of Extended Family Support: Care of the Elderly in African American Families” in McLoyd, Hill and Dodge, eds., *African American Family Life*, 211 recognize an African American extended family traditions with distinctions including fluidity, fictive kin, and reciprocity.

⁴⁴ Angelo Herndon, *Let Me Live*, with an introduction by Marlon B. Ross (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 6

The high level of self-confidence famed African American jurist and author, Pauli Murray developed was in large part due to the family culture that in many ways sheltered her from segregation as a child growing up in the 1910s. In her autobiography, Pauli Murray remembered that she “did not lack close relatives,” although she lived with neither her parents nor her siblings.⁴⁵ Murray grew up in North Carolina around dozens of aunts and uncles and cousins from the families of both of her maternal grandparents, the Cleggs and the Fitzgeralds. “There was much visiting back and forth, and the children ran around in groups as parents had done before them. In those days the generations mingled closely, and age and experience rated highly within the family. I had to show proper deference to each degree of kinship.”⁴⁶ Indeed, the reverence she had for her elders extended beyond her immediate caretakers. Murray explained:

Outside my immediate household, the authority of my grandfather’s brother and two sisters—Great-uncle Richard Fitzgerald, Great-aunts Mary Jane Fitzgerald and Agnes Clegg—was supreme. Their children, who were my second cousins and members of my mother’s generation, had to be obeyed as uncles and aunts. I was also expected to defer to older third cousins and seldom went anywhere that I was not under the watchful eye of some adult relative. While this web of intricate relationships kept me under constant supervision, it also gave me an identity and an expanding world to which I belonged by right of birth.⁴⁷

Murray also became the godmother of her Aunt Sallie Small’s son with the Rev. Small. “Although I was not much older than my cousins, they were like my little brothers and they looked upon me as a sister,” Murray noted.⁴⁸ Murray was part of a family culture in which children were taught to pay allegiance to their elders. Such training expanded the group of people to whom children were accountable beyond their parents and

⁴⁵ Murray, 28

⁴⁶ Murray, 28

⁴⁷ Murray, 28

⁴⁸ Murray, 50

allowed for young girl like Murray to be the godmother of her cousins although she was not much older than they.

Accounts of children being taken in by distant relatives and as well as families who pooled resources and sheltered and supported extended kin during hard times also abound in African American autobiographical literature. Angelo Herndon's immediate family was so poor by the time Angelo began attending grade school that more distant relatives took in two of his brothers as "an act of charity."⁴⁹ Henry Damon Davidson's mother died when he was around seven years old, leaving him under the care of his grandmother, while his father continued to work nearby his home. Davidson lived with three sets of aunts and uncles after the death of his grandmother, all the while, his father subsidized his care and continued to provide guidance for him in Alabama.⁵⁰ As these examples indicate, economic needs as well as affective ties shaped African American extended families at the beginning of the twentieth century.

A second important characteristic of black family culture at the turn of the twentieth century is that Black Americans developed a flexible familial consciousness that allowed them to integrate non-related individuals into their primary survival units as necessary. Their malleable patterns of kinship emerged from the experience of antebellum slavery and the early years after emancipation. Such patterns were especially important in raising children at times when economic pressures demanded that parents work long hours outside of their homes. James Robinson, born in 1907, explained that his Knoxville, Tennessee community where he grew up was one in which children had

⁴⁹ Herndon, 6, 12

⁵⁰ Henry Damon Davidson, *Inching Along or The Life and Work of an Alabama Farm Boy: An Autobiography* (Nashville, TN: National Publication Company, 1944), 5-11

numerous parents: “Every adult had liberty to chastise another’s child. When this happened we dared not breathe a word of it at home to our parents and we prayed that it would not get back to them from other sources. We would only get another beating at home.”⁵¹ This sense of community child-rearing was common among black communities, and demonstrates the ways in which family ties could even extend through neighborhoods, easing the burden of economically pressed parents. The high degree of flexibility within black families suggests that black people have developed a sensitivity to family identity that allows them to incorporate members as needed, based on the roles they need performed and those they recognize in the behaviors of incorporated members.

Third, adopted kin members in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century African American familial networks were not necessarily primarily connected by the fulfillment of traditional familial roles. Indeed, the political and cultural implications of extended and adopted kin networks that developed out of economic need or traditional familial functions are far-reaching. In familiar adoptive kin patterns black churches, fraternal organizations, and mutual aid societies provided Black Americans with options that mirrored services white Americans acquired from state and private vendors, such as insurance, loans, and burial provisions. Extended and adoptive kin networks were crucial to African Americans’ survival and over time they would also help their members advance political agendas and shape society in ways that addressed major stresses on black family life.

⁵¹ James H. Robinson, *Road Without Turning: The Story of Reverend James H. Robinson: An Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Company, 1950), 21

CHAPTER OVERVIEWS

This dissertation attempts to address gaps in the history of African American family life by analyzing the importance of extended kin networks in various historical periods throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It explores the origins, history and historical significance of the distinctive kinship patterns long common among Black Americans, shedding new light on how and why African Americans maintained the large kinship networks they first developed during slavery well into the twentieth century.

This project posits that a malleable appreciation of family is historically the greatest resource within African American communities even beyond slavery during which it has been recognized as an essential component of survival. The kinship networks that have long organized and sustained black communities have often depended on reshaping, creating, and sustaining family ties amid repeated experiences of separation and distress. The following chapters tie together in that they demonstrate the importance of various extra-nuclear familial constructions in analyzing social, economic, and political African American history. Using family as an analytical framework provides a powerful method of investigating the various ways in which Black Americans have historically addressed racism, poverty, and familial dispersion.

Chapter one, “‘Homes for Some and Work for Others’: Affective Ties, Economic Needs and Reunion in the Post-War Era” surveys the conditions under which freed families first formed and the emotional as well as economic ties that connected them. Chapter one also explains African Americans’ efforts to establish churches and church families. The church family was perhaps the most formidable expression of African

Americans' appreciation of extended and adoptive kin at the turn of the twentieth century.

"In the Household of Faith: The Church Family Among African Americans at the Turn of the Century," the second chapter, explores levels of church family among black populations, including local congregations, national denominations, and the church universal, through which the African American faithful gained white allies. Church families provided emotional and material support, reinforced positive identities and prepared children to contribute to community leadership, while also providing a broader context within which to define one's self amid the dehumanization of Jim Crow. Analyzing the adoptive kin function of turn-of-the twentieth century black churches sheds light on the processes by which African Americans made the black church into one of the most powerful resources for surviving post-slavery America.

Chapter three, "Making Emmett Till Justice: Political Sensibilities, African American Families and the Migration Years," explores the politicizing function of extended kin networks within black families affected by war-time migration and contributes to a maturing historiographical discussion on the impact of the migration on non-migrants. Migration dispersed family members from the South. Yet, economic interdependence and cultural ties often kept migrants connected to their southern relatives. The experiences of second- and third-generation migrant children demonstrate one of the most important ways in which migrants families remained connected across regional lines. Migrant children were often sent home for summer visits with southern family members and less frequently southern children visited newly northern relatives. Young people in families affected by the migration often discovered political regional

discrepancies through interactions with family members. Through an exploration of the intra-familial politicization of African Americans I reveal the integral role black families played in galvanizing the generation of young people who would advance the Civil Rights Movement.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation, “In the Family of Civil Rights: Southern African American Kinship and the Civil Rights Movement,” examines the extent of African American adoptive kinship patterns through an analysis of the political kinship in operation among southern African American participants in the Civil Rights Movement and the Mississippi Freedom Summer Project(s) in particular. Because rural African Americans incorporated outsiders, most of whom were white, into their homes and families during the Freedom Summer, in the dangerous Jim Crow South, this historical moment presents an optimal case study for observing the important political functions of adoptive kinship. Investigating the ways in which existing patterns of adoptive kin among black southerners shaped the Movement highlights the importance of the black family to civil rights activity and identifies modes of political participation that are under acknowledged in the historical record.

The family reunion movement at the turn of the twenty-first century reveals the continuing importance of extended and adoptive kin constructions to African American communities in the new millennium. Following the post-desegregation, cultural nationalist impetus of the 1970s, Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family* helped ignite widespread interest in genealogical exploration among African American families. Thousands began researching family history and celebrating familial identity and unity with regular family reunions. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, largely in

response to negative depictions of black families in the mainstream media, national mobilizers and grassroots organizers employed the familiar family reunion model to both counteract the negative images of black families and address prominent areas of concern within African American communities. Mobilizers like the National Council of Negro Women were largely successful in infiltrating the media with images of vibrant extended black families, while the Family Reunion Institute's annual reunion conference helped to revitalize earlier functions of extended families. Contemporary reunions are the evidence of significant preexisting patterns that demonstrate the importance of forming and maintaining kinship ties to African American communities. Moreover, contemporary reunions are made possible by a long and complex history of kinship patterns that have materially sustained black communities and buttressed political agendas within them.

The final chapter, "'All the Folks You Love Together': New Identities, Black Family Reunions and Reclaiming the Extended African American Family in Recent History" examines trends toward increased commercialization, diminished historical specificity, and generational, regional, and class conflicts in black family reunion culture as well as the impact such tensions may have on economic interdependence within millennial black families. It presents somewhat of an ironic coda to a long history of familial interdependence that began with the experience of slavery and African Americans' first efforts to establish independent households after the end of the Civil War.

Chapter 1

“Homes for Some and Work for Others:” Affective Ties, Economic Needs and Reunion in the Post-War Era

In December of 1862, siblings, Lucy and Sarah Chase, Quaker missionary teachers from Worcester, Massachusetts, were assigned to “report to Brigadier General Ludovickus Viele, Military Governor of Norfolk, Virginia for work on Craney Island” in the Chesapeake.¹ Their observations of refugees on the island during the year of 1863 illustrate the importance the enslaved placed on recovering family members, even before the close of the Civil War. On their last day, 30 September of 1863, Lucy, who penned most of the letters for the twosome, described reunion culture in the camp as its residents were moved from the Island to the Norfolk Mainland. “We sometimes witness the unexpected meeting of scattered members of a family,” Lucy wrote.² “When the John Tucker [ship] was at the C.[haney] Is[lan]d wharf,” she reported, “a little girl who had wondered where she should go, as she had no friends to go with, or to go to, strolled upon the dark of the deck of the steamer and found in one of the hands her father!”³ After reaching Norfolk there were other surprise meetings and recognitions. Sarah [Chase] assisted many to find their friends, and she found homes for some, and work for others.”⁴

As quasi-free populations, like those surrounding Norfolk and former slaves across the South reconstituted their families at the end of the Civil War, they found that

¹ Henry L. Swint, editor, *Dear Ones At Home: Letters from A Contraband Camp* (Nashville, Tennessee: Vanderbilt University Press, 1966), 1

² Swint, 96

³ Swint, 96

⁴ Swint, 96

the post-war economy burdened their families such that their emotional reunions were tempered by harsh material realities that mirrored the struggles of slavery and placed a similar demand on kin networks. Sarah Chase's contributions of finding "homes for some and work for others" understated the paradox of family reunion for many former slaves. Thousands found comfort, peace, and rest in the arms of their loved ones, while many others found confusion, restlessness, and pain in either not being able to relocate their loved ones or discovering them in compromising situations that detracted from the integrity of the homes they hoped to construct. Former slaves first had to find their lost relatives. Once relatives were recovered they went about the arduous task of establishing independent households. For most, this would mean dependence on extended relatives and adoptive kin with whom they could share resources. Former slaves also had to contend with the demands of the federal government and an unrepentant and vengeful southern populace that was dead set against African American equality in any form. The church would be the one institution in which African Americans could establish a measure of autonomy, even as they found it a significant challenge to do so for their own families.

"TO GO TO SEE MY PEOPLE AND BE FREE": THE MEANING OF FREEDOM AND FORMER SLAVES' QUESTS FOR REUNION

For enslaved Americans, the Civil War had been a war for freedom and, above all, freedom meant the ability to gather one's family without the threat of forced separation. As they saw the possibility of a Confederate defeat approaching, slaves' hopes for reunion rose. Although it did not legally apply to them, thousands of southern slaves, including women and children hoping to meet their enlisted loved ones, acted on the Emancipation Proclamation and ran away to Union lines, refusing to

be denied their freedom. General Benjamin F. Butler was so overcome with war-time runaways that he declared slave property as “contraband of war.” Some thousands of would-be-free people followed Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman on his march to the sea, after which he issued a famous proclamation granting land to war refugees. As Leslie Schwalm and others argue, the war-time activities of quasi-free populations contributed to the end of slavery and the eventual establishment of a federal agency to assist them in the transition to freedom.⁵

Established by an act of Congress on 3 March of 1865, The Federal Bureau (FB) of Refugees, Freedmen, and Abandoned Lands’ responsibilities included helping freedpeople gain education, negotiate labor contracts, and receive medical care, while also assisting homeless and hungry poor whites. The Bureau received neither sufficient funds nor adequate personnel for its assigned tasks.⁶ Moreover, its decisions as to when state governments had officially met the requirements for the restoration of local authorities were left up to individual Union agents, many of whom were anxious to leave the South. Furthermore, the FB largely operated on a trial and error basis in satellite locations across the South where local whites resented what they considered to be the looming presence of a federal militia.

Despite its shortcomings, the most endearing legacy of the Freedmen’s Bureau is its work in reuniting formerly enslaved African American families. The Bureau served as a clearinghouse for families seeking lost members and played a major role in

⁵ See Schwalm, 141-42 for a discussion of the role of quasi-free women in helping bring the war to an end in South Carolina.

⁶ Eric Foner, *A Short History of Reconstruction, 1863-1877* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990), 31; These advocates of their independence behaved in ways similar to the fugitive slaves who sought relief from the Union army. Leslie Rowland has argued that women and children followed black men to war, resisting the government’s efforts to view the soldiers as men who were unattached to families.

facilitating family reunions among the thousands of separated individuals who petitioned the Bureau for assistance. The abundance of requests for aid in finding family members in the FB files indicate that freedpeople believed the government could help them relocate their lost relatives and were probably encouraged by the numerous successful reunions it fostered.

The processes by which freedpeople and Bureau agents worked together to reassemble families included diverse methods. Information from old slave communication networks and vestiges of pre-war correspondence facilitated post-war searches for family members. Agents sometimes contacted former slave traders who had transported individual slaves to new locales. They might also locate slaves who were enslaved on the same plantations as missing persons. While Bureau agents often used their resources to help former slaves unite with family members, their lack of substantial funds just as often prohibited them from transporting people to their loved ones once the whereabouts of such persons were recovered.

The most important use of African Americans' new mobility and independence was its employment in finding missing relations. "For nothing were Negroes more eager than for transportation," wrote, John William De Forest, Acting Assistant Commissioner of Greenville, South Carolina in his 1865 memoir *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction*. "They had a passion, not so much for wandering," he continued, "but for getting together; and every mother's son among them seemed to be in search of his mother; every mother in search of her children. In their [freedpeople's] eyes the work of emancipation was incomplete until the families which had been dispersed by slavery

were reunited.”⁷ Former slaves went about “trying to hear from” and gathering any and all family members in whatever means they found or could make available to them. Many combed the countryside in the aftermath of slavery and war in search of their separated relatives. Ex-slave Sarah Fitzpatrick recalled, “Ya’see a’ter de war close all de ‘Niggers’ wuz lookin’ round fer deir own fo’ks. Husbands lookin’ fer dey wives, an’ wives lookin’ fer dey husbands, chillun lookin’ fer pa’ents, pa’ents lookin’ fer chillun, ever’thing sho was scrambled up in dem days.”⁸

Indeed, finding family members who were sold away was at times very perplexing and could seem to be a near impossible feat. “The attempt to find lost relatives became an arduous, time-consuming, and frustrating task, requiring long and often fruitless treks into unfamiliar country, the patience to track down every clue and follow up every rumor, and the determination to stay on a trail even when it suddenly appeared to vanish.”⁹ Although the task was daunting, the desperate desire to find relatives encouraged a variety of searching methods. Some people posted ads or listed

⁷ De Forest, 36

⁸ Blassingame, 644

⁹ Leon F. Litwack, *Been In the Storm So Long: The Aftermath of Slavery* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979) 230. For more evidence of the varied experiences of reunion among freedpeople see: Martin Abbott, *The Freedmen’s Bureau in South Carolina, 1865-1872* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1967); Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom: A Documentary History of African-American Kinship in the Civil War Era*; Paul Cimbala and Randall Miller, *The Freedmen’s Bureau and Reconstruction: Reconsiderations* (New York: Fordham University Press, 1999); Barry A Crouch, *The Freedmen’s Bureau and Black Texans*, (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992); James H. Croushore, John William De Forest, edited and with an introduction and notes by James H. and David Morris Potter, *A Union Officer in the Reconstruction* by (Hamden, CT: Archon Books, 1968); Edward Magdol, *A Right to the Land: Essays on the Freedmen’s Community* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1977); William S. Feely, William S., *Yankee Stepfather: General O. O. Howard and the Freedmen* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1968); Donald Nieman, editor, *The Freedmen’s Bureau and Black Freedom* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1994); Claude F. Oubre, *Forty Acres and A Mule: The Freedmen’s and Black Land Ownership* (Baton Rouge and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1978); Paul Skeels Pierce, *The Freedmen’s Bureau: A Chapter in the History of Reconstruction* (New York: Haskell House Publishers, 1971); William Richter, *Overreached On All Sides: The Freedmen’s Bureau Administrators In Texas, 1865-1868* (College Station: Texas A & M University Press, 1991); Schomburg, *Freedmen’s Bureau Records* (New York); Ted Tunnell, *Edge of the Sword: The Ordeal of Carpetbagger Marshall H. Twitchell in the Civil War and Reconstruction* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2001).

the names of loved ones in colored newspapers. Others solicited scouts for their family members by word of mouth or written correspondence. The New Orleans *Tribune* ran the names of individuals who appeared in the letters to the local Freedman's Bureau office.¹⁰ Henry Hill posted the following ad on 7 October 1865 in the Nashville *Colored Tennessean*:

Information Wanted:

OF MY WIFE, LUCY BLAIR, who I left in Jonesboro, Washington County, East Tennessee, four years ago. She was then living with William Blair. I was raised by John Blair. I am a wagon maker by trade, and would be thankful for any information respecting her whereabouts. I am in Nashville, Tenn. On Gay street, north of the Statehouse. Address me or the Colored Tennessean, Nashville, Tenn. Box 1150.

After he lost his son in the Memphis "Riots and Massacres" some seven months later, Robert Johnson posted an ad in the same publication. On 31 March 1866, the *Colored Tennessean* ran Robert Williams' ad for his son Daniel whom, "when last heard from was in Memphis, Tennessee."¹¹

Continuing to search for loved ones would prove heart-breaking for the many seekers who never found their relatives or discovered their mortality. Some quests lasted for decades.¹² Ida B. Wells recalled that long after Emancipation, her mother continued to search for the sister she lost to slave traders. Her mother "often wrote back to somewhere in Virginia trying to get track of her people, but she was never successful."¹³ Reuniting was especially difficult for families seeking children who were disconnected at young ages. Former Missouri slave Jennie Hill remembered that "when

¹⁰ Magdol, 59-60

¹¹ *The Colored Tennessean* (Nashville) 31 March 1866

¹² Litwack, 232

¹³ Ida B. Wells-Barnett, *Crusade for Justice: The Autobiography of Ida B. Wells*, edited by Alfreda M. Duster (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1970), 8

Lincoln freed the slaves I knew of dozens of children who started out to search through the southland for their parents who had been sold 'down the river.' Parents left in the north country searched frantically for their children. But I only know of one case where the family was ever united."¹⁴ The difficulties of recovering loved ones encouraged ex-slaves to solicit government aid for their searches.¹⁵

Milly Johnson, one of the many clients of the Freedmen's Bureau, beseeched the agency from Chapel Hill, North Carolina to help her locate her children. Johnson had five children who were sold from her, but she could only furnish the Bureau with approximate location information for her daughter Anna Johnson, who was living with her mother's former owner in Hertford County, North Carolina. Milly Johnson supplied the Bureau with the name of the last slaveholder she knew of for her son Musco and daughter Letty, but she had no knowledge as to where speculators in Richmond, Virginia sold their siblings Henrietta and William Quals Johnson. Eventually the Bureau reunited Milly and her daughter Anna and provided suggestions as to the whereabouts of Musco and Letty. The burning of their slave trader's records withheld further information about where to locate Henrietta and William Quals.¹⁶

On 11 May 1867, twenty-four years after he was sold to Texas from Virginia, Hawkins Wilson requested that the Freedmen's Bureau help him find his sisters, brother-in-law, aunts, nieces, and nephews, the whereabouts of each he detailed as he understood them before deportment. In an enclosed letter to his sister Jane, Hawkins

¹⁴ Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 593

¹⁵ Leslie Schwalm identifies this pattern as beginning with quasi-enslaved people's petitions to the government during the Civil War. See Schwalm,

¹⁶ "Milly Johnson to Freeman's Bureau," 26 March 1867 in Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 214-15

shared his hope that they would not have to wait to be united in Heaven. He penned, “I am writing to you tonight, my dear sister, with my Bible in my hand praying Almighty God to bless you and preserve you and me to meet again— Thank God that now we are not sold and torn away from each other as we used to be— we can meet if we see fit and part if we like— Think of this and praise God and the Lamb forever.”¹⁷ His allusion to “forever” indicated that while Wilson might have had an appreciation for an eternity with God in Heaven, he enlisted the Freedmen’s Bureau in his quest to praise God with all of his family members before their terrestrial departure, while they could enjoy the benefits of earthly freedom and brave its challenges together. It is not known whether Hawkins reunited with his family members.

While Hawkins may have eventually experienced a joyous reunion with his extended family, others discovered the agonizing legacy of having had more one partner under slavery. Formerly enslaved men and women who were forced to abandon marriages and engage new relationships often confusing and heart-wrenching emotional conundrums during Reconstruction. Government regulators urged former slaves to address the problems of multiple marriages by selecting a single partner. However the horrors of slavery left many with few non-painful options.

Consider the correspondence of freedwoman Laura Spicer and her husband. Slave traders separated the two, and, thinking her deceased, Laura’s husband married another woman, Anna. Their hearts were torn at his decision not to reunite with Laura upon their rediscovery of one another after emancipation. Vacillating, “I want to see you and I don’t want to see you. I love you just as well as the last day I saw you,” he wrote,

¹⁷ “Wilson Hawkins to Chief of the Freedmen’s Bureau at Richmond,” 9 February 1864, enclosing “Hawkins Wilson to Sister Jane, [11 May 1867] in Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 19

“it will not do for you and I to meet I am married, and my wife have two children, and if you and I meets it would make a very dissatisfied family.”¹⁸ “You know the Lord know both of our hearts,” he assured her “you know it never was our wishes to be separated from each other, and it never was our fault.”¹⁹ Asserting that neither his polygamous state nor Laura’s ambiguous singleness were of their own creation, this tormented father, begged, “will you please get married, as long as I am married my dear.”²⁰ He continued, “If I was to die, today or tomorrow, I do not think I would die satisfied til you tell me you will try and marry some good, smart man that will take good care of you and the children, and do it because you love me; and not because I think more of the wife I have got than I do you.”²¹ In so doing, he declared that the moral degradation they felt slavery imposed on he and Laura could not define them in freedom if they chose to abide by a monogamous standard.

Moreover, it is not clear whether the “two children” belonging to his current wife were also his own. The troubled man refers to his children with Laura as “my children.” Since he confessed, “I do not know which I love best, you or Anna” and he had had children with Laura first, one might think that children born to in an earlier covenant relationship might increase the commitment to that partnership. However, as de facto adoption was customary among slave communities, this man most likely considered the children of Anna to be his own, if they were not his blood heirs. “Oh I can see you so

¹⁸ Swint, 217

¹⁹ Swint, 217

²⁰ Swint, 217

²¹ Swint, 217

plain, at any other time, I had rather anything to had happened to me most than ever have been parted from you and the children.”²²

Perhaps in making the decision to choose one wife and consecrate himself to the marital commitment he deemed the standing one, Spicer’s husband was deciding to deny the bondage-derived definition of a black husband. He would rather be a “husband of one wife,” but never wavered in his concern for Laura or their children. Asserting his integrity as a father he confirmed, “You know I love my children. I treats them good as a father can treat his children; and I do a good deal of it for you.”²³ In keeping with his commitment to the family he created with Laura, while aiming not to violate his present marriage this husband and father redefined himself as having a role different from the one ascribed him in bondage. Although Spicer’s husband could not realize his hopes of being reunited with her, he concluded that his own freedom would not be complete unless he knew that the needs of his family were met. Like many other former slaves he saw his own well-being as connected to the well-being of his loved ones.

“TO HOLD US ALL”: THE MEANING OF FREEDOM AND THE POST-WAR HOUSEHOLD

As black and white southerners endeavored to establish independent households in the aftermath of the war, the types of family networks that helped African Americans survive slavery continued to be important. Although they likely valued the privacy to which they had little access in slave cabins, former slaves’ domestic situations did not mirror their white southern counterparts in terms of the primacy of nuclear units.

²² Swint, 217

²³ Swint, 217

Brenda Stevenson argues that indeed race was the most important factor in determining how families were organized in the antebellum South, such that for the enslaved and free people of color alike, the following held true:

“The most important characteristic of their families and domestic households were the overarching importance of the extended family and the constancy of variety – variety in household composition, marital relationship, longevity, and leadership. Poverty, legally sanctioned instability, and growing white hostility meant that free men and women who were black continuously had to rely on alternative familial and marital styles. Despite the tendency among the upwardly mobile of their community to embrace monogamous marriage and patriarchy, diverse domestic styles, the extended family and a growing number of matrifocal families were the southern person of color’s most common familial experience.”²⁴

This variety and malleability was in direct contrast to white families in antebellum America for whom “monogamous marriage, patriarchal privilege, and a nuclear-core household clearly composed the foundation.”²⁵ And, despite their improved class status, race continued to shape the organization of households among freed populations.

Race even conscribed the legal benefits of marriage for freed couples, to whom whites hoped to gain legal access through the enforcement of patriarchy. As Laura F. Edwards explains, “Where indigent women and children became wards of the state in the absence of marriage, they became the legal responsibility of individual household heads in its presence.”²⁶ Moreover, reconstruction officials discussed marriage among former slaves in the language of paternalism in terms of “obligations” or reciprocal practices instead of “rights.” Unfulfilled “obligations” would leave room for punishment and more control, whereas, “rights” could be legitimately demanded only

²⁴ Stevenson, xi

²⁵ Stevenson, xi

²⁶ Edwards, 35

of citizens who had legal redress to defend such rights in a court of law.²⁷ While legal marriage for white families could provide a launching point for political participation, it did not afford African Americans the same right. Moreover, as many ex-slaves began to formalize their relationships, whites continued to view freedpeople as “promiscuous and uncontrolled,” and “used the private realm of sexuality to justify decisions about who should exercise political power in the public sphere.”²⁸

Nevertheless, formerly enslaved couples who were united under informal slave ceremonies took pains to marry under the law and often with the important distinction of having a Negro minister. In 1938, at ninety years of age Sarah Fitzpatrick, who had been enslaved in Alabama, detailed the former slaves’ preferences. “See, af’ter surrender, “she told interviewer Thomas Campbell, “we got ‘Nigger’ preachers to marry’us. White preachers married us ef we wanted dem to but we ruther a ‘Nigger preacher’ marry’us.”²⁹ Likewise, “Virginia house servant Mildred Thomas” and her husband “had a slave broomstick marriage, but after the emancipation...paid one dollar to have ‘a real sho’ nuff weddin’ wid a preacher.”³⁰

While whites often dismissed the value black couples placed on their wedding rites and tried to manipulate black marriages for political control, African Americans often saw marriage as an institutional sanction for their families and a platform from which to assert citizenship and political participation.³¹ Many couples “agreed to participate in formalizations of their union for more practical reasons – to legitimize children, to qualify for soldiers’ pensions, to share in the rumored forthcoming division

²⁷ Edwards, 35-39

²⁸ Frankel, xii

²⁹ Blassingame, 644

³⁰ Gutman, 418

³¹ Edwards, 19, 39

of the lands, and to exercise their newly won civil rights.³² Some former slaves even registered marriages with deceased partners, most likely to record their children as legitimate heirs.

Furthermore, the practical needs of navigating the post-war economy created a family culture in which newly married couples were not necessarily expected to establish homes of their own or without the assistance of family members. The poetry of nineteenth century Underground Railroad activist, lecturer, and author Frances E. W. Harper demonstrates this phenomenon. She derived the passion of her literary characters from her real-life encounters with the reunited families she met while working with runaway populations. In "The Reunion," the fourth section of her poem "Aunt Chloe," Harper captures the joy of a mother reuniting with her adult son and the prospects for assembling their family members:

Well, one morning real early
I was going down the street,
And I heard a stranger asking
For Missis Chloe Fleet.

There was something in his voice
That made me feel quite shaky.
And when I looked right in his face,
Who should it be but Jakey!

I grasped him tight, and took him home--
What gladness filled my cup!
And I laughed, and just rolled over,
And laughed, and just give up.

"Where have you been? O Jakey, dear!
Why didn't you come before?
Oh! when you children went away
My heart was awful sore."

"Why, mammy, I've been on your hunt
Since ever I've been free,

³² Litwack,, 240

And I have heard from brother Ben,--
He's down in Tennessee.

"He wrote me that he had a wife,"
"And children?" "Yes, he's three."
"You married, too?" "Oh, no, indeed,
I thought I'd first get free."

"Then, Jakey, you will stay with me,
And comfort my poor heart;
Old Mistus got no power now
To tear us both apart.

"I'm richer now than Mistus,
Because I have got my son;
And Mister Thomas he is dead,
And she's nary one.

"You must write to brother Benny
That he must come this fall,
And we'll make the cabin bigger,
And that will hold us all.

"Tell him I want to see 'em all
Before my life do cease:
And then, like good old Simeon,
I hope to die in peace."³³

This poem illustrates the ways in which former slaves interpreted free households. They were not necessarily looking to mirror nuclear models among white elites. Rather, they were most concerned with gathering all of their family members together and helping one another to survive the hostile post-emancipation environment. Just as Harper's Chloe implored "we'll make the cabin bigger, and that will hold us all, " when many freed men and women sought out their loved ones they aimed to reestablish collective households that often included adult children or aging parents. Chloe requested that her married son, his wife and three children join she and her other son in one large home. In Harper's depiction, both the freedom and the very peace of the former slave mother would be incomplete if she were not reunited with all of her children.

³³ Frances Ellen Watkins Harper, *Sketches of Southern Life*, Electronic Resource (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Library; Boulder, CO: NetLibrary, 1996), 20-22

In addition to easing psychological pain, partnering with extended and adoptive kin networks also helped advance a family's economic success. Freedman Dave Waldrop encouraged his family to live near him. "I received word last week that you wer [sic] not doing very well in Montgomery and that times there wer [sic] very hard there," he wrote to his cousin Sarah.³⁴ "Now Sarah if you will come down here to me I will take care of you and your children and you and children shall never want for anything as long as I have anything to help you with."³⁵ "Freedpeople's struggles for fair wages, reasonable terms of employment, education, civil rights, and, political power depended on their ability to establish and maintain their own households."³⁶ Waldrop and his family collaborated like other sets of relatives who determined to maintain their families.

With emancipation came not only the opportunity to live with and near family members, but also the full responsibility for the well-being of one's family. Freedpeople no longer had to work for their former masters, but they were also without the benefit of the meager supplies once provided by slaveholders. Freed families took on new responsibilities that had been unnecessary, impossible, or restricted under slavery. Relatives raised youngsters when parents could not, and once children matured, they were expected to care for their elders. With the end of slavery, families were more capable of assisting one another in these capacities and during crises.³⁷ Nevertheless, freed men and women were prepared to pay the costs of freedom, whatever they may be.

³⁴ Berlin and Rowland, 230

³⁵ Berlin and Rowland, 230

³⁶ Edwards, 46

³⁷ Noralee Frankel, *Freedom's Women: Black Women and Families in Civil War Era Mississippi* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 146.

“I AM STRIVING SIR”: MAINTAINING FREEDOM AND FAMILY THROUGH LABOR CONTROL

Since meeting economic objectives was as important as fulfilling affective longings, freedpeople's newly reconstituted households were as significantly shaped by labor demands as finding lost loved ones in the post-war economy. Moreover, men and women tried to carefully negotiate how they would meet the needs of their families and still maintain a family-life-work balance that corresponded with the goals of freedom. Seemingly private areas became major sites of contention between former slaves and slaveholders. Hence, “the struggle of freedpeople to establish private lives involved gendered decisions about work, family, and community participation.”³⁸ Eventually the costs of freedom would put demands on the labor of each family member, such that women and children were also eventually found working in Reconstruction era fields, where many newly crowned male household heads had hoped to carve out a living for their families that allowed their wives to not have to work outside the home and their children to regularly attend school.

The hopes of former slave John A. Dennis are emblematic of the desires of newly freed families. Dennis hoped to define a safer world for his wife and children. In 1864, he wrote to the War Department from Boston requesting their aid in finding his family. Having been separated from his wife on 19 November 1859, Dennis had to rear their children without her. His master had deported him “some forty miles from them so I could Not do for them,” the distressed father contended.³⁹ “The man that they live with half feed them and half Cloth them & beat them like dogs & when I was admitted to go to see them it use to brake my heart & Now I say again I am Glad to have the honour to

³⁸ Frankel, x

³⁹ “John Q. A. Dennis to Hon. Stan,” 26 July 1864 in Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 45

write to you to see if you Can Do Anny thing for me or for my poor little Children.”⁴⁰ Acknowledging that he had “but letle to live on,” Dennis assured the Secretary of War, “I am Striveing Dear Sir.”⁴¹ He pleaded for an official permit to remove his son and daughter from “those men that keep them in Savery” and ended his letter with a request to “be permitted to rase a School Down there & on what turm I Could be admitted to Do so.”⁴² There is no indication that the War Department acknowledged John Dennis’ letter.⁴³ However, his desire to exercise control over his children’s labor and education is evident. A free citizen of the United States, Dennis petitioned the government agency assigned to assist him and believed that his “striveing” would help his cause.

To former slaves, like Dennis, freedom meant that black people were able to prioritize taking care of their families, even as they endeavored to work for themselves. Principally, as they gave time to their homes and families, freedpeople “refused to accept the white southerner belief that only labor for whites constituted legitimate work for African Americans.”⁴⁴ The system of labor that developed across the post-war South reflected the negotiations – between freedpeople like Dennis and his family, their former owners, and governmental authorities – over African American’s desire for control over the labor of their families in the post-war economy.

While freedpeople concerned themselves with *both* economic *and* familial autonomy, William De Forest and other Bureau agents did not share their priorities. At a time when a war ravaged nation was desperate to see the once-profitable South back in

⁴⁰ “Dennis to Hon. Stan,” 45-46

⁴¹ “Dennis to Hon. Stan,” 45-46

⁴² “Dennis to Hon. Stan,” 46

⁴³ Berlin and Rowland, *Families and Freedom*, 46

⁴⁴ Frankel, xi

business, these federal officials were primarily committed to stimulating the region's economic growth, stabilizing its labor force, and reinstating peace across the South. African Americans' experiences with federal representatives during Reconstruction demonstrate the extent to which ideas about the future of African American familial networks and black labor were contested during this period. In fact, the Freedmen's Bureau undermined black parents and their kin networks by acting as "friends" and "guardians" of black children as if their parents and family members were incapable of taking care of them.⁴⁵

Child apprenticeship was one of the primary ways in which Freedmen's Bureau officials and former slaveholders alike encroached upon African Americans' rights to reassemble their families on their own terms. After Emancipation, Southern legislatures enacted child apprenticeship laws that threatened to keep formerly enslaved parents from their children by warding them out to former planters, usually without parental consent. Landlords argued that the children's labors were due them as payment for their years of caring, however limited, for enslaved families.

Eager to exercise their own authority over their children's labor and futures, freed parents and their kin networks greatly resisted apprenticeship and often appealed to Freedmen's Bureau officials for help. In his memoir, John De Forest reported that often if parents were deceased or incapable, other relatives, including cousins, aunts, and uncles would take up apprenticeship cases in court and fight for custody of apprenticed youngsters.⁴⁶ While he acknowledged the active role of both birth parents and extended kin members in recovering apprenticed children from former

⁴⁵ Edwards, 44

⁴⁶ DeForest, 56

slaveholders, De Forest still resisted the attempts at familial autonomy he witnessed among freedpeople.

De Forest's response to a South Carolina mother desperate to reclaim the child whose temporary stay with a white planter seemed to have turned permanent, illustrates the Bureau's preoccupation with economic matters. Upon the mother's request that her daughter be released from Jack Bascom, De Forest inquired, "Perhaps she is very well off with Mr. Bascom; I understand he is a man of property. What do you want her back for?"⁴⁷ "I wants to see her, She's my little gal, an' I has a right to hev her, an' I wants her," the mother replied, insisting that she had not apprenticed her daughter.⁴⁸ De Forest and a local man standing in the Bureau office tried to convince the freedwoman to leave her child with Bascom and to move closer to his home so that her daughter might enjoy material comfort and relative proximity to her mother. "Attacking her on the religious side, always an open one with the Negroes," De Forest told her, "'if you have put your child into the hands of a decent man, well off in this world's goods, if you have done by her to the best of your intelligence, you must trust that God will do the rest. You are bound to believe that He will take just as good care of her as if you were there and saw it all.'"⁴⁹ "'True preachin'" said the woman, but she still wanted her daughter back. "'I don't keer for all that," she maintained, "yes I does keer, but I wants to see my little girl.'"⁵⁰ However, De Forest refused to order the girl returned, contending that the child would make more money living with the white patriarch.

⁴⁷ DeForest, 112

⁴⁸ DeForest, 112

⁴⁹ DeForest, 113

⁵⁰ DeForest, 113

The officer's disregard for the woman's lowly state, her dedication, and ability to provide for her daughter without the mention of aid from a man, was underscored by his observation that women all over the South who wanted their children operated from a combination of "affection, stupidity, and selfishness."⁵¹ De Forest was contemptuous of such women's maternal concerns and disregarded their rights in deciding what was best for their offspring in terms of economic and affective provisions. What he does not seem to have realized is that such parents valued having access to their family members more than material comfort, but they also wanted control over the benefits of their labor. Moreover, having control over their families' labors would likely increase the material resources of a family and raise their overall quality of life. Freedpeople were not against material wealth. However, they wanted the profits of family labors to benefit their own households, rather than increase the profits of exploitative landowners.

Common during slavery, a gang labor system initially predominated after emancipation. In this arrangement, groups of former slaves worked under white overseers. With emancipation, they were paid for the first time, in shares of the crop or in meager wages that provided only subsistence pay. Although both former planters and recently freed slaves preferred a cash-wage system, planters' lack of credit and credit worthiness in the devastated South made them cash poor and without sufficient funds to compensate laborers. By 1868 gang labor became obsolete having been replaced by joint contracts between two to ten workers who collectively tackled large projects. The Freedmen's Bureau encouraged freedpeople to sign squad contracts with former planters that often threatened family security and limited family mobility – sometimes

⁵¹ DeForest, 112-13

forcing family members to contract on separate farms or delay migration in order to honor contract obligations.⁵²

Nevertheless, freedpeople refused to work in patterns similar to those in which they worked under slavery. They rejected efforts to have the demands of commercial agriculture take precedence over the immediate needs of their families. As Laura Edwards argues black women even began to remake womanhood with the new opportunities of emancipation, including making work within their homes a priority and donning fancy ladies' clothes while simultaneously boasting of their contributions in the field. "They did not tie their lives to a domesticity centered on consumer items and sentimentalized ideals of motherhood. Instead, they cast their notions of womanhood more broadly to encompass whatever was required to contribute to their families' welfare."⁵³

Moreover, freedpeople did not want their access to family members determined by work rhythms or locales. However, the increased opportunities of freedpeople to assume familial responsibilities often upset landowners as ex-slaves' familial duties required more of their energy. Nevertheless, while former slaves preferred work schedules that privileged familial concerns, families still needed to be productive to secure even the most basic of life's necessities.⁵⁴ "Indeed, the fulfillment of other aspirations, from family autonomy to the creation of schools and churches, all greatly depended on success in winning control of their working lives and gaining access to the

⁵² Litwack, 417-18, Schwalm, 171-73

⁵³ Edwards, 147-51

⁵⁴ Foner, 48

economic resources of the South.”⁵⁵ It was through their labor struggles that African Americans were able to get their familial rights recognized.⁵⁶

Landowners eventually had to convert to new plans of labor management that addressed both freedpeople’s concerns about familial autonomy and their disdain for white supervision of their work. “The only way to make planting, or as you would say, ‘farming,’ a profitable business now,” counseled one landowner to another, “is to divide your force into squads of eight or ten hands each, and have a white man to every squad, not to drive, but to lead.”⁵⁷ These squads might include adoptive kin networks among neighbors and squads that centered “around a family unit, often including members distantly related, or simply people who got along together well.”⁵⁸ The squad system was more amenable to the autonomy goals of freed families, but it had shortcomings that eventually brought on a shift to a family unit-based system of agricultural employment.

Although freedpeople preferred the “short pay” of cash wages to the “long pay” of the sharecropping system, after an extended transitional system of trial and error, by the mid-1870s a family-based sharecropping system emerged. Freedpeople attributed the transition from gang labor to family unit cropping to four main factors: “[The] laborers’ desire for autonomy in their work habits, the gradual decentralization of labor organization, poor work performances by groups, and discord over the distribution of earnings.”⁵⁹ In short, black families wanted to be in charge of their work schedules and

⁵⁵ Foner, 48

⁵⁶ Edwards, 19

⁵⁷ Jaynes, 181

⁵⁸ Jaynes, 186

⁵⁹ Jaynes, 159

to be paid sufficiently for their labors without “free-riders” taking advantage of the labors of a few. While, planters valued the system because it released them from the burden of managing their workers and made their farms more productive, African American families welcomed opportunities for black women to work in their own homes without the interference and exploitation of whites, and were anxious to educate their children as they saw fit without having to put them in the field, although this often could not be avoided because, renting and sharecropping, which made each family responsible for its own plot of land, put a premium on the labor of all family members.”⁶⁰ Nevertheless, if former slaves could not own their own land, sharecropping gave them a sense of independence.

Still sharecropping helped ensure that slavery’s legacy of racial discrimination continued to plague Black Americans in the late-nineteenth century and beyond. Moreover, the hardships of tenancy also ensured that the family structure that Brenda Stevenson identifies as a “malleable extended family,” which first developed under slavery, continued to shape African American family life after emancipation. In constructing viable post-war households, African Americans often formed family-like bonds with individuals who were not their relatives, a practice that dated back to the days when slave sales often separated African Americans from their kin. Adoptive kin patterns remained necessary as freedpeople struggled to broaden their resources in the hopes of securing familial autonomy in the post-war South. Groups of farming families shared resources in terms of childcare, material goods, food and farming equipment. The freedom to establish their families and craft kin systems gave African Americans

⁶⁰ Foner, 38

access to establishing other institutions within their communities. The church and church families they created in the years after emancipation laid the foundation for a system of expanding resources and institutional strength well into the twentieth century.

"FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY": THE ESTABLISHMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN CHURCHES

Freedom to worship as they pleased was an important expression of familial autonomy for African Americans during Reconstruction. Couples like James and Fanny Smith likely relished the opportunity to attend church services without reprisal. While enslaved, James often ran about "at nights and on Sundays trying to preach the gospel among the slave population, which had a tendency to divert their attention from their work, and made them dissatisfied," a practice for which he was frequently whipped "with a rough hide until his back was literally bathed with blood, and yet he'd slip off and do the same thing over again."⁶¹ In a 1938 interview a former Alabama slave described life after emancipation to Thomas Campbell. "Man en wife got togedder den," he explained, "dey had been a livin' on separate plan'ations, but when dey did get togedder dey would walk 18 miles tuh Church."⁶²

In fact, churches were the first buildings African Americans constructed after slavery, contributing thousands of dollars to church communities even though their individual families were usually living in rented properties. The founding of Sixth Mount Zion Baptist Church in Richmond, Virginia presents a formidable example of newly freed people's commitment to establishing churches in the post-war era. Sixth Mount Zion first formed in 1867, under the leadership of the Rev. John Jasper, who

⁶¹ Blassingame, 277

⁶² Blassingame, *Slave Testimony*, 641

organized the church “with nine members, on Brown’s Island in the James River, just opposite the city, in a little, old wooden shanty, which had been used by the government for a stable.”⁶³ Despite their humble beginning, in only a year the congregation outgrew the space and “rented an old carpenter shop” in downtown Richmond, where they continued worshipping for two years.⁶⁴ They eventually raised “the sum of two thousand and twenty-five dollars” and purchased a church building from an existing congregation. In less than twenty years the congregation grew to include two thousand members who contributed over six thousand dollars to building repairs and kept the church “clear of any debt or encumbrance of any shape or form.”⁶⁵ That the congregation was consistently able to amass enough capital to purchase new properties and remain debt free is a testament to the people’s dedication to make the church a chief investment. With the aid of the thousands of white and black missionaries and teachers who flocked to the South to help educate and disciple the four million freedpeople, other congregations across the South joined in similar enterprises, establishing church houses that served as educational and social centers for African American communities.

Perhaps most significant, the church became one of the most important examples of how African Americans’ ideas about kinship shaped both their political organizing and resource acquisition. Churches hosted constitutional conventions, political party meetings, and citizenship workshops across the Reconstruction South, providing safe spaces for African American men and women to articulate their political concerns and

⁶³ Edwin Archer Randolph, *The Life of Rev. John Jasper, Pastor of Sixth Mt. Zion Baptist Church, Richmond, Va., from His Birth to the Present Time, with His Theory on the Rotation of the Sun* (Richmond, VA: R. T. Hill, 1884; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2001; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jasper/jasper.html>)), 30-31

⁶⁴ Randolph, 30

⁶⁵ Randolph, 30-31

contribute to formal political processes. Churches were also important spaces for helping to recover lost family members. Freedpeople circulated special documents called “‘quirin’ letters” that described the last-known whereabouts of missing family members and provided contact information for the inquiring parties. Churches announced the letters to their congregations, provided any information available to assist the searches, and forwarded the letters on to the next fellowship. This method was particularly successful in reuniting families after long and distant separations because it reached a variety of church populations.⁶⁶

Acquiring information about the whereabouts of lost loved ones was only one of the possible benefits of membership in a church family. Thousands of the African American faithful would find the church to be a tremendous resource in the years after Reconstruction and well into the twentieth century. In fact one hundred years after the abandonment of Reconstruction, churches would become prominent sites of reunion activities for African American families because of the enduring legacy of church families within black communities. The following chapter provides insight as to why church families – African Americans’ various interpretations of adoptive kin networks among fellow church-goers – has such an enduring legacy among African Americans.

⁶⁶ Magdol, 78

Chapter 2

“In the Household of Faith: The Church Family among African Americans at the Turn of the Twentieth Century

In his 1895 *Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama*, the Rev. Charles Boothe attributed African American progress in Alabama since Emancipation to family life, work, and autonomy within the church. In response to his questions “What have we attained to in this time? Have these years given us any fruits?,” Boothe argued that the successes of the Baptist churches in Alabama mirrored those of the black community as a whole.¹ In addition, he contended that the church was the central institution through which African Americans engaged in all of the activities that were important to their development as a people progressing from the ranks of slavery to freedom. They turned to the church for help with acquiring homes and land, erecting and supporting schoolhouses and developing autonomous families. Boothe was correct to root the progress of black families in the church, but he could just have easily located the progress of the black church family. A closer look reveals the ways in which the churches themselves functioned as outgrowths of African American family life.

At the turn of the Twentieth Century, the increasing presence of African American churches and their extensive adoptive kin networks played integral roles in helping their members to mediate poverty, racism, and familial dispersion. Between 1890 and 1920, the church family was the one organization that affirmed a positive group identity and provided access to an expanded resource base, which at times

¹ Charles Octavius Boothe, *The Cyclopedia of the Colored Baptists of Alabama* (Birmingham, AL: Alabama Publishing Co., 1895; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2001; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/boothe/boothe.html>), 248

included white allies. Church families shaped children in important ways by insulating them from segregation, exposing them to a support network of adults, and providing more opportunities than individual families were able to amass on their own. Through outreach to children and the unchurched, collective church families reproduced and sustained themselves, and built legacies for future generations of believers. Observing the church family at the turn-of-the-century exposes an important pattern of family among African American populations at the height of its effectiveness. The Jim Crow era a historical moment in which untold numbers of black Americans turned inward to their own resources and often found the refuge of a church family to be tremendously useful in their quest for life improvement. This chapter will move from the 1890s to describing the role of the church in holding families together during the great migrations of 1915-1945.

“IN THE HOUSEHOLD OF FAITH”: TOWARD A DEFINITION OF “CHURCH FAMILY”

The concept “church family” describes the way in which many African Americans viewed themselves in relation to other church members, with “church” signaling individual congregations, particular denominations or the Christian church universal at varying moments. “Family” in this sense denotes individuals who interact with an understanding of shared inheritance, legacy, resources, identity and destiny that motivate individuals to cooperate with one another in patterns that resemble those of extended family groups.² The most common expression of the church family was on the

² See the introduction to this dissertation, “Making It What We Need It to Be”: Lessons from the Past and a Twentieth-Century African-American Familial Consciousness” for an elaboration of “extended family groups.”

local level. However, African American parishioners, especially those in leadership, also advocated allegiance to denominational branches.

African Americans' various denominational affiliations shaped the types of church families that developed within turn-of-the-century black Christian networks, the bulk of which included Methodists, Baptists and Pentecostals, while smaller groups of Presbyterian, Episcopalian and Congregational assemblies account for most of the minority of black believers in this era.³ Scholars classify the three largest sectors as members of "the black church" with cultural similarities including Biblical fundamentalism, expressive worship, and strong family-like bonds, but the collective black church was no more monolithic than were its individual congregants, to which the existence of minority black church groups attests.⁴

The experience of church family appears in different denominations and among varying classes within African American communities. The culture of adoptive kin within church groups was more formalized in some groups than others and less emphasized in some groups than others; yet, it cut across class and regional boundaries among black parishioners, poor and elite, in the North and in the South. While elite

³ A comparison of the variations between church family cultures among black denominations is a subject to be investigated at a later date. See Anthea Butler, *Women in the Church of God in Christ: Making a Sanctified World* (Chapel Hill and London: UNC Press, 2007) for an excellent exploration of church family culture among the largest Pentecostal denomination. I have chosen to limit this discussion by not including black Catholics, whose explicit connection to the Church Universal makes complicates their expressions of church family in ways that are beyond the scope of this project. They will be included in future research.

⁴ Milton C. Sernett, *Bound for the Promised Land: African American Religion and the Great Migration* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997), 252; Lois E. Meyers and Rebecca Sharpless, "'Of the least and the Most': The African American Rural Church" in R. Douglas Hurt, editor, *African American Life In The Rural South, 1900-1950* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003), 58; Michael Battle, *The Black Church in America: African American Christian Spirituality* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 2006), sees "its belief and practice that when any person is mistreated or disadvantaged, an incident of supreme importance has occurred, and something sacred violated" as the most significant characteristic of "the black church."

congregations may have had less need to depend on their church brothers and sisters for material support, they still found family-like comfort, identity, and assistance within church communities which often helped them mediate racism, economic inequities, and the pressures on their biological families. Rarely, however, did the church family concept forge an appreciation of the larger household of faith across denominational preferences and through alliances with white Christians. Instead, church families within black church denominations performed traditional familial obligations such as providing orphan and elder care, burial services, property ownership, and a valued family name, when the physical family was itself weakened or threatened.

The denominations making up what scholars define as the “black church” today, still represent the various groups within which African Americans worshipped in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. As they did at the beginning of the Twentieth Century, Baptist denominations constitute the highest numbers of black believers.⁵ In 1895, the National Baptist Convention’s (NBC) founders intended that it should “do mission work in the USA, in Africa, and elsewhere abroad” with a view to fostering “the cause of education” both religious and secular, and that these tasks should be performed and managed by blacks.”⁶ Most of the NBC’s work was on the home-front mission fields of the rural South and later urban northern communities. The second black denomination, Methodist churches, included the oldest black congregations and enjoyed earlier success in urban areas than did Baptist groups.

⁵ The National Baptist Convention of America, Inc. (1915), the Progressive National Baptist Convention (1961), and the Full Gospel Baptist Fellowship (1994) all emerged from the National Baptist Convention, USA Inc (NBC). The NBC was formed in 1895 upon the resolution of North Carolinian Albert W. Pegues. Three organizations combined: the American National Convention (1886), the National and Educational Convention (1893), and the Foreign Mission Convention (1880). William E. Montgomery, *Under Their Own Vine and Fig Tree*, 229; Lincoln “The Black Church in the Context of American Religion” in Hill, 57

⁶ Montgomery, 229

African American Methodists were dispersed among all-black United Methodist congregations and black Methodist denominations including African Methodist Episcopal, African Methodist Episcopal Zion, and Colored (now Christian) Methodist Episcopal churches. Baptist congregations were more democratic than Methodist assemblies and outgrew them by the 1890s.⁷ The lack of official hierarchy created strong bonds among local Baptist congregations, whereas the centralization of Methodist churches aided expressions of church family in the denominational sense. Of the African Americans who attended church in the early twentieth century only ten percent were not members of the Baptist or Methodist denominations.⁸

The Holiness and Pentecostal Movements that took root in Southern black communities in the 1890s, presented viable alternatives for discontented believers within mainline denominations who longed for more expressive worship and more resonant spiritual experiences.⁹ The Holiness Movement emerged from divisions within Methodism and advocated the “second blessing” of sanctification, through which adherents were empowered to refrain from unholy living. After a series of revivals including the famed 1906 Azusa Street Revival, detailed below, untold numbers of Holiness devotees accepted Pentecostal doctrines. Pentecostals sought a “third blessing” of the Baptism of the Holy Spirit and experienced magnificent spiritual gifts including

⁷ See Christopher H. Owen, *The Sacred Flame of Love: Methodism and Society in Nineteenth Century Georgia* (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1998), 186. Owen argues that “From 1890 to 1906 the number of black Methodists in Georgia increased to 158,103 or 20 percent. Meanwhile, black Baptist membership grew 67 percent, totaling 342,154 members in 1906, increasing an already sizable advantage to outnumber black Wesleyans more than two to one.”

⁸ Myers and Sharpless, 56; Paris, 20; Battle, 61 argues that the early appeal of Baptists and Methodist evangelists to enslaved populations lie in the similarities between tradition African religions and preachers emphases on conversion and possession by the Holy Spirit.

⁹ Montgomery, 347; Sernett, 95-97

speaking in tongues.¹⁰ The movements initially attracted both black and white adherents but the Holiness-Pentecostal Movement soon split along racial lines. Established in 1897 in Lexington, Mississippi, the Church of God in Christ (COGIC), the largest of the black Holiness-Pentecostal churches emphasized “growing in grace” and outward expressions of internal transformations. “Sanctified churches,” such as COGIC created spaces in which one’s class status was not a mediating factor in one’s rise to church family leadership.¹¹ Holiness-Pentecostal converts could be found among both urban and rural populations. However, the even more expressive worship style than was common among Methodist and Baptist churches and emphases on manifestations of the Holy Spirit among Holiness-Pentecostal congregations made them unappealing to most elite worshipers who usually gathered in urban churches.

Elite members of the black community were most often involved in Presbyterian, Episcopalian, or Congregational churches where services were more “dignified” and reserved, lacking behaviors characterized as African in origin such as the use of percussion instruments, loud exclamations, and the ring shout in worship.¹² Elite ministers were usually formally trained and many of the black congregations within these denominations were established by black people who had been free prior to the Civil War and attended services with white parishioners. Within their own refined congregations, elite blacks could better articulate their class positions as the self-

¹⁰ Leon Litwack, *Trouble in Mind: Black Southerners in the Age of Jim Crow* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 1998) 395; Allan Anderson, *Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 39-62; Butler, 19; Battle, 86-87; John M. Giggie, *After Redemption: Jim Crow and the Transformation of African American Religion in the Delta, 1875-1915* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2008). 165-66

¹¹ Christian Smith, *Christian America?: What Evangelicals Really Want* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2000), 13-14; Paris, 1-2; Anderson, Litwack, 395; Sernett, 95

¹² Montgomery, 346; Giggie, 187

proclaimed leaders of racial uplift. Despite their class and worship style distinctions, elite black churches in southern towns and cities were also affected by racism and segregation. Likewise, their congregations were defined by the intimacy and self-direction that characterized churches in rural areas and shared in the broad adoptive kin culture among black churches at-large.

Church families differ from “family churches,” which were congregations peopled by groups of blood and legal relatives or groups of non-related families with long histories of connection within a particular area. In 1903, the Rev. W. H. Holloway attributed two-thirds of church expansion in the Black Belt to disgruntled lay preachers who left their congregations and started new churches with their families and “nearest relatives.”¹³ Charging his readers, Holloway contended, “Study the rolls, therefore, of many of the churches and you will find that they are largely family churches, and that the first preacher was some venerable patriarch.”¹⁴ On the contrary, church families did not necessarily have to include blood relatives. Moreover, since the church was the center of social activity it was often the place most frequented outside of the home. In light of these facts, it was not uncommon for church groups to also become extensions of individual families. Pauli Murray’s experience with church and family displays several expressions of this complex concept.

Murray’s maternal grandfather’s family founded a Methodist family church and she was also part of an extensive church family of Episcopalians. Well known in

¹³ Holloway, “A Black Belt County, Georgia,” 57

¹⁴ Holloway, “A Black Belt County, Georgia,” 57

Durham, North Carolina, the Fitzgerald family built what Murray called “a Fitzgerald family church.”¹⁵ She described it in her autobiography:

Emmanuel Methodist Church on Old Chapel Hill Road (now Kent Street) was built with Great-uncle Richard’s bricks, and he held title to it. His youngest daughter, Irene was organist, and Fitzgerald children and grandchildren sang in the choir or filled the Sunday school pews. My parents were married there, and most of our family funerals were held there, although the family divided its affiliations among the Presbyterian, Methodist, and Episcopalian denominations.¹⁶

Murray was raised in the Episcopalian branch of Fitzgeralds. “The Episcopal Church and its struggling colored missions were, like the schoolroom, a natural extension of my home life when I was growing up,” she remembered.¹⁷ When her Dear Aunt Sallie married a new vicar, the Reverend J. E. G. Small, “the rectory [where her aunt and uncle resided] next door to the church became my second home,” Murray recalled.¹⁸ She also delighted in her family’s relationship with the new assistant to the bishop of North Carolina, “the Right Reverend Henry B. Delaney,” of the famous Delaney family of Raleigh. He “was a close family friend,” whom Murray’s aunts regarded as “an older brother as well as pastor and priest.”¹⁹ Delaney had taught her aunts at Saint Augustine’s School, an Episcopalian-sponsored institution for colored students. He also “officiated at Aunt Sallie’s wedding ceremony and confirmed” Murray at nine years of age.²⁰ Pauli Murray’s church family included blood relatives as well as those who were engrafted into the family through church association. In the trying times of her youth the

¹⁵ Pauli Murray, *The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 30

¹⁶ Murray, 30

¹⁷ Murray, 49

¹⁸ Murray, 49

¹⁹ Murray, 49

²⁰ Murray, 49

church became a sustaining force that shaped her for future activism. The church culture of which Murray and her family were part had a long history that was shaped by African American traditions of self-help amid the isolating impact of segregation.

"IN THE PRESENCE OF MINE ENEMIES:" BLACK CHURCH CENTRALITY IN THE POST-REDEMPTION SOUTH

The unrealized dreams of Reconstruction and the limitations of segregation shaped the character of life within southern black communities and, by extension, black churches in the 1890s. At the turn of the century, the majority of southern black Americans remained in close-knit communities engaged in agricultural pursuits similar to those of their enslaved foreparents and, in some cases, even worked the same plantations. As late as 1900 only ten percent of African Americans lived outside of the South, eighty-three percent lived in rural areas, and about seventy-five percent of all black farmers were sharecroppers. In the first decade of the twentieth century, the proportion of blacks in the South dropped by only one percent with seventy-three percent remaining on farmland. Sharecropping included a life of back-breaking labor, few material amenities and often perennial debt. Some sharecroppers enjoyed a close relationship with the land, but often the satisfaction they took in their work was marred by the reality of extortion by landlords, whom few croppers were able to successfully contest. Moreover, their activities were restricted by segregation and white authority.²¹ One South Carolina memoirist wrote: "It behooved Negroes to be humble, meek, and

²¹ Benjamin Mays, *Born to Rebel: An Autobiography*, foreword by Orville Vernon Burton (Athens and London: University of Georgia Press, 1971);⁶ Hurt, 1; See Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work, and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York: Basic Books, 1985), 79-82; Sernett, 17

subservient in the presence of white folks...It was dangerous to argue with a white person.”²²

Indeed, *subordination* rather than *separation* was Jim Crow’s chief cornerstone. While segregation was customary in northern and southern cities prior to 1890, the widespread adoption of Jim Crow laws during the following decade marked a new rigidity in and formalization of racial apartheid across the South. This hardening of racial lines was codified in the landmark 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* case. The US Supreme Court declared racial segregation legal as long as public accommodations were as “equal” as they were “separate.” In practice however, in the Jim Crow South, the races were neither separated nor equal. Instead, blacks and whites intermingled on terms defined by the former’s subjugated position in the social hierarchy. By the end of the 1890s segregation had been sufficiently codified to subordinate African Americans in public life by enforcing psychological subjugation through substandard public amenities.

The 1890s saw a rising tide of violence against African Americans from vigilante groups like the Ku Klux Klan, who regularly punished black people who transgressed racial mores or presented an affront to whites’ status. President Grant’s removal of federal troops from the South, in 1877, allowed white men’s societies to operate in the open, at a time when southern principalities were rallying to the cause of white supremacy. African Americans were hanged, maimed, raped and burned for refusing to kowtow to whites, who were angered at their loss of legal control over black labor and resentful of African Americans’ new status as citizens. Black families were punished for

²² Mays, 22-23

advocating fair wages and for trying to make economic gains without depending on white men.²³

Segregation's legislatures drew inspiration from the laws that had governed free black populations in the antebellum era, when racial restrictions were based on practices of exclusion. Some historians have argued that policies of racial segregation were improvements from practices that excluded African Americans from participation in public activities at any level.²⁴ Among majority white church populations, the trend progressed in the opposite direction. White churches had allowed African Americans to attend their services before the war and many were amenable to black congregants continuing to worship among them, as long as black worshippers maintained their restricted status within white church communities.²⁵ However, black people were generally disinterested in this option and increasingly left white churches to form their own congregation, within which they could worship on their own terms. Some churches segregated by de facto lines, while others split after emancipation. By 1870, racial

²³ See Grace Elizabeth Hale, *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 46-51, 131-36, 236; Owen, *The Sacred Flame of Love*, 168-69 asserts while a few even advocated it and some openly repudiated it, white Methodists did little to help fight lynch law or eradicate the general mistreatment of their African American kindred.

²⁴ For evidence that segregation was an advancement over practices of total exclusion see the following classic works: Leon Litwack, *North of Slavery: The Negro in the Free States, 1790-1860* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1961), describes the northern template for southern segregation that existed well before emancipation and C. Van Woodward *and Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974) argues for the slow development of segregation across the South that did not crystallize into a stringent legal system until 1890. See also Howard Rabinowitz, *Race Relations in the Urban South, 1865-1890* (Urbana; Chicago; London: University of Illinois Press, 1980)

²⁵ Katharin L. Dvorak, *An African-American Exodus: The Segregation of the Southern Churches* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson Publishing, Inc., 1991), 169; John B. Boles, "Slaves in Biracial Protestant Churches" in *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*, Samuel S. Hill, editor (Baton Rouge, LA and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 112; C. Eric Lincoln, "The Black Church in the Context of American Religion" in Hill, 57-58; Othal Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church (Revised)* (Memphis, TN: The CME Publishing House, 1996) 114-130

segregation in churches was complete.²⁶ As some white southern churches began to bar or restrict black worshippers, African Americans assembled together in the fashion articulated in Earl Lewis' description of black people in Norfolk, Virginia:

"On public conveyances, in downtown shops, at voting booths, and in innumerable other ways, segregation cast blacks as second-class citizens. But at other times and in critical ways, blacks lived within reach yet beyond the world of white control. At home, they chose the people with whom they would interact, and in most cases they interacted with their own. Here the operative word is *congregation*."²⁷

Black parishioners refused to be treated as second-class citizens and articulated their own interpretations of Christianity.²⁸ Katharin Dvorak argues that what black congregants "did, said, sang, preached, wrote, and prayed during the period [when African Americans first formed their own churches] shows that black Christians were not helpless victims of events but rather executors of the religious legacy earned in their forbears' and their own Christian experience."²⁹ As an all-black institution, virtually free of white control, the church became an importance source of black empowerment and religious expression.

²⁶ Dvorak, 169; John B. Boles, "Slaves in Biracial Protestant Churches" in *Varieties of Southern Religious Experience*, Samuel S. Hill, editor (Baton Rouge, LA and London: Louisiana State University Press, 1988), 112; C. Eric Lincoln, "The Black Church in the Context of American Religion" in Hill, 57-58; Othal Hawthorne Lakey, *The History of the CME Church (Revised)* (Memphis, TN: The CME Publishing House, 1996)114-130

²⁷ Lewis, 91-92

²⁸ Although she neglects a full discussion of the ways in which the "invisible institution" fostered distinct interpretations of Christianity among African Americans, in Dvorak, *An African American Exodus* presents a strong argument that the segregation of southern churches was a result of African Americans "acting on their distinctive appropriation of Christianity" (p. 114) through her case study of the formation of the Colored Methodist Episcopal Church, which was established by former members of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South.

²⁹ Dvorak, 2

The church as the center of social activity among segregated African American populations (as well as their white southern counterparts) has been well documented.³⁰

“Here it might be said that, unlike much of our American population, the Negro is well churchied,” declared the Rev. W. H. Holloway in his 1903 description of African American life in the Black Belt. He continued:

It is his only institution and forms the center of his public life. He turns to it not only for spiritual wants, but looks toward it as the center of his civilization. Here he learns the price of cotton and the date of the next circus; here he is given the latest fashion plates or the announcement for candidates for justice of the peace. In fact, the white office seeker has long since learned that his campaign among the Negroes must be begun in the Negro church, and by a Negro preacher.³¹

Regardless of the type of edifice, locale or denominational affiliation, the church remained central to the lives of black southerners throughout the political oppressive years of the late- nineteenth and early-twentieth century. “The church showed remarkable vitality as it spread across the South, drawing in people for fellowship, mutual aid, and a powerful message of salvation. Its presence and influence in black communities were so overwhelming [persuasive] that black social organization had an almost one-dimensional quality.”³²

³⁰ For more discussion of the church as central to southern whites and the South in general see James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 197-236; Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 148; and Samuel E. Hill, *Crisis of Southern Churches* (New York: Holt, Reinhart and Winston, 1967); See also Arthur E. Paris, *Black Pentecostalism: Southern Religion in an Urban World* (Amherst, MA: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1982), 13.

³¹ W. H. Holloway, “A Black Belt County, Georgia,” in *The Negro Church: Report of a Social Study made under the Direction of Atlanta University; together with the Proceedings of the Eighth Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, held at Atlanta University, May 26, 1903*, 57-63, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University Press, 1903; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2001; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/negrochurch/DuBois.html>), 57

³² Montgomery, 351

Arthur E. Paris argues that the church held an ideological hegemony at the turn of the century, especially before urban life brought challenges to the church's message as the central worldview of African Americans.³³ C. Eric Lincoln contends that the church was "the black Christian's government, social club, secret order, espionage system, political party, and impetus to revolution."³⁴ The church also was the focal point of educational pursuits, economic support, political involvement, philanthropic efforts, and reform measures. In his landmark 1903 exposition, *The Souls of Black Folk*, W. E. B. Du Bois concluded that "the church proper, the Sunday-school, two or three insurance societies, women's societies, secret societies, and mass meetings of various kinds" all met in rural churches.³⁵ In 1906, Washington, DC educator Leila Amos Pendleton described "the largest of the churches" in the all-black town of Mound Bayou: It "serves, as do most of these edifices, as church, lecture hall, theater, council hall, and center for debating society."³⁶

The church became the avenue by which African American families engaged in all types of independent development opportunities, in part because they had few opportunities to congregate in other places. While growing up in South Carolina, Benjamin Mays recalled that his church Old Mount Zion was an important institution because "Negroes had nowhere to go but the church."³⁷ For most black church-goers,

³³ Paris, 13-14

³⁴ Lincoln "The Black Church in the Context of American Religion" in Hill, 59

³⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk* (Boston: Paperview and the Boston Globe, 2005) 139-40

³⁶ Leila Amos Pendleton, *A Narrative of the Negro* (Washington, DC: Press of R. L. Pendleton, 1912); Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 1999; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/pendleton/pendle.html>, 182

³⁷ Mays, 13

church was “an all-day affair.”³⁸ “They went there to worship, to hear the choir sing, to listen to the preacher, and to hear and see the people shout.”³⁹ The church was as Mays described it, “the one place where the Negroes in my community could be free and relax from the toil and oppression of the week. Among themselves they were free to show off and feel important.”⁴⁰ As such, church was central to the lives of black southerners during this time. The numbers of black parishioners increased thirty-eight percent from 2.6 million to 3.6 million from 1890 to 1906.⁴¹ Population growth combined with the proliferation of independent black denominations as well as splits within black congregations, which contributed to this increase in overall membership.⁴² With a rise in the numbers of black parishioners the resource bases of black church families widened.

EXPRESSIONS OF CHURCH FAMILY ON THE LOCAL CONGREGATION AND DENOMINATION LEVELS

The collection of papers from the Third Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, edited by W. E. B. Du Bois in 1898, included assessments of the benevolent work of churches in Atlanta, Georgia. Du Bois calculated charitable contributions, visits to jails and “slums,” and missions established by black churches among indigent populations. He pointed out that his assessments could “not give an account of all of the benevolent work of Negro Churches; much is done by individuals, and perhaps the

³⁸ See Wilson Fallin, Jr., *The African American Church in Birmingham, Alabama, 1815-1963: A Shelter in the Storm* (New York and London: Garland Publishing, Inc., 1997), 41-42

³⁹ Mays, 13

⁴⁰ Mays, 13

⁴¹ Montgomery, 342

⁴² See Fallin, 37-39 for a discussion of the development of churches in Birmingham, AL from 1900-1920. He argues that much of the church growth was due to splits among Baptist congregations and strong capable Methodist leadership; Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 23 discusses the growth of churches in Norfolk.

larger part of the charity is entirely unsystematic and no record is kept of it.”⁴³ “Some needy person or cause appeals to a congregation. Immediately in a whirl of sympathy or enthusiasm a collection is taken up and the money given, although no official record remains of the deed,” Du Bois surmised.⁴⁴ Moreover, he also noted that “the distress of the needy is often relieved by neighbors through notices given in the church.”⁴⁵ Yet, the unrecorded world of benevolence to which Du Bois pointed was barely detectable to many of his elite contemporaries.

“Very few of the churches have organizations” for benevolent work, the African American Rev. Hugh H. Proctor, pastor of First Congregational Church of Atlanta noted in the same 1898 volume.⁴⁶ “The want of organization,” he continued, “makes the benevolence unsystematic and unintelligent.”⁴⁷ Although it may not have been as widespread as the work churches might have performed with more organization and planning, the assistance church members offered to one another was anything but unintelligent. Rather, sharing resources among brothers and sisters at church had become intuitive to many congregants by the turn-of-the-century.

⁴³ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Results of the Investigation,” in *Some Efforts of American Negroes For Their Own Social Betterment, Report of An Investigation Under The Direction of Atlanta University; Together With The Proceedings of The Third Conference For The Study Of The Negro Problems, Held At Atlanta University, May 25-26, 1898*, 50-51, editor, W. E. B. Du Bois, (Atlanta, GA: Atlanta University Press, 1898; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2000; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/DuBoisau/DuBois.html>), 11

⁴⁴ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Results of the Investigation,” 11; See also W. E. B. Du Bois, editor, *Co-Operation Among Negro Americans. Report of a Social Study Made by Atlanta University, Under the Patronage of the Carnegie Institute of Washington, D. C., Together with the Proceedings of the 12th Conference for the Study of the Negro Problems, Held at Atlanta University, on Tuesday, May the 28th, 1907* (Atlanta: Atlanta University Press, 1907; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2000; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/DuBois07/DuBois.html>)

⁴⁵ W. E. B. Du Bois, “Results of the Investigation,” 11

⁴⁶ Henry H. Proctor, “The Church as an Institution for Social Betterment,” in Du Bois, editor, *Some Efforts of American Negroes For Their Own Social Betterment*, 50-51

⁴⁷ Proctor, “The Church as an Institution for Social Betterment,” 50

Only a year earlier African Methodist Episcopal bishop, W. J. Gaines gave a somewhat different perspective of “Negro religion.” He wrote:

Another marked characteristic of the religion of the negro is its benevolence. I do not believe any people have ever given as much, with so little of wealth to give from, as the colored people of America...Christian negroes are proverbially hospitable. They will share their last crust of bread with their needy and helpless brethren. They open their hearts and homes for the entertainment of Christian workers and ministers, feeling it a proud privilege to have in their houses the servants of the Lord. The negro has no element of selfishness nor *stinginess* in his nature, and his record of charity and benevolent giving proves it without question.⁴⁸

Gaines rooted the abundant generosity of black parishioners in the “nature” of African Americans and, in quintessential late-nineteenth century fashion, dismissed the complexity of an entire people. Like any group of humans, early-twentieth century African Americans included those who could be classified as stingy or selfish. A spirit of giving among black southerners at the turn of the century conceivably was associated with the legacy of slavery, widespread poverty, and the experience lived under Jim Crow. Most black Americans in the era likely also believed that they shared a *linked fate*—a common destiny, such that what happened to African Americans as a group affected individual lives. Michael Dawson’s contemporary assertion that “the historical experiences of African Americans have resulted in a situation in which group interests have served as a useful proxy for self-interest” applied to Black America in this era as well.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Wesley J. Gaines, *The Negro and the White Man* (Philadelphia: AME Publishing House, 1897; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2000; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/gaines/gaines.html>), 188

⁴⁹ Michael Dawson, *Behind the Mule: Race and Class in African American Politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 77

Beyond practical manifestations of operating like an extended family, devotees who believed in the Biblical family of God saw the church as a space to build a spiritual legacy. Members of church families endeavored to extend membership to their wider communities and leave inheritances for future generations of church families. Some church authorities insisted that the church advance a collective vision of evangelism and brotherhood. Other, less devout parishioners saw the advantages of church cooperation and participated in it to develop positive identities and share resources alongside committed devotees. Whatever their motivations, church families often worked together to expand their reach and denominational prowess.

Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History, presented by AME Rev. James A. Handy, reads: "The fact that you are a member of the Methodist Church implies that you prefer its doctrines, government and usages to any other Church. In the bosom of the church you get your spiritual food, and within her borders lie the field of your usefulness; she is your spiritual mother and claims you as a loyal and dutiful son."⁵⁰ With this assertion Handy intended to argue that the AME church was the family members *chose* to support. "By voluntary vows," they "obligated" themselves "to be faithful to all her interests," Handy reminded his AME readers.⁵¹ It was the loving maternal figure of the church who had embraced her members. In case they had forgotten Handy affirmed:

In her communion, your family and kindred live; in her communion perhaps a mother or father died and passed away to the better world. Your

⁵⁰ James A. Handy, *Scraps of African Methodist Episcopal History* (Philadelphia: AME Book Concern, 1902; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2000; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/handy/handy.html#p268>), 394

⁵¹ Handy, 394

church has a splendid history in the past, and a present influential promise among other Gospel Churches, and golden prospects for future usefulness.⁵²

Handy tied the work of the church directly to the “family and kindred” of AME congregants, implying that advancing the work of the church was directly beneficial to one’s family, both biological and spiritual. Membership in “the Connection,” the wide affiliation of AME churches, was to be prized above other denominations, not simply because it was the church of one’s birth, but because it was the church that carried the heritage and the future legacy of both one’s spiritual and biological families. He also boldly contended:

The faith that carries us into a church, ought to lead us to consecrate our lives to promote its welfare. The highest stamp of Christianity, therefore, is all together consistent with the warmest denominational zeal and activity. If Methodism is Christianity in earnest, then to be devoted to Methodism is to be consecrated to Christianity.⁵³

He denounced “sectarian narrowness,” asserting that “A decided preference for your own home, is not to be construed to mean any dislike towards your neighbor’s home.”⁵⁴ Moreover, Handy argued that being privy to “the sacred ordinances of Christ’s Church, to the spiritual benefits of pastoral care, and all the means of grace to fit and prepare you for heaven” made for an “exalted privilege” of being “associated with the people of the

⁵² Handy, 394

⁵³ Handy, 395

⁵⁴ Handy, 395; Giggie, *After Redemption*, 35-36 argues that as black communities followed railroad expansion in the Mississippi Delta at the turn-of-the century congregations centralized their meeting places, a practice which somewhat lessened the patterns of rural blacks travelling to different churches on each Sunday and helped to strengthen the sectarianism that influenced denominational allegiance, although it did not completely.

Lord.”⁵⁵ Through membership in the AME church one was “introduced into the loyal family of God, a family composed of patriarchs and prophets.”⁵⁶

“All of whom resemble the children of a king.” Being a member of this royal family, it is expected that you walk and be worthy of this high vocation, that you seek in all laudable ways to promote the prosperity of the church, cheerfully sharing her burdens and co-operating harmoniously with all her movements.⁵⁷

Membership in the church family meant more than supporting the goals of the church with time, treasure, and talents. Church membership and the support of its work were both part of the singular endeavor of living a true Christian life. Such a life came with the privilege of being among the “royal priesthood,” a group set aside to go before God on behalf of the people and to represent God to the masses. The AME church, Handy proposed, was among the most consecrated of all Christian denominations and worthy of earnest devotion born of unity.

To emphasize oneness among church families, some church groups inserted by-laws into their constitutions that proclaimed members were of one body. A portion of the Providence, Rhode Island Shiloh Baptist Church covenant read:

We further engage to watch over one another in brotherly love; to remember each other in prayer; to aid each other in sickness and distress; to cultivate Christian sympathy in feeling, and courtesy in speech; to be slow to take offence, but always ready for reconciliation, and mindful of the rules of our Saviour to secure it without delay.⁵⁸

⁵⁵ Handy, 394-95

⁵⁶ Handy, 395

⁵⁷ Handy, 395

⁵⁸ Jeter, Henry N. *Pastor Henry N. Jeter's Twenty-five Years Experience with the Shiloh Baptist Church and Her History. Corner School and Mary Streets, Newport, R. I.* (Providence, RI: Remington Printing Co., 1901; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2001; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jeter/jeter.html>), 23

Shiloh Baptist enforced the concept of oneness through explicit statutes on allegiance and joint identity. One of its ordinances declared, “A public offense is one not against any particular individual, but against the whole church, an injury to the cause of piety, a reproach to the gospel, and a scandal” in Section 20, number 6 of the Church Rules.⁵⁹ Lifecycle ceremonies, such as funerals and weddings were exclusively reserved for persons “having connection with the church.”⁶⁰ “Section 17” of the Church Rules, while acknowledging that members constituted a collective body, also stated that it was the “duty of each and every member of this church to welcome strangers to the public services.”⁶¹ In order to grow the church, members were encouraged to extend kindness to non-believers and unaffiliated people to draw them to the fellowship. The allegiance of church family members to one another ran deeper than formal statements in church by-laws and was shaped by a strong group identity that recognized a shared heritage, a need for group maintenance, and growth in hopes of sustaining a lasting legacy. Shiloh members seemed to have adhered to the mandate to “contribute cheerfully and regularly to the support of the ministry” as well.⁶² In 1895, they raised \$500 for the church’s twenty-fifth anniversary.⁶³ The dedication of lay people like the members of Shiloh Baptist to church families demonstrates that church leaders were not the only ones who held a distinct commitment to church work.

Bishop Wesley Gaines was amazed at how black parishioners gave to their churches. In 1897 he wrote:

⁵⁹ Jeter, 30

⁶⁰ Jeter, 29

⁶¹ Jeter, 29

⁶² Jeter, 23

⁶³ Jeter, 29, 20

It is marvelous what they have given for the erection of church edifices and the support of their church institutions since they were made free thirty-two years ago. If written out, it would make a chapter of self-sacrifice and heroism without a parallel in the history of mankind. From their small earnings they set apart a certain sum, and this is given Sabbath after Sabbath with a regularity that is as beautiful as it is constant.⁶⁴

Gaines argued that what a person values can be judged by the consistency of one's investment and concluded that "the negro puts the highest estimate upon his religion and cherishes it as he does nothing else in this world."⁶⁵

Belief in the spiritual benefits of their material investments played an important role in the lives of turn-of-the-century parishioners, who consistently gave of their meager means to churches. Fellowshiping among other believers who had faith that God would produce a harvest from the seeds they sowed encouraged parishioners to persevere through difficult times and in spite of opposition they might experience from immediate family members. Although his wife saw no return from his offerings, Henry Robinson continued to donate to the sanctified church he attended. "'Why don't you go down to that church where you give all your money and wear yourself out half the night whooping and shouting? Maybe they'll hand some of it back'" his wife Willie Belle frequently chided.⁶⁶ Despite his wife's taunting, the family's lack and the dearth of jobs for black men in particular, Robinson never lost his commitment to his church. His son, the Rev. James H. Robinson wrote: "I marveled at Papa's lack of bitterness; all he did was pray. His faith in God never diminished."⁶⁷ Adherents with a commitment level like Henry Robinson may not have seemed practical, but their actions expressed the

⁶⁴ Gaines, 188

⁶⁵ Gaines, 189

⁶⁶ James H. Robinson, *Road without Turning: The Story of Reverend James H. Robinson: An Autobiography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Company, 1950), 38

⁶⁷ Robinson, 48

essence of belief: perceiving as real fact what is not revealed to natural senses. He trusted that God would reward him and his fellow church members for their faithful giving even if they did not see how that reward might manifest. As a result of the collective giving of such members black churches achieved a degree of economic autonomy rarely achieved by their parishioners.

For example, church buildings represented important economic investments for church families, who often took great pride in these buildings. In total, black church property was valued at \$26.6 million by 1890 and \$56.6 million by 1906. In 1902 G. F. Richings described the grand scope of the African Methodist Episcopal Church, the oldest of all African American denominations. He assessed the property value of all the property in "The Connection," the network of AME churches, calculating the following:

fourteen Bishops, eleven general secretaries of departments, 4,365 itinerants [unassigned/travelling preachers], and 15,885 local preachers, full membership, 543,604, probationers, 35,287; total membership, 599,141. Church edifices, 4,575, valuation, \$8,650,155; parsonages, 1,650, value, \$75,950; schools, colleges and universities, 41, value of buildings and grounds, \$756,475; grand total valuation of property, \$9,482,580.⁶⁸

On the individual congregational level, black parishioners treasured church property as well. In 1895 a man called Deacon Jones told William James Edwards that he considered many county residents in Carlowville, Alabama to be indifferent toward the need for churches and educational buildings. Nevertheless, he fellowshipped at Hopewell Baptist Church, which functioned as a three-month session schoolhouse during the winter season. Jones was among 500 people who gathered in the "large one-room log cabin, 30 by 36 feet on the road-side, with a double door and three holes for

⁶⁸ G. F. Richings, *Evidence of Progress among Colored People* (Philadelphia: Geo. S. Ferguson Co., 1902; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2000; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/church/richings/richings.html>), 382

windows cut in the sides,” without a “chimney nor anything to show that the room could be heated in cold weather.”⁶⁹ The faithful at Hopewell gathered one Sunday a month and “spent the entire day, eating, shouting, and praising God for His goodness toward the children of men.”⁷⁰ Although the edifice was neither fancy nor comfortable, it was likely invaluable to its members, as was church property to black people in general at the turn of the century. Indeed, as property of the black community, black churches became important symbols of solidarity and consistency.⁷¹

Black congregants also provided family-like non-material support to one another.⁷² In South Carolina, educational activist Septima Clark wrote about exchanges between church members, who lavished one another with emotional support like kin. Clark taught on James Island from 1916 to 1919 where she observed church families supporting one another during moments of bereavement. Individuals took the Biblical admonition to “mourn with those who mourn” to heart on John’s Island, South Carolina, where entire congregations joined mourning families in all-night wakes. Clark, who was a teacher and principal on the island, wrote:

At these wakes, held at the church where the funeral was to be conducted the next day, while the body was lying in state at the front of the church, the congregation sang song after song, the preacher preached, and perhaps a visiting preacher or two joined the pastor in exhorting the assembled throng, and members of the congregation arose to pay tribute to the one gone on.⁷³

⁶⁹ William James Edwards, *Twenty Five Years in the Black Belt* with an introduction by Daniel T. Williams and an epilogue by Consuela Lee (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1993), 28

⁷⁰ Edwards, 28

⁷¹ Myers and Sharpless, 56

⁷² Gaines, 189

⁷³ Septima Clark with LeGette Blythe, and foreword by Harry Golden, *Echo in My Soul* (New York: E. P. Dutton and Co., Inc., 1962), 55

"It always seemed to me," Clark continued, "that at these wakes the mourners, despite loud protestations of sorrow and great loss, were having a most wonderful time."⁷⁴

Perhaps the festive way in which the congregants involved themselves was especially comforting to mourners. Through rituals that celebrated the life of the deceased, collective mourning aided the grieving process for the bereaved family by lifting their spirits and simultaneously bore witness to West African cultural retention in the Sea Islands

Although they often had little to share in terms of financial support, church families still provided important resources for families needing material support time of sickness or death.⁷⁵ Angelo Herndon did not mention blood relatives who attended church with his mother, but several women in her church treated her like a sister. In 1920, as a child of six years, he lay desperately ill, requiring medicine that his family could not afford. His mother "called on her dear friend Mrs. Josephine Tolbert...they belonged to the same church and very often attended prayer meetings together in neighbor's homes."⁷⁶ "As usual," Herndon wrote, "Mrs. Tolbert did not fail her," and loaned his mother enough money to cover the cost of his treatment.⁷⁷ Herndon acknowledged the role of church members in two additional moments of significant hardship for his family. When his little brother died of scarlet fever, in 1922, Herndon wrote: "My mother's friends, Mrs. Tolbert, Mrs. Josephine, Effie and others arranged

⁷⁴ Clark, 55

⁷⁵ E. Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Church in America* (New York: Schocken Books, 1963), 34-38

⁷⁶ Angelo Herndon, *Let Me Live*, with an introduction by Marlon B. Ross (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2007), 5

⁷⁷ Herndon, 5

meetings of churchgoers to help raise money for the burial, for we were penniless and weak from hunger.”⁷⁸

The church family came to Mrs. Herndon’s aid again after the death of her husband. She requested help from her siblings-in-law, pleading “‘After all, he was your brother’ ... ‘You must help him get a decent Christian burial,’” to little avail.⁷⁹ “All our relatives, with the exception of Uncle Jeremiah, pleaded poverty, and we got nothing from them,” Angelo concluded.⁸⁰ It is probably not ironic that the only blood relative who contributed to the burial cost was Herndon’s Uncle Jeremiah, a preacher, who, “despite his foxy [cunning] disposition had a generous streak in his twisted nature.”⁸¹ A plea for a “Christian burial” was perhaps what convicted him to help a relative in time of need.⁸² Again, Herndon affirmed: “As usual, Mrs. Josephine and Effie proved themselves staunch friends.”⁸³ Having little to offer, they nonetheless “contributed their mite toward the funeral expenses. It was a real sacrifice for them.”⁸⁴ In addition, “dear Ms. Josephine and Effie decided to hold another prayer meeting in our home,” Herndon wrote.⁸⁵ With the extent of their material resources reached, the women of Mrs. Herndon’s church family accessed the power of collective petition to God, praying that He would make up the difference in meeting the family’s need. As members of the great

⁷⁸ Herndon, 26

⁷⁹ Herndon, 29

⁸⁰ Herndon, 29

⁸¹ Herndon, 29

⁸² Herndon, 29

⁸³ Herndon, 29

⁸⁴ Herndon, 29

⁸⁵ Herndon, 29-30

family of God, black congregants had access to resources that were unavailable through any other institution.

Segregation, an official policy of the region, did not rule out entirely interactions between black and white Christians in the Jim Crow South at the turn of the century. In fact, some white advocates of Christian unity championed the eradication of racial divides within denominations. Bishop Monroe Jamison attended a church session as early as 1875 where a white elder from the northern branch of the Methodist Episcopal Church spoke out against the various branches of Methodism. He argued that all Methodists should combine into one big family, claiming that the northern branch had always supported black people.⁸⁶ In 1922, Walter Brooks argued that white and black Baptists had a long history of interracial collaboration—including several black ministers pastoring white churches—that was thwarted by wealthy whites who did not want to see such collaboration across racial lines among poor devotees.⁸⁷

As part of an anti-racism committee at the 1968 World Council of Churches assembly in Uppsala, Sweden, Pauli Murray called for racial reconciliation in the Episcopalian Church. She lived to see cross-racial ecumenical alliances that she would

⁸⁶ Monroe Franklin Jamison, *Autobiography and Work of Bishop M.F. Jamison, D.D. ("Uncle Joe")*, Editor, *Publisher, and Church Extension Secretary: A Narration of His Whole Career From the Cradle to the Bishopric of the Colored M.E. Church in America* (Nashville, TN: Printed for the author, Publishing House of the M.E. Church, South, 1912; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2000, <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/jamison/jamison.html>), 86-93

⁸⁷ Walter H. Brooks, "The Evolution of the Negro Baptist Church" in *The Journal of Negro History* (Volume 7, No.1 [January 1922]), 11-22. The Populist Movement had the opportunity to supersede Pentecostalism in being the most successful and far-reaching interracial movement in the nation's history, but as David Roediger has argued, among others, "the wages of whiteness" and Populists efforts to court the Southern Democratic vote thwarted its success. See David Roediger, *The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class* (London and New York: Verso, 1991), for a long history of the ways in which the way the psychological payment of being white worked to foil cross-racial class alliances in the nineteenth-century United States and C. Van Woodward, *Tom Watson, Agrarian Rebel* (New York: Macmillan, 1938) traces the complex and tragic transformation of the Populist leader, including his fall from interracial organizer to outspoken racist.

have never imagined being promoted as a child.⁸⁸ Young Murray regularly visited Maryland, where her uncle, the Rev. Smalls served as pastor over several churches. In many towns and cities white and black churches that shared denominational roots were among the most powerful symbols of segregation. Such was the case with “the two Episcopal churches in Croom, [Maryland] both visible from the rectory,” where her aunt and uncle resided. The buildings stood close enough to “have been part of the same property.”⁸⁹ Murray described the stark differences between the segregated churches in this manner:

Saint Thomas, for white Episcopalians, stood in a grove of trees at the top of the hill, a stately red structure dominating the countryside, it seemed to me then its churchyard filled with walnuts and tombstones befitting its historical significance. Its bell, which tolled for services and funerals, had a deep, mellow sound. Down the hill, across the road from the churchyard, was Saint Simon’s the church for colored Episcopalians, a small frame chapel on a grassy plot barren of trees...Its high, shrill bell was more like a dinner bell than a church bell, and the few graves behind the chapel were marked by weather-beaten wooded crosses with no other sign of identification.⁹⁰

Members of both congregations were “intimately acquainted with one another’s families, and the easy familiarity common to rural life marked their daily interchange.”⁹¹ However, their separate worship services with the same prayer books and hymnals “within sight and sound of one another” made a strong impression on young Murray.⁹² Although she recognized that the inhabitants of this rural community were quite familiar with one another, the separate churches likely worked to encourage stronger racial group identity among youngsters like Pauli Murray, who experienced and an

⁸⁸ Pauli Murray, *The Autobiography of a Black Activist, Feminist, Lawyer, Priest, and Poet* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1989), 380-84

⁸⁹ Murray, 53

⁹⁰ Murray, 53

⁹¹ Murray, 53

⁹² Murray, 53

extra layer of connection as members of spiritual families in all-black churches. It would take many years before Murray began to address and understand the racial inconsistencies within the Episcopal Church and the church universal.

At a time when faithful alliances between black and white southerners were rare, black parishioners who believed in the church family as the wider network of Christians made powerful alliances with their white brothers and sisters. On rare occasions, white Christians who took the Biblical description “all nations of one flesh” gave willingly and generously to black members of the household of faith. African American Rev. Hugh Proctor of the First Congregational Church of Atlanta believed that he could access the resources of the larger community of Christians, both black and white and championed the reformatory power of the church family for racial reconciliation. Although he was greatly dissatisfied with what he identified as “the lack” of organized benevolence among black churches in 1898, in the next decade he began a massive and well-structured campaign to expand the services of his church. He planned to make the church “as attractive as the dive,” by keeping it open for twenty-four hours a day and providing substantial recreational activities.⁹³ A desire to help heal the wounds of the 1906 Atlanta race riot motivated Proctor to solicit donations from Christians outside of the South and from Christians across the color line, including black and white believers outside of the Congregational Church. “Colored people of other denominations subscribed two and a half thousand dollars” to his project.⁹⁴ “I made an appeal to the

⁹³ Hugh H. Proctor, *Between Black and White: Autobiographical Sketches* (Boston and Chicago: Pilgrim Press, 1925), 99

⁹⁴ Proctor, *Between Black and White*, 100

white people for a similar amount and they gave twice as much,” Proctor wrote.⁹⁵ He found comfort in being part of a supportive Christian family that challenged him to believe that cooperation among Christians could overcome societal ills. “Hitch up the religion of the South to its great unsolved problem,” Proctor declared, “and a new day will come to that section.”⁹⁶

Perhaps the most significant display of interracial union among black and white Christians occurred within the Holiness Movement that was revitalized at a 1906 meeting in Los Angeles called the Azuza Street Pentecost Revival.⁹⁷ The *Los Angeles Times* described the crowd as “colored people,” which included African, Asian, and Latin Americans and a “sprinkling of whites”⁹⁸ W. J. Seymour, a black holiness preacher was one of the most central prophetic voices of the revival. He studied under white Pentecostal preacher, Charles Fox Parham, who is credited with first popularizing, in the United States, the doctrine that speaking in tongues is the primary evidence of being filled with the Holy Spirit.⁹⁹ Seymour embraced and shared Parham’s teachings as an evangelist and, while pastoring a church in Los Angeles, he led a Pentecostal meeting that grew from a home-based meeting on Bonnie Brae Street to a powerful mass revival that moved to an abandoned AME church storage facility on Azuza Street.¹⁰⁰ The Azuza Street revival, which lasted three years, brought together Pentecost seekers from across

⁹⁵ Proctor, *Between Black and White*, 100

⁹⁶ Proctor, *Between Black and White*, 106

⁹⁷ At this writing the Pentecostal Movement is the fastest growing religious movement in the world and contains a strong cross-racial/national appeal. See Battle, 86; Anderson, *An Introduction to Pentecostalism: Global Charismatic Christianity*, 279-86;

⁹⁸ Vinson Synan, *The Holiness-Pentecostal Movement in the United States* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1971), 95, 109, 168

⁹⁹ Anderson, 35; Parham believed that the gift of tongues would be used in “the last days” to spread the Gospel more quickly and advance the Second Advent of Christ. See also Synan, 99-103.

¹⁰⁰ Anderson, 39

North America and was discussed around the world. There people of various backgrounds “tarried” for the Holy Spirit, experienced miracles of healing, glossalia, exorcism, visions, and prophecies as one large gathering of the family of God. According to their Biblical beliefs, this type of manifestation of God’s power occurred because they were “all united on one accord in one place.”¹⁰¹

The interracial character of this movement was a source of comfort for its black and white adherents who longed for a nation healed of racism. Unfortunately, Rev. Parham eventually articulated strongly discriminatory views toward Jewish people and even championed the Ku Klux Klan as having ““high ideals for the betterment of mankind.””¹⁰² However, for a time after the revival, the predominantly black Church of God in Christ served as a resource for white Pentecostal ministers who wished to become ordained. Incorporated in 1897, COGIC was the only one of four organized Pentecostal denominations incorporated at the time of the Azusa Street outpour. Dozens of white ministers sought their licenses from COGIC until 1924, when white Pentecostals formed the Assemblies of God, creating the largest Pentecostal denomination in the nation.¹⁰³ Although Pentecostalism eventually fell in line with the prevailing social patterns of segregation, it remained one of the most integrated of church segments throughout the Twentieth Century.

For African American parishioners, being active in a church family helped mediate the impact of segregation by affirming individual value and recognizing

¹⁰¹ Acts 2:1-16

¹⁰² Anderson, 35, See Randall J. Stephens, *Fire Spreads: Holiness and Pentecostalism in the American South* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2008) for a discussion of interracial Pentecostalism among African Americans and white post-Confederates who rejected the Lost Cause.

¹⁰³ Synan, 169-70

individuals' contributions to the community. Although external culture defined people according to their economic status and racial affiliation, the absence of a limit to spiritual development encouraged church members to be devoutly spiritual and earn the social benefits of a high position with God. Where men and women might be disparaged at their secular jobs or discouraged by the nature of their work or personal material conditions, their attachment to church bodies affirmed them as empowered individuals. Shared faith, service and fellowship in the church also helped affirm one's identity in ways that transcended the impact of second-class citizenship. Church attendance and faithfulness to the things of God was a significant determinant in what Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham called African Americans' "politics of respectability."¹⁰⁴ Higginbotham first identified this schema as part of the culture of uplift among women activists in the National Baptist Convention, who believed that by inculcating parishioners with middle-class values and changing their behaviors they might gain the respect of whites and also improve black people's self-concepts. Within this paradigm, integrity, not monetary gain, cleanliness, not pomp and circumstance, and faithfulness, not showmanship, influenced one's status in a community.

This type of attitude points to the interior world of African American churches, wherein one's status was not readily determined by possession of material wealth or even gender. Especially among less elite congregations, men and women had access to positions of authority based on their ascension in things spiritual, such as prayer, Bible study, preaching and teaching. Such people created the leadership of many church families who wielded varying degrees of authority among the larger congregations of

¹⁰⁴ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880-1920* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1993), 14-15

brothers and sisters. Mrs. Sarah Coleman remembered that at Brandon Presbyterian Church in the late 1920s elders commanded substantial authority. “The elders sat on the right hand side of the pulpit,” she recalled “*nobody* else could sit in their seats but the elders, terrible, but, that’s the way it was... elders just – the elders ruled, ruled the church.”¹⁰⁵ The elders to whom Coleman refers in the Presbyterian Church at that time where all male. However, when viewed as a general category of revered older leaders, in many churches, “elders” included a number of formidable females.

“Church mothers,” in particular, played important roles within the church family. As authority figures, they shaped church culture, helped maintain unity, and contributed to building church legacy.¹⁰⁶ They were a special category of elders who nurtured youngsters in the ways of the world as well as the walk of faith. These women often had a special rapport with ministers and were respected by the men of the church. One memoirist noted a common image of a church mother as he described, Luella Byrd who was “slightly overweight and walked with her left foot turned outward.”¹⁰⁷ Moreover, “When she walked, her hands would be clasped behind her back, and whatever the day, she was dressed as if she were in charge,” continually commanding her motherly presence even outside of the sanctuary.¹⁰⁸ He wrote:

As I watched the activity of the church, my eyes fell on Mother Luella Byrd. Mother Byrd was not only head of the Mother’s Board, but basically in

¹⁰⁵ Interview with Sarah A. Coleman by the author. 21 February 2006

¹⁰⁶ Butler, 66 explores church mothers in the COGIC, one of the Pentecostal churches, in which Gilkes Townsend *If It Wasn’t for the Women: Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 68-69 argues, women are likely to have more authority than their Baptist or Methodist counterparts; See Townsend for an argument that the title “mother” was also used outside of the church to denote respect for women leaders in various capacities of community activism with varying degrees of authority. See Cheryl Gilkes Townsend, 61-64

¹⁰⁷ Clifton L. Taulbert, *When We Were Colored* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1989) 94-95.

¹⁰⁸ Taulbert, 94-95

charge of the church. There she sat, dressed in white with her black cape draped over her shoulders, her arms folded and her face set. Once Mother Byrd had taken her position, God could begin to move.¹⁰⁹

Women such as Mother Byrd shaped church culture and empowered young female parishioners. In the church, black women enjoyed a public platform that was unavailable to their white female counterparts.¹¹⁰ This platform varied among denominations depending on class positions and doctrinal leanings. Pentecostal churches, with their democratic emphasis on experiencing the presence of the Holy Spirit were more inclined to permit women to function in public leadership roles.¹¹¹ In addition to setting the tone for reverence and dignity among the congregation, church mothers like Mother Byrd, were also important in regulating morality and were known for being able to “sniff out” fornication, lying, and cheating among church youngsters. They also encouraged and instructed younger women in their roles as mothers and wives and served as surrogate grandparents to church community youth. They might serve as stewardesses or deaconesses and were the keepers of the old-time way. The responsibilities of women organized into Mothers’ Boards reflected the responsibilities of church mothers. Such groups facilitated =prayer meetings, visited the “sick and shut-in,” prepared meals for special guests or church events, and cleaned the church house. In Pentecostal churches like the Church of God in Christ, where women had more

¹⁰⁹ Taulbert, 95

¹¹⁰ Elsa Barkley Brown argues that among of turn-of-the-century black congregations, black women once enjoyed a position that allowed them a public voice in community decisions for which white women had no counterpart. See Elsa Barkley Brown, “Negotiating and Transforming the Public Sphere: African American Political Life in the Transition from Slavery to Freedom” (*Public Culture* 1994, No. 7., pp. 106-146), 110.

¹¹¹ See Elaine J. Lawless, *Handmaidens of the Lord: Pentecostal Women Preachers and Traditional Religion* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1988) and Estrela Alexander and Amos Yong, editors, *Phillip’s Daughters: Women in Pentecostal-Charismatic Leadership* (Eugene: Pickwick Publications, 2009).

authority and served in more leadership roles than their Baptist or Methodist counterparts, church mothers led nearly autonomous female auxiliaries.¹¹²

The Women's Department of COGIC cultivated a variety of women leaders, who were often from poor and working class backgrounds. COGIC women leaders were often not from the Talented Tenth, the elite segment of the African American population designated as the "leaders of the race" who should use their education, material and political resources to advance upward mobility for all African Americans. Because they were not counted in this group, they were not as concerned with the "politics of respectability" as were the members of the National Baptist Women's Convention who worked among lower-classed women, hoping to convince them to conform to middle-class norms in the spirit of uplift. Anthea Butler argues that "COGIC women's concern for living holy and living right, rather than living like whites, made their belief in living sanctified a subversive exercise that gave them access to lower-class women that their Baptist and AME sisters did not have."¹¹³ When prospective church members looked at church mothers, especially those in the Church of God in Christ and other Pentecostal traditions, they often saw women who found powerful meaning in living Christian lives.

Likewise, a man might labor all week on a farm where he was treated poorly by his landlord, but within the church family he could espouse a more positive affirmation of identity. As a minister of the Gospel, a man would be respected as a shepherd and sometimes be revered by black and white people within the at-large community. As the

¹¹² Men and women so revered the first director of COGIC's Women's Department, Mother Lizzie Robinson that she was given a funeral comparable to that of a bishop; see Townsend Gilkes, 70.

¹¹³ Butler, 67

chief formal leader, the shepherd of the church was honored as a man of God with titles such as “Pastor,” “Reverend,” or “Preacher,” followed by a surname. In some congregations ministers were called “Father” or “Dad.” Anthea Butler argues that through representation of ideal gender norms, the father of the church and the church mothers worked in tandem to bring stability to the church family amid the turmoil of public life.¹¹⁴ Pastors were leaders who helped to enforce from the pulpit what church mothers taught in the pews. They preached on morality, thrift, sexual discipline, and the necessity of keeping oneself “unspotted” from the world.¹¹⁵

Pastor Alexander Bettis was widely respected throughout Edgefield County South Carolina, where he served as a Baptist pastor. Ministers like Bettis were charged with “watching over the souls” of their members, providing guidance and protection in ways that helped secure the health of the church family. The Rev. Bettis was even allowed to administer corporeal punishment should “any ruffian to begin any misbehavior.”¹¹⁶ No one dared sue Bettis for “thus taking the law into his own hands” and one author claimed that “there was not in Edgefield or Aiken counties a magistrate who would issue a warrant for, or a constable who would serve a warrant upon, the Rev. Alexander Bettis for whipping an obstreperous negro.”¹¹⁷ It seems that local white authorities and black residents alike yielded to Bettis’ disciplinary discretion. In

¹¹⁴ Butler, 48-50

¹¹⁵ Wilson Fallin, Jr., *Uplifting the People: Three Centuries of Black Baptists in Alabama* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007), 44

¹¹⁶ Alfred William Nicholson, *Brief Sketch of the Life and Labors of Rev. Alexander Bettis. Also an Account of the Founding and Development of the Bettis Academy* (Trenton, SC: Published by the author, 1913; Electronic Edition, Chapel Hill: UNC Documenting the American South Project, 2001; <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/nicholson/nicholson.html>); 37

¹¹⁷ Nicholson, 37-38

addition to the right to inflict bodily punishment on parishioners and local African Americans, Pastor Bettis's needs were readily attended to by his parishioners.

As a pastor, he received no salary. The people saw his needs and lovingly provided for them. Had his suit become thread bare? Then somewhere, in a manner unostentatious, a box would be given him and next Sunday the pastor would be seen to have on a new suit of clothes. Had his buggy become dilapidated? Then, while he was in church his old buggy would be stolen away and a brand new buggy would be in its place. In this way and divers others the pastor's wants were supplied.¹¹⁸

Parishioners revered Bettis in part because he was not a "money hungry" "gospel grafter."¹¹⁹ Rather, "When money was given him, as it often was, he would get in his buggy and go hunting the sick and needy of his flocks and administer to their needs."¹²⁰ Leaders like Rev. Bettis were especially important for their role in shaping young church members.

"TRAIN UP A CHILD IN THE WAY HE SHOULD GO": BLACK CHILDREN AND THE CHURCH FAMILY AT THE TURN OF THE CENTURY

Perhaps the most significant evidence of the church family's role in helping black people mediate racism, poverty, and familial dispersion is its impact on the lives of children. Churches enabled children to see themselves as part of an identity group that expanded beyond their extended biological families. Membership in the household of faith also expanded the resources available to individual families, inculcating in children the belief that they were loved and protected. Individual case studies bear out this conclusion.

¹¹⁸ Nicholson, 39

¹¹⁹ Nicholson, 39

¹²⁰ Nicholson, 39

As an adult, Odette Harper Hines contributed to the civil rights movement, in part, by hosting activists in her home and extending family like hospitality to them. She rooted her motivation for social activism in both her biological family as well as her church family. As a young child at Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem, New York she was part of a church group that “dispensed free food and clothing to anyone who came for it.”¹²¹ “My family’s interest in social issues and sense of responsibility for others laid the foundation for me,” she recalled, “but I think it was in the loving, activist atmosphere of Abyssinian Baptist Church that my social concern and involvement really blossomed.”¹²² With the varying extended familial roles church members played in the life of the church, children like Hines, learned the patterns of church relationships that would help to sustain them as adults and contribute to advances in the larger community.

Belonging to a church family also helped to empower as well as provide guidance for black children by expanding the number of people who held authoritative positions in their lives. Mother Byrd “was without question the matriarch of the church, her young observer remembered.”¹²³ “Not only was she an influencing and stabilizing factor for Saint Mark’s,” he continued, “but her demand for perfection and self-respect and her high hopes for the colored race will always be with me.”¹²⁴ Parents enlisted church members in training their children in the “way they should go” and children were expected to respect church members as formidable authorities.

¹²¹ Judith Rollins, *All is Never Said: The Narrative of Odette Harper Hines* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1995), 45

¹²² Rollins, 45

¹²³ Taulbert, 94-95

¹²⁴ Taulbert, 95

A North Carolina woman remembered that childrearing was a collective endeavor among her church family. "When we were growing up everybody's family was your family," Sarah Coleman explained.¹²⁵ "Your mother could scold me, your mother could feed me or would...We were always comfortable in each other's homes. And that was just a way of life" among the families in her Charlotte, North Carolina community, where most of her neighbors attended Brandon Memorial Presbyterian Church.¹²⁶

Because of the church's investment in young people and the reverence non-church-goers had for the church, a child's decision to commit to Christian discipleship was an interest held by entire communities. Bishop R. Pryor recalled that in the early twentieth century, "The unsaved Negro children in the southern farmland are constantly sought after and encouraged to get religion and be saved."¹²⁷ He asserted that "by the age of twelve" a child would have heard the common questions "'Are you saved?'" and "'Do you have religion?'" from a "father, mother, or aunt" or some other elder in a community.¹²⁸ At only nine years old, James Weldon Johnson became a full member of his grandmother's enthused Methodist church after he sat on the mourner's bench at a church revival and feigned conversion, much to the chagrin of his parents. With the encouragement of his grandmother, whose "consuming ambition" was for

¹²⁵ Coleman interview

¹²⁶ Coleman interview

¹²⁷ Bishop R. Pryor, *America What Are You to Me* (Washington, DC: Provident Press, 1970), 20

¹²⁸ Pryor, 20

Johnson to become a preacher, he participated in weekly class meeting, youth prayer groups, and love feasts.¹²⁹

Churches placed a high value on getting young members, like Johnson, into their folds. Sunday School departments were integral to this endeavor. In his account *Methodism in the South*, AME Bishop Wesley J. Gaines advised that “Sunday-schools and general education” were very important to church life. “The church that neglects either must expect to suffer the consequences in diminishing numbers and disintegration,” he argued.¹³⁰ Gaines warned that if Methodist churches weren’t aggressive in recruiting children they might be swept up by other denominations. According to Gaines, children “reared” in “Sunday-schools established by the Missionary churches of other denominations throughout the South,” often attached “themselves to the church which thus fostered them.”¹³¹ “Each church may expect this outcome,” he affirmed because, “the Sunday-school becomes a family, with strong family relations and ties.”¹³² He continued:

It is but a step—and a natural one at that—to ally oneself to this family by Church Bonds; so that wisdom calls for every church that would retain its children and youth for its service, to make its own Sunday-school relations so strong, so sacred, so attractive, that no mere inclination will lead these away from its fold, for inclination is largely the reason given for the abandonment of the church of their fathers and mothers.¹³³

¹²⁹ Johnson, James Weldon, *Along This Way in James Weldon Johnson: Writings* (New York: Literary Classics of the United States, 2004), 161-65; The love feast ritual among Methodists congregations involved a communal sharing of food and drink, unusually bread and water, and greeting one another with hugs, handshakes, and kisses of affection. They were intended to demonstrate a sprit of unity among believers and to encourage non-Methodists to join the church.

¹³⁰ Wesley J. Gaines, *African Methodism in the South; or Twenty-Five Years of Freedom*, with an Introduction by W. S. Scarborough (Atlanta, Georgia: Franklin Publishing House, 1890), 59

¹³¹ Gaines, 59-60

¹³² Gaines, 59-60

¹³³ Gaines, 60

Children were seen as being vital to church congregations because they could be trained to carry on the faith and traditions of the church, which understood its role as an extension of individual families. Gaines further warned that “in but few cases is this inclination superinduced by any of the theological reasons, but by those things that appeal so directly to the young, and seem to satisfy their craving desires, the desires of the most intellectual and refined spirits.”¹³⁴ In other words, the church family, in this case the AME church, would only lose young people whose interests were not being maintained, not those who had theological leanings contrary to the beliefs of Methodism. Moreover, the church also strove to keep the attention of youth so that they would remain in the faith of their foreparents, continue the traditions of the church, and not be drawn away by lodges and other fraternal organizations that some church leaders saw as competitors for the allegiance of their parishioners. Indeed many churches considered Sunday School and other forms of Christian education to be community investments in future adult leaders.¹³⁵

The father-daughter like mentorship between Church of God in Christ founder and leader, Bishop Charles H. Mason and a young woman who eventually served as the General Supervisor of the denomination’s Women’s Department demonstrates the investment of church leadership in future leaders. Bishop Mason was an acquaintance of the father of Mother Lillian Brooks Coffey who led the COGIC Women’s Department from 1945 until her death in 1964 Coffey first met Mason, as a child and was led to Christian conversion while he visited her Sunday School class. When she joined COGIC

¹³⁴ Gaines, 60

¹³⁵ Giggie, 70-73 argues that Masonic lodges offered different opportunities for leadership and a different type of elevation in knowledge and prestige that was especially appealing to black men who were increasingly pushed out of public politics in the 1890s.

as a young adult, Mason identified her leadership potential, took her under his wing like an adopted daughter and began helping to cultivate Coffey into the type of young woman who could one day lead the women of COGIC. Coffey played big sister by caring for the Mason children on family vacations and traveled along with Mason and the rest of his leadership team throughout the COGIC network as an apprentice. With the death of her parents when Coffey was twenty-one years old, Mason's fathering took on an even more special meaning. In addition to encouraging her academic work, he reminded Coffey of her future role and enforced the discipline of Bible study and the lifestyle of holiness like a protective father. Anthea Butler argues that Mason's investment in Coffey, "when he almost certainly could have mentored any number of men...suggests, perhaps, that the women's work was integral to his ideas about where the church would go in the future."¹³⁶

The identities of children like young Pauli Murray, who lost her parents at an even younger age than Coffey, may have benefitted most from being privy to affirming church fathers. Upon the death of her mother, while Murray was still a child, her father assumed responsibility for several of her older siblings and she was adopted by her aunt. Murray was very fond of the Rev. Henry B. Delaney, who was among the first African American priests to be ordained a bishop in the Episcopalian church. Bishop Delaney, was "a gracious old gentleman with kindly eyes, a man who loved children and took the time to answer my many questions," Murray remembered.¹³⁷ Bishop Delaney's fatherly engagement with Murray provided positive attention and affirmation that contributed to her view of her church family as a safe community.

¹³⁶ Butler, 56-58

¹³⁷ Murray, 49

Church fathers like Bishop Delaney were also influential in shaping the lives of young boys. One female congregant fondly recalled the Boy Scout troop founding by a beloved father in the church, Mr. Suber.¹³⁸ She also recounted how the Rev. Thomas Jenkins, the son of her childhood pastor, C. N. Jenkins “took a genuine interest in the boys in the neighborhood...he would be in the back of our church, the church lawn, teaching our boys to play tennis and it was a beautiful sight. He was just so close to the boys.”¹³⁹ This portrait of an adult male leader guiding young boys in athletic activity on the lawn evokes images of fatherhood. The pastor’s role was one of a loving father figure to his “sons,” instructing them in a sport in the backyard of their “home” – the church. Fatherly figures within the church family such as Mr. Suber and the Rev. Jenkins nurtured ideas of manhood that the church valued and urged the young men to value themselves in light of the investment of time and instruction from respected men in the church and community.

Church leaders and parishioners viewed the church as a primary place for black children to discover and hone leadership talents, including public speaking and literacy skills.¹⁴⁰ Churches endorsed the pursuit of education by encouraging people to read the Bible, disciplining them through sermons and Sunday School classes. Churches also served as formal schoolhouses, raised funds for equipment, and provided cultural literacy training by hosting events that featured literary works by African American

¹³⁸ Coleman interview

¹³⁹ Coleman interview

¹⁴⁰ Juan Williams and Quinton Dixie, *This Far By Faith: Stories from the African American Religious Experience* (New York, NY: William Morrow. An Imprint of Harper Collins, 2003), 232

artists.¹⁴¹ The church served as a village that prepared black children to achieve in a country that identified them as only useful as laborers for white people. As members of church families, children embraced a distinctive identity that encouraged them to value themselves above the second-class images segregation and poverty imposed on them.

Benjamin Mays recalled:

We had what was called 'Children's Day.' I do not remember exactly how old I was—possibly nine—when I participated, having committed to memory a portion of the Sermon on the Mount. After my recitation, the house went wild: old women waved their handkerchiefs, old men stamped their feet, and the people generally applauded long and loud. It was a terrific ovation, let alone a tremendous experience, for a nine-year-old boy. There were predictions that I would "go places" in life...The people in the church did not contribute one dime to help me with my education, but *they gave me something far more valuable*. They gave me encouragement, the thing I most needed. They expressed such a confidence in me that I always felt that I could never betray their trust, never let them down.¹⁴² (emphasis added)

The "encouragement" the church provided Mays was made more valuable by the connection he felt with his church family. His identity was rooted, in part, in being part of his church, a body of people who saw him as a representation of themselves. This perspective was in part responsible for Mays' determination to venture out into the world and be successful, no matter the challenges of racism or poverty.

Through supporting young people's educational aspirations, church families also prepared them for leadership. The Rev. Alexander Bettis envisioned "an institution of learning, peculiarly adapted to the needs of the negroes of Edgefield and Aiken counties

¹⁴¹ Valerie Grim, "African American Rural Culture, 1900-1950" in R. Douglas Hurt, editor, *African American Life In The Rural South, 1900-1950* (Columbia and London: University of Missouri Press, 2003) 115

¹⁴² Mays, 17

and the contiguous territory” in South Carolina.¹⁴³ He asked churches under his jurisdiction “to choose from their midst some young men to be sent away to school, and whose expenses would be guaranteed by the given church.”¹⁴⁴ This allowed the church to select among their affiliates, but was not limited to church members. Neither a member of the church or a professed Christian at the time of his selection, Pleasant Grove Baptist Church selected Alfred W. Nicholson to pursue such an educational opportunity.¹⁴⁵ He “was sent to the Schofield Normal School at Aiken, S. C. ...because of his faithfulness to and aptitude shown in the Sunday School, his quiet demeanor, his well known integrity and his general reputation for thrift, honesty and truthfulness.”¹⁴⁶ The church hoped to gain community educators who were also vested in the churches that supported them by sponsoring the schooling of young men like Nicholson. The fact that the church saw themselves as important to the community and empowered to shape it is telling. The church family had the power to affect the community by taking members of it and shaping them into the type of community contributors that would most benefit the work of the church.

By extending to the community and bringing children into the church family, the church provided children with adult role models they might not otherwise have encountered. Black families also expanded the resources available to their children for educational advancement by connecting themselves to a church family. For Benjamin Mays the church provided the institutional support and motivation to pursue

¹⁴³ Nicholson, Alfred William, *Brief Sketch of the Life and Labors of Rev. Alexander Bettis. Also an Account of the Founding and Development of the Bettis Academy* (Trenton, SC: Published by the author, 1913 Electronic Edition <http://docsouth.unc.edu/neh/nicholson/nicholson.html>), 85

¹⁴⁴ Nicholson, 85

¹⁴⁵ Nicholson, 85

¹⁴⁶ Nicholson, 85-86

educational opportunities that his poor parents could not provide, and those his father in particular found superfluous because he thought it was a waste for a black man to pursue education in the Jim Crow South. His church did not supplant his familial support, but became an extension of it and provided an expanded resource base that encouraged him to aspire to educational heights beyond those envisioned by his family. “Nobody in the family had gone beyond the fourth or fifth grade,” Mays wrote.¹⁴⁷ He continued:

I didn’t seem to have much to go on. But I had learned industry and honesty from my parents. I had been inspired by my county teachers, encouraged by the Reverend Marshall, and motivated by the people in the church who made me believe that I could become something worthwhile in the world. These are the things that drove me on and, when they are summed up, I guess they amount to quite a lot.¹⁴⁸

Mays’ father could not see the value in him leaving the family farm to attend school. But, Mays insisted on doing so: “My teacher in the one-room school, my pastor, and the church people at Mount Zion had inspired me to want an education far beyond what the four-month Brickhouse School could offer, and away beyond what my parents could possibly provide,” so Mays found a way to attend school.¹⁴⁹ He eventually graduated from a high school department at a black college twenty-six miles away from his home. He then travelled north to prove his worth in academic competition with Yankees, whom he thought, at the time, intellectually superior to southern white men. Undoubtedly the courage his church and community helped build in young Mays shaped his performance during his tenure at Bates College in Maine.¹⁵⁰ He joined the

¹⁴⁷ Mays, 20

¹⁴⁸ Mays, 20-21

¹⁴⁹ Mays, 35

¹⁵⁰ Mays, 47-55

trail of thousands of other African Americans who travelled out of the South to find better opportunities in the wake of World War I and who took their church culture with them into their new locales.

THE CHURCH FAMILY, THE GREAT MIGRATION, AND MEDIATING FAMILIAL DISPERSION

During the Great Migration, church families would become even more important to black children whose families were dispersed by the as the exodus. Mary Hickson's family migrated from rural South Carolina to a North Carolina town, but she never lost ties to her family there. Throughout her 1930s childhood her grandmother took Hickson and her siblings back to South Carolina on a regular basis "to keep the family connection."¹⁵¹ Every second Saturday in September her grandmother's home fellowship, Hickory Hills Church, held their "September Picnic" in Tuberville, South Carolina, where the tradition had existed long before Hickson's birth. Such festivities were common among southern church communities impacted by migration.¹⁵²

Indeed, the commemorative activities of turn-of-the century black church congregations were integral to keeping migrants connected to their church families, and sustaining their extended families. Yearly revivals reinforced the role of the church within communities and provided opportunities for new members to come into the fold. Through church anniversaries and homecoming celebrations church members reinforced and honored the solidarity, sense of belonging, and security of shared identity they experienced within their church families. By maintaining the patterns of

¹⁵¹ Mary Daymon Hickson, interview by Ray Allen, 10 December 1992, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, (Schomburg Library, New York, NY),⁵

¹⁵² Hickson interview, 15

fellowship they developed in the South and returning home to participate in church festivities, migrants were continually strengthened by their church families.

In the late summer, after crops had been laid, scores of rural church communities held annual weeklong gatherings called revivals or camp meetings, during which some families lodged on the grounds where the festivities were held. Revivals were either denominationally specific, or sponsored by visiting evangelist associations, or both. However, annual revivals and conferences might bring disparate denominational communities together for a spiritual refreshing and social reinvigoration. Revivals often involved special guest speakers, theme sermons, and nightly calls to repentance and discipleship.¹⁵³ W. E. B. Du Bois explained that in some communities, like those in rural Georgia, “revivals take place every year after the crops are laid by; and few indeed of the community have the hardihood to withstand conversion,”¹⁵⁴ thus expanding the membership of church families.

Annual revivals were major events for rural congregants. Individuals who did not attend regular weekly or bi-weekly services during the year were apt to flock to revival meetings.¹⁵⁵ In addition to keeping individual church families connected, revival meetings and other such events brought together communities of people who might not have been formal members of church groups, but who appreciated the work of the church family in the community and the socializing opportunities it provided. Charles Denby remembered that during his childhood in Southeast Tennessee, three-fourths of the people who crowded church grounds during August revivals “didn’t even go inside

¹⁵³ Myers and Sharpless, 70

¹⁵⁴ W.E.B. Du Bois, *Souls of Black Folk*

¹⁵⁵ Myers and Sharpless, 70

of the church but they would be there at the side. It was their holiday too. They did as much preparing for the holiday as the deacons, the sisters or the preachers of the church. It was a chance for everybody to socialize,” including non-church members.¹⁵⁶

Revival culture also included church anniversaries and homecoming celebrations which marked the heritage of the church family at large. These events honored church founders and the legacies of the first families of local churches. They also included heritage-honoring sermons, reviews of ministerial lineages, and references to the construction of church facilities. Moreover, since it was often family groups or sets of families that established black churches in the late nineteenth century, founding festivities often brought together blood kin as well as spiritual kin members, including visiting migrants. The most important aspects of these celebrations included the allusions to church family and the traditional role it played in the lives of church members. Ministers invited departed members to visit and welcomed “backsliders” back into fellowship.

Migrated members returned to expound on their adventures in the city and to pay homage to the churches that had helped generations of southern family members.¹⁵⁷

After migrating to New York City, in the 1910s, Mamie Garvin Fields’ cousin Naomi regularly returned to the South to visit with her church family and display her newly acquired affluence. She was known for driving expensive new cars that got her into trouble with policemen who felt that her vehicles were too fine for a black woman to tout. Fields recalled that her cousin often wowed officials with her ability to offer cash

¹⁵⁶ Charles Denby (Matthew Ward), *Indignant Heart: A Black Worker’s Journal* (Detroit, MI: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 11-12

¹⁵⁷ Grim, 117

money for speeding fines. In addition to acquiring material wealth in New York, according to Fields, Naomi joined a “cult”, a non-denominational Pentecostal church, in which she rose to a high position in ministry, leadership, and administration and was treated as if she was “divine.” Nevertheless, Naomi acquired enough earthly good to contribute to the small South Carolina community of her birth. She dreamed of retiring to the South and planned to “come back home and build a clinic for her father’s church at Orange Grove.” To her family’s great sorrow, the cold hand of a murdering robber took her life before she was able to return home and fulfill her dream. But, many migrants made it back to their home churches and were able to reconnect with the communities and church families with which they were formerly involved.¹⁵⁸

Migrants returning to Nashville, Tennessee for the Annual Church of God in Christ Convocation experienced an atmosphere akin to a big family reunion that provided “a time to remember what had been left behind, including Jim Crow, segregated railway cars, and meager housing,” as well as the ways in which the church family helped individuals to mediate life in the South.¹⁵⁹ Southern residents prepared for Convocation by cooking meals, sewing clothes and bed linens, and making space in their homes for visiting saints, who would find few accommodations in the city of Memphis. No doubt the national convocation provided opportunities to exchange stories about life outside of Dixie in addition to testimonies about the goodness of the Lord and the blessing of the sanctified life.

¹⁵⁸ Mamie Garvin Fields with Karen Fields, *Lemon Swamp and Other Places: A Carolina Memoir* (New York: Free Press; London: Collier Macmillan, 1983), 180-82

¹⁵⁹ Butler, 71

Interaction between rural and urban church family members both fueled the migration and kept travelers connected to their southern roots. Southern churches reported on the success of the migration and many migrants moved on the recommendation of departed church members and relatives. Southern preachers often shared the Gospel in northern churches and returned home spreading the Good News of northern opportunity. Other southerners sometimes sent their children north with church members to survey a locale they could not visit for themselves. Consider nine-year-old Lillie Eikens Butler, whose bass voice so impressed a northern visitor to Mount Carmel Methodist in Ninety-Six, South Carolina that the woman offered to take Lillie and her singing group to the North. The choir director promised to take care of the girls and place them in school in addition to promoting them on the 1923 gospel circuit. Although this patron was a friend of the pastor of Mount Carmel, Lillie's maternal grandfather, Whit Lewis and Lillie's father William Eikens, who were the primary caretakers of Lillie and her five siblings, declined the offer. Sans the young bass-singing wonder, the woman rescinded her invitation to the remaining members of the group.¹⁶⁰ Perhaps such an offer was not an anomaly among black southerners who wanted to provide their children with new opportunities.

The northern music scout's visit to Butler's church and her confidence in attempting to recruit Butler and her singing group is a testament to the strong networks between southern churches and migrant communities. Migration networks were also instrumental in the formation of new churches in the North and Midwest. Some migrants moved in entire church groups like those members of Morris Chapel

¹⁶⁰ Lillie Eikens Butler with Rev. Robert Butler, interview by Ray Allen, 17 June 1993, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, (Schomburg Library, New York, NY), 13-14

Baptist in Abbeville County, South Carolina who started a new fellowship in Philadelphia of the same name. Migrants often infused churches in locations outside of the rural South with the spirit of their parent churches, thereby transporting rural southern culture. As Earl Lewis argued, migrants “changed the urban environment in ways that reflected the migrants’ past, drew on experiences of solidarity, resistance, and reciprocity that were necessary in both the antebellum and Reconstruction periods in the South, and formed as an identity separate from those who discriminated against them.”¹⁶¹ In forming their own institutions in the North migrants found protection.

Furthermore, migration provided opportunities for parishioners to experience community with new church families in denominations other than those in which they were raised.¹⁶² Changing denominations provided opportunities for migrants to reinvent themselves or reassert their common southern identities. Some migrants preferred fellowships that were more conservative than the rousing worship houses they encountered in the South, while others opted to heighten their worship experiences by attending more charismatic churches. As an adult, Lillie Eikens Butler, a Methodist originally, finally came north after her husband Paul Butler sent for her and their children. He had been living with the bishop of his New York church, St. Mark’s Pentecostal Holiness, who had helped him find employment. Lillie was familiar with the bishop’s family since they often traveled south to visit. When she and the children arrived they also joined Paul at the bishop’s home, where they resided until they

¹⁶¹ Allen B. Ballard, *One Day’s Journey: The Story of a Family and a People* (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1984), 13-15; Phillips, 161-189; Sernett, 161; Austin Zeiderman, “Ruralizing the City: The Great migration and Environmental Rehabilitation in Baltimore, Maryland (*Identities: Global Studies in Culture and Power*, 13:203-235, 2006), 203

¹⁶² Sernett 161, James R. Grossman, *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 213

secured a home of their own. Although Lillie also joined her husband at St. Marks, she regularly traveled home to visit with her Methodist church family and sing for special services.¹⁶³

As the Butler case indicates home churches remained prominent in the lives of many migrants. Mrs. Sarah Coleman explained that as she and her Brandon Presbyterian Church cohorts matured many of them “moved away because of segregation.”¹⁶⁴ “It wasn’t that we left the church,” she clarified, but the lack of professional employment options forced many formally educated congregants to seek work outside the area.¹⁶⁵ However, these young professionals who came of age in Brandon remained connected to their home church in spirit, so much so that many returned to the church when they moved back to the area. Mrs. Coleman notes:

As we came back home, many of us came right back to Brandon, what’s now C. N. Jenkins. [Memorial Presbyterian Church]....when we were all away, we probably went to a different church wherever we were. But, when we came back home, then we came back to home church.¹⁶⁶

Church attendance was not simply a tradition of their youth for migrants raised in Brandon. During adulthood, even though they had left their place of birth, church remained very much a part of their lives. In fact, joining churches in new locales often helped to make migrants feel at home.

As they adopted new church families in their destination cities, migrants mediated the impact of being dispersed from their biological families. Churches, like the homes of extended family members, served as refuges or safe places for often-homesick

¹⁶³ Eikens Butler, interview, 18-25

¹⁶⁴ Coleman interview

¹⁶⁵ Coleman interview

¹⁶⁶ Coleman Interview

migrants who required assistance in adapting to the new urban landscapes.¹⁶⁷ COGIC church mothers like Mother Lillian Brooks Coffey who started a storefront church in Chicago, were instrumental in embracing recent migrants and establishing churches during the migration. When elite congregations discriminated against COGIC migrants they “appropriated the southern revivalist traditions of outdoor preaching and canvassing from door to door for converts, and these techniques bore fruit in the urban locales to which they migrated.”¹⁶⁸ Moreover, because of the demand black families put on their natural extended family groups, the individual expectations of spiritual kin members, especially those that manifested in migration patterns, were not unfamiliar. Likewise, the work church mothers performed for COGIC convocations hosting guests to Memphis and training their charges in the ways of holiness prepared them to be of service to migrant congregants in the North. Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ grew to be an important center for southern transplants and a home away from home which helped them adjust to life in Chicago as will be discussed in the following chapter.¹⁶⁹

CONCLUSION

In the last decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth century, the black church evolved as one of the most important institutions for improving African American lives.¹⁷⁰ It became an extension of black family life because of its position at the center of social activity in African American communities. Black congregations constituted more than a group of people with whom one regularly

¹⁶⁷ Frazier, 53-54; Butler, 64; Wolcott, 115

¹⁶⁸ Butler, 59

¹⁶⁹ Butler, 59

¹⁷⁰ Johnson, *Along this Way*, 162-64

interacted and became very familiar. Instead, church groups often became adoptive kinfolk, whose reciprocal behaviors earned them familial regard. As part of church families individuals gained access to expanded sources of material, human and spiritual capital. Within the church family a set of parents and their children might find money to pay off a debt, a mentor to help a youngster through school and a collective of believers who would agree with them in prayer for a miracle.

In the harsh climate of Jim Crow, the uplifting spiritual identity church fellowship provided cannot be underestimated. Within church families, men and women could gain the respect and validation the exterior world refused them. And, during some encounters, white Christians demonstrated a brotherly and sisterly love that gave the black faithful hope for America's redemption. Moreover, through accessing the church family within the wider definition of the entire population of Christians, regardless of racial affiliation, black parishioners challenged racism in powerful ways. Perhaps most importantly, the church family prepared African American children to maximize opportunities that were unavailable to their foreparents.

This examination of the community among church members demonstrates that despite denominational variations, African American parishioners shared the experience of church family. The church served the needs of its congregants by subsidizing and in some cases replacing the spiritual, emotional, social, and material support of the extended black family. Although there are significant class dimensions and hierarchal positions within the experience of church family, the larger experience of segregation shaped African Americans' collective need to turn inward, in this case, to the more intimate setting of church family. Wealthier black people may not have engaged the

church family for economic resources in patterns similar to those of their poorer counterparts, nevertheless, African Americans of all classes invested in their church families. In so doing they created positive group identities, shared resources through informal support networks, gained white allies, and shaped black church children in important ways that helped mediate poverty, racism, and familial dispersion.

Documenting and illuminating these phenomena during this era highlights an important example of how African Americans' kin adaptations worked to create important sources of institutional support to sustain black families in the post-Redemption South. Church communities would continue to be important in sustaining black families in the migration years.

Chapter 3

Making Emmett Till Justice: Political Sensibilities, African American Families and the Migration Years

People had to be able to “visualize what had happened” Mamie Till-Mobley said, explaining why she decided to hold an open casket funeral for her son, Emmett, who was brutally murdered by two white men for allegedly flirting with a white woman while visiting family in Money, Mississippi.¹ Everyone “had to see what I had seen,” Mrs. Till-Mobley continued, the “whole nation had to bear witness to this.”² From 2-6 September 1955, cameras captured over 100,000 mourners crying over Emmett’s marred face and swollen, bruised corpse in Chicago’s Roberts Temple Church of God in Christ. Images in *Jet Magazine*, a African American news weekly, along with reports in black journals and major newspapers across the country, outraged thousands of Americans. Among those who gathered to pay their condolences was Representative Charles C. Diggs, Jr. of Michigan, and several famous local entertainers. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) collected thousands of dollars in donations from new supporters enraged by the heinous crime and eager to hasten the national triumph over injustice.

In the aftermath of Till’s assassination, Tallahatchie County plantation owner and ardent white supremacist Sheriff Clarence Strider complained: “We never have any trouble until some of our Southern niggers go up North and the NAACP talks to ‘em and they come back home. If they would keep their nose and mouths out of our business

¹ Mamie Till-Mobley and Christopher Benson, *Death of Innocence: The Story of The Hate Crime That Changed America* (New York: Random House, 2003), 139

² Till-Mobley and Benson, 139

we would be able to do more when enforcing the laws of Tallahatchie County and Mississippi.”³

Needless to say, the sheriff’s allocation of blame was misplaced on several levels. During the 1950s “trouble” often arose across the South without the aid of black southerners returning from visits north; and such travelers were more likely to visit with family members than meet with civil rights groups. Moreover, black southerners themselves had many motives to challenge segregation. In fact, the lawlessness and terrorism of the South – what Strider termed “trouble” – was often in direct response to the injustice and inhumanity of Jim Crow. Nevertheless, the sheriff’s comment contained some insight.

In particular, his observation that the cross-regional exchanges between black southerners and their northern kinfolk disturbed southern race relations was accurate. Youngsters like Emmett Till, who came of age during the climax of Jim Crow, gained their earliest impressions of racial inequities through their experiences with family members in and from different regions. When school let out for the summer southern-born children sometimes went north to visit family members replenishing migrant culture with fresh southern folkways. More often during the summer months, migrant children traveled south along railroads and highways for extended visits with southern cousins who eagerly awaited them at the ends of dusty roadways. As Mamie Till-Mobley noted, the 1950s saw a “great black migration to the North, but in the summer, there were quite a few black kids from cities of the North who went south to visit

³ “People & Events: Clarence Strider (1904 -1970),” “American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till” available on http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/peopleevents/p_strider.html. Internet; retrieved 3 September 2006.

relatives. For our kids, it was as close to summer camp as they were going to get.”⁴

Thousands of southern black families hosted the children of migrants during the summer.⁵

Witnessing the treatment of black families in the South and comparing their experiences in the North, caused migrant children to strengthen their identification with southern relatives and personally abhor Jim Crow. Meanwhile, their visiting cousins introduced southern children to northern liberties that made them interested in life outside of Dixie. Through interactions with familial peers and elders, young people discovered the varying ways in which African Americans experienced life in different regions. Moreover, these migration-fostered political exchanges within families shaped a generation that understood the complexities and possibilities of interracial life in the United States in ways not experienced by generations before them and helped nationalize the Civil Rights Movement.

Emmett Till’s generation, which includes individuals born within five years of 1940, will be the focus of this chapter. These grandchildren of individuals who left the South during the Great Migration, around the First World War, were often born into extensive transplant communities that were charged with southern folkways. Emmett Till is now most remembered for the infamous way in which he was murdered, but a review of his life within a transregional migrant family reveals a childhood that was in

⁴ Till-Mobley and Benson, 100

⁵ Several migration monographs and other texts mention this pattern of sending children south for summer visits. See Kimberley L. Phillips, *Alabama North: African-American Migrants, Community, and Working-Class Activism in Cleveland, 1915-45* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1999), 141; Earl Lewis, *In Their Own Interests: Race, Class, and Power in Twentieth-Century Norfolk, Virginia* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and Oxford: University of California Press, 1991), 104, 107; Gretchen Lemke-Santangelo, *Abiding Courage: African American Migrant Women and the East Bay Community* (Chapel Hill and London: University of Chapel Hill Press, 1996), 148-49; Sam Gadsen, translated by Nick Lindsay, *An Oral History of Edisto Island: Sam Gadsen Tells the Story*, (Goshen, Indiana: Goshen College, Pinchpenny Press, 1975), 6-7

many ways typical of his generation – and resonated with his peers. His death helped politicize young African Americans across the country at least in part because his short life encapsulated the experiences of a new generation of young African Americans whose southern roots and northern upbringings combined to create a cross-regional migrant culture. A look at the trans-regional world from which Emmett Till and his cohort emerged provides insight into the important role of black family culture in shaping the political fallout of his death.

A NEW WORLD FOR A NEW GENERATION: THE FORMATION OF CROSS-REGIONAL MIGRANT CULTURE⁶

In 1924, Alma Carthan and her two-year-old daughter Mamie, the future mother of Emmett Till, left from “just outside of Webb, Mississippi” and boarded a Chicago-bound train. They traveled to meet her husband Wiley Nash Carthan in the sleepy town of Argo, Illinois, just outside of the Windy City. Wiley had arrived about two months earlier to secure employment and a place for his family to live. He found work at the Corn Products Refining Company, which drew hundreds of transplants to Argo, which they lovingly termed “Little Mississippi.”⁷ Such nomenclature reminded migrants of both the familiars of home and what Mamie Till Mobley said was “the part that was more understood than talked about...the part that was dominated by what people knew

⁶ I am still refining my ideas about what constitutes a cross-regional family. For the purposes of this chapter I consider cross-regional to include families that have members who have moved out of the South but remained connected to southern family members either through visiting or other cultural practices. For example, although he dislikes the South, I consider Claude Brown’s family to be cross-regional because of the contact they maintain with southern relatives and folkways. I also consider John Lewis’ family to be cross-regional because it is a southern family whose political ideas are being shaped by the return of family members residing in the North who also bring with them northern cultural attributes. This discussion is part of an on-going effort to explore African American identity and the questions of when one becomes a northerner upon living outside of the South for a number of years, but while maintaining lifestyle characteristics that are common to southerners. I am also interested in examining how the South changes as a result of the migration.

⁷ Till-Mobley and Benson, 18-19

they had fled.”⁸ Her mother Alma Carthan became a pillar in the Argo community, serving, as did hundreds of other migrant women as a primary kinkeeper. She helped migrants them with find jobs, housing, and community support, while reinforcing southern heritage.⁹

Mamie remembered that her “whole neighborhood was like an extended family”¹⁰ and that her home became a center for migrant interaction. Her mother “took in relatives and friends of relatives and some people even our *relatives* didn’t know.”¹¹ According to Mamie she “gave them every reason to look forward, never back.”¹² Yet many migrant families, including the Carthans, often looked back. Their folkways, political opinions, and economic aspirations were all shaped by their experiences in the South. As historian James Gregory writes, “migration is often best understood as a circulation rather than as a one-way relocation because, in many instances, migrants at some point circle back toward home.”¹³

The Carthans were part of the “Southern Diaspora” or out-migration of the millions of black and white southerners in the first three-quarters of the twentieth century. Whites outnumbered blacks during each decade of the migration. However, in many arenas African Americans created a more significant impact by leaving the South at much higher rates than whites and entering regions that “previously had known little

⁸ Till-Mobley and Benson, 18-19

⁹ Lewis, 109; Lemke-Santangelo, 137-38; 147-49

¹⁰ Till-Mobley and Benson, 21

¹¹ Till-Mobley and Benson, 18

¹² Till-Mobley and Benson, 18

¹³ James N. Gregory, *The Southern Diaspora: How the Great Migrations of Black and White Southerners Transformed America* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), xii

racial diversity.”¹⁴ As blacks populated northern areas, the country had to address racial tensions that were previously sectionalized to the South.

Black southerners who left the South and decided to settle in the North departed in a series of migration waves. Around the First World War, contemporary observers termed the flight of 1.2 million African Americans out of rural southern communities into industrial areas in the North and Midwest, the “Great Migration.” Several factors led to this exodus from the South: racial tyranny, wartime industry, immigrant restrictions, decline of the cotton market, poverty, sexual exploitation and emotional and physical abuse, lack of education and scarce employment opportunities. Indeed, for most migrants, leaving the South, family members and family friends, was born of economic, political, and social necessity.¹⁵

The migration transformed black America. “By 1920,” as John Hope Franklin and Alfred Moss record, “the number of black farm workers had decreased by nearly half, while the number of black industrial laborers had increased by a third.”¹⁶ A “conservative estimate” asserts that over 400,000 black people had left the South within the two-year period between 1916 and 1918. During the 1920s the number of black Chicagoans rose from 44,103 to 109,458. In Milwaukee, the black population grew from 373,857 in 1910 to 457,147 in 1920 and in Philadelphia from 84,000 to 134,000.¹⁷ By 1920,

¹⁴ Gregory, 16-17

¹⁵ Darlene Clark Hine was among the first to add sexual exploitation and reproductivity concerns to this traditional list of “push-pull” factors describing why black southerners chose to migrate. See “TITLE” *Hine Sight*

¹⁶ John Hope Franklin and Alfred A. Moss, Jr., *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans*, 7th Edition (New York: McGraw Hill, 1994), 340

¹⁷ Joe William Trotter, *Black Milwaukee: The Making of an Industrial Proletariat, 1915-1945* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1985) 41; Allen Ballard, *One More Day's Journey: The Story of a Family and a People* (New York: McGraw Hill Book Company, 1984), 184

New York City, the nation's premier urban center, was also the leader in black residents, topping its closest rival by 50,000.¹⁸

During the 1920s over 800,000 black southerners moved out of the region.¹⁹ Between 1910 and 1930, Detroit's African Americans population increased by 800%.²⁰ The state of Mississippi had a net loss of 129,600 black residents, while Pennsylvania had a net gain of 82,500, from 1920 to 1930."²¹ By 1930, Georgia lost an additional 260,000 black migrants, adding to the 90,900 that departed in the twenty years between 1900 and 1920.²² New York State gained 172,800 migrants from the South during the 1920s, while 119,300 black people migrated to Illinois that same decade.²³ African Americans continued to migrate out of the South until the Great Depression slowed the trans-geographical movement to a trickle throughout the 1930s with less than half the number of migrants exiting the South than did in the previous decade.²⁴ Still, by 1940, "nearly eight of every ten African Americans remained a southerner by residence."²⁵

With World War II, migration momentum intensified as wartime industry again drew workers to northern industrial centers in record numbers in the 1940s and 1950s. In the 1940s 1,447,229 black southerners migrated out of the region and another 1,105,836 departed the following decade. During this second wave, the population of Southern migrants tripled, causing the number of African American inhabitants to soar

¹⁸ Franklin and Moss, 340

¹⁹ Denoral Davis, "Toward a Socio-Historical and Demographic Portrait of Twentieth-Century African Americans" in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, edited by Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson, MS and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 10

²⁰ Franklin and Moss, 340

²¹ Stewart E. Tolnay and E. M. Beck, "Rethinking the Role of Racial Violence in the Great Migration" in *Black Exodus: The Great Migration from the American South*, edited by Alferdteen Harrison (Jackson, MS and London: University Press of Mississippi, 1991), 22

²² Tolnay and Beck, 22

²³ Tolnay and Beck, 22

²⁴ Davis, 11

²⁵ Davis, 11

in cities like Detroit, Philadelphia, Milwaukee, Cleveland, Oakland, New York City and Chicago, where some 214,000 migrated in the 1940s and over half of those from Mississippi.²⁶

In this second wave, black Americans again left the South seeking redress from a variety of political injustices. Southern communities were newly infused with the resentment of WWII veterans, who had fought a war for democracy abroad and were unable to realize it on American soil. Proto-Civil Rights Movement activists included veterans across isolated southern communities. For example, upon returning to the Mississippi Delta from World War II, Amzie Moore became a prominent leader in the Regional Council of Negro Leadership whose activities set the stage for the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. Local activists like Moore fought for justice in the Jim Crow South even though the possible repercussions of demanding political participation included bloodshed. Their efforts to exercise self-determination and secure economic autonomy led to race riots, lynch mobs, sexual exploitation and other forms of racial terrorism.²⁷

Migration was common among veterans who feared that their propensity to retaliate against violence might place them in danger. John Wiley of Greenville, Mississippi, who fought in World War II, almost pulled out his switchblade when a white man demanded his seat at the rear of a bus, refusing to go to the all-white section. Wiley was enraged that the man continued to harass him until the bus driver finally convinced the white patron to go to the front. "I went home and told my wife, I say, 'I'm

²⁶ Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1988), 15

²⁷ See Phillips, 44-45; Ballard, 13, 154-61,

gōn leave here before I get in trouble,’ and I went the next day and put in my resignation,” Wiley said. Soon after, he and his family moved to Chicago.²⁸ Likewise, veteran Harvey Hickson migrated to avoid retaliation for injuring a white man. Upon return from World War II he helped his older brother sharecrop their deceased parents’ farm in Tuberville, South Carolina. A confrontation over the land ended with Harvey stabbing a white man with a pitchfork. Although the man did not die, the risk of remaining in Tuberville was too great, so Hickson left town for New York.²⁹ He would return south to greet his new bride, but only as far as Baltimore.³⁰ Thousands of other black people voted with their feet and left Dixie in hopes of securing their autonomy and casting meaningful ballots beyond the Mason-Dixon Line.

Migrants found that the abuses and limitations they left in the South had urban counterparts that were treacherous in their own right. In the North and southern cities, violent race riots replaced lynch mobs and overcrowded shantytowns and tenements stood in for dilapidated farm shacks. Moreover, the burdensome demands of the factory grind, laundering, public sanitation, and live-in domestic duties proved comparable to the hard and dirty labor of field work. Nevertheless, in the North, increased monetary compensation, the freedom to leave a job without indebtedness, a less formal social etiquette in comparison to the South as well as, and the reestablishing of community networks like those in the South all assisted migrants in bettering their families.

²⁸ George King, Director and Producer, *Goin’ to Chicago*, presented by George King & Associates, The Center for the Study of Southern Culture and the Afro-American Studies Program at the University of Mississippi (San Francisco, CA: California Newsreel, 1994)

²⁹ Harvey Hickson in Mary Hickson, interview by Ray Allen, 10 December 1992, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, Schomburg Library, New York, NY, 34. Unfortunately, the Hickson interview fades after Mr. Hickson answers only a few questions, so the remaining details of his immediate migration are currently unavailable.

³⁰ Mary Hickson, 17

In the North, black migrants were able to claim political rights that were not accessible to them in the South, and found political allies among northern white Democrats, liberals, Communists, Socialists, and organized labor groups – all constituencies rarely encountered in the South. Moreover, although never the majority in the North, black voters wielded significant political strength by using their ballots as a balance of power in close elections. If politicians did not heed the demands of black voters in cities like Chicago, they could be defeated by African American swing votes for their opponents. The North boasted all-black districts that could elect African American officials, like Rep. Diggs.³¹

Because black migrants from the South sought both economic advantages and political asylum they were more politically active than white exiles from the South.³² Chad Berry explains that white southern migrants' "political involvement (or lack of) in the Midwest and [North] was consistent with what it had been in the South."³³ Many of them despised the "good ol' boy" system that characterized southern employment politics, such as having to "go before a local bank president to get hired at a western Kentucky coal mine."³⁴ However, unlike African American southerners, poor whites at least had access to informal and formal political systems in both regions that assisted them in securing employment. White southerners also had access to an "open labor market" that discriminated against black people.

Unprecedented political access in the North combined with new, but limited economic options to shape black migrant culture in important ways. As James Gregory

³¹ Gregory, 246

³² Chad Berry, *Southern Migrants, Northern Exiles* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2000), 138

³³ Berry, 138

³⁴ Berry, 138

explains, white families were able to earn “stable and respectable incomes” in the North and West, despite their limited educational backgrounds, simply because “they were white.”³⁵ By contrast, in these regions “black southerners encountered all sorts of restrictions that affected their ability to earn incomes,” purchase homes in comfortable neighborhoods and place their children in good schools.³⁶ Because racism made them more interdependent, black members of the Southern Diaspora created distinct communities in the North that became “cities within cities,” whereas whites spread out across urban and suburban landscapes. For white southern migrants there was “nothing equivalent to the kind of solidarity, the dense institutional matrix, and the resulting cultural and political influence that came together” in African American migrant communities.³⁷

Moreover, the major urban cities to which black migrants moved were national centers of financial development, media dissemination, and political power, places where people of authority and influence resided.³⁸ Together, old black settlers and new black arrivals built the “Black Metropolises” in northern cities, which became the centers of African American economic and institutional strength, media voice, cultural diffusion and new political power.³⁹ The substantial communities and new alliances black migrants formed in the North provided the political leverage that later helped black northerners support the Civil Rights Movement in the South and created a cultural system that moved information back and forth between the regions.⁴⁰ Indeed, the Great

³⁵ Gregory, 89

³⁶ Gregory, 97

³⁷ Gregory, 154

³⁸ Gregory, 113

³⁹ Gregory, 124

⁴⁰ Gregory, 124

Migration brought a new geography of African America that had major cultural, social and political import for both black communities and the nation as a whole.

Through migration, African Americans demonstrated the malleability of their complex familial systems. As earlier descriptions of black familial patterns within this dissertation suggest, migration became as much a connecting agent as it was a cause of familial dispersion. The formation and growth of the Black Metropolises reflected the expansion of southern families into northern branches. As black families branched out into the North they brought their resistance to Jim Crow with them creating northern black communities that articulated the political concerns of their southern family members and the migrants own hatred of Jim Crow. Moreover, the influence was ongoing because these connections between family members sustained much of the migration's momentum.

It was through familial networks that many migrants, especially females, fulfilled the economic objectives of moving out of the South, finding employment, establishing homes, and sustaining childcare. While some men and women traveled together, migration patterns varied among men and women migrants, who rarely traveled in nuclear family groups. "As a rule," according to Darlene Clark Hine, single black women "traveled the entire distance in one trip. They usually had a specific relative – or fictive kin – waiting for them at their destination."⁴¹ Geneva Ray remembered that "to leave home [from South Carolina]," in 1949 "I had to go to a

⁴¹ Darlene Clark Hine, "Black Migration to the Urban Midwest," in Darlene Clark Hine, *Hine Sight: Black Women and the Re-Construction of American History*, with foreword by John Hope Franklin (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1994), 91.

relative. And that was my sister; my parents wouldn't even let me come if it weren't for her."⁴²

By contrast to single women, most single male migrants worked their way north through "secondary migration," "leaving farms for southern cities, doing odd jobs, and sometimes staying in one location for a few years before proceeding to the next stop."⁴³ Married couples often relocated through chain migration, where one spouse, established work and later sent for the rest of the family. Charlie Russell, father of legendary Boston Celtic's star Bill Russell traveled to Detroit, found a job, and relocated to California, deciding against Michigan's cold climate, before calling for his family to join him in Oakland.⁴⁴ No matter how their parents reached their destinations, migrant children were often tied to the South by the same family networks that sustained the migration.

Childcare was central among the shared economic responsibilities that sustained cross-regional ties among black families throughout the migration years. Migrants, who arrived in northern locales with few relatives to welcome them, often left their children in the care of southern relatives during periods of transition or for the duration of their childhood. Shortly after his family migrated to Oakland in 1946 Charlie Russell's wife Katie died leaving him alone to raise his two sons in a new city. When the family traveled back to Monroe, Louisiana to bury Mrs. Russell, Charlie met with family members who wanted him to move the boys back south "where he had kinfolk to pitch in and help."⁴⁵

⁴² Geneva Ray, interview by Ray Allen, 10 June 1993, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, Schomburg Library, New York, NY, 11

⁴³ Hine, 91.

⁴⁴ Bill Russell and Taylor Branch, *Second Wind: The Memoirs of an Opinionated Man* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1979), 28

⁴⁵ Russell and Branch, 34

Charlie Russell refused to relocate his family, but as his son Bill explained, the Russells were part of a black southern familial culture that compensated for migrant parents who abandoned their children, were not connected to migrant networks or without familial resources in new locales. "By tradition," Bill wrote in his memoir, "Mister Charlie [Russell] could leave us in Louisiana with absolute assurance that we would be 'raised' even if no one ever heard from him again."⁴⁶ "He could send for us at any time," Russell explained "or he might never send for us. The extended family would always be there like a safety net beneath all the children stranded by the hardships of the great black migration out of the South."⁴⁷

Even if they did not solicit permanent childcare, many other migrant parents sent their children home to temporarily live with southern relatives. After migrating to New York, World War II veteran William Ray met and married Geneva Morant. While they worked and saved money in the city, Geneva's mother kept their two daughters in her South Carolina home for about three years. Sending children home for the summers or extended holiday visits also relieved migrant parents from having to establish childcare and opened up more time for work according to industrial schedules. Moreover sending children home for the summer provided them with vacations and kept them out of trouble on city streets.

In his 1965 autobiography *Mancihld in the Promised Land* Claude Brown notes that his parents considered sending him down south while trying to get him to stop playing hookey from school on Harlem streets. Convinced that someone had "worked roots" on her misbehaving child, Mrs. Brown "was writing to all her relatives in the South for

⁴⁶ Russell and Branch, 34

⁴⁷ Russell and Branch, 34

solutions, but they were only able to say, ‘that boy musta been born with the devil in him.’”⁴⁸ “Some of them advised Mama to send me down there, because New York was no place to raise a child,” Claude wrote.⁴⁹ Mr. Brown “thought this was a good idea, and he tried to sell it to Mama. But Mama wasn’t about to split up her family. She said I would stay in New York, devil or no devil. So I stayed in New York, enjoying every crazy minute,” Brown recorded in his memoir.⁵⁰

Despite Mrs. Brown’s objection, a New York City court eventually ordered Claude’s parents to send him south. Because of his failure to avoid mischief the court mandated that Claude be exiled to his grandparent’s home in South Carolina for an entire year. Perhaps the regularity of the practice of sending migrant children south influenced the court’s decision. Whether or not the court understood southerners’ roles in providing childcare for migrant families or valued some sort of southern ethic for cultivating well-behaved children, Claude’s stint in the South did little to reshape his behavior. Nevertheless it introduced him to additional southern folkways and family members.

Since black rural families, like the one headed by Claude Brown’s grandparents, often included extended networks, responsibility for young migrant visitors did not fall exclusively to nuclear units. Moreover, some children who remained in the South, even after their parents migrated, grew up in family communities that in many ways compensated for the loss of their parents’ regular immediate attention. Carolyn Bonaparte was so attached to her maternal grandfather, who helped raise her, and her four siblings, after her father’s death, that she wanted to stay behind when her mother

⁴⁸ Claude Brown, *Manchild in the Promised Land* (New York: Touchstone, 1999), 21

⁴⁹ Brown, 21

⁵⁰ Brown, 21

Wilma Eason remarried and prepared to migrate with her new husband who had six children of his own.⁵¹ As Wilma's father conceded, "'I'm getting up in age, I can no longer help out,'" her parents moved in with her older sister Lucille, who also took in her namesake niece Barbara Lucille. Wilma's other siblings also stepped in to assist her with childrearing responsibilities, taking in two more of her five birth children.⁵² While migrants like Wilma Eason found support others may have encountered the resentment of aging grandparents and siblings who did not want to care for additional children.

Nevertheless, children left behind or sent south who were old enough to perform agricultural work often helped ease the financial burdens of rural families. William Ray and his two brothers lived with their grandmother in Hoke County, North Carolina after his mother migrated to New York and moved in with one of her brothers. Ray wrote to his mother requesting that she rescue him from being overworked by another uncle on the family farm. "While my uncle run up and down the road," he recalled, "I was farming. Doing what he was supposed to be doing."⁵³ His uncle intercepted the letter and refused to forward it to his sister. Upon a second request "before they knew anything, she was there" and Ray and his brothers returned to New York with their mother.⁵⁴ "We had to walk about three miles to get somebody to bring us to Fayetteville [likely to catch a train]," Ray recalled, "'cause my uncle said he couldn't stand to see us leave."⁵⁵ Other children of migrants benefited their southern families by caring for

⁵¹ Carolyn Bonaparte, interview by Ray Allen, 26 July 1993, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, Schomburg Library, New York, NY, 1-2

⁵² Bonaparte, 1-2

⁵³ William Thomas Ray, interview by Ray Allen, 10 June 1993, New York, NY transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, Schomburg Library, New York, NY, 8

⁵⁴ William Ray, 8

⁵⁵ William Ray, 8

ailing elders or small children while “down home” for the summer. Inevitably, while they were apart from their children, migrant parents were likely to save money that could contribute to the care of their children and the overall well-being of the entire extended family network.

Sylvia Presley Woods’ family presents a vivid portrait of the economic interdependence of migrants and their family members in the South. “We’ve done it all! We did what we had to do, what we fe[lt] like we should do; what we could do to make things better for us,” she explained, assessing her family’s interaction throughout the migration years.⁵⁶ Woods’ migration trail began with her mother in the 1920s and extended to her grandchildren, who remained connected to their southern roots throughout the 1990s and into the new millennium.⁵⁷

Hard times drove Mrs. Woods’ family north. Sylvia’s father, Van Presley, died on 1 March 1926 in Hemmingway, South Carolina, four days after her birth. Mr. Presley left behind his widow and two daughters. Julia Presley was a smart, hard working woman. When her husband died, she already owned a portion of land inherited from her family. Along with her mother, Julia farmed cotton, corn and tobacco on property that included the land she owned and a section she rented. Upon her husband’s death she also began working as a part-time laundress in New York City. Eventually, Julia was able to build a new home for her girls and purchase the remainder of the land on which the Presleys farmed. She returned to New York to “better her condition,” once her

⁵⁶ Sylvia P. Woods, interview by Ray Allen, 1 October 1992, New York, NY transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, Schomburg Library, New York, NY, 13

⁵⁷ Woods, 13

family was settled. Her mother remained on the South Carolina farm to keep it going and take care of Sylvia and her sister.⁵⁸

As she grew into a teenager Sylvia also longed to “better *her* condition.” By 1941, she grew weary of farming and upon completing the ninth grade she joined her mother in Brooklyn. Her first glimpse of New York City was disappointing. Exiting Penn Station, she saw “people with [a] wagon and horse carrying coal” —just like in the country!⁵⁹ Nevertheless, Sylvia remained, attended high school, and “began to take up beauty culturing.”⁶⁰ She spent her summers in South Carolina. After graduating from high school in Brooklyn, Sylvia returned south for a while and then ventured back to New York where she worked in a salon with her cousin, a fellow migrant. Returning to Hemingway, Sylvia opened a beauty parlor and married her childhood sweetheart Herbert Woods who served in World War II. After Herbert got out of the service, the couple returned to New York, at which time, their oldest child, the first of four, was only nine months old.⁶¹

Just as her mother’s childcare enabled her to work in the North, Sylvia’s mother, Julia Presley, who eventually resettled in South Carolina, extended the same support to her daughter and son-in-law. Since she had been one herself, Julia Presley understood the struggles of migrant parents. While Sylvia and Herbert worked hard and established their way in Brooklyn, they sent their children back and forth between New York and South Carolina, where the children attended primary school. Sylvia and Herbert’s sustained connection with their southern base fortified their economic wellbeing as well. Through the support of their southern family members, which allowed them to make

⁵⁸ Woods, 1-9

⁵⁹ Woods, 5

⁶⁰ Woods, 5

⁶¹ Woods, 3-7

more money in New York, the Woods were able to supply their children with greater economic freedom than they experienced growing up in the Carolinas. The appreciation for the economic interdependence that sustained their childhood kept Sylvia's children connected to their southern relatives long after they became more financially independent in later years. While less financially dependent on familial support than prior generations, the Woods' children and grandchildren regularly returned to the South to keep in touch with their southern elders, because, Sylvia believes, they were raised "not to forget where they came from."⁶²

As the early generations of the Presley-Woods family demonstrate, travel between the North and the South was more than a cultural choice for war-time migrants, it was an economic necessity. As these cross-regional families shared financial responsibilities, cultural and political exchanges were inevitable and ultimately as important in shaping African American familial history.

Accordingly, young northern visitors were familiar with many of the southern folkways they encountered upon trips to the South. They ate some of the same foods, listened to some of the same popular music, sung some of the same hymns, and enjoyed some of the same radio programs. But, the social and political context in which northern children like Claude Brown and Emmett Till came to learn about race was very different from their Jim Crow counterparts and their relatives in either region of earlier generations.

TILLING THE SOIL: THE RACIAL TRAINING OF BLACK CHILDREN

"I had never had a reason to feel the kind of anxiety about him, about his safety in Argo and in Chicago, that I felt about his trip to Mississippi," Maime Till-Mobley

⁶² Woods, 14

explained, looking back on her decision to send her son Emmett to the South.⁶³ Indeed, mothers like Till-Mobley carefully schooled their children before sending them south. She had “the talk” with Emmett “about strange things in a strange, new place.”⁶⁴ This was, she remembered, “the talk every black parent had with every child sent down South back then.”⁶⁵

Mamie Till-Mobley later realized that this discussion marked the first time she reviewed the details of racial etiquette with Emmett, because there had been no prior need to discuss race as events unfolded in their lives in Argo and Chicago. As she instructed her son, Till-Mobley wondered, “How do you give a crash course in hatred to a boy who has only known love?”⁶⁶ The entire community echoed Mamie’s warnings, charging the lovable Emmett who “thought he could talk his way out of anything,” to carefully deport himself in Mississippi and avoid transgressing southern customs.⁶⁷

Drawing on knowledge of the ways of the South garnered from her family members and close friends over the years, Mamie prepped Emmett on how to interact with white people. She encouraged him to avoid initiating conversations, to always add “sir” or “ma’am” to his responses, to move out of the pathway when approaching whites, and to never look directly at or engage white women. In her memoir Till-Mobley recalled that Emmett considered her efforts a bit overdone and assured her that her good home-training would suffice to keep him in line while in Dixie.⁶⁸

⁶³ Till-Mobley and Benson, 100

⁶⁴ Till-Mobley and Benson, 100

⁶⁵ Till-Mobley and Benson, 100

⁶⁶ Till-Mobley and Benson, 102

⁶⁷ Till-Mobley and Benson, 75

⁶⁸ Till-Mobley and Benson, 101-102

But Till-Mobley knew that In order to have her son survive Mississippi, “everything Emmett had come to believe all his life had to be unlearned” as he readied himself to travel south.⁶⁹ “He had developed a sense of dignity, pride, confidence, self-assuredness,” she recalled.⁷⁰ “He was used to having certain things in his contented life. He was comfortable with himself and the things he had.”⁷¹ The white southern public would not tolerate a self-confident, expressive, independent-thinking black boy like Emmett. This was a truth Emmett had not been reared to entertain.⁷²

Emmett “thought he understood all that he needed to understand” and assumed the dangers could not possibly be as grave as his mother predicted.⁷³ Emmett’s portrait of the South included an abundance of family members and images of an adventurous landscape. He was aware that things were different, but believed that his family would insulate him from whatever cruelties his mother imagined, just as his extended familial network had always done in Illinois. But, Illinois was no Mississippi. Mississippi was a dangerous place for a boy like Emmett, confident, barely schooled, and unrehearsed in the ways of the South.

Indeed, parents in the Delta began training their children in southern racial etiquette at very young ages. Regardless of their class positions, most black southern children learned only to speak to whites when spoken to, to never look them in the eye, and to move out of the paths of approaching whites. Young black males also learned to never come in close contact with white women. Children of both sexes were trained not

⁶⁹ Till-Mobley and Benson, 101-102

⁷⁰ Till-Mobley and Benson, 101-102

⁷¹ Till-Mobley and Benson, 101-102

⁷² Till-Mobley and Benson, 101-102

⁷³ Till-Mobley and Benson, 101-102

to enter certain spaces and to pretend that they did not aspire to advance or propose to be as good as white people.

Yet race training in the South varied slightly according to class. Middle and upper-class black southern children were raised with a sense of respectability similar to that which shaped Till's understanding of himself. Like Mamie Till, many upwardly mobile southern parents emphasized their children's worth and promise. These "race" men and women encouraged their children to embrace their personal dignity, teaching "the need for individual blacks to define or redefine themselves and their race in the public eye."⁷⁴ Respectability was supposed to ease the degenerating impact of segregation, which was tailored to make children feel inferior. Therefore, if they behaved in dignified fashion, respected themselves and their communities, and did not stoop to the dehumanizing attitudes and antics expected from southern whites, they were as worthy as any of God's other creatures.⁷⁵ Nevertheless, even children who trained to embrace their personal respectability were also made aware that a positive self-concept was an affront to southern whites who considered proud colored people to be "uppity" and "out of their place."

Like their educated counterparts, lower-class parents trained their children in hard work, thrift, respect for one's community, and personal integrity, but were more likely to emphasize deference.⁷⁶ Working-class black southern parents consistently warned their charges to "stay in their place," to "never sass white folks," and to "never

⁷⁴ Jennifer Ritterhouse, *Growing Up Jim Crow: How Black and White Children Learned Race* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), 85

⁷⁵ Ritterhouse, 85

⁷⁶ Ritterhouse, 104

look them in the eye.”⁷⁷ While many such parents still emphasized individual self-worth and the importance of education, fear prompted many of them to insist that their children avoid the dangers of “crossing white folks,” which could include any number of behaviors deemed inappropriate or offensive.⁷⁸

For many southern children, “playing by the rules became a self-conscious performance in which they ‘got one over on’ or otherwise manipulated whites.”⁷⁹ Young black children knew how to behave in front of whites and young northern visitors also learned how to code switch while in the South. Although he neither recognized nor appreciated it, Harlemitte Claude Brown became bi-cultural during his twelve-month stint down south. He emulated his relatives and “even learned how to say ‘yas’m’ and ‘yas suh.’”⁸⁰ “But, I don’t think I really learned those things,” he explained, “I think I just made believe I learned them. As soon as I got on that train going back to New York, I knew white potatoes were white potatoes, and I knew I had said ‘yas suh’ and ‘yas’m’ for the last time.”⁸¹ During subsequent trips to the South a child like Claude would have a reference for the type of behavior that was expected of him.

Although they might not have been as worldly as northerners like Brown, southern children were often more militant than their parents in their dealings with racist encounters. However, “the penalties for failing to perform according to the rules remained ever in force, demanding that black children suppress (although not entirely

⁷⁷ Ritterhouse, 103

⁷⁸ Ritterhouse, 103

⁷⁹ Ritterhouse, 17

⁸⁰ Brown, 47

⁸¹ Brown, 47

‘forget’) their individual and contrary impulses.”⁸² One of the most important ways children learned restraint was through the examples of adults.

As a young boy in rural Louisiana in the spring of 1942 Bill Russell learned an important lesson in Jim Crow etiquette from his father Charlie, a stately and proud man who usually chose his battles wisely. One afternoon, the Russell family waited as a white service station attendant continued a conversation with a white patron long after pumping his gas. Mr. Russell started the engine in preparation to leave. Just then, the first customer pulled off and the attendant “stormed over to our car and said ‘Boy, don’t you *ever* do what you just started to do!’ Then he cussed Mister Charlie [Russell] about his manners, spitting out the words,” Bill Russell recalled.⁸³ “I’d never heard anybody talk to my father like that,” he continued, “and my cheeks stung as if they’d been slapped.”⁸⁴ His father grabbed a tire iron and walked toward the man who took off running in disbelief and fear. Bill and his brother “were about to burst with pride” as they watched their father chase the man.

Repentant, Charlie Russell left the man running and returned to the car, declaring that “there wasn’t anything to be happy about,” which “stunned and confused” his son.⁸⁵ His father was ashamed that he had allowed the gas station attendant to provoke him to violent retaliation. “It was many years before I understood why Mister Charlie [Russell] was so upset about something I thought magnificent,” Bill wrote.⁸⁶ His father wished that he’d shown more self-control. He lamented, “I know

⁸² Ritterhouse, 17

⁸³ Russell and Branch, 27

⁸⁴ Russell and Branch, 27

⁸⁵ Russell and Branch, 27

⁸⁶ Russell and Branch, 27

deep down I'da hit that man with that iron if he hadn't run off. I'd have ended his life and ruined mine, plus my kids' and my wife's, just 'cause some fool was using me as a boy in front of my family."⁸⁷ "I let him take full possession of me, a grown man. I don't even like to think about it," Charlie Russell concluded.⁸⁸ While Bill was proud of his father's boldness in not kowtowing to Jim Crow, he had to wrestle with the danger of his father's actions. Moreover, he had to learn to garner that same resilience for himself, as did many other black children across the South. In short, no matter how they interpreted their self-worth or the ways in which their parents trained black children to deal with racism and respond to Jim Crow's abuses, black children understood and practiced the intricacies of southern race rituals, helping to secure their physical safety, but not without substantial internal damage.

In turn, northern children learned the racial codes of the city streets that came with their own share of violently enforced racial subordination. Some parts of the North were marked by racial violence comparable to anything seen in the Mississippi Delta. For example, in 1942 white residents protesting potential black neighbors in Detroit's Sojourner Truth Housing Project burnt a cross and formed a blockade to stop the first black families from moving into the complex. The next year the Detroit race riot sparked by a rumor that a white mob threw a black woman and her baby into the Detroit River from Belle Isle Park was "one of the worst of the century."⁸⁹ Still in the North, black people had more access to legal protection than in the South where a highly segregated

⁸⁷ Russell and Branch, 27

⁸⁸ Russell and Branch, 27

⁸⁹ Victoria Wolcott, *Remaking Respectability: African American Women in Interwar Detroit* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2001) 244; For more discussion of the segregation and violence migrants experienced in the North also see Thomas Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 231-258

judicial system ensured that black people had very limited opportunities for securing justice.

While they may not have been able to understand the meaning of an all-white jury or the value of the franchise, children in migrant families possessed valuable political sensibilities. Moreover, when youngsters moved across regional lines with their racial-political training in tow, they were still in fact children, with young minds capable of imagining a world that reconciled who they were in one region with who they could not be in another.

CROSS-FERTILIZATION AND RISING SPROUTS: THE POLITICIZATION OF BLACK CHILDREN IN CROSS-REGIONAL FAMILIES

Emmett Till is part of a larger community of migrant children, young people whose political sensibilities were heightened through a cross-regional upbringing that exposed them to both Northern and Southern mores. Like other migrant children, Till first learned about the South from the memories and experiences of his family members. Unlike many of his counterparts, Till only took two trips south. His second trip, which resulted in his death, made him both a martyr for social justice and an anomaly for his cohort. Other youngsters of Till's generation were afforded multiple opportunities for cross-regional exchange. In visits to and through familial visitors from different regions, black children developed and quenched curiosities, many of a political nature that often later grew into political activism.

Most exchanges began with simple explorations of regional differences as basic as landscape, climate, cultural activities, and familial life, which connected children to familial and regional heritage. Spending time in the South introduced northern children to relatives they did not know and folkways with which they may have been barely

familiar. For example, whatever concepts of “nuclear family” northern-born children may have developed were regularly challenged and debunked during visits to the Southland, connecting northern visitors to the southern networks from which their northern shoots had sprouted. Southern Christian Leadership Conference executive Ralph David Abernathy grew up in rural Alabama. Abernathy explained that extended southern families often created nurturing environments in which children knew that they were cared for and cherished. “‘Family’ meant more than a couple and their children,”⁹⁰ he continued:

It meant grandparents, aunts, uncles, and countless cousins, most of them living in the same town or rural area. In such a world, every child knows he is watched with love and concern by literally dozens of people in addition to his parents. I was well aware of the inescapable presence of my kin wherever I went, and I knew that if I misbehaved they would either step in to correct me or else tell my parents about the incident. But, if I was hurt or in danger, they were just as quick to come to my rescue or defense.⁹¹

As Abernathy implied, embracing children in wide family networks helped to shield them from Jim Crow and racism in general. Although segregation was intended to impose second-class citizenship and degrade African American dignity, black parents enacted what Earl Lewis termed “congregation” and created affirming communities of choice that emphasized an appreciation for family, the human dignity of black people and community-building.⁹² In this context black children were valued as especially important cultural assets who were trained to contribute to the families and communities of which they were a part.⁹³

⁹⁰ Ralph David Abernathy, *And the Walls Came Tumbling Down: An Autobiography* (New York: Harper and Row, 1989), 15

⁹¹ Abernathy, 15

⁹² Earl Lewis, 91-92

⁹³ Lemke-Santangelo, 147

Summer trips also provided opportunities for migrant children to explore everyday life in the South. Cupland County, South Carolina migrant Rev. Chester Butler sent his children home in the summers expressly so they could “find out how they could be out in the country in a place where they could run around and do what they want to do.”⁹⁴ In the rural South, second-generation migrants discovered “what they could do” with open spaces, fresh foods, and activities that were not available to them in the North. Young northern visitors attended Sunday school in one-room sanctuaries that also functioned as schoolhouses, and slept atop tired haystack mattresses. They swam in rushing rivers, tracked animal trails through the woods, and visited general stores where their families held running accounts.

Although she grew up in the South Bronx area of Morrisania and Melrose, Marian Webber could relate to the isolated rural experience recalled by Ralph David Abernathy and Chester Butler. Webber was born in 1928 to migrant parents, and all six Webber children visited their extended family along the North Carolina-Virginia border every summer throughout the late 1930s and the 1940s. Each year Marian looked forward to traveling south with other young relatives who lived in the Bronx. “It was a way of bonding,” she explained, “You got the good country fresh air and you got to know your relatives.”⁹⁵ “I don’t remember any time not wanting to go,” Webber confirmed.⁹⁶

⁹⁴ Chester Butler, interview by Ray Allen, 10 February 1992, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, Schomburg Library, New York, NY, 23

⁹⁵ Webber, 2

⁹⁶ Marian Webber, interview by Ray Allen, 29 March 1993, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, Schomburg Library, New York, NY, 20

Conversely, visits from southern relatives to his Harlem, NY home assured Claude Brown that he never wanted to visit the South.⁹⁷ After an unbearable wet-kiss, bear hug, extended greeting from his long-lost southern aunt, Claude “realized that this was just another one of those old crazy-acting, funny-dressing, no-talking people from down South.”⁹⁸ He watched her from the far side of the room, “wondering if all the people down South were crazy like that. I knew one thing—I had never seen anybody from down there who looked or acted as if they had some sense.”⁹⁹ “It was probably eating corn bread and biscuits all the time that made those people act like that,” he concluded.¹⁰⁰

Upon returning from a year-long visit to the South, Brown recalled, “Down South seemed like a dream when I was on the train going back to New York. I saw a lot of things down South I never saw in my whole life before, and most of them I didn’t ever want to see again.”¹⁰¹ While there he witnessed “a great big old burly black man hit a pig in the head with the back of an ax,” his “Grandma kill a rattle snake with a hoe,” and “a lady rat have a lot of little baby rats on a pile of tobacco leaves.”¹⁰² Upon returning he concluded: “Down South sure was a crazy place, and it was good to be going back to New York.”¹⁰³

While Brown could not appreciate the ways of his southern kinfolk and his stint did nothing to shift his delinquent behavior, Marian Webber was positively intrigued by rural southern folklife in her grandparents’ community. Her minister grandfather, a

⁹⁷ Brown, 37

⁹⁸ Brown, 37

⁹⁹ Brown, 37

¹⁰⁰ Brown, 37

¹⁰¹ Brown, 50

¹⁰² Brown, 50

¹⁰³ Brown, 50

prototypical southern patriarch, was especially impressive. She recalled that he maintained strict household rules about no work on the Sabbath, regularly provided all the children with buttermilk and corn and was readily available to perform his duties as a minister. One summer, a couple requested his services while he was working in the field. That he came into the house, washed his face and married them right in the parlor impressed his young granddaughter, who had no access to such transactions in the North.¹⁰⁴ It was precisely the transactions of the North that intrigued southern youngsters about life beyond Dixie.

For segregation's children, perhaps the most fascinating aspect of life outside of the South was the freedom black people seemed to embody in not having to act according to Jim Crow's script. In the 1950s, John Lewis, who would become a civil rights worker and US Congressman, was a black child living in Troy, Alabama, who was obsessed with the North. Like John, Bill Russell and his older brother were both amazed at the prospect of life outside of the South. As he pondered his family's impending migration to Oakland, California from Monroe, Louisiana, Bill Russell surmised, "maybe we'd become like those families who return every summer to visit from the North, driving long cars, wearing shiny clothes and making people uncomfortable."¹⁰⁵ "We weren't well-traveled," Bill explained, "New York, Chicago and Los Angeles were huge fairylands to us – even bigger than New Orleans – somewhere over the Louisiana line."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Webber, 6

¹⁰⁵ Russell and Branch, 28

¹⁰⁶ Russell and Branch, 28

John Lewis' first exposure to life outside of Dixie was also through visiting relatives who returned to Alabama in their fancy clothes and shiny cars, including his "mother's brothers Dink Jr. and O.C." who lived in Buffalo, New York.¹⁰⁷ After they moved north, young John "saw them once a year, the third Sunday in July, when they'd come back to Carter's Quarters [Lewis' maternal family homestead] for the annual reunion over at Macedonia Baptist."¹⁰⁸ Hearing accounts of desegregated schools and lunch counters made Lewis wonder what life was like in the North.

In the summer of 1951, Lewis' Uncle Otis decided to take John north to visit his uncles Dink and O.C. for an extended stay. Uncle Otis, a local schoolteacher and principal scheduled the trip from Alabama for the express purpose of quenching his nephew's curiosity about life outside of the Jim Crow South. That June, reaching Buffalo was like "stepping into a movie, into a strange, otherworldly place. It was so busy, almost frantic, the avenues filled with cars, the sidewalks crowded with people, black and white, mixing together as if it was the most natural thing in the world."¹⁰⁹

John Lewis' exposure to the desegregated spaces of the North shaped the ways in which he engaged the South upon his return. When it was time to leave Buffalo he was glad to be going home because he missed his family. He cried as he hugged Uncle Otis goodbye because, "it felt so good to be back."¹¹⁰ "But, home would never feel the same as it did before that trip. And neither would I," Lewis wrote.¹¹¹ As he went about his daily life in Troy, Alabama, memories of his visit to Upstate New York challenged him

¹⁰⁷ John Lewis with Michael D'Orso, *Walking in the Wind: A Memoir of The Movement* (New York, NY: Simon & Schuster, 1998), 49

¹⁰⁸ Lewis and D'Orso, 49

¹⁰⁹ Lewis and D'Orso, 49

¹¹⁰ Lewis and D'Orso, 51

¹¹¹ Lewis and D'Orso, 51

to want a better life for black southerners, having experienced freedoms available to African Americans north of the Mason-Dixon Line.

In *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* Clifton Taulbert noted that his northern relatives “would always keep my head filled with dreams of life in a land where color bars were non-existent and colored people could eat in the same places with whites.”¹¹² He recounted his anticipation of his migrant cousin’s return to Mississippi after some twenty years. “I couldn’t wait to meet this new older cousin. I wanted to meet him first so I could be the favorite one. I wanted to show him around Glen Allan [Mississippi], to be near this visitor from the alien and magical North.”¹¹³ Taulbert remembered that “it didn’t matter why he had waited so long to come home. He was in Glen Allan now, and that was all that mattered.”¹¹⁴ Over the next four days, young Clifton’s new favorite cousin Melvin “recounted for us his adventures of the past twenty years.”¹¹⁵ Melvin was just the first of several northern visitors during that summer.

Taulbert’s interactions with migrants shaped the ways he perceived southern family members’ travels north. He recalled being happy at the prospect of his Aunt Willie Mae departing for Saginaw, Michigan to visit her son, but he also was worried that she might never return. Through his familial interactions he discovered a North that seemed wonderful, mystical, and promising, yet it held the capability to separate loved ones and cause them to never again return home. Because of his family’s involvement in the migration, Taulbert’s sensibilities about regional differences were peaked.

¹¹² Clifton Taulbert, *Once Upon a Time When We Were Colored* (Tulsa, OK: Council Oak Books, 1989), 139-40

¹¹³ Taulbert, 139

¹¹⁴ Taulbert, 139

¹¹⁵ Taulbert, 139

Although they may not have longed to live there, the presence of family members in the South made some northern children nearly as anxious to investigate it as Taulbert was to see the North. Young Carolyn Dillon wished she could go south like other migrants in her Chicago neighborhood. Carolyn's family was nervous about letting her visit the South. Unlike Darlene C. Hill, whose relatives sent her home early from visits to Alabama if she or her cousins "accidentally did things that were out of line for the situation," Carolyn's caretakers took no such chances.¹¹⁶ Forbidden from traveling to Dixie proper, Carolyn Dillon spent her childhood summers with an aunt on the *Southside* of Chicago.

Some adults in her world supported Dillon's desires to travel south. "Our family friend, Joe Brown, was always trying to get my aunt to let me come south to Atlanta to visit and my aunt, Mollie Lipscombe, wanted me to come to Louisiana to spend the summers," she recalled.¹¹⁷ But, Carolyn was "never allowed to go, because her family considered it too dangerous."¹¹⁸ She explained:

Even though I was a child who said "yes ma'am" and "no sir" my aunt was afraid I would be stubborn enough not to say it if someone white made me mad or insulted or disrespected me. She said they would just be looking for an opportunity to kill a cute little colored girl and she would not let me go.¹¹⁹

In the "pleasant" and insulated comfort of some rural communities, visiting northern children like Marian Webber might be sheltered from the immediate

¹¹⁶ Darlene C. Hill, comments on "Do You Remember," "American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till" available on http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_remember.html Internet; retrieved 3 September 2006; Hill's comments no longer appear on the webpage, where only comments from famous individuals remain.

¹¹⁷ Carolyn C. Dillon, comments on "Do You Remember," "American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till" available on http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_remember.html Internet; retrieved 3 September 2006, Dillon's comments no longer appear on the webpage, where only comments from famous individuals remain.

¹¹⁸ Dillon, comments

¹¹⁹ Dillon, comments

demonstrations of racism from which Carolyn's family tried to protect her. If migrants visited areas like the rural Alabama community where Ralph David Abernathy grew up they might even be sheltered from regular interaction with white southerners. Their father's warning to avoid playing with white children was one Abernathy remembered as "merely hypothetical to us."¹²⁰ He continued:

We lived on five hundred acres, which gave us plenty of breathing space, and most of the farms around us were owned or run by our uncles and cousins. Our nearest white neighbors had—Mr. and Mrs. Robert Jones—had children who were off at college. So we didn't sit around and brood about whether or not to play with whites our age. We'd never met any and had no desire to.¹²¹

Likewise, black northerners like Marian Webber did not recollect any direct blows from Jim Crow during summer visits to the South, which she readily compared to interracial relations in the North. In her Bronx neighborhood, Webber remembered, "we didn't know discrimination because the neighborhood was integrated."¹²² "The whole neighborhood," she continued, "the schools we went to were integrated...so we never had problems, because the people of all nationalities" lived in close vicinity to one another and were relatively amicable.¹²³ "The shock came in New Brunswick, New Jersey," Marian recalled, "when I was in my teens [in the 1940s] and we went to visit my cousins there and we were going to the movies and we had to sit up in the [segregated] balcony."¹²⁴ In New York," she continued, "children sat in the main section, you couldn't sit in the balcony in the movies in New York. For me, that was really my first real encounter with segregation and that wasn't in the South."¹²⁵

¹²⁰ Abernathy, 29

¹²¹ Abernathy, 29

¹²² Webber, 4

¹²³ Webber, 4

¹²⁴ Webber, 8

¹²⁵ Webber, 8

During their cross-regional exchanges the realities of discrimination came into sharper relief for children in families impacted by the migration. Like Webber, many young people recognized the pervasiveness of direct injustices in the North in comparison to all-black southern communities in which children sheltered mostly-black rural communities in the South. Others simply figured that the North was much better than the South upon seeing the resources available to black people there. Caretakers understood that travel could raise questions for children and considered the probable impact of cross-regional exposure in their preparations for sending them across the Mason-Dixon Line. As much as migrant families may have cared to ensure that their children remained culturally connected to their southern roots or as much as they may have needed to occupy children during the summer months, parents feared the political repercussions of exposing youngsters to Jim Crow or life outside of it.

For example, although she wanted Carolyn Dillon to visit Louisiana, her Aunt Mollie Lipscombe resisted allowing her daughter Barbara to visit Carolyn in Chicago, fearing she might get “fancy Northern ideas in her head that would get her killed once she arrived back in Natalbany, Louisiana.”¹²⁶ Finally, Aunt Mollie relented and allowed Barbara to make the trip north. During her visit to Chicago, Barbara was “very impressed with how I lived,” Carolyn recalled, “I who lived in a Federal Housing Project!”¹²⁷ Although much of Carolyn’s world was also segregated, Barbara was moved because Carolyn’s “huge school had swimming pools, tracks, well-educated black teachers and was an all-black school, had real books, and school supplies.”¹²⁸ In Chicago with Carolyn, Barbara also discovered that the girls did not have to ride in the

¹²⁶ Dillon, comments

¹²⁷ Dillon, comments

¹²⁸ Dillon, comments

back of the bus; neither were they forced to “sit in the balcony (in those days called ‘nigger heaven’) of the movie theater.”¹²⁹ No doubt young Barbara’s impressions of the North changed the way she perceived the balcony the next time she attended a matinee in a southern theater.

Meanwhile Carolyn got her taste of the South through Barbara’s comparisons about how her Louisiana home compared to the North. Especially in Barbara’s assessments of Carolyn’s Chicago school and Jim Crow education, Carolyn gained a personal reference for the experience of childhood in the South. Carolyn’s interactions with Barbara also made her more sensitive to efforts to desegregate southern schools. “When a little black girl tried to go to school with little white children,” and “the moms! — congregated and threw tomatoes and nasty words at her,” young Carolyn cried.¹³⁰ “All my young life,” she explained, “I had been told that ‘they’ (white people) would like us better if we were better educated ‘like them.’”¹³¹ She couldn’t “believe that moms — the moms of *Fun with Dick and Jane* (and Spot) — would throw tomatoes at a nice little colored girl who was trying to go to school.”¹³²

Learning the truth about Jim Crow caused Carolyn to do “a lot of growing up overnight.”¹³³ Carolyn accused her migrant aunt of having lied to her about “what we needed to do to be accepted. I remember she had tears in her eyes when she told me, ‘I believed it was true, too.’”¹³⁴ Although she never set foot below the Mason-Dixon Line, through her familial interactions and the sensitivity they brought to southern problems,

¹²⁹ Dillon, comments

¹³⁰ Dillon, comments

¹³¹ Dillon, comments

¹³² Dillon, comments

¹³³ Dillon, comments

¹³⁴ Dillon, comments

Carolyn Dillon “learned a very hard lesson” and affirmed that “[the] reality [of racism] is a hard row to hoe when you are not yet a teenager.”¹³⁵

As they interacted with their peers in different regions black children, like Carolyn and Barbara, began to ask questions about their identity in relation to their families. As Jennifer Ritterhouse argues, “In the Jim Crow South, questions of place were inevitably questions of race: Why are some people treated one way and others another? How will I and the people I love be treated, and will that treatment be fair?”¹³⁶

Consider this 1945 conversation between eight-year-old Claude Brown, called “Sonny” by family members and his little Brother, nicknamed “Pimp” because a self-employed prostitute was the only person around to finance a cab for their mother when she went into labor with him. When his little brother queried, ““They got crackers down there, ain’t they Sonny?”” Brown replied:

“Yeah, Mama said they got crackers down South.”

“Sonny what is crackers? They ain’t the kinda crackers you buy in the candy store, is they?”

“No, the crackers down South is white people, real mean white people.”

“Is Mr. Goldman a cracker Sonny?”

“No, he’s a Jew.”

“But he’s white and look real mean.”

“I know that, but some white people is crackers and some-a dem is Jews, and Mr. Goldman is a Jew. You see, Pimp, white people is all mean and stingy. If one-a dem is more stingy than he is mean, he’s a Jew; and if he is more mean than he is stingy, then he’s a cracker.”¹³⁷

Brown’s interpretation of the “differentiations” between “white” people was likely more an assessment of descriptions of white people from his parents and other adults in his migrant community than his limited experiences with either “crackers” or European

¹³⁵ Dillon, comments

¹³⁶ Ritterhouse, 4

¹³⁷ Brown, 42-43

immigrant groups. Unlike their southern contemporaries, northern children like the Browns did not have exposure to the abundance of clear, state-sanctioned markers designed to publicly subordinate African Americans beneath the status of whites.¹³⁸ Southern children had greater exposure to injustices and inequities they could readily attribute to whites and often had fewer opportunities for interactions with amicable or respectful white people than did their peers in the North.

Although Emmett Till's family may have had more positive interactions with white northerners than did Claude Brown's, the most likely way for either migrant child to gain an understanding of the ways of southern white folk was through the conversations and silences of black migrants in their communities. Just like Claude, Emmett Till was not afforded the context of Jim Crow and the constant reminder of whites' obvious bad behavior with which to juxtapose his own. Fortunately for Claude, a self-described juvenile delinquent, his northern bravado did not put him in danger while visiting his southern relatives. Emmett's encounter with the South was quite different.

TILL NORTH MEETS SOUTH: THE CONTRADICTIONS AND COINCIDENCES OF A "CHICAGO BOY" IN MISSISSIPPI

Although they had done much to prepare him, Emmett Till's mother and grandmother were reluctant to send him to Mississippi – with good reason as it turned out. In the summer of 1955, when Emmett turned fourteen, his beloved Uncle Mose, who preferred the good life in the country, visited Chicago from Money, Mississippi, where he interacted with Emmet bringing his vivid depictions of wide open spaces, fishing, and long summer nights. The southern adventures promised through his

¹³⁸

Ritterhouse, 110

uncle's stories were even more inviting once Emmett discovered that two of his favorite Argo cousins, Wheeler Parker and Curtis Jones, would be visiting Pap Moses later in the summer.¹³⁹

When his mother refused his request to travel, he came back with the kind of inquiry that made sense to a child in a trans-regional interdependent family. "'Why is it that you can take two of Papa Mose's girls and raise them for years,'" he asked, "and you won't even let me go to Mississippi and stay a week?"¹⁴⁰ For Emmett it was illogical that the familial trust and exchange could not flow both north and south. Other family members agreed with Emmett and assured Mamie and her mother that "there was no need to worry so much, that the boys would be looked after" by all the neighboring family members and friends.¹⁴¹

The proponents of Emmett's vacation had a point: Emmett was comfortable with his southern relatives and by most standards very familiar with southern folkways. His grandmother Alma was a founding member of the Argo Temple Church of God in Christ, which was full of southern migrants who shared their loving southern ways with Emmett. Perhaps Philadelphia native Prathia Hall, future leader in the Albany, Georgia Movement and minister, would have backed Emmett's case. She attributed her status as a daughter of a minister to increasing her familiarity with southern culture in general. "I knew the church up side down," she maintained.¹⁴² "I'd never been south before, but I knew the songs. I knew the prayers. I knew these people, 'cause I knew their relatives

¹³⁹ Till-Mobley and Benson, 98

¹⁴⁰ Till-Mobley and Benson, 98

¹⁴¹ Till-Mobley and Benson, 99

¹⁴² Prathia Hall, interview by Sheila B. Michaels, 23 February 1999, Congress of Racial Equality/Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee Veterans Oral History Project, Columbia University Oral History Archives, New York, New York, Tape 1 of 2

when they came north.”¹⁴³ Emmett too knew southern hymns, and southern people, but unlike Hall, Emmett *had* actually traveled south.

Indeed, Emmett had been barely two years old when he made his first trip to Mississippi, in the care of his grandmother who went down to assist in the delivery of a child born to Aunt Lizzy and Uncle Mose after several miscarriages. Emmett probably did not remember this visit, but surely his family remembered Mamie’s bright-eyed Chicago-born baby boy. Both Aunt Liz and Uncle Mose had made several visits to Chicago among other Mississippi relatives, including two of their daughters who had lodged with the Mamie Till-Mobley for a time. Uncle Crosby, one of Emmett’s favorites, had lived next door to the Carthan-Till home before he moved back to Mississippi and Emmett hoped to visit him during his trip. (Ironically, Emmett’s only “visit” with Uncle Crosby would be the train ride back to Chicago in his coffin). In addition, Emmett would be traveling with his favorite cousins who were also raised in the Chicago area. To be sure, when Mamie Till-Mobley was reluctant to allow Emmett to visit Mississippi, it was not a lack of community or belief that he would be uncomfortable around his family members that concerned her. She was concerned that Emmett might be too comfortable.

Indeed, Emmett was comfortable down South. Although his summer vacation ended tragically, his activities were not unlike many of his peers. Like thousands of other children in migrant families, Till and his two cousins traveled south with his granduncle. While in Money, Emmett picked cotton for the first time and decided he might be most helpful with household chores out of the hot sun, which Uncle Mose allowed since he was on vacation. He also helped his Aunt Liz with the garden and

¹⁴³ Hall interview

preparing meals. Throughout his visit, Till joined his cousins in front porch conversations, at local worship services, and ate fresh home-cooked meals. Several days prior to his death, Emmett wrote home. He explained that his final week in Money would include a visit to see his Uncle Crosby, affirmed that “everybody here is fine and having a good time” and sent greetings to family and friends.¹⁴⁴

While Till’s summer activities were similar to those his southern cousins regularly experienced, he brought with him the confidence of a self-assured youngster for whom there “had been no danger, no discrimination, no deprivation.”¹⁴⁵ Moreover, his mother explained, “it wasn’t only that he was taught that he was just as good as anyone else. It was that he was made to feel that way, in every way. It was that he always had that awareness simply because of the way people treated him, the respect people always showed him” in Illinois.¹⁴⁶ To be sure, in insulated southern communities young black children could acquire strong senses of themselves similar to the confidence Emmett displayed. But, those young black children would also have an awareness of the danger of displaying that same confidence in front of white people.

Racial deference was a difficult lesson for black children to learn in the South and a hard one for northern children to accept. Youngsters like Emmett could not often fully comprehend why the person one was in the North did not translate to the South. Emmett had not recognized a notable difference between himself and the white children he encountered in Chicago or white adults with whom he regularly interacted. The “things that ran deep in the awareness of people who lived in the South, things he

¹⁴⁴ “Emmett Till to Mamie Till-Mobley,” August 1955, on “Primary Sources: Letters to Chicago,” “American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till” available on http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/filmmore/ps_letters.html, Internet; retrieved 3 September 2006

¹⁴⁵ Till-Mobley and Benson, 100

¹⁴⁶ Till-Mobley and Benson, 100

couldn't possibly have understood," made Emmett's trip to Money the most dangerous of his life.¹⁴⁷

However prepared for his visit Till might have believed he was, his supposed mastery of southern social etiquette was insufficient to keep him out of danger. In rural Money, Mississippi, there were no "obvious signs of trouble. None of the things Emmett had been warned about. No 'White' or 'Colored' drinking fountains, no segregated sections on buses, nobody stepping off sidewalks to let white folks pass."¹⁴⁸ As his mother explained "there were no sidewalks. Money wasn't like other places in the Jim Crow South. It was worse. It was much worse. The dangers were hidden, and a lot more treacherous" than those Emmett might expect in a more urban southern community.¹⁴⁹ His status as an outsider was threat enough to the white men who maintained authority in Money. What his mother described as a vibrant personality and bold self-image made him even more of a target.

Of all the South's unspoken codes, perhaps Till understood southern sexual mores least. "For boys, growing up in the Jim Crow South meant confronting white stereotypes of black men as generously endowed and sexually aggressive, if not predatory and bestial."¹⁵⁰ Certainly, Emmett, who at fourteen, according to his mother, had not yet begun to pay much attention to girls, must not have been aware of the stereotypical image he, a handsome and manly boy, represented to the southern whites who encountered him.

¹⁴⁷ Till-Mobley and Benson, 101-102

¹⁴⁸ Till-Mobley and Benson, 121

¹⁴⁹ Till-Mobley and Benson, 121

¹⁵⁰ Ritterhouse, 193

Unlike their southern counterparts, young northern black males' lessons about the dangers white women posed to black men were not routinely reinforced. By contrast, periodic trials, beatings, and murders reminded young southern men of what Mississippi-born author, Richard Wright called "the white death, the threat which hung over every male black in the South."¹⁵¹ The *Jackson Daily News* attested to Till's probable ignorance of southern protocol, reporting that he must have been "feeble-minded" to whistle in a white woman's presence, since no young black man in his right mind would have done so in the South.¹⁵²

One August afternoon as Till and several cousins stood outside of Bryant's Grocery and Meat Market, Till went inside to take his turn buying treats as his cousin Simeon Wright stood in the doorway. In the exchange between Till and Carolyn Bryant, the twenty-one year-old white clerk and wife of the store manager, Emmett apparently whistled as he tried to pronounce "bubble-gum." Upon hearing this story, Mamie Till feared that the training she provided her son to help secure his self-confidence helped to provoke his murder. As a small child, Emmett survived a bout with polio that left him with a stuttering speech impediment that was especially evident when he got excited. His mother encouraged him to stop, breathe, and even whistle if he needed to regroup himself in order to clearly and succinctly pronounce words. It is likely that Emmett used this speech technique that had become a "hypnotic clue that would calm him, steady his breathing and allow him to finish saying what he had started to say."¹⁵³

¹⁵¹ Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger): A Record of Childhood and Youth* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 202-3

¹⁵² *Jackson Daily News*, 2 September 1955, p. 8

¹⁵³ Till-Mobley and Benson, 66

By some accounts, Till whistled to be playful in response to a dare to speak to Bryant. Perhaps the jovial teenager accepted the dare, forgetting or ignoring the warnings to watch how he carried himself in front of southern white men. Perhaps he did not understand that Dixie's dangers applied to him, having experienced a very different system of segregation in Chicago. At any rate, he could not have perceived the gravity of his effort to avoid stuttering or his seemingly playful gesture.

White men's responses to Till's innocence or ignorance turned his time of connecting with his family into a fatal encounter. By virtue of his stature and persona alone, Till, handsome, "about five feet four or five inches tall," "about 160 pounds," "muscular and stocky" and speaking with a slight lisp posed a formidable threat to the white men in the store who overheard his subtle salutation to Bryant.¹⁵⁴ What might have seemed harmless to Till and his cousins was perceived as an assault on the virtue of white womanhood and demanded strong retribution. Bystanders told Bryant's husband that the strapping young black man made a pass at his wife and he was not pleased. In "protection of southern womanhood" and white male authority, Roy Bryant and Carolyn's brother-in-law J. W. Milam kidnapped Till from the home of his granduncle and aunt in the middle of the night.

Till's encounter with Milam and Bryant proved that he was not skilled in southern etiquette. His sixty-four year-old uncle, Moses "Preacher" Wright, allowed the men, twenty-one and thirty-six years old into his home and escorted them to the children's bedroom upon demand. However, less acquiescent, Till reportedly responded without the traditional "yes sir" and made the men wait while he put on both socks and

¹⁵⁴

Whitfield, 15-16

shoes. He fully dressed his feet asserting that he did not wear shoes without socks despite Milam's command for "shoes only," in an effort to hurry the boy. Emmett was known as a sharp dresser who liked to look his best and was not accustomed to walking barefoot on the sidewalks of Chicago and nearby Argo.

Following their acquittal, Till's murderers revealed in a story in *Look Magazine* that they intended only to beat the young man and "scare the Chicago" out of him. In fact Milam alleged, "We were never able to scare him. They had just filled him so full of that poison that he was hopeless."¹⁵⁵ Indeed, the assassins said the young man "never hollered" and taunted them declaring, "You bastards, I'm not afraid of you. I'm as good as you are. I've 'had' white women. My grandmother was a white woman."¹⁵⁶

Disgusted with Till's apparent inability to relinquish his stance of equality Milam contended:

Well, what else could we do? He was hopeless. I'm no bully; I never hurt a nigger in my life. I like niggers—in their place—I know how to work 'em. But I just decided it was time a few people got put on notice. As long as I live and can do anything about it, niggers are gonna stay in their place. Niggers ain't gonna vote where I live. If they did, they'd control the government. They ain't gonna go to school with my kids. And when a nigger gets close to mentioning sex with a white woman, he's tired o' livin'. I'm likely to kill him. Me and my folks fought for this country, and we got some rights. I stood there in that shed and listened to that nigger throw that poison at me, and I just made up my mind. "Chicago boy," I said, "I'm tired of 'em sending your kind down here to stir up trouble. G--d--m you, I'm going to make an example of you—just so everybody can know how me and my folks stand."¹⁵⁷

In this depiction of Till, the men not only defamed his character, for which his mother sued *Look Magazine*, but also created a fallible justification for Emmett's murder and exonerated the other murder suspects, in claiming to be the sole perpetrators.

¹⁵⁵ Huie, "The Shocking Story"

¹⁵⁶ Huie, "The Shocking Story"

¹⁵⁷ Huie, "The Shocking Story"

Moreover, while they may not have succeeded in “scaring the Chicago” out of the young northerner, Bryant and Milam ensured that Emmett Till would not have another chance to transgress southern sexual mores. The men severely beat him, gouged out his eye, tied a seventy-five pound mill fan to his neck and tossed his swelling body into the Tallahatchie River, sending shock waves of protest throughout the country. Upon identifying Emmett’s body a number of days later Mamie Till-Mobley wished she had followed her motherly instinct and not allowed her son to travel south.

TILL’S LEGACY: A NATIONAL PLEA FOR JUSTICE

Emmett Till did not die in vain. As Katherine Verdery argues, dead bodies are “excellent means for accruing something essential to political transformation: symbolic capital...Dead bodies ... can be a site of political profit.”¹⁵⁸ Moreover, Mamie Till-Mobley refused to allow her son’s death to go unnoticed, like hundreds of murdered black people before him. She joined forces with the NAACP and began telling her story, helping to raise funds for the organization’s justice work. In lodges, churches, and schools across the country she shared her fondest memories of Emmett, the steps she took to prepare him for his trip south, and the surrealism of his death. She hoped to ensure that such a tragedy never happened to another family. In her memoir she affirmed: “I had come to see that Emmett had died for a reason.”¹⁵⁹ In the currency of symbolic capital, Till’s image became worth more than a contemporary thirty-second American Super Bowl commercial slot. The aftermath of his death did for the Civil Rights Movement, African American families, and the wide American conscience what a costly advertising campaign could not have done.

¹⁵⁸ Katherine Verdery, *The Political Lives of Dead Bodies: Reburial and Postsocialist Change* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), 33

¹⁵⁹ Till-Mobley and Benson, 192

The significance of Till's death was also linked to the aftermath of the landmark *Brown v. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* (1954) Supreme Court case. The case, outlawing the "separate but equal" clause, carried its own tremendous civil rights momentum. Riding the tailwinds of images of the victorious third-grader Linda Brown or Nettie and Nickie Hunt atop the Supreme Court House stairs, images of Till's body raised the consciousness of millions of Americans, including those who were not descendants of African American migrants.¹⁶⁰ Furthermore, the widespread availability of television in the United States by the early 1950s provided a wider platform from which to broadcast the news of Till's death and the trial of his murderers.

In Chicago, Till's murder was an attack on the best of what migration had to offer black families—a chance for their children to be fully healthy, happy, vibrant, educated, and protected. In such Black Metropolises, "building communities in the big cities of America during an era when those cities monopolized important forms of power gave black migrants unique opportunities for influence."¹⁶¹ As such, Chicagoans and black people in other northern cities with substantial migrant populations pressured Mississippi officials to prosecute Till's assassins.¹⁶² Chicago also housed some of the nation's most powerful black media outlets, including the *Chicago Defender*, *Ebony* and *Jet Magazines*, and the Associated Negro Press, as well as other well known figures such as the entertainers Louis Armstrong and Jelly Roll Morton and the politician Oscar de

¹⁶⁰ Linda Brown was the daughter of Rev. Oliver L. Brown, who was the principal plaintiff in the *Brown vs. the Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* case which denounced segregation as illegal and permitted young Linda to desegregate a white elementary school four blocks from her home. She had previously been forced to travel four miles to school. Mrs. Nettie Hunt posed for a photo with her daughter Nickie on the Supreme Court steps explaining the case to her and holding a newspaper with the headline "High Court Bans Segregation in Public Schools." The image was widely circulated across the country.

¹⁶¹ Gregory, 326

¹⁶² Gregory, 326

Priest. In this context, Till's death was not only a horrific murder of a child, but a symbolic affront to African American progress.

Not surprisingly, Emmett Till became an instant martyr. Along with the desegregation plaintiffs of *Brown v. Board of Education* he became a symbol of the new generation of freedom fighters, to whom black people across the country could relate. His family helped give his death national significance, by both commemorating his life, and boldly condemning his killers. The image of Till's uncle Moses Wright standing before the Leflore County court boldly pointing out the men who absconded with his nephew in the early morning on 28 August 1955 enlivened black people across the country, who recognized that Till could have been a member of their families. Meanwhile, Wright represented the tired elders who had preserved the dignity of African American families throughout the early twentieth century and fought American racism as best they could. Although it endangered his life, through his testimony Uncle Moses did his part to pass the torch to the next generation. Through both the publicization of Emmett's death and the acquittal of his murderers, the new generation found a catalyst for joining the fight for African American liberation.

Indeed, young black southerners were riveted by Till's death and the trial that followed in ways that helped generate a new generation of activists. Till's death had a major impact on Cleveland Sellers, a future leader of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), who grew up in the upcountry town of Denmark, South Carolina, where he had little interaction with whites. He recalled that "the

greatest realization of racial injustice” and “the atrocity that affected me the most was Emmett Till’s lynching.”¹⁶³ Sellers remembered:

Emmett Till was only three years older than me and I identified with him. I tried to put myself in his place and imagine what he was thinking when those white men took him from his home that night...There was something about the cold-blooded callousness of Emmett Till’s lynching that touched everyone in the community. We had all heard the atrocity accounts before, but there was something special about this one.¹⁶⁴

Anne Moody had just entered a rural Mississippi high school at the time of Till’s death. She went on to become active in the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and participated in many sit-in protests, the March on Washington, and the Mississippi Freedom Summer—a civil rights initiative chronicled in chapter four. Her impressions of Emmett Till’s murder shaped her decisions to become active in the movement. Moody first learned about Emmett’s death as she overheard classmates discussing the impending fallout. When she inquired about the details of who was murdered and why she felt “so stupid.”¹⁶⁵ “It was then that I realized I really didn’t know what was going on all around me,” Anne explained. She had had to “work after school” and complete her “lessons on the lunch hour” since the age of nine and was not accustomed to keeping up with local happenings.¹⁶⁶

Anne’s mother cautioned her to pretend as if she knew nothing of the murder when she went to work at the home of Mrs. Burke, “the meanest white woman in town.”¹⁶⁷ Although she was extremely nervous the entire evening, Anne complied with her mother’s warning and likely cringed when Mrs. Burke broached the subject

¹⁶³ Cleveland Sellers, *The River of No Return: The Autobiography of a Militant and The Life and Death of SNCC* (New York: William Morrow & Company, Inc., 1973), 14

¹⁶⁴ Sellers, 15

¹⁶⁵ Anne Moody, *Coming of Age in Mississippi* (New York: Dell, 1976), 104-5

¹⁶⁶ Moody, 104-5

¹⁶⁷ Moody, 107

inquiring, "Do you know why he was killed?"¹⁶⁸ Answering her own question Mrs. Burke explained, "He was killed because he got out of his place with a white woman. A boy from Mississippi would have known better than that. This boy was from Chicago. Negroes up North have no respect for people. They think they can get away with anything. He just came to Mississippi and put a whole lot of notions in the boys' heads here and stirred up a lot of trouble."¹⁶⁹

"Before Emmett Till's murder, I had known the fear of hunger, hell, and the Devil," Anne wrote.¹⁷⁰ "But now," she continued, "there was a new fear known to me — the fear of being killed just because I was black."¹⁷¹ "This was the worst of my fears," she continued, "I knew once I got food, the fear of starving to death would leave. I also was told that if I were a good girl, I wouldn't have to fear the Devil or hell. But I didn't know what one had to do or not do as a Negro not to be killed. Probably just being a Negro period was enough, I thought."¹⁷² In making this assessment, Moody obviously concluded that Emmett's crime was not his "disrespect for people." From the discussions and silences of those in her community she began to wonder if something more heinous was afoot in the murder of this young outsider.

Till's death further peaked Moody's interest as she overheard Mrs. Burke and a group of white women discussing "the NAACP," and "that organization" in relation to the Till murder. Although her mother would not discuss the "NAACP," Anne learned about it from her homeroom teacher Mrs. Rice who explained the organization's goals in

¹⁶⁸ Moody, 107

¹⁶⁹ Moody, 107

¹⁷⁰ Moody, 107

¹⁷¹ Moody, 107

¹⁷² Moody, 107

reaction to the Till case, but told her not to tell anyone what she disclosed.¹⁷³ Looking back on her discoveries, Ann wrote:

I was fifteen years old when I began to hate people. I hated the white men who murdered Emmett Till and I hated all other whites who were responsible for the countless murders Mrs. Rice had told me about and those I vaguely remembered from childhood. But I also hated Negroes. I hated them for not standing up and doing something about the murders. In fact, I think I had a stronger resentment toward Negroes for letting whites kill them than toward whites.¹⁷⁴

Certainly the secretiveness that surrounded her inquiry troubled Ann. She must have been bothered that her questions were so quickly dismissed by her mother and that her only adult informant was so fearful to share information. It was her desire to see black people free to *speak on* and *do* something to end mistreatment that prompted Ann to join the movement. The events surrounding the “Chicago boy” had resonated across Mississippi and other parts of the South.

The Alabama native, John Lewis, whose summer visit to Buffalo, New York shook his world asserted, “I was shaken to the core by the killing of Emmett Till. I was fifteen, black, at the edge of my own manhood, just like him. He could have been me. *That* could have been me, beaten, tortured, dead at the bottom of a river. It had only been a year since I was elated at the *Brown* decision. Now I felt like a fool.”¹⁷⁵

Emmett’s death crushed the hopes that had risen when Lewis learned of the Supreme Court’s desegregation ruling in the *Brown v. Board of Education* case. He had begun to question the possibility of justice in America, surmising that “the American principles of justice and equality I read about in my beat-up civics books...the messages

¹⁷³ Moody, 109

¹⁷⁴ Moody, 111

¹⁷⁵ Lewis and D’Orso, 47

I heard in church, the songs we would sing – ‘In Christ there is no east and west, no north or south’ – declarations of absolute equality in God’s eyes, didn’t seem to matter either.”¹⁷⁶

However, after Till’s murder, he wrote, “I was chewing myself up with questions and yes, anger – anger not at white people in particular but at the system that encouraged and allowed this kind of hatred and inhumanity to exist.”¹⁷⁷ e decided that he would no longer embrace the status quo South he came to know as a child. “I couldn’t accept the ways things were, I just couldn’t. I loved my parents, but I could not live the way they did.”¹⁷⁸ Like Anne Moody, John Lewis decided that he would funnel his anger and passion into working for change and later became chairman of SNCC.

Historian James Horton had a similarly transformative response. Raised in the North, Horton was twelve years old and visiting family in the South when he first learned of Emmett Till’s death. “It was Monday morning when my family got the word about the death of Emmett Till,” he wrote.¹⁷⁹ “I was barely two years younger than he and in the South for one of the first times that I was old enough to remember.”¹⁸⁰ Horton’s mother used the occasion of Till’s death for a teachable moment, spending “most of the morning counseling me on ‘being careful,’ a non-specific term which at the time I took to mean watching out for traffic on unfamiliar country roads.”¹⁸¹

¹⁷⁶ Lewis and D’Orso, 47

¹⁷⁷ Lewis and D’Orso, 47

¹⁷⁸ Lewis and D’Orso, 47

¹⁷⁹ James Horton comments on “Do You Remember,” “American Experience: The Murder of Emmett Till” available on http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/till/sfeature/sf_remember.html Internet; retrieved 3 September 2006

¹⁸⁰ Horton, comments

¹⁸¹ Horton, comments

The death of Emmett Till shaped both Horton's later visits to southern family members and his decision to become a professional historian. He remembered, "On subsequent trips to the region I was 'more careful.' I was also more apprehensive about being there."¹⁸² Horton "was never sure what to do when in contact with Southern whites" and he "tried as much as possible never to make such contacts," likely remaining in the relative safety of familial compounds as much as possible.¹⁸³ Horton remembered that his "personal experience and the story of Emmett Till, which I read in great and gory detail upon my return North, served to confirm my notion that the South and its white people were different and dangerous...I wondered if I would ever understand these people and their society. The need to understand encouraged my graduate study of Southern history."¹⁸⁴ Something powerful was ignited in Horton like hundreds of other youngsters in his generation.

CONCLUSION

Emmett Till's death brought the reality of lynching to the North and one of the most significant of the Black Metropolises in a fashion that bore witness to the impact of the migration on African American familial life. The national coverage of Till's murder made an especially strong impression on northern blacks who empathized with the Till family. Even for individuals who did not remain connected to their southern families after migration and those who had migrated independently, Emmett's death was a reminder of what African Americans families faced in the South. Many northerners related to Till because they were also members of families that participated in cross-regional summer exchanges and could easily imagine themselves or their young

¹⁸² Horton, comments

¹⁸³ Horton, comments

¹⁸⁴ Horton, comments

relatives meeting a fate similar to his. They had visited relatives in the South or welcomed visitors in northern train stations. They themselves had been roughed up by white boys in old pick-up trucks or molested by white men for appearing uppity during trips to the Southland. With Till's death, northern children who were not allowed to go south for fear that they would get into trouble gained a better understanding of the dangers from which their caretakers were trying to protect them. But, Till's murder also inspired activism, moving the hearts of young people to express and channel the very anger and defiance that their elders had taught them to suppress.

Perhaps his mother best assessed the significance of Emmett's death among his peers. Mamie Till-Mobley concluded:

Emmett represented so many things to so many people. To Bryant and Milam [his murderers], he had represented everything they had refused to recognize in black people. He was confident and self-assured, and he carried himself with a certain dignity they felt they had to beat down, beat back, beat to a bloody pulp. To little black children who gazed upon the images of my son in the pages of *Jet* magazine, Emmett was the face of a harsh reality that left no place to hide. To all black people, he was a reminder of the common problem we faced in this country, whether we lived in the North or the South. He was a unifying symbol. And his name would be spoken at so many rallies and fund-raisers and even in congressional hearings.¹⁸⁵

Indeed, Till helped unite black families and civil rights protestors across the regions because he was northern-born and of southern heritage, a product of migration and interdependent black families.

Although they lived in different regions, the African Americans who remained in the South during the migration years and those who migrated to the North were not a separate people. They were members of the same extended family groups and shared cultural kin networks that intricately linked the regions. Young people in migrant

¹⁸⁵ Till-Mobley and Benson, 199-200

families learned early that the identities they articulated in the North were not transferable to the South. In turn, southern children discovered that the North allowed their family members to experience freedoms that were unavailable in Dixie. If not for the migration, the extension of familial systems and the interfamilial exchange of political ideas and experiences, neither Emmett Till nor his legacy could have existed. Moreover, since Till's death was widely publicized, northerners were unable to disconnect themselves from their southern relatives' struggle for freedom. If child murder was a problem in the Mississippi Delta, it was also a problem in Chicago's Black Metropolis. If Jim Crow was the resident demon of the South, it still haunted those who left it and made homes in the North. African American families could no longer continue to make the world that nurtured Emmett in his cross-regional, northern migrant community without addressing the injustice of their southern homeland.

The new patterns of life that youngsters discovered while visiting family members in different parts of the country were accompanied by new understandings of blackness and what cross-regionalism meant to their families. To be sure, while young people discovered differences in the racial patterns in the North and South, many also recognized that Jim Crow had his own relatives in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Detroit. Young people spurred on by trans-regional experiences and moved by the death of Emmett Till sought to examine the varying aspects of their identities and force the United States to close the gap between its ideals and practices. Time had come to demand justice. African Americans would continue to employ family ties, their greatest resource in the movement that accelerated after Emmett's death gave life to the political consciousness of thousands of African American families.

Chapter 4

“In the Family of Civil Rights”: Southern African American Kinship and the Civil Rights Movement

Nine years after his death, the murder of Emmett Till was still fresh in the memory of black families whose fight for justice had burgeoned into a boundary-crossing national movement. Volunteers from around the country supported civil rights activities across the South, some with money and prayers others with sweat and blood. In a letter posted from Greenville, Mississippi in 1964, a civil rights worker reported, “It’s amazing how you can grow to love a place so quickly. The Negro community has been so receptive and welcoming. The other night, a woman who has seventeen children invited twenty of us over for dinner. It was a good dinner too.”¹ Another volunteer in Gulfport, Mississippi wrote: “Time and time again we go to a restaurant or bar, we start to pay, only to be told that the bill has been taken care of. People bring over a dozen eggs or cake or invite us to dinner. The hospitality seems like that of the old frontier, with its house raisings and quilting bees.”² In Ruleville, Mississippi, another freedom fighter asserted, “We have been given a wonderfully warm welcome wherever we have gone.”³ And, despite the mayor’s “warning” that white activists were arriving to murder black people, volunteers “were given the best of everything, and housing was found for all forty of us.”⁴ “Two people have already lost their jobs for housing us,” the activist continued, in a letter sent in July 1964, “and yet in each case half a dozen families

¹ Elizabeth Sutherland, *Letters From Mississippi* (New York, London, and Toronto: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1965), 43

² Sutherland, 44

³ Sutherland, 46

⁴ Sutherland, 46

begged us to stay with them after we have had to leave.”⁵Such reports confirm that the black southern families who interacted with Civil Rights Movement volunteers were generally welcoming and generous with their material resources.

However, the experience of segregation and the dangers of crossing racial boundaries both shaped the ways in which and the reasons why such hospitality was practiced. Extending their resources to “outside agitators” was dangerous for black people in Mississippi. If families decided to participate in the movement by investing in movement workers it was also because of their own interests in advancing the work of the movement despite the risks. The methods by which black families extended to outsiders were a reflection of familial culture and characteristic of the familial patterns that had served as a resource for survival and political advancement in African American communities for decades.

As has been argued in previous chapters, the historically specific ways in which black families form and maintain familial ties have long been some of African American communities’ greatest resources. During the Civil Rights Movements, black families transferred their traditional patterns of forming bonds, sharing resources, responsibilities, obligations, and privileges with non-related individuals into a form of political kinship with outsiders who decided to cast their lots with African American communities. The type of relating observed here between local black activists and visiting workers included affective ties, a language of familial identity and household incorporation, which helped to advance the goals of the movement. Dozens of civil rights memoirs record the emotional impact black southern families had on the

⁵ Sutherland, 46

individual outsiders who initiated and joined campaigns in their communities and several academic monographs acknowledge the contributions of particular black families.⁶

For instance, Charles Payne's *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* presents compelling portraits of black families with traditions of defiance, refusing to see themselves "as merely acted upon," that shaped grassroots leaders in the movement.⁷ In his study Payne observed an important "distinction between movement families and non-movement families," arguing that "much of what drew individuals into the movement and kept them there is explicable only in the light of the nature and the history of the particular families they came from."⁸ Payne's acknowledgement of how local black people became like family to movement workers makes him one of the few historians to address the myriad and often subtle ways in which black family culture in general shaped the movement.

The interactions between local people and movement workers during the Civil Rights Movement reveal the significance of African American familial culture to African American political history. But the ways in which participation in the movement shaped African American families and familial identity are largely absent from historical scholarship on both the Civil Rights Movement and the black family. This chapter examines the relationship between the Civil Rights Movement and African American families through the lens of the political summer campaigns of 1964 and 1965 in

⁶ See the following civil rights memoirs and contemporary studies for short references to black families in the movement: Sutherland; James Farmer, *Lay Bare the Heart: An Autobiography of the Civil Rights Movement* (Fort Worth: Texas Christian University Press, 1985); Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1965); Mary King, *Freedom Song: A Personal Story of the 1960s Civil Rights Movement* (New York: Morrow, 1987); Dick Reavis, *If White Kids Die* (Denton, Texas: University of Northern Texas, 2001); and Doug McAdam, *Freedom Summer* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988)

⁷ Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1995), 235

⁸ Payne, 208

Mississippi and several other southern states. African Americans' patterns of forming and making use of kinship ties at these historical moments illuminate the ways in which African American identity and perceptions of familial resources shifted through movement participation, while also providing a starting point for rethinking political activism and familial identity among African American communities. Freedom Summer, in particular, reveals how African Americans' conceptualization of political kinship operated on multiple levels at a time when they extended it to community insiders, outsiders, including black northerners, and far outsiders, white allies from both the North and the South. As local African Americans interacted with each of these groups in the movement they incorporated them into a larger sense of family.

Such exchanges underscore that black families should be acknowledged alongside the educational and religious institutions that scholars recognize to be critical to the success of the Civil Rights Movement. Sociologist Aldon Morris argues that the major civil rights organizations drew on a combination of existing and often overlapping institutions such as black colleges and churches – which were often heavily populated with students.⁹ Family was another such institution. In movement centers like Nashville, Tallahassee, and Atlanta, black churches and students often worked together, and both drew support and inspiration from black families. Black college students gained an understanding of giving back to their communities from their families. Moreover, growing up in interdependent extended families taught black people to value individual contributions to groups. Indeed, the traditions, structures, and functions of

⁹ Morris, 200; Steven F. Lawson, "Freedom Then, Freedom Now: The Historiography of the Civil Rights Movement" *American Historical Review* 96, no. 2 (April 1991), 466

black families shaped both the Freedom Summers and the Civil Rights Movement in important ways.

TESTING THE WATERS AND TAPPING LOCAL RESOURCES: ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND IN THE MISSISSIPPI DELTA

[BAY-Wirte a topic sentence and transition] In 1962, Tom Gaither of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and Medgar Evers and Aaron Henry from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) met with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee's (SNCC) Bob Moses to revamp the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO), originally established in 1961.¹⁰ These leaders joined forces to address the concerns among civil rights workers outside of Mississippi, native Mississippi activists and would-be activists, who believed the Movement could not grow across the Magnolia State without overcoming the cross-organizational and generational tensions that often plagued their organizing efforts. They restructured COFO into "an organization incorporating all national, state, and local protest groups operating in the state," of Mississippi including the minister-dominated Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC).¹¹

Since SNCC was the organization most active on the ground in Mississippi, its grassroots strategies and organizing principles shaped the development of civil rights work there. SNCC was committed to working itself out of a job—organizing local leadership that could continue to advance civil rights justice after outside volunteers were no longer present in the South. SNCC volunteers entrenched themselves in communities to counter all perceptions of SNCC workers as temporary rabble raisers.

¹⁰ John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 118

¹¹ Dittmer, 118

When he first came to Greenwood, Leflore County Mississippi SNCC activist Willie Peacock lived within the home of the principal of the local elementary school, Mrs. E. H. McNease, until local pressures forced her to evict him.¹² Likewise, Sam Block worked on the ground for eight months, strengthening local leadership and earning the trust of residents in Greenwood. After vigilantes destroyed their Greenwood office, for two nights Block “slept in a junkyard on the seat of a wrecked auto.”¹³ He eventually found a room, but “it would be five months before they could find another office.”¹⁴ Even so “he [Block] and Willie Peacock stayed in town, visiting people every day.”¹⁵ As SNCC leader Bob Moses explained they were “‘breaking down the psychological feeling on the part of Negroes that these boys are just coming in here, they’re going to be in here for a short time, and then they’re going to leave, and we’re going to be left holding the bag.’”¹⁶ While bonds of ideological conviction may have connected some outsiders to local activists, community work could only progress as outsiders proved themselves accessible and dedicated to local people, as was the case in Greenwood. If black families identified volunteers as merely troublemakers or adventure-seekers, then they would not be trusted to endure the long haul of struggle.¹⁷

Despite the record of SNCC workers like Block and Green, prior to the formation of COFO in 1962, the movement did not have statewide appeal in Mississippi. SNCC had had only a few isolated successes in select counties throughout the state. Funding

¹² Dittmer, 131

¹³ Zinn, 85

¹⁴ Zinn, 85

¹⁵ Zinn, 85

¹⁶ Zinn, 85

¹⁷ Dittmer, 138

for voter registration was low and many sharecroppers were out of work.¹⁸ However, once SNCC's emphasis on developing indigenous leadership was combined with the collaboration among the state's most prominent civil rights groups, many local Mississippi activists began to identify COFO as a people's organization that unified disparate black communities within the state.¹⁹

In the fall of 1962, SNCC tested the capacity of local residents to welcome and support an influx of outsiders in a Greenwood project. During their campaign to secure registrants there, the town's beleaguered municipal government refused federal food subsidies to county residents who tried to obtain access to election polls. SNCC leaders made a national plea for foodstuffs and received tons of supplies that needed to be distributed in an orderly fashion.²⁰ SNCC workers in other active sites, like Holly Springs in Marshall County and Hattiesburg, Forrest County were reluctant to leave their posts. Nevertheless, volunteers descended on Greenwood, eager to capitalize on the political momentum provided by the outpouring of support from political allies across the country and local residents' heightened interest in registering. Moreover, after an unlicensed car shot into a SNCC vehicle, wounding Jimmy Travis who was driving, SNCC leaders believed they had to make a good showing to establish that they refused to be shot out of town. The forty state-wide workers, including a few white volunteers, were a precursor outsider group to the inside community work being performed by the

¹⁸ Kay Mills, *This Little Light of Mine: The Life of Fannie Lou Hamer* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 78

¹⁹ Dittmer, 119

²⁰ Payne, 158-60

close-knit Greenwood community, of which Delta natives Peacock and Block had become a part.²¹

Historian John Dittmer maintains that “Peacock was ambivalent about the decision” to bring so many outsiders...into Greenwood.²² “For over eight months he and Block had been working patiently to develop local leadership in Greenwood, and these efforts could be undermined by the arrival of the new workers, many of whom did not know the territory.”²³ Block’s reference to the new volunteers’ ignorance of “the territory” was not simply an allusion to geography, but a reference to the social terrain of the Greenwood community. The incoming volunteers were not familiar with the individual black families with whom Peacock and Block had been working. They had not earned the trust of the community, as had the two young men. “Still,” as Dittmer notes, “the benefits of bringing nearly forty people into Greenwood outweighed all risks. The food distribution drive was now in high gear, and workers were badly needed to keep up with the shipments, paperwork, and allotment. For the first time in Mississippi hundreds of local blacks were eager to register.”²⁴ Overall, the youngsters’ presence helped raise community morale and reinforce community resolve even as local governments continued to retard the progress of the movement.²⁵ But as the black community grew more emboldened, so too would white supremacists.

In fact, the summer of 1963 proved to be the most violent in Mississippi since Reconstruction. During the first few months of 1963, the Mississippi Klan had

²¹ Payne, 163
²² Dittmer, 149
²³ Dittmer, 149
²⁴ Dittmer, 149
²⁵ Dittmer, 149

reconvened, with new constitutions, leadership, and commitments. One white supremacist branch vowed to annihilate the state's Negro population, while another promised to destroy the Mississippi civil rights movement.²⁶ Local authorities continued to condone the destructive behavior of local vigilantes, refusing to punish them for attacking civil rights protestors. On 9 June 1963 NAACP leader Medgar Evers was shot in his driveway just as he prepared to greet his awaiting wife and children. And in the days that followed, police harassed the hundreds who gathered to protest his murder and mourn his death.

That summer, Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer, who joined the Movement after an unsuccessful attempt to register in Sunflower County, would become one of the Movement's most powerful national symbols in part because of the violence she endured. She and six other COFO workers were arrested in Winona, Mississippi for entering the white section of a restaurant during their trip from a COFO training session in South Carolina. While waiting in the holding cell of the isolated county jail, Mrs. Hamer heard the blood-curling screams of fifteen year old local volunteer June Johnson who was brutally beaten until she lost consciousness. Annell Ponder, an adult SCLC citizenship school trainer was also severely beaten for refusing to use "sir" in reference to the jailers, who continued to assault her with kicks, punches, and perverse epithets until she prayed aloud for God's mercy on them.

By the time Mrs. Hamer's turn came the jail officials were exhausted and enlisted two Negro prisoners for the job. They forced one to whip her with a wide metal or rock-filled leather strap until he was worn out and then the second to whip her while the first

²⁶

Dittmer, 217

was made to sit on her feet, ensuring a steady target. Mrs. Hamer was so badly bruised that she could not sit down. "I had been beat 'til I was real hard, just hard like a piece of wood or somethin'," she remembered.²⁷ Gulfcoast SNCC field director Lawrence Guyot went to the town after calling around to see where they might have been detained and he too was arrested and severely beaten. The US Justice Department finally brought charges in this case after Mrs. Hamer, Guyot and others testified before the Credentials Committee at the National Democratic Convention in 1964, but the jailers were acquitted by an all-white jury.

Others were falsely arrested, beaten, and found missing that summer with no one held accountable to the law. State and municipal officers were performing or condoning many of the crimes. FBI agents observed negligent and criminal activity in Mississippi, but failed to intervene. Federal administrators provided money for the Voter Education Project, but refused to fund direct action campaigns. The Kennedy Administration feared alienating white southern supporters and was reluctant to send federal protection.²⁸

African Americans continued to be denied access to the democratic processes that could potentially redress state and federal neglect. The state's Democratic Party essentially prohibited black participation in nominating conventions and repaid those who challenged the system with police sanctioned violence. It was evident that the movement in Mississippi could not progress without the federal government providing protection for civil rights workers. COFO established the Freedom Vote Campaign to

²⁷ Howell Raines, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days in the Deep South Remembered* (Toronto, New York, and London: Bantam Books, 1978), 278

²⁸ Dittmer, 120

challenge Mississippi's white-only nominating procedures in the 1963 gubernatorial election. Through it, COFO dispelled the myth of black political apathy and tested the idea of bringing in a formidable group of white outsiders to the South.²⁹

In an unprecedented effort, COFO arranged for several of Allard Lowenstein's elite white university contacts to help with the challenge in the fall of 1963. The prior success of bringing outsiders to Greenwood encouraged some when they considered Lowenstein's proposal to bring in students from Stanford and Yale to assist in the Freedom Vote Campaign. At the very least, white volunteers would help bring publicity to the region. The eighty to ninety recruits joined the campaign for two weeks, provided manpower that allowed COFO to canvass more homes including those in Sunflower and Leflore counties, which were difficult to penetrate, and garnered the expected result from the national media.³⁰ Rather than focusing on the importance of the Freedom Ballot Campaign, Associated Press articles placed most emphasis on the presence of the white volunteers from Yale and Stanford, to the chagrin of many veteran activists.

Although the participation was less than half of what COFO had anticipated, the 80,000 Freedom Ballots cast marked a huge success. The vote empowered African Americans to recognize that they could participate in formal politics and enough ballots were cast to prove African American interest in the electoral process. COFO also encouraged the nearly 25,000 Negroes who were already registered to vote in the regular election and write in the Freedom ticket. Still, after the election, the federal Voter Education Project removed funding for work in Mississippi, probably because the group was doing more than just registering people to vote. COFO remained convinced that the

²⁹ Payne, 294-95

³⁰ Mills, 82

federal government was neither interested in recognizing the violation of African Americans' rights in the gubernatorial election nor securing protection for civil rights workers in Mississippi.³¹

Thereafter, COFO leaders decided to concentrate their efforts on a full-out assault on the "closed society" of Mississippi, which would call for support from SNCC branches in other states. Attacking Mississippi, a bulwark of the old Confederacy, they believed, would advance the cause of freedom throughout the South and across the nation. They organized the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party (MFDP) and suggested holding a nominating convention of their own that would give ear to the voices of black people.

In a meeting in November 1963, in Greenville, MS, COFO organizers debated bringing in more white students the following summer – and thus attracting some of the same publicity the Yale and Stanford students brought to the Mississippi movement during the gubernatorial election. SNCC's work in the state had come a long way from 21 November 1961 when then SNCC chairman Charles McDew wrote to the president of the United Packinghouse Workers of America (AFL-CIO), Ralph Helstein: "we feel the authorities would descend directly upon us if we announce our operations" in Mississippi.³² By the fall of 1963 so many Mississippi civil rights workers had been abused or murdered without the government offering any protection that overt publicity seemed to be among COFO's only hopes for advancing their goals in the state.

³¹ Payne, 295

³² "Charles McDew to Ralph Helstein," 11 November 1960, SNCC Papers Reel 1, University of Rochester Archives, 66-67

Bob Moses, who was a SNCC pioneer in Mississippi and one of its most respected veterans, supported “bringing the law to the South” by placing large numbers of northern white students on the frontlines of organizing in Mississippi. He believed that this would help attract media attention and more importantly intervention from the Kennedy Administration.³³ Lawrence Guyot sided with Moses, remembering that when Ivy League students visited Hattiesburg earlier that year “wherever those white volunteers went, FBI agents followed.”³⁴ Likewise, Fannie Lou Hamer agreed that whites should be allowed to join the fight, contending that if COFO was fighting segregation they could not segregate themselves. CORE director Dave Dennis concurred with this group, but they were among the minority.

However, veteran Greenwood activists Sam Block and Willie Peacock, along with most of the COFO staff remained unconvinced. They were worried that bringing in a bunch of elite white youth, whose educated backgrounds might make them expect leadership positions, would compromise the cultivation of indigenous leadership that was taking shape in the region. According to Charlie Cobb, a SNCC volunteer from Howard University, some staffers felt that inviting more outsiders constituted a concession that the existent group could not handle the work, which was to some extent true. Still others thought that adding too many whites would disrupt the delicate balance within SNCC itself. The workers who opposed inviting a large white outsider conglomerate were not without a sound argument.

³³ The hopes of the Moses led cohort would receive tragic fulfillment in the national response to the 1964 murders of summer volunteer Andrew Goodman, and CORE worker Michael Schwerner, both white and a local Negro COFO worker, James Chaney, whose death also garnered national attention because he was killed alongside two white men.

³⁴ Raines, 313

The volunteers for Freedom Summer would present a far more problematic “outsider” collective than any previous cohort of freedom workers in the region. During the ration denial, the small group of food distribution volunteers who converged on Greenwood were mostly Negroes. Moreover, all of these individuals including the handful of white volunteers had previously been involved in Mississippi freedom work. During the gubernatorial race, black families in Mississippi had proved willing to host outsiders when the eight dozen white students from Yale and Stanford visited the region. But the Freedom Summer workers would include *hundreds* of white far outsiders.

After much deliberation, the decision to bring in white volunteers was finalized and the project developed in two phases. The Freedom Summer project of 1964 was organized by COFO, and carried through until the Mississippi Democratic Freedom Party achieved its remarkable showing at the 1964 Democratic Convention. In the summer of 1965, however, SCLC took over the vanguard of voter registration in Mississippi. They began SCOPE, the Summer Community Organization and Political Education Project, which worked alongside the remaining elements of the MFDP, which became the SNCC-Freedom Democratic Party after 1965. This group continued the work of the COFO coalition and “focused on building parallel institutions” that mirrored local and essentially segregated political institutions, “with local blacks in charge.”³⁵ The remainder of this discussion will explore the interactions between local black families and outside volunteers over the course of both summers.

³⁵ Mary Aickin Rothschild, *A Case of Black and White: Northern Volunteers and the Southern Freedom Summers, 1964-1965* (Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press, 1982), 32

FREEDOM SUMMER FAMILIES

Neither the pivotal Freedom Summer of 1964 nor its much less notorious 1965 counterpart would have achieved their important legacies without the participation of the hundreds of white volunteers whose presence brought much-needed publicity to the danger of justice work in Mississippi. Equally crucial to the success of these two movements however, were the local black families who hosted the volunteers in their families and homes during the summer projects. These families opted to participate in the Freedom Summers in a more politically dangerous climate than Mississippi had seen in a decade. Every black family that hosted volunteers knew that they were endangering themselves and their communities, and yet they took the risks.

While hosting volunteers itself was dangerous work, black families took on additional commitments. For black southerners, allowing volunteers to live in one's home also meant participating in a community struggle that embraced a new network of people eligible for kinship status. The interactions between civil rights workers and local activists within movement communities helped form what Eslanda Robeson called the "family of civil rights," consisting of people from varying backgrounds who lent themselves to the struggle of southern Negroes. As volunteers recognized the injustices of Mississippi as a dilemma within the larger American family, African American southerners embraced them as political kin.³⁶

When they decided to participate in the movement in this way, despite the dangers, local black families began to shape the southern civil rights struggle in new and important ways. When they opened their homes to white civil rights workers, black

³⁶ See Eslanda Robeson, "The Freedom Family" in *Let Freedom Ring: A Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*, Peter B. Levy, ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 1992)

Mississippians introduced unprecedented levels of egalitarian cross-racial interaction in the South. Indeed, most of the Freedom Summer organizers, some of whom were local people themselves, attributed SNCC's organizing strategies to the indigenous familial culture of black southerners. Veteran activist Mary King noted: "There was no guidebook for how to organize...We took some from the labor movement, it's true. We took some from study. But, primarily, the tactics that we developed grew out of the experience and engagement with the people in the Black Belt counties in which we were working."³⁷

The familial interaction that characterized civil rights workers' relationships with local people was in many ways reciprocal. The commitment to the community Charles McLaurin and other SNCC volunteers demonstrated early on in Ruleville paved the way for Freedom Summer outsiders who volunteered there. Even after the shooting injuring of two college coeds deterred many people from participating in the voter registration drives in 1962, "'We were able to keep a place to stay [in Ruleville] because of Mr. Joe [McDonald] and his wife [Rebecca McDonald],'" Charles McLaurin wrote.³⁸ While hoping to reinvigorate interest in the movement SNCC workers picked cotton, chopped, wood, provided transportation and proved themselves invested in the families of Ruleville. And, even after his job was threatened and he was eventually fired, Joe McDonald and his wife continued to provide housing for SNCC staff. This type of interaction between local and visiting activists typified the undervalued contributions of black family culture to political activism. Black people extended to SNCC's organizing

³⁷ Cheryl Greenberg, *Circle of Trust: Remembering SNCC* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1998), 26

³⁸ Mills, 48

style because it both drew on and incorporated traditional patterns of organizing within black communities.

Among other things, the participation of African American families in the civil rights movement drew on the expansive notions of kinship that had long been fostered within black churches. In *I've Got the Light of Freedom*, Charles Payne argues that African Americans' appreciation of all humanity as belonging to God's collective family influenced their response to the influx of outsiders during the summer of 1964 (and later during the 1965 campaign). Many African Americans understood their role as answering to an authority higher than white supremacists—God the Father, who ruled over all. Despite her neighbors' fears Mrs. Mary Dora Jones opened her home to volunteers in Marks, Mississippi believing that God would protect her and that dying was only a matter of living right and being ready to die.³⁹ In examining why African Americans, especially older people and children, readily embraced white outsiders, Charles Payne notes that "whatever flaws they [local black residents] saw in the volunteers, they were still willing to accept them into their hearts and families. Their ability to do so is certainly in part a reflection of how Black southerners saw God."⁴⁰

Moreover, Payne argues that the black southern tradition of "praying for those who despitefully use you" helped Negroes to allow whites into their homes. In short, black people in 1960s Mississippi ultimately recognized themselves and whites as kindred, just as their enslaved ancestors had.⁴¹ Moreover, Payne explains that the

³⁹ Raines, 308

⁴⁰ Payne, 308-309

⁴¹ Mia Bay, *The White Image in the Black Mind: African American Ideas About White People, 1830-1925* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000) explored slaves' perceptions of white people in relation to themselves and humanity.

understanding gained from growing up with white neighbors and the intimacy of working in white folks' homes gave black people opportunities to view the frailty of whites and build compassion for the sickness of white supremacy. These interpretations highlight the spiritual grounding for local black people's warm reception of white outsiders.

In addition to spiritual motivations, certain practical principles determined whether a person would be considered part of the family within local cultural kin networks and shaped the patterns by which local black people adopted outsiders into their homes and communities. As Carol Stack defined fictive kinship in her classic work *All Our Kin*, black people treated like family individuals who behaved like family, accepting the responsibilities and obligations along with the benefits and privileges of membership. Black families were willing to accept whites who interacted with them respectfully and demonstrated a commitment to justice. "If Mrs. Fannie Lou Hamer and other local Mississippians are to be believed," Casey Hayden wrote, "this was what mattered to them, about the summer [of 1964]. For the first time in Mississippi, black and white met as equals."⁴²

Misdirected animosity was not useful for the wise elders and hopeful youngsters who comprised much of the local movement activist base across Mississippi. Instead, these black southerners' religious convictions helped them remain hopeful regarding justice. A young volunteer named Doug wrote home describing the sincerity of faith that he witnessed among African Americans in Mississippi. "The faith of these people here is

⁴² Casey Hayden, "Fields of Blue" in Constance Curry, Joan C. Browning, Dorothy Dawson Burlage, Penny Patch, Theresa Del Pozzo, Sue Thrasher, Elaine DeLott Baker, Emmie Schrader Adams, and Casey Hayden, *Deep in Our Hearts: Nine White Women in the Freedom Movement* (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2000), 355

amazing,” he explained, “and not a dead form, like in most Northern churches. The services are lively, and it seems like the people follow the theory of Love Thy Enemy better than any people I’ve come in contact with. They have every reason to hate the white man, but I think they really don’t...”⁴³ Since this sensibility was in operation before the Freedom Summer brought hundreds of white allies to the South, black families were equipped to maximize the momentum of the movement. Many African American southerners had learned that it was not profitable for them to employ bitterness and hatred in their fight for justice.

Moreover, southern blacks also learned to respect SNCC workers, who Bob Moses termed “deep-sea divers” – individuals who had carefully infiltrated Mississippi communities and demonstrated their commitment to the day-to-day struggle of sharecropping families.⁴⁴ Simply put, Fannie Lou Hamer is recorded as saying “they treated us like we were special and we loved ‘em.”⁴⁵ ““They treated me like a human being, whether the kids was white or black. I was respected with the kids,” who “never told nobody what to say,” and honored local sharecroppers’ rights to think and interpret situations for themselves. Mrs. Hamer appreciated the volunteers’ sincerity and believed that the people of Mississippi needed help and would take whoever was willing to offer assistance. By the 1960s black southerners were more “sick and tired of being sick and tired” than generations before them had been. As a result, they were ready to forge

⁴³ Sutherland, 50

⁴⁴ Payne, 404

⁴⁵ Raines, 251

“unusual alliances” wherein “race and gender were sometimes suspended – not forgotten, but momentarily subsumed in passionate pursuit of a common goal.”⁴⁶

Mary Jones typified this type phenomenon. She ignored warnings to not “fool with them Communists.”⁴⁷ Even when her white bosses’ insisted that civil rights workers were affiliated with the Communist Party Ms. Jones was willing to defy them. ““Well, I tell you what,” she replied to her bosses, “I don’t think they no more Communists, then you Communists. They cain’t hurt me no mo’ than I already been hurt.””⁴⁸ “Anything that helped the people, then I’m right there,” Jones affirmed, “so I didn’t stop.”⁴⁹ Ms. Jones “had about seven blacks and four whites” as movement boarders in her home in Marks, Mississippi.⁵⁰ As she remembered them, the volunteers “really move. They comes in, they mean business. They didn’t mind dyin’, and as I see they really mean business, I just love that for ‘em, because they was there to help us, I was there to help them.”⁵¹ ““Some of ‘em come around five o’clock that evenin’, landed in my house,”” she explained. ““I give ‘em my house. ‘My house is yo’ house,”” she told the volunteers.⁵²

In addition to pressure from white employers, black movement families also risked alienation from members of black communities who were weary of “instigators.” The Green family in the Greenwood, Mississippi movement were alienated from their congregation at Wesley United Methodist Church and local people ““didn’t want to be

⁴⁶ Elaine DeLott Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, *Deep in Our Hearts*, 257

⁴⁷ Raines, 309

⁴⁸ Raines, 309

⁴⁹ Raines, 309

⁵⁰ Raines, 307

⁵¹ Raines, 307

⁵² Raines, 308

seen talking to us. They just didn't have anything to do with us,'" Alma Greene recalled.⁵³ This isolation pushed them closer to their movement family because they "'didn't have nobody to deal with but people in the movement,'" like Bob Moses, Sam Peacock, and others prominent in Greenwood.⁵⁴ Mrs. Lula Belle Johnson also kept working in the movement even though she was also increasingly alienated from her church in Ruleville.⁵⁵

The kind of kinship black Mississippians extended to white volunteers was the type they had become accustomed to extending to each other. In Holmes County, Hollis Watkins observed that although there was no COFO organizer working in the movement there in the spring of 1963 local people kept protesting and attempting to register. Individuals in the community "were so used to cooperating with one another. They habitually shared tools and exchanged labor" and "made a success of a cooperatively owned cotton gin," supporting one another like family and refusing to be intimidated by local authorities.⁵⁶ In 1962 when Fannie Lou Hamer refused her landlord's offer for to return to his plantation and have "'t'hings be like they always was,'" both Mary Tucker and Joe McDonald offered their homes. When Hamer announced at a Ruleville meeting that she had nowhere to go, Tucker said, "'Don't say you ain't got nowhere to stay as long as I got a shelter — if I ain't got but one plank, you stick your head under there, too.'"⁵⁷ Mc Donald, another brave Ruleville resident who

⁵³ Payne, 221

⁵⁴ Payne, 221

⁵⁵ Payne, 229

⁵⁶ Payne, 279-80

⁵⁷ Mills, 39

was among the first to welcome volunteers into his home said, “‘If you ain’t got room, I got’ room. And we just put our arms around her,’” Tucker said.⁵⁸

In short, local black families who were active in the movement were both spiritually and practically motivated in their engagement of outsiders to their communities. The ways in which black southerners worked with and supported outside volunteers were shaped by black familial patterns that had never been solely reserved for members of local black families. But in the culture of their interactions, including the personal investments local activists made in visiting volunteers and the language that coded them, black families helped develop an activist culture of political kinship that sustained the black freedom struggle.

BECOMING THE FAMILY OF CIVIL RIGHTS: THE POLITICAL IMPORT OF AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIAL CULTURE IN THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT

The pre-existing familial culture of black southern communities facilitated the introduction of both outsiders and far-outsiders into those communities and helped the movement flourish. Once local African American activists decided to participate in the movement they usually did so wholeheartedly and with a family-like commitment. African American communities supported the work of the movement by incorporating volunteers into their daily patterns and caring for them like family members. By incorporating movement workers into their homes and everyday lives, black families incorporated the movement into their families.

Many visiting students were overwhelmed by the hospitality of their hosts. Jean Smith recalled, “One family I stayed with, I was there about two weeks before I realized that the father was sleeping on the floor so that I could have a place to sleep. They didn’t

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Mills, 39

have any reason to trust us, to trust that our judgment was particularly great, but they had good instincts about our good instincts. Having those people love me before they knew me reinforced for me the idea that people have in them the potential for just—goodness.”⁵⁹

This ethos extended to entire communities, like the one that embraced “Joe,”⁶⁰ a Freedom Summer worker, who had to carefully negotiate his visiting time among black families in his canvassing population. Much like a beloved college coed, home for a holiday break, he recalled:

Literally, some of the greatest conflicts that I had to resolve in the black communities that I worked in was who was going to wash my clothes and where I was going to eat. I’d have to try to walk a tightrope, making sure that I didn’t spend too much time at any one family’s house. If I needed a couple of bucks, or even a ride for a hundred miles or so, there would be people waiting in line. Their feelings would have been hurt if I didn’t let them help me. When there’s that kind of a push behind you, you can keep going.⁶¹

It is this “kind of push,” background support, that characterized movement participation among local African American populations that has been overlooked in civil rights scholarship. Elaine DeLott Baker recognized and valued the contributions of black families, while living and working among them in Mississippi. She first arrived to the state in May 1964 as part of a Harvard/Radcliffe exchange program with Tugaloo College and transferred to Panola County in early 1965. There in the town of Batesville she lived with prominent local movement workers Robert and Mona Miles. “There were always several civil rights workers living in the Miles home,” Baker recalled.⁶²

Moreover, Baker confirmed, “The strength, dignity, and graciousness of Mr. and Mrs.

⁵⁹ Cluster, 31

⁶⁰ “Joe” is among the unnamed workers in William R. Beardslee’s memoir *The Way Out Must Lead In: Life Histories in the Civil Rights Movement* (Westport, CT: L. Hill, 1983)

⁶¹ Beardslee, 73

⁶² Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 275

Miles, along with the sweet devotion of their family life, provided the bedrock for my daily work.”⁶³ Outside volunteers like Joe and Baker cherished the contributions of black hospitality, which black families performed purposefully, intending, in small and meaningful ways, to improve the lives of their families. Such family-like treatment, boosted the morale of justice workers, provided a means for personal connection and investment and was itself justice work.

One of the most important lessons that Robert Moses learned during the five months he spent working in Southwest Mississippi was that local people took care of movement workers like family:

One of the things that we learned out here [in Amite] was that we could find family in Mississippi. We could go anyplace in Mississippi before we were through and we knew that somewhere down some road there was family. And we could show up there unannounced with no money or no anything and there were people there ready to take care of us. That’s what we had here in Amite. One of the things that happened in the movement was that there was a joining of a young generation of people with an older generation that nurtured and sustained them....It was an amazing experience. I’ve never before or since had that experience where it’s almost literally like you’re throwing yourself on the people and they have actually picked you up and gone on to carry you so you don’t really need money, you don’t really need transportation.... They’re going to see that you eat. It’s a liberating kind of experience.⁶⁴

Likewise, Elinor Tideman Aurthur remembered that while she worked at a Freedom School in Mississippi, the embrace of local women nourished her both emotionally and physically. Ladies from a local church

everyday would bring food for all the teachers...I used to look forward to it so much, and the fact that they would give this to us every day, you know, was just wonderful...they had fried chicken and deviled eggs and potato salad...They would spread it out on the table and they would, it was so nice [starts to cry]...it was so touching...to be cared for...that [way] I felt like I belonged; I felt like they

⁶³ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 275

⁶⁴ Payne, 128

liked me and they wanted me to be there and I, it was so healing, you know, knowing what the divisions were...and yet somehow you can heal...I don't mean to say that they idealized us...because I don't think they did, but I think there was a kind of love...and a kind of compassion for us that they showed. It was a daily demonstration of love and acceptance...they were feeding us; they were giving us nourishment.⁶⁵

The care the women extended to workers like Elinor Aurthur demonstrated their approval of the work she was doing and from which they were benefiting. Perhaps they were not able to lead the Freedom School classes or to attend the sessions, but the daily efforts they took to gather items from their home pantries, prepare food in their own kitchens, and bring meals to the Freedom School was meaningful work in its own right. Through feeding workers black families incorporated them into existing systems of communal care in ways that were less overtly political than canvassing or even hosting, but nonetheless significant to the women who participated and the youngsters with whom they shared.

Leon Hall from *The Way Out Must Lead In* memoir also cherished the nurturing kindness of women in one southern town in which he campaigned during the summer. As he walked around visiting homes, women "waving their husbands off to work" would call him into their homes, offering safe havens from local whites who "would just love to catch you out there in them streets by yourself."⁶⁶ "Then they'd ask me to stay and eat."⁶⁷ "Then they'd send me out the back way," he continued, "warning me to be careful. I was out there by myself, and there was such caring. I just couldn't want for any richer experiences."⁶⁸ Women like Leon's hostesses may not have been available to canvass neighborhoods for registration candidates, but they eased the psychological

⁶⁵ McAdam, 89

⁶⁶ Beardslee, 72

⁶⁷ Beardslee, 72

⁶⁸ Beardslee, 72

strain of such work by providing comfort to volunteers. Black women like those described in Hall's encounters quietly supported the visible work of the movement during inconspicuous kitchen scenes wherein older women boosted the morale of workers and shared wisdom about the ways of the South.

Elderly people played important roles in this regard. They were less likely to be harassed by police and were often willing to take greater risks than younger men and women who had children to consider. Many elders, some living with few to no relatives and possibly residing on homesteads with more than one dwelling, provided freedom houses in various movement locales. Others became makeshift "grandmamas" and "papas" who sometimes grew very attached to the individuals they hosted. Elderly Mrs. Rosa Lee Williams of Itta Benna, Mississippi took in two white COFO workers. Initially she refused to cook regularly for the two young men. Eventually, she grew to trust and care for them and began to refer to them as "Big Bro" and "Lil Bro. At one point, project directors suggested that her boarders move into the home of her neighbor Mr. Bevel, a minister who owned a telephone. Having warmed up to the volunteers, Mrs. William protested hotly.⁶⁹ Roy, one of the "Bros," explained: "When we mentioned it to Mrs. Williams, she was furious with Bevel for trying to take us away and we had to stop talking about it for fear she'd start a fight with him. She is really a fiery, fast moving old woman."⁷⁰ That Mrs. Williams accepted and grew fond of the young white men is a testament to elders like her who remained hopeful despite years of injustice.

Some of the black men and women who embraced the civil rights activists as family did so on behalf of their own family members—turning family loyalty into

⁶⁹ Sutherland, 40

⁷⁰ Beardslee, 47

activism. Black Mississippian Lula Belle Johnson is one example. Rather than become embittered after her fifteen-year-old daughter June was beaten unconscious in a Winona County jail upon return from a COFO trip to South Carolina, Johnson “quit her job and opened her home to the movement.”⁷¹ “There were often more COFO workers in the house than family members.”⁷² Mrs. Johnson worked in the movement fulltime, canvassing in locations where SNCC volunteers were not welcomed, serving as an all-around volunteer, and recruiting older women from her cohort who helped to give the movement more legitimacy. These contributions were enough to consider her a politically motivated activist, but more than that, she extended a family-like embrace to SNCC staff and volunteers. Jean Wheeler Smith called Mrs. Belle Johnson “‘our mother-in-Greenwood,’” who “‘performed feats of magic to provide us with beans and greens and cornbread and sometimes even sweet potato pie. There would also be plates on the back of the stove for those who couldn’t get back before she went home to cook for her own family.’”⁷³ The movement had become her family in many ways. Ms. Johnson’s friend and co-canvasser Mrs. Susie Morgan, was also drawn to the movement through the activism of her daughter. She became as active as Mrs. Johnson and although she did not have a lot of space in her home “she housed civil rights people whenever she could.”⁷⁴ The motherly care of these women was an extension of the familial culture of which black southerners were part that was characterized by sharing limited resources.

Although organizational funds and their parents provided significant subsidies for Freedom Summer volunteers, local Negro families housed, fed, and protected

⁷¹ Payne, 228

⁷² Payne, 228

⁷³ Payne, 229

⁷⁴ Payne, 232

outside workers in patterns that mirrored African American kinship traditions. Charlie Cobb remembered the diversity of local contributions to SNCC activism in Ruleville, MS. “People did a lot things,” he explained.⁷⁵ Perhaps “they wouldn’t go to the courthouse with you,” but “they would bring you some food. They knew that the McDonalds’ [Joe and Rebecca McDonald in Ruleville] having the three young students who ate a lot...was a burden on them, and one of the levels of assistance was getting food, helping with just feeding us.”⁷⁶

Casey Hayden remembered that during her stay in the “Literacy House” in Tugaloo, Mississippi, she and the other COFO workers “always had rice, beans, corn meal, and flour, from local people’s sharing of their ‘commodities’ – Department of Agriculture surplus food.”⁷⁷ Although they were often hungry themselves, Mary King remembered that other families supplemented the workers’ meals with platters of “fried chicken, greens, black-eyed peas, and okra.”⁷⁸ If black neighbors were on government subsidies, it can be assumed that they did not have much themselves, but this did not preclude them from supporting the work of the movement through sharing basic necessities.

Spelman College professors, Mendy Samstein and Howard Zinn were overwhelmed at the kindness extended to them during a Hattiesburg, Mississippi “Freedom Day” campaign in 1964. They entered a crowded scene at a “Freedom House,” donated by a local elderly woman, hoping to get some rest. Zinn recalled: “[Lawrence] Guyot said someone was trying to find a place for us to stay; there were

⁷⁵ Raines, 269

⁷⁶ Raines, 269

⁷⁷ Hayden, “Fields of Blue,” in Constance Curry, et al, 358

⁷⁸ King, 403

four of us now looking for a place to sleep.”⁷⁹ Zinn and Samstein finally found refuge with another family. According to Zinn’s account around 3:30 a.m. they arrived at a dark “small frame house” on a dark street in the Negro section of town.⁸⁰ After Oscar, a project leader knocked carefully on the front door:

A Negro man opened the door and looked at us; he was in his pajamas. Here we were, three whites and a Negro, none of whom he had ever seen. Oscar said hesitantly “They told us at headquarters...” The man smiled broadly, “Come on in!” He shouted through the darkness back into his bedroom, “Hey, honey, look who’s here!” The lights were on now and his wife came out: “Can I fix something for you fellows?” We said no, and apologized for getting them up. The man waved his hand: “Oh, I was going to get up soon anyway.”⁸¹

Their gracious host returned with a mattress to add to the couch and the cot already prepared for their rest. Zinn discovered the extent of the couple’s unselfishness the next morning when he noticed that there was no mattress in the couple’s bed frame. He concluded that the caring pair “had led us to believe that they had brought out a spare mattress for us, but had given us theirs.”⁸² In the simple act of sharing their bed and home with Zinn and the others, the elderly couple supported the work of the movement. Although their kindness did not register a voter or place a pro-desegregation candidate in office, by harboring civil rights workers, they refueled the foot soldiers for work on the frontline, work that could not have been completed without people like them.

Deciphering the impact of hosting on the couple is more challenging. They likely overcame fears of trusting white people or the possible danger of entertaining strangers in their home. They might have anticipated such an opportunity or the unnamed couple may have already been involved in overtly subversive activities. The couple did not

⁷⁹ Zinn, 106-107

⁸⁰ Zinn, 108

⁸¹ Zinn, 108

⁸² Zinn, 109

appear to consider the young activists to be interruptions to their regular patterns and familial life. They made no big production upon the men's arrival. They readily and inconspicuously gave up their bed. The husband did not seem bothered that his sleep was disrupted and promptly called for his sleeping wife to come greet their guests. The wife's offer to prepare food for them was likely one she would have made to any number or kind of arriving guests. She might even have been preparing to make breakfast for her husband who "was going to get up soon anyway" most likely to go to work.

The couple was also likely accustomed to sharing their limited resources and probably did not think of their self-denial as a major act of benevolence. Rather, such hospitality was in keeping with the traditions of rural black communities, as has been demonstrated in previous chapters. Whatever the case, hosting was a bold activity and providing an emergency hide-out was perhaps even more dangerous. In welcoming the youngsters into their home the couple rejected white supremacy and segregation, and also honored their role in the family of civil rights.

Another demonstration of civil rights hospitality occurred as an impoverished mother of ten children hosted Mary King and Casey Hayden in Rosedale, Mississippi "the largest town in the Delta, on the Mississippi River between Greenville and Memphis."⁸³ The mother taught King an important lesson when she insisted that King and Hayden sleep in the bed usually shared by the *entire* family. "It was important to her sense of who she was that she was able to offer us the double bed," realized King,

⁸³ King, 139

“and I suddenly saw that if we refused it, we would hurt her feelings.”⁸⁴ King concluded, “I learned a lesson that night: Be careful about rejecting someone’s hospitality or generosity out of concern for their welfare; evaluate the sincerity of the offer; it may be an error to impose your sense of what is right.”⁸⁵ King’s assessment suggests that the mother taught her to value human agency and familial dignity even in the midst of abject poverty.

This interaction might also read as a reflection of deference to white people on the part of King and Hayden’s host. Would such cousins or perhaps visiting relatives of a neighbor be expected to allow the children to share the bed or would they have to find accommodations as best they could on her cabin floor? The reasons the mother offered the bed to her guests cannot simply be addressed by racial conjectures. Local household heads like this mother interacted with Freedom Summer volunteers with an unprecedented level of agency, wherein they entered the movement on largely self-defined terms. Therefore, hosting outside workers was a volunteer activity that families agreed to on their own volition.

Moreover, that the unnamed mother considered King and Hayden safe enough to open her home and bed to them is a testament to her kindness as well as support of the movement’s goals. Multiple factors were likely to have shaped her bold decision to welcome the young women into her home. Perhaps she believed that the advantages of advancing the fight for freedom that would eventually create a safer world for her children outweighed the risks and discomfort hosting posed for her family. Even if COFO provided some sort of compensation or support for her efforts, the woman did

⁸⁴ King, 139

⁸⁵ King, 139

not discount her capacity to contribute even with ten additional lives for which she was responsible. The mother was part of a culture of hospitable people who shared their limited resources, especially with those who shared their commitments. Although they were far outsiders, white and not from Mississippi, by virtue of their involvement in the movement, King and Hayden became eligible for political kinship, which demanded hospitality. The Rosedale woman considered her family bed a suitable accommodation for her guests and valued the significance of the movement above her own comfort. Intimate peeks into the lives of poor rural families, like this one, gave outside volunteers personal experience with the suffering they aimed to alleviate and appreciation for the contributions of black families to the movement.

By offering their homes and families to the sacrificial work of the movement, families like this Rosedale mother and her children empowered themselves to affect change in their own communities while affirming their dignity and the value of extending kinship. This episode is also an example of the wide parameters of kinship among black families who were willing to share their limited resources. To make a difference they needed only to utilize what was already in their possession to whatever degree they found effective. By valuing themselves as movement resources, black families not only strengthened themselves but also facilitated the movement through the cultural consistency with which they extended themselves into the family of civil rights.

It is not clear where the mother and her children slept during the night of Hayden and King's stay. But, hosting white civil rights workers must have left a major impression on the ten Rosedale children that perhaps eventually included an appreciation of their collective sacrifice. Meanwhile, their growing familiarity with black

families also made outside volunteers more sensitive to life in Mississippi. When they shared meals, beds and the ins and outs of everyday life with rural families like this one, non-southern and non-black activists learned lessons about black southern communities that challenged them to become more accountable for their actions within such homes and communities.

In housing them, local black people addressed the immediate needs of the Freedom Summer volunteers much as they took care of their own families. In *A Case of Black and White*, Mary Aickin Rothschild presents a foray into Chickasaw County, Mississippi at the end of the 1965 SCOPE summer. This story illustrates that black people were willing to help outsiders who showed themselves dedicated to the movement despite the attendant danger. Two Seattle, Washington, residents, a white young man and a Filipino young woman, given the alias names of “Jerry Johnson” and “Anna Sampson,” pretended to be a married couple. They drove to Mississippi and signed up with SNCC to start a new project in Chickasaw County.⁸⁶ They tried for several weeks to find permanent housing to no avail. Although members of the community feared allowing them to reside in their homes, “Jerry and Anna were often given meals, and one woman who lived on the other side of town allowed them to use her bathtub.”⁸⁷ After Anna’s departure, Jerry received temporary housing from Mrs. Brown, an elderly Negro woman, whose home, though without running water, had lots of space. Rothschild records:

Living in her home was one of the most important experiences of his stay in the South. He had never before lived in poverty, nor had he ever really

⁸⁶ Rothschild holds the records of “Jerry Johnson” and “Anna Sampson’s” testimonies and has only changed their names and their Chicasaw County counterparts for confidentiality purposes.

⁸⁷ Rothschild, 159

comprehended the dignity a person could have even in poverty. For her part, Mrs. Brown had never contemplated having a white person stay with her. They learned many things from each other...Several times late at night, Mrs. Brown's friends from neighboring farms came to see a white civil rights worker. Although he was sometimes in bed, she was so proud of Jerry that she would take them into his room to shake his hand. The visitors always left quickly, but they were amazed to meet a young white man who showed them respect. They called him "Freedom Rider."⁸⁸

Mrs. Brown came to appreciate Jerry, and, like a son decorated in a victorious war, she showed him off to her friends. She also seemed proud of herself and her boldness to host the young man in a community where few endeavored to do so.

Eventually, the looming threats against Mrs. Brown prevailed and Jerry was no longer permitted to stay with her. A local black bachelor offered to share his dirt-floor room and Jerry accepted, but was soon run out of town by vigilantes and the sheriff. In the end, Jerry and Anna lost their battle to fear and intimidation despite the few courageous gestures of Negroes in the community.⁸⁹

Since the municipal authorities failed to protect the rights of black families to protest injustices the opportunity to initiate a movement was not realized in Chickasaw at that time. Nevertheless, these families demonstrated their willingness to consistently extend their familial community structure to include Jerry and Anna. The volunteers' inability to establish a SNCC beachhead in Chickasaw County was in direct relationship to the terrorism of local authorities. Indeed, in areas and instances where the movement would have taken hold, it did not in large part because black families were unable to safely extend their networks to incoming activists.

⁸⁸ Rothschild, 164

⁸⁹ Rothschild, 155-68

“Justice Department troubleshooter”⁹⁰ attorney John Doar warned Freedom Summer volunteers not to expect federal protection while in Mississippi, where state authorities were in charge of maintaining law and order.⁹¹ Veteran COFO workers and local activists knew that the latter portion of his disclaimer was no more comforting than the former was alarming. The hopeful idealistic volunteers would soon come to understand, in grave detail what resident Mississippi activists knew personally. Civil rights work was dangerous and the movement family had to protect itself.

In her unpublished writings Faith Holsaert recalled the comfort and protection within the family of civil rights, including members of the local black community of her movement days in Mississippi. “The people that I was closest to on a day-to-day basis were people in the community, most of whom were women....We had to protect one another in a deep sense, regardless of the daily bump and grind of sheriffs and feds, understanding we could never protect one another from the physical blows.”⁹² Holsaert and others attributed the cohesion of the community to the danger it faced working in states like Mississippi. “You had to have something around you strong enough to take the fear of death and dissipate it, and that was this community,” contended SNCC member and Students for a Democratic Society founder Tom Hayden.⁹³

From gentle warnings of how not to comport themselves in front of white southerners to standing guard with loaded shotguns, black southerners also protected outsiders like they were kinfolk. Fannie Lou Hamer protected volunteers like they were

⁹⁰ Dittmer uses this term for John Doar, whom the Kennedy Administration assigned to be a movement moderator in Mississippi.

⁹¹ Belfrage, 28-29

⁹² Schultz, Debra L. with a foreword by Blanche Wiesen Cook, *Going South: Jewish Women in the Civil Rights Movement* (New York and London: New York university Press, 2001), 51

⁹³ Greenberg, 32

her own children in Ruleville and tried to prevent them from unnecessarily provoking harassment. "Being nurtured in the black community, they [outside summer volunteers] had the feeling of being safe, but of course they weren't safe," so Mrs. Hamer, for example, made sure that interracial groups did not hold hands in public, Tracy Sugarman told Hamer biographer Kay Mills.

Likewise, SNCC volunteers also protected members of their civil rights families. In 1962 Swarthmore coed, Penny Patch, became the first white person staffed on a SNCC field project and by the time she joined the Panola County Mississippi movement in the spring of 1965 she was accustomed to the dangers of the movement. Like many other volunteers, while in Panola, Patch lived on the family farm of Robert and Mona Miles, who were under assault as a consequence of their consistent involvement in the movement. By the time Patch got there, their home had "been shot into, bombed and tear-gassed" and Mrs. Miles suffered "from a kind of nervous paralysis apparently brought on by the emotional trauma of these last years."⁹⁴ So when bullets whirled into the Miles' residence, that spring, Patch crawled "into the children's bedroom" and "pulled Kevin and Vernon [Miles] onto the floor, cuddling their soft pajama-clad bodies" next to her own.⁹⁵

Because of their commitment to the Movement, the Miles' home was the scene of several violent assaults. Still they continued to host volunteers and counted on local activists to help protect their home. When Elaine DeLott Baker arrived to Panola County in 1965 she resided in the front bedroom of their home where "the bullet holes in the pane-glass window and in the headboard of my bed were reminders of just how real

⁹⁴ Penny Patch, "Sweet Tea at Shoney's" in Constance Curry, et. al, 158

⁹⁵ Patch, "Sweet Tea at Shoney's" in Constance Curry, et. al, 161

and serious a threat we were to the white power structure, and conversely, just how serious a threat they were to our personal safety.”⁹⁶ While residing on the Miles farm, “once, in the dead of the night, on the way to the kitchen,” Baker, “unexpectedly came across one of the neighbors who rotated watches in the dawn-to-dusk rooftop patrol.”⁹⁷ “We all knew the men were there,” she wrote, “but seldom saw them.”⁹⁸ “That evening, the neighbor on watch was taking a break,” she continued, “warming his hands around a cup of coffee, shotgun at his side.”⁹⁹ Although many civil rights workers believed in non-violence “in the trenches” self-defense was necessary.¹⁰⁰

From the journal of volunteer Gren Whitman, Doug McAdam quoted an incident in which “‘coming down the hall from the bathroom’” Whitman “[says here co]mes Mrs. Fairley coming down the hall from the front porch carrying a rifle in one hand [and] a pistol in the other.”¹⁰¹ Whitman was unaware of what had alarmed his host. “[All she said was] ‘You go to sleep; let me fight for you.’”¹⁰² Mrs. Fairley knew that Whitman was fighting for her in a different way, through his work with SNCC. Community members in Milestone, Holmes County established an armed patrol during the summer of 1964 that ensured no unexpected arrivals entered the town. Although the group was largely nonviolent, it benefited from black men and women protecting workers through armed defense as they protected their own homes and property.

While the physical and material contributions of hosting were central to the grassroots progression of the movement, the cultural and political impact of housing

⁹⁶ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 275

⁹⁷ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 275

⁹⁸ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 275

⁹⁹ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 275

¹⁰⁰ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 275

¹⁰¹ McAdam, 90

¹⁰² McAdam, 90

outsiders within local homes may have had the most lasting impact on movement participants. Living with host families provided glimpses into black southern culture that many volunteer activists would not have otherwise experienced.¹⁰³ Freedom Summer volunteers received civil rights training from elders like Mrs. Mary Davidson who believed that in order to reap the benefits of struggle a people had to combat bitterness. Mrs. Davidson began working with SNCC after two volunteers appeared on her doorstep in Tennessee, where some Freedom Summer leaders trained.¹⁰⁴ Mrs. Davidson recalled, “They didn’t stay with me, but, you know, they would come by. I would go places with them, and counsel them. I just went all out with them and for them.”¹⁰⁵ She also visited them: “The first Freedom House [in her area] was right across the street from me. I was in and out of it all the time.”¹⁰⁶ She especially wanted to protect volunteers from harboring racial resentment. She “noticed how the feeling came about between the whites and the blacks. I saw the hatred growing.”¹⁰⁷ She reprimanded white volunteers for acting on their ignorance about black people and corrected black activists for taking out long-standing anger on their white comrades. “I don’t know how they stood me as well as they did, because we were constantly at loggerheads. There were things I just wouldn’t stand for, and I spoke up for what I believed.”¹⁰⁸ Elders like Mrs. Davidson imparted their longstanding traditions to movement workers and helped to build family among them.

¹⁰³ Beardslee, 150

¹⁰⁴ William Beardslee’s follow-up interview with Mrs. Davidson, originally called Ann Williams in the first edition of *The Way Out Must Lead In*, indicates that at the time of the second printing she continued to live and work in Tennessee. See p. 167.

¹⁰⁵ Beardslee, 45

¹⁰⁶ Beardslee, 45

¹⁰⁷ Beardslee, 45

¹⁰⁸ Beardslee, 48

Indeed, elders and families who hosted workers understood their investment in the volunteers as investments in the movement. The Amos family of Greenwood, Mississippi who hosted Sally Belfrage for Freedom Summer 1964 is a prime example of Black Belt families who put their faith into action and fought for justice by embracing movement workers. When the Amoses took in Belfrage and Lorna Smith, a blue-haired boarder who also happened to be a childhood friend of Belfrage, the two young women became the latest in a long list of SNCC volunteers to be welcomed at the Amos home. During her tenure, Belfrage was adopted into the Amos family and together they demonstrated the boundary-breaking possibilities of familial flexibility among southern African Americans in the 1960s South.

Like many Negro families, the Amoses embraced their lodger upon first meeting. Twelve-year-old Cora Lou Amos implored "'I want you to stay with me,'" on first meeting Belfrage as she stood among Greenwood, Mississippi volunteers awaiting her official Freedom Summer residential assignment. "SNCC had started working in Greenwood three years before," Belfrage wrote, "and civil rights workers, black and white, from the North and South, had been bedding down on the sofas and floors, using the bathroom, and eating Amos grits and chicken ever since."¹⁰⁹ During the summer of 1964, she explained, Mrs. Amos "hadn't planned to house summer volunteers, but Cora Lou's guest [Belfrage] immediately became to her another child."¹¹⁰ All but one of the five Amos children lived in the house where Cora Lou and her sister gave up their bed for Sally and Lorna. When she arrived at their home, Belfrage remembered, Mrs. Amos "hugged me, fed me fried chicken and cornbread, and installed me in the back room

¹⁰⁹ Belfrage, 36

¹¹⁰ Belfrage, 36

with Lorna.”¹¹¹ Mr. Amos “arrived home from work at last. Apparently resigned to the results of his wife’s generosity, he was quite unshaken by the announcement that his family had expanded since morning to include a fully grown blonde.”¹¹² “They asked me no questions,” she remembered “except whether I wanted anything, and accepted me from the first moment.”¹¹³

The Amos family was already well aware of their identity as a Negro family, made up of men and women with moderate resources, but as Sally Belfrage became a fixture in the Amos home, class, race, and gender contoured the interactions of everyday family life in new ways. Their intimate contact with women like Sally introduced the Amoses to a type of white person they had never before encountered and with whom they likely never expected to be in close relationship. For example, Mrs. Amos had a hard time believing that Belfrage had grown up washing dishes. Sally tried to “allay the family’s total impression of whites as the waited-on.”¹¹⁴ “These unearned elevations,” Sally affirmed, “were hard to inhabit and the greatest job to tear down. It was some weeks before any of them would sit at the table and eat with me, and I never succeeded in getting Mr. Amos to stop saying ‘Miss Sally,’” she lamented.¹¹⁵

While Mr. Amos and sixteen-year-old Edgar Amos accepted Belfrage into their home, her identity as a white woman prevented them from extending the type of welcome they would have granted a black woman in the segregated South. For example, Edgar, as he had been trained, never looked directly at Sally and referred to her as

¹¹¹ Belfrage, 36

¹¹² Belfrage, 37

¹¹³ Belfrage, 37

¹¹⁴ Belfrage, 47

¹¹⁵ Belfrage, 47

“ma’am” whenever he could not avoid speaking to her. Likewise, Mr. Amos was careful not to cross traditional boundaries.¹¹⁶ “We were so scared of offending each other, with our roles so undefined,” Belfrage contended, “that each kept bowing to the other in an utterly foolish sort of dance.”¹¹⁷ She continued:

He had never sat at a table with a white woman, and since that situation is within the heart of the mess of the South, it was not something done easily. I had been trying to talk with him for weeks about our [COFO’S] success and now realized that in some extraordinary paradox he would never think of us as equal until I ordered him to. I begged him to sit down; he wouldn’t; I told him to sit down. He did, in great confusion. Somehow or other, everything was all right after that. Later Mrs. Amos reported to me that he had been amazed to find that we could be friends.¹¹⁸

It is not clear whether Mr. Amos was amazed by his wife’s friendship with Sally, or his own. Whatever the case, having a young, white woman become an intimate member of his family was revolutionary for Mr. Amos. He and Sally discussed travel, the need to appeal to the young people for change in the South, sharecropping and other issues. In those discussions Mr. Amos and Sally Belfrage began to see themselves differently even as they reshaped the contours of political kinship.

Even if, as she contends in her memoir, Belfrage believed she would never find full acceptance in a general Negro population, she found it in the Amos family.¹¹⁹ Throughout her stay in Greenwood, Belfrage enjoyed an overall loving relationship with the Amoses and grew especially close to Mrs. Amos, who treated her like a daughter. As Belfrage “sat down to a big breakfast of eggs and sausage” preparing for a big Freedom Day protest, Mrs. Amos promised, ““When y’all gets in jail, I’m going to have to cook

¹¹⁶ Belfrage, 53

¹¹⁷ Sally Belfrage, *Freedom Summer* (Greenwich, CT: Fawcett Crest, 1965), 82

¹¹⁸ Belfrage, (Fawcett Crest, 1965), 82

¹¹⁹ Belfrage, (Greenwich), 80

you up some food and bring it to you.’”¹²⁰ “After a tearful hug from Mrs. Amos,” Sally departed for the campaign.¹²¹ That night, gunshots tore through the air outside the Amos’ home. The next morning Mrs. Amos presented Sally with “four freedom forms; she had registered some friends. This was the first time she had done anything for COFO but feed and house it, but she didn’t elaborate on what she had done, or refer to the previous night,” when she had prepared her gun and stood with her husband and children watching for snipers.¹²²

Although, her roommate Lorna Smith had recently departed from the Amos home, Sally greatly bemoaned the prospect of leaving the Amoses when asked to yield her space to a newly arrived movement couple. She wrote: “It was selfish of me, but I couldn’t leave the Amoses. I tried to explain to Dick [Frey, a project leader]. ‘I’m having a love affair with Mrs. Amos.’ ‘So is everyone else,’ he said.”¹²³ The prospect of Sally moving out upset Mrs. Amos too. When Belfrage told Mrs. Amos about Dick’s request, “she got angry. ‘Nobody goin’ to move in here,’ she said. ‘That your room. You tell them one of the girls is sleepin’ with you. Tell them my son is comin’ back. Tell them, what they want. Ain’t nobody movin’ in here.’ I thanked her. ‘Nothin’ to do with thanks,’ she said. ‘We won’t let you move out.’”¹²⁴

“We were getting to be a family,” Belfrage explained. She recalled a significant moment in her stay with the Amos family wherein she realized the extent of their connection. “I finished the dishes, and as I left for work she [Mrs. Amos] wrapped me in a tremendous hug, trying to lift me off the ground. I was a head taller, but her strength

¹²⁰ Belfrage, 137

¹²¹ Belfrage, 197

¹²² Belfrage, 197

¹²³ Belfrage, 235

¹²⁴ Belfrage, 235

was enormous and she nearly managed it.”¹²⁵ Sally knew she was not just a guest, but a member of the family. Indeed, the Amos family was the sustaining community of Sally’s Freedom Summer experience and she began to care for them as she might her own immediate family. Sally wanted to help the Amos family and especially wished she had the funds to send the oldest son back to college. He would have to remain in the North to save up for school in the fall. All the other Amos children longed to venture out of Mississippi to various locations as well. Mrs. Amos “thought she would have to take the family north just to keep them together.”¹²⁶

Belfrage too wished that she would be able to keep in contact with Mrs. Amos after she left. “I hoped I could return to Greenwood to work,” she wrote, “or at least to see her, and we talked about it sometimes. As I was packing to leave in the end she said, ‘When you come back I’m goin’ to have the floor of your room painted and it all fix up.’ ‘It’s not my room,’ I said. ‘Oh yes it is. Fact I’m namin’ this room ‘Sally.’” A while later I heard her muttering to herself, ‘Yes, that’s what I’m gonna name that room. I’m gonna write on it ‘Sally.’”¹²⁷

Extending kinship to Sally Belfrage birthed changes of identity that shifted the social category divides that previously separated Sally Belfrage from the Amos family. Boldly following the pattern of cultural conviction to support “God’s work” the Amoses welcomed Sally into their home, where she found solace, acceptance and even a legacy among the Amoses. Certainly their engagement of Sally was fundamental to their understanding of their role in the Freedom Summer. As Sally explained, the Amoses who “were intensely religious,” purposefully lived out their Christian faith:

¹²⁵ Belfrage, 47

¹²⁶ Belfrage, 235

¹²⁷ Belfrage, 236

They didn't drink or curse and observed in their lives all the old Christian virtues—which uniquely included absolute toleration of those who didn't. They couldn't go to mass meetings because these conflicted with church; their whole involvement with the movement was open, generous, but inactive except where its work was clearly God's. Since God was on the side of equality, and so were we, they filled out Freedom Democratic Party forms and gave food and comfort to the COFO workers.¹²⁸

The Amoses "open and generous" involvement with the movement was rooted in their Christian understanding of the duties, purposes and functions of a family. These convictions shaped their understanding of family and how their resources were interpreted and disbursed. Because of the limited resources within rural communities, even less reverent people practiced communalism in Mississippi. As such, the ways in which black communities were accustomed to sharing resources shaped the ways in which the Amoses and other black families shared with the large group of far outsiders who arrived in the summer of 1964. By hosting youngsters like Sally, families like the Amoses fought for justice and demonstrated the power of their familial resources.

Not unlike the interactions between Sally Belfrage and the Amos family, the experiences within the host home of Nancy, a young volunteer whose correspondence is featured in Elizabeth Sutherland's *Letters from Mississippi* is quite telling. Nancy described her adoration for her host family from Holmes County, Mississippi. "Dear Mom," she began, "I have become so close to the family I am staying with—eleven people—that Mrs. H. finally paid me a great compliment:"¹²⁹

She was introducing me to one of her Negro women friends and said, "This is Nancy, my adopted daughter!" I baby-sat for her one night and in general we have become very close friends. She is a beautiful mother...such love oozes from this house I can't begin to explain. All evening I have little children crawling over me and big boys, 16, my buddies, combing my hair, confiding in me, appreciating me, because I will open my heart and mind to them and listen and

¹²⁸ Belfrage, 74

¹²⁹ Sutherland, 48

care for them and show my concern. I may be sex- and love- starved, as some like to picture me, but at least I have faced the problem and have found my own inner peace by being with people who have not forgotten how to love...When I see these simple people living lives of relative inner peace, love, honor, courage, and humor, I lose patience with people who sit and ponder their belly buttons.¹³⁰

During her tenure in this home Nancy not only discovered the beauty of simplicity, but she also learned the value of family as a resource for surviving poverty, experienced the comfort of kinship, and the benefits of crossracial social exchange. Through such close contact she was able to view the common humanity of rural African American people and embrace the love she found in Mrs. H.'s home.

The revelations of the individual members of Mrs. H.'s family were likely quite different. Although the children may have had white playmates before the Freedom Summer, they were not likely to have encountered white coeds like Nancy. Having access to her provided the children with an opportunity to meet white people who were socialized to interact with black people in ways that were uncommon in the South. That toddlers warmed up to her and teen-aged boys played in her hair, shared secrets, and became her "buddies" suggests that they may have begun to think of Nancy as a big sister, whom they felt safe in embracing.

Moreover, the eleven family members were probably used to sharing material goods and enjoying the company and challenges of lots of relatives in close proximity. Opening their home to one more was probably not a major inconvenience to them since they had been reared to share resources among so many. What Nancy depicted as a "simple" lifestyle was simply the normal pattern of life for everyday rural people in Mississippi. In the presence of this family and the voter education work, the amenities

¹³⁰

Sutherland, 48-49

and activities she grew not to miss became less and less important. She would probably agree with Hattiesburg, Mississippi volunteer David Owen, the son of a California academic, who learned that one “could be a worthwhile, dignified, thoughtful human-being without any of that really hard-driving achievement stuff in your life.”¹³¹ While Mrs. H.’s family and others in Mississippi modeled the employment of resources that might seem insignificant to more affluent individuals, they left indelible marks on Nancy and others in her cohort.

One author explains that “the closeness [within SNCC] had two dimensions. One was that the organizers became very dependent on and shared with the few other organizers with whom they worked. The other was that organizing led to new relationships with people in the community that was being organized. It led to knowing a great deal about and sharing much with these people.”¹³² Elaine DeLott Baker might agree. She “left the South with two powerful realizations. The first was the deep appreciation for ordinary people and the ways in which they understand the world. My teachers were the people whose faith, intelligence, and willingness to risk everything were the heart of the black freedom struggle. The second realization was a terrifying, gut-level understanding of racism. A terrible awareness of its corrosive and pervasive legacy. As an outsider, I had underestimated the power of racism as a social phenomenon and the lengths to which our society would go to preserve its privilege.”¹³³ Baker began to understand the perspective of black people and those committed to the struggle for justice. “The more I worked with the local people,” she wrote, “the more I

¹³¹ Sheila B. Michaels CORE/SNCC Veteran Interview with David Owen 25 September 2000, St. Louis, MO (New York: Columbia University Oral History Archives) Tape 1 of 2

¹³² Beardslee, 150

¹³³ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 280

became immersed in the way they viewed the world, and the more difficult it became for me to communicate with people outside the movement.”¹³⁴

By sharing their families with outside activists and addressing the inevitable displays of racial inequity that emerged while hosting, local Negro hosts helped transform outsiders into more powerful resources for the movement and simultaneously resisted white supremacy. After his encounter with a family during the SCLC-led 1965 Summer Community Organization and Political Education project, Dick Reavis’ understanding of white privilege and the ways in which he interacted with African Americans was forever altered. The source of his lessons was his host, Mrs. Julia “My Dear” Haskins whom Reavis described in his memoir *If White Kids Die*. My Dear was a local leader who performed preliminary screening before SCOPE volunteers were ferried out to various community hosts for the summer. Reavis spent his first night in Demopolis, Alabama at the home of Henry Haskins, Jr., My Dear’s son and the president of the local Demopolis Youth Committee, the group whose registration efforts the volunteers would support for the summer. Reavis met Mrs. Haskins the next morning at breakfast. He recalled: “While I was eating, the female SCOPEs came in from My Dear’s house, but before we could converse, My Dear was upon us. She was a dark, very heavy woman, probably weighing 250 pounds. Her face was puffy and her eyes glowed with life, but she wasn’t a bubbly kind.”¹³⁵

In part, Haskins’ reserve reflected the fact that accepting white outsiders into their homes did not mean that black families lacked either prejudice or discretion in their interactions with white outsiders. On the contrary, many black families were very

¹³⁴ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 270

¹³⁵ Reavis, 24

cautious in their interactions. Clayborne Carson argues that many Negro families received workers with patterns of “friendliness combined with fear and reticence.”¹³⁶ He maintains that “certainly the [1964 Mississippi SNCC] Summer Project could not have taken place without their assistance, yet there was an ambivalence among some black Mississippians who supported the volunteers but remained skeptical of the project and disturbed by the lifestyles of the newcomers.”¹³⁷

If she was leery of the lifestyles of the volunteers she hosted, Mrs. Haskins had no reservations about stating her opinions.¹³⁸ Her responses to the different types of youngsters she and her community hosted that summer, including Reavis, reveal the boundaries in her sense of political kinship with them and the varying degrees to which she was willing to embrace such outsiders as kin. Factors beyond the volunteers’ demonstrated commitment to civil rights work shaped My Dear’s interpretations of how well they would fit into the movement in Demopolis.

For example, in addition to assessing her guests’ racial classification and regional background, she was also interested in their spiritual allegiances. Upon their initial meeting, as the young people sat in her living room, My Dear asked the boarders to identify their names and religious affiliations. Linda Brown, a “fashionably-dressed, lithe, green-eyed native of Harlem” with “golden skin and shoulder-length, straight black hair,” provided the safe answer of being a member of the African Methodist Episcopal Church. In his memoir Reavis identified her as the child of one African American parent and one Jewish parent, one of whom was demoted for being a member

¹³⁶ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and The Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1981), 116

¹³⁷ Carson, 116

¹³⁸ Carson, 116

of the Communist Party. She probably did not disclose her parentage to the Haskins, who likely identified her as an upper-class northern Negro. Reavis records no comments from My Dear that signaled a note of distrust about amalgamating Brown into their community.¹³⁹ She was both “Christian” and black and a northerner who had chosen to cast her lot with poor rural black southerners, all of which made her a near outsider, a likely candidate for political kinship.

When a “slender,” “fair-skinned and freckled” woman with “very curly red hair,” whom Reavis nicknamed “Little Red” addressed her religious orientation, My Dear “shrieked” at her reply.¹⁴⁰ “Well, I guess I’d say that if I had anything that could be called religion,” the young woman said, “it would be communism.”¹⁴¹ In a “maternal rebuke, delivered in good cheer,” My Dear chided, “child, you’d better get you a religion of some kind. When you go to church this morning, you pay attention now.”¹⁴² Perhaps unwilling to have to feign religious deference all summer, by the next morning, “Little Red was claiming to be ill” and decided to leave the program. Reavis and the many other activists who stayed embraced the challenges of cross-cultural interracial alliance.

Ruth Levin, white, northern, and Jewish, represented a racial and religious outsider who was incorporated by political kinship. Ruth was “a very light-skinned young woman with rosy cheeks, somewhat husky of build, with shoulder-length, fine, light-brown hair, a student from Vermont who probably typified SCOPE.”¹⁴³ When

¹³⁹ Reavis, 25

¹⁴⁰ Reavis, 25

¹⁴¹ Reavis, 25

¹⁴² Reavis, 25

¹⁴³ Reavis, 26-27

Ruth said she was Jewish, “My Dear threw a glance to Johnny Ray,” her co-interviewer “who straightened his frame and gestured excitedly. ‘Jewish? Well, if that’s what you are,’ he exclaimed, ‘then you ain’t got no religion at all.’ My Dear nodded and scowled in agreement and the gathering began to disperse.”¹⁴⁴ A religious woman herself, My Dear probably associated her work with her Christian conviction and believed that it ought to be an important moral basis for helping people secure civil rights. What kind of motivation sustained the work of outsiders like Levin, with “no religion at all?”

Respecting black southerners’ religious commitments helped young outsiders to be accepted as viable contributors. SCLC’s Andrew Young of Atlanta encouraged SCOPE participants to “attend church each week,” and evidently many did so.¹⁴⁵ Elaine DeLott Baker, another Jewish volunteer visited southern churches and became convinced that Sunday services provided volunteers with important emotional support. “I loved the meetings,” she explained, “Sunday was a day of renewal, of personal faith and collective courage,” through which she and other outsiders and local activists alike were strengthened for more work.¹⁴⁶

A nominal Baptist, Reavis was familiar with the work of white southern churches—those that excluded black people. He had long been alienated from his Southern Baptist upbringing because he witnessed family members vote against accepting black converts into their congregation and had not been to church since high school. “Though it was hardy true” Reavis told SCOPE members that he was Baptist, remembering Andrew Young’s admonition on the importance on church attendance to the movement. On hearing his declaration of Baptist identity, “nodding with a smile,”

¹⁴⁴ Reavis, 27

¹⁴⁵ Reavis, 26

¹⁴⁶ Baker, “They Sent Us This White Girl,” in Constance Curry, et al, 276

My Dear said, "'Oh, that's good. You're from the same religion as us.'" ¹⁴⁷ His identification as "Baptist" helped to mediate the fact that Reavis was a white southerner for the moment.

However, he was still a white southern male, a representation of dominance and power in the South. This identification would shape the ways in which he and the Haskins interacted in important ways and would preclude him from being fully incorporated into the Haskins' family in ways, for example, that Sally Belfrage's gender and regional identity did not inhibit her sense of kinship within the Amos home.

In the crowded Haskins' home, Reavis recalled that one of the curtained spaces was reserved for Julia Mae Haskins who was shortly due home from a segregated state college:

That left nowhere for me to sleep except in the room with Johnny Ray, whose double bed occupied almost all of its space. He accepted me without any reticence. But he soon noted my fakery. Each night before retiring, Johnny Ray kneeled beside the bed to pray. I kneeled with him, but never tried to speak to God. ¹⁴⁸

Johnny Ray displayed his commitment to Christian discipleship through daily observance of bedtime prayer. If Reavis had been more devout, demonstrating the same conviction, the two might have prayed together, creating a stronger bond between them. Nevertheless, Reavis does not mention that Johnny Ray ever exposed him or that his young host's religious practices ever encouraged him to investigate his own. If Reavis eventually slept comfortably in Johnny Ray's room and found meals in his host home

¹⁴⁷ Reavis, 25

¹⁴⁸ Reavis, 29

“marvelous, with great portions of Southern cooking, well-prepared,” he lamented that “with meals there was talk, too.”¹⁴⁹

Indeed, hosting white outsiders provided opportunities for black families to engage white people with never before queried topics. Active local families like the one that hosted Reavis were much less reticent and fearful than many of their counterparts. Candid dinner conversations with My Dear pushed into the realm of Reavis’ life at home with his parents. When she pressed to find out information about his relationship with his mother and father, the Texas-born Reavis said “as little as possible, because there didn’t seem to be much point. I didn’t want to be rejected or accepted on the basis of their stand.”¹⁵⁰ “Somehow,” he continued, “she captured a caricature of my father, whom she began to index as ‘your cracker dad.’”¹⁵¹ Through this reference to his father and sometimes using “cracker” to refer to Reavis, My Dear exercised her authority as a black female leader in a movement led by black people. Reavis could not have much to say as a white outsider who was depended on black women like Mrs. Haskins’ acceptance of him for participation in that movement. If he had a chance of remaining a part of the movement he had to withstand black people’s expressions of their exasperation with white people.¹⁵²

If his status as a white southern male kept him an outsider within the movement, it also made him a special ally. Throughout the summer Reavis was called on to “pretend to be a local white” using his accent to get information like bail costs from

¹⁴⁹ Reavis, 40

¹⁵⁰ Reavis, 40

¹⁵¹ Reavis, 40

¹⁵² Reavis, 40

jailers.¹⁵³ Reavis learned that he was rare among black allies in Demopolis and although he worked with them, elders watched him with a careful eye. In part, his commitment to the movement family to which he had been admitted deterred him from capitalizing on the sexual attention he received from local young women like “The Twins,” “identical sixteen-year-olds with shining yellow skin, hazel eyes and straight hair, as long as Linda Brown’s.”¹⁵⁴ The girls father was “a white man who sold insurance policies to blacks, door-to-door,” the type of canvasser, with which Reavis wanted to avoid association.¹⁵⁵

While she may have taken advantage of the opportunity to release her frustration or anger with white people on her ally Reavis, Mrs. Haskins’ interaction with the young white southerner helped maximize a very teachable moment in both of their lives. Reavis recalled that “My Dear took the lead” in intensifying their conversations “by denouncing racism in forms that I’d never imagined, and at first, found hard to accept. She’d say, for example, that ‘the crackers get their mail in the morning, but they don’t bring it to us until the afternoon.’ It was true, of course, and after thinking over charges like that, I came to see things more nearly her way.”¹⁵⁶ My Dear helped Reavis to become aware of how African Americans experienced or perceived racism in its multifarious subtleties. Moreover, in the context of family life in a Negro home Reavis made the difficult and positive decision to investigate his own identity and experiences as a white southerner in relation to those of his hosts and other African Americans.

¹⁵³ Reavis, 37

¹⁵⁴ Reavis, 30

¹⁵⁵ Reavis, 30

¹⁵⁶ Reavis, 40

A misunderstanding over laundry as Reavis recalled it demonstrates the degree to which the patterns of the Freedom Summer challenged traditional African American kinship. In the Haskins' home, Reavis explained:

Things got unpleasant at times. One Saturday morning I noticed clothes piled on the patio and the family's old wringer-type machine, hooked-up and ready to go. I went inside, unpacked my duffel bag, and dumped my clothes with the others. Then I went back inside, and half an hour later, headed off again. Julia Mae, home from college was standing at the washer. My dear was sitting on a patio chair. As I passed, My Dear halted me.

"What do you mean putting your clothes out there like that?" she barked. I shrugged. "I don't know, I thought that that was what we were supposed to do," I said.

"What do you mean 'supposed to do?'" she pressed. "Who ever told you that?"

I shrugged again, not understanding what was afoot.

"Listen, cracker boy, My Dear continued, "you're too used to having black folks do your washing for you, that's what."

It wasn't true. My mother didn't have a maid – but I said nothing.

"You pick up your clothes out of here and take them to the Laundromat." She demanded.¹⁵⁷

Alarmed, Reavis ventured to the laundromat "a block or two past the color line."¹⁵⁸ He was thankful to greet a local volunteer who escorted Reavis to his mother's home where she agreed to add his clothes to her wash for a small fee. "But I realized that I had made a mistake," Reavis wrote, despite his ignorance about proper washing procedures in My Dear's house, "to assume that I was a member of the family. I should have asked if my clothes could be washed with the others. My lack of courtesy had become a racial incident."¹⁵⁹ Although she may have misread his actions, just as she was becoming more comfortable with Reavis, My Dear was reminded of the pervasiveness of racism. Although Reavis had no ill intent in placing his soiled garments among the others, his

¹⁵⁷ Reavis, 41

¹⁵⁸ Reavis, 41

¹⁵⁹ Reavis, 41

comfort level in My Dear's home desensitized him to the possibility of offending the family by adding his clothes to the household wash. It never occurred to him that My Dear might have prepared the laundry of white families or to wonder how she might feel having to do so. Without considering the impact of his identity as a white man on his black hosts and eager not to cause further tension, Reavis assumed that he was simply following protocol.

Reavis' affiliation with the Haskins family was contingent on his participation in the local civil rights movement. As a white southerner without prior investment in southern black communities or relationships with relatives or friends of the Haskins, Reavis had no place in My Dear's home, save his commitment to the civil rights struggle to which she was also committed. Although Mrs. Haskins entrusted Reavis with access to her family, home-life, and material goods his racial identity precluded him from some household privileges. As far-outsiders Reavis and other activists invited communities of black southerners to expand their families – their greatest resource base. Although internalized and institutionalized racism prevented full cultural access to incorporated outsiders like Reavis, allowing them into black families reshaped the contours of political kinship. In short, while Reavis and other volunteers developed new families of sorts, they also witnessed the limitations of assimilation into those families. In the homes of their black hosts, volunteers gained glimpses into the intimate racial lives of black southerners who were forced to remain constantly aware of their racial position in relation to non-Negroes. During his tenure in the Haskins' home, Reavis became more sensitive to his own engagement of white privilege as well as the various ways he might fight it.

Reavis and the Haskins show that African Americans' kinship traditions had limits that meant that they could not extend kinship to everyone and that its flexibility could bend inward as a mode of protection. After the laundry incident and disturbed by his growing attraction to the Haskins' daughter Julia, Reavis left the Haskins home. Mrs. Haskins had come to resent him. His status as an outsider had seemed to widen during the time he lived with Mrs. Haskins and his realizations about white supremacy and injustice at times became overwhelming. [BAY=Explain-I think it means that it was overwhelming for him and there was too much constant reminder for him with my dear in his face].

The committed outside activists who joined the family of civil rights went through a unique process of identity formation through their engagement with black families and communities. Some outsiders came south and "gave their whole lives" to the idea of revolution.¹⁶⁰ "They put their future out of the way, they cast themselves off from their families, they gave themselves to a movement," career activist Tom Hayden explained. "From that," he continued, "they got purpose, a new family, a substitute community, they grew up together through that experience."¹⁶¹

Barbara Ransby argues that for young volunteers growing up in the movement was "a coming of age like no other. They matured intellectually and emotionally in Freedom Houses and Freedom Schools that SNCC established in dusty southern towns. In these rural communities, SNCC volunteers taught and learned from black folk who were old enough to be their parents or grandparents. In the process, they forged new

¹⁶⁰ Greenberg, 32

¹⁶¹ Greenberg, 32

identities at the same time that they formed new political ideas and strategies.”¹⁶² Even as outsider youngsters like Reavis evolved through work in the family of civil rights, so too did black participants in relationship with social others of varying degrees.

In turn, developing close relationships with whites and northern blacks who were dedicated to social justice provided black southerners with new conceptualizations of themselves in relation to whites and the possibilities for racial peace or reconciliation. “Mrs. Washington,”¹⁶³ a local Mississippi activist, explained that her contact with white volunteers empowered her to engage local whites in new ways. “In the Movement,” she asserted, “the relationship between black and white wasn’t the hostility and hate of the whites that we had known.”¹⁶⁴ She continued:

When whites came into the community, they’d just sit down with us and laugh and talk and we’d say “Wow!” we just couldn’t believe it because we never had had any contact with white folks except on another side of the fence. That whole thing had an effect psychologically on us. It got us to a point where we could confront the people that we had to deal with a little bit better.¹⁶⁵

If hosting white outsiders was a revelatory experience, Negro outsiders brought revelations of a different kind to local black activist homes. Mrs. Washington and her husband hosted a Negro Freedom School teacher named “Mary” in their home.¹⁶⁶ Through their intimate intra-home contact, Mississippi volunteer Mary “would sit and

¹⁶² Barbara Ransby, *Ella Baker and the Black Freedom Movement: A Radical Democratic Vision* (Chapel Hill and London: UNC Press, 2003), 295

¹⁶³ Neither of the editions indicates another name for “Mrs. Washington” who is a real activist who may or may not have been represented with a fictitious name in Beardslee’s *The Way Out Must Lead In*

¹⁶⁴ Beardslee, 122

¹⁶⁵ Beardslee, 122

¹⁶⁶ Beardslee, 121

talk to us for hours” introducing Mrs. Washington to new aspects of black identity and black culture.¹⁶⁷ Mrs. Washington asserted:

She [Mary] told us about the history of black people. She told us exciting stories about ourselves. I didn’t know anything about the history of black folks. I never related it to Africa on any terms because all we saw was the jungle movies – the folks going “booga, booga booga” – and we didn’t want to be a part of that. We learned there was something more. She explained how we have our own culture. She told us how we should just relax and try to be ourselves, and that we don’t have to be like white people. I didn’t know at that time what she was doing like I do now. She was getting us ready.¹⁶⁸

Mary and Mrs. Washington developed a productive relationship that empowered Mrs. Washington as she became the person to inform Mary about how best to reach the people in her community. “I had something to give her,” she remembered about her activist partnership with the Freedom School instructor, “it was a kind of relationship that I had never experienced before” working in the movement.¹⁶⁹

Mary was also “very warm, and she was educated.”¹⁷⁰ “I had never had contact with any educated person who talked and acted that way,” Mrs. Washington explained. Mary was remarkable to Mrs. Washington because her academic training had not hindered her engagement of the Washington family. “She just shared our lives,” Mrs. Washington affirmed.¹⁷¹ Mrs. Washington remembered that the humble Mary “would eat whatever we had, beans or greens or whatever; we didn’t have that much. She would sleep anywhere. If I had to wash, she’d help wash or whatever. She was just

¹⁶⁷ Beardslee, 121

¹⁶⁸ Beardslee, 121

¹⁶⁹ Beardslee, 121

¹⁷⁰ Beardslee, 121

¹⁷¹ Beardslee, 121

home with us.”¹⁷² Mary’s adoption into the Washington family expanded the family’s identity by showing that someone of her educational caliber could be a member. In turn, Mary empowered Mrs. Washington to recognize her own contributions to the movement.

During her tenure in the Washington home, Mary also challenged Mrs. Washington’s thinking about beauty and introduced her to a new kind of black woman. Washington’s horizon was expanded by witnessing a type of womanhood that seemed inaccessible before she came to know Mary in the context of the movement’s kinship network. “Dark-skinned and nappy-headed” Mary regularly put off Washington’s offer to “go down to get her hair pressed and get it fixed,” likely straightened.¹⁷³ Eventually it was Mary’s flaunting of her natural hair, among the other women Washington saw in town that encouraged her to “not have my hair fixed.”¹⁷⁴ “I was comfortable with myself the way I was and she [Mary] was comfortable. Finally I just got to the point where one day I just got up and washed it and walked out in the streets. Everybody looked. Now you walk around here and you’re just as liable to see hair fixed or not fixed. It was just that kind of breakthrough.”¹⁷⁵ The close vicinity of living in the Washington home allowed Mary to make an important impact on her host, while also providing the opportunity for Mrs. Washington to empower herself through embracing Mary into her family. Mrs. Washington extended to Mary in a traditional pattern, but was surprised that she accepted the warm welcome to an extended degree. The kind of

¹⁷² Beardslee, 121

¹⁷³ Beardslee, 121

¹⁷⁴ Beardslee, 122

¹⁷⁵ Beardslee, 122

connection between Mary and the Washingtons was representative of the kind of breakthroughs families across the state experienced during the Freedom Summer.

CONCLUSION: LESSONS AND LEGACIES OF CROSS-CULTURAL POLITICAL KINSHIP

There were many breakthroughs during the Mississippi Freedom Summer of 1964. Beyond the obvious and oft-investigated revelations about racism, white privilege, and Messiah complexes that some far outsiders gained from interacting with black families, black families themselves were transformed through their Freedom Summer activities. Generations of African American southerners had already been working for change when SNCC arrived in Mississippi. Their willingness to use what was in their hands — their traditional familial patterns — allowed the nation to capitalize on the momentum of the Freedom Summer. As they put their familial resources into action, African American southerners affirmed that their ways of living and knowing had political value, which they translated into political power.

By opening their homes and hearts to unlikely allies, African American southerners helped shape modern political culture and organizing tactics that secured the Voting Rights Act of 1965 as well as other congressional measures. They also encountered significant numbers of white people who were willing to treat them with respect and helped renew their faith in the promise of America. Moreover, the Movement also introduced black southerners to a rising generation of black northerners who were descendants of the Southern Diaspora. African American activists across class and region extended kinship to movement volunteers on the basis of shared political convictions, but gender and racial identities shaped the ways in which they interacted. Indeed, joining the family of civil rights challenged the ideas and behaviors

of movement workers as much as it encouraged African American families to incorporate racial and religious outsiders into their intimate circles. Political kinship as African Americans practiced it in rural 1960s Mississippi presented one of the most viable demonstrations of community in the history of American democracy.

The influences of family-like relationships within the movement shaped the legacy of the movement in important ways. Many activists would agree with Rudy Lombard when he said that if there ever was integration it was probably best achieved among civil rights movement activists in the 1960s. Ohio native Charles McDew explained that within the family of civil rights, “once you joined yourself to the struggle, it made no difference where you came from. We faced a common enemy and a common problem. It made no difference that you spoke with an accent that was from New York or Chicago; you faced a common battle.”¹⁷⁶ Another volunteer confirmed, “I think for some of us the Movement itself became a family. In a sense it became more than a family because the people became one of you. That had really nothing to do with race, someone could be black or white, but every person, in a sense, became your brother or sister.”¹⁷⁷ The family to which these sources refer included black and white, southern and non-southern individuals, who were all dedicated to similar goals of social change and were willing to work together despite their varied social locations.

At the same time, black families benefited the outsiders they allowed into their communities by expanding their understandings of African American culture. Black southern communities consistently recognized the differences among themselves and outsiders, yet they were willing to incorporate outsiders into their concepts of family in

¹⁷⁶ Greenberg, 46
¹⁷⁷ Beardslee, 34-35

order to advance the Movement, which in turn built and maintained the family of civil rights. Even after formal civil rights organizations lost their relevance in the wake of the voting rights act and other legal changes, black families and communities often sustained the reform activities that blossomed during the civil rights movement. For example, in Greenwood, Mississippi long after outside movement workers left Leflore County, “local organizers and local people went right back to the slow process of building a solid movement, with more confidence than ever,” having had the experience of standing up to local authorities.¹⁷⁸

Today, Civil Rights activists of the mid-twentieth century meet for family reunions of sorts that celebrate the spirit of kinship that connected them during the movement and the work they accomplished together. Cosmopolitan white northerners visit the shanty homes of their rural black hosts, sites of great revelation for each party. Leon Hall affirmed that during post-movement visits to activist sites in Georgia, “people welcome you back. They’ve always got an extra plate, or they can always roust up a comfortable bed for you. It’s good to stay in touch with them.”¹⁷⁹ That various civil rights communities gather to commemorate their legacy and transfer their values to younger generations is a testament to the value of family as an organizing model within the civil rights movement and an important category of analysis for political history. Although some in the younger generation of civil rights workers abandoned many of the old black familial organizing methods that characterized organizing in Mississippi and across the South, black family culture continued to shape United States history in the post-desegregation era. As African Americans searched for identity in post-modern

¹⁷⁸ Payne, 175
¹⁷⁹ Beardslee, 82

America, many turned to their families, which had been historically instrumental in shaping black social, political, and economic history. Black family reunions mark a new era in patterns of black family maintenance, which will be explored in the final chapter of this dissertation.

Chapter 5

“All the Folks You Love Together”: New Identities, Black Family Reunions and Reclaiming the Extended African American Family in Recent History

The Wright Family of Edisto Island, South Carolina held their first reunion — “A Family Reunion in Honor of Mr. Peter Wright, Sr.” August 18-20, 1978. Peter and his wife Hattie, who died in 1931, nurtured twelve children, eight of whom were living at the time of the reunion. The family tree printed on the reunion program listed thirty-two grandchildren, fifty-six great-grand children, and three nieces. The nearly one hundred people gathered included representatives from each generation. Local family residents greeted out-of-town attendees at a cocktail reception in Charleston that Friday. Saturday, the family fellowshiped under the palm trees at Edisto Beach State Park with a “family picnic,” complete with family favorites like red rice, blue crab, and okra soup. “Family services” communed at the Edisto Community Center at two o’clock on Sunday with close family friends and church members. The ceremonies included family “dedication selections” and the “recognition of elders” by representatives from three generations of Wright descendants. After a duet by his son and daughter-in-law, Peter Wright Sr. gave his closing remarks. The family sang their “unity song,” “Blessed Be the Tie that Binds,” received the blessing of the food from the esteemed progenitor, and proceeded to dinner.¹

The Wright Reunion was typical of black family reunions in the late 1970s. Most of Peter and Hattie Wright’s descendants lived in and around Edisto and Charleston.

¹ Wright Family Reunion Planning Committee, “A Family Reunion in Honor of Peter Wright, Sr.,” Family Reunion Program, Edisto Island, South Carolina, 18-20 August 1978; original in the personal collection of Mrs. Carrie W. Smashum.

However, many of them were migrants to Georgia, North Carolina and New York. The reunion called all of them “home” to the place of the family’s origin, where they paid homage to family history and celebrated familial heritage. The Wrights took collective visits to the graveyards where ancestors were buried, toured the family property on the portion of the island called “Little Edisto,” and listened to elders tell family stories.²

While the Wright family has a specific familial identity, they share the common historical background that made the late 1970s an important moment for inciting a reunion movement among black families that continues today.

While significant anthropological, sociological, and folkloric research exists on contemporary black reunions, very little of this scholarship investigates the ways in which these patterns have changed over time and taken on new meanings within black communities. Mark Auslander of Brown University and a former fellow at the Emory University Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life briefly surveys the broad history of reunion traditions. He finds that “in the final third of the nineteenth century, the ‘family reunion’ appears to have become established as a free-standing institution, not necessarily linked to other calendrical holidays or religious devotions.”³ He argues that the “recent proliferation of formal narrative and ritual practices oriented around family memory and history” is directly linked to shifts in the American nuclear family that make the home a less economically interdependent space and encourage people to rearticulate the purposes and values of family.⁴ This phenomenon influences patterns among African American families. However, African Americans’ long-standing patterns

² Carrie Wright Smashum, interview by Author, 27 June 1998, Charleston, South Carolina (Original cassette tape in Author’s possession)

³ Mark, Auslander, “‘Something We Need to Get Back To’: Mythologies of Origin and Rituals of Solidarity in African American Working Families” (Working Paper No. 006-02, The Emory Center for Myth and Ritual in American Life, April 2002), 7

⁴ Auslander, 2

of economic interdependence within extended and adoptive kin groups may shape black family reunion patterns in distinctive ways.

In the last two decades family reunions have garnered greater popularity among non-African American segments, yet, African Americans continue to lead the nation in family reunion meetings.⁵ Hotels and resorts increasingly cater to the two hundred thousand family reunions held each year and bookstores carry dozens of instructional texts by reunion experts or enthusiasts.⁶ According to Jennifer Crichton, *Family Reunion: Everything You Need to Know to Plan Unforgettable Get-Togethers*, African Americans account for half of all American reunions and nearly seventy percent of non-business travel by black people is reunion-related.⁷ In 1977 the *New York Times* recorded that 25 million blacks in the US shared an estimated annual income of \$77.1 Billion and spent \$1 billion annually on travel, usually to visit relatives.⁸ Moreover, the African American family reunion tradition continues to hold its distinction because it is a much older tradition, the history of which stretches back to Reconstruction era reunions that were made necessary by separations from slavery.

There are many African American families across the country that have long-standing traditions of formal reunion gatherings in the twentieth century. In 1978 the Washington Post reported on the expansive Quander family, which conducted “a search for roots comparable to Alex Haley.” “Through record checks, oral history and, in some

⁵ Seventy percent of respondents attend family reunions at least every 24 months, according to a 2005 survey in *Reunions Magazine*.

⁶ Some of the most comprehensive among these are Krystal Williams, *How to Plan Your African-American Family Reunion* (New York: Citadel Press, 2000); Edith Wagner, *Family Reunion Sourcebook* (Lowell House, 1999); National Genealogical Society and Sandra MacLean Clunies, *A Family Affair: How to Plan and Direct the Best Family Reunion Ever* (Nashville, TN: Rutledge Hill Press, 2003); Cheryl Fall, *Family Reunion Planning Kit for Dummies: A Reference for the Rest of Us*, (New York: Hungry Minds, Inc., 2002)

⁷ Jennifer Crichton, *Family Reunions: Everything You Need to Know to Plan Unforgettable Get-Togethers* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1998) 13-16

⁸ Thomas A. Johnson, *New York Times*, 17 August 1977, Sec. 3, p. 1

instances, outright questioning of strangers who supposedly have the “Quander look,” the Quanders have pieced together an impressive family history,” the journalist wrote.⁹ Three years later, the Smoots of West Virginia began gathering regularly at their family homestead.¹⁰ Another family in Windsor, North Carolina held their first meeting in 1937.¹¹ A York, Pennsylvania family, with roots in the South, inaugurated their reunion celebrations in 1959.¹² However, most of the millions of black families that participate in regular reunion activities today expanded, formalized or initiated their reunion traditions in the late 1970s. Indeed, reunions have historically displayed the Americanness of African Americans, who unlike their voluntary immigrant neighbors, could trace their lineages to generations of native-born Americans and reference particular homelands on American soil. Among other displaced groups, the experience and cultural heritage of American slavery makes African American families distinct and continues to shape contemporary reunions.¹³

This chapter serves as the capstone to this dissertation’s investigation of kinship within African American communities. In it I explore the efforts of black families to preserve the extended networks that have been historically important to the survival of black communities through practices of family reunion. Although reuniting with family members in festive forms is an old tradition among black people, the distinctive type of

⁹ Courtland Milly, “Quander Family Tree Spreads Its Branches Through History,” *Washington Post* 19 January 1978, sec. Virginia Weekly, p. 7

¹⁰ Topper Sherwood, “Reunion: The Smoots Gather for the 60th Time” *Goldenseal* (Winter 1989), 9-17

¹¹ “The John Redden Bazemore Family Heritage” in the personal collection of Dr. Ione Vargus, founder of Temple University’s Family Reunion Institute in the School of Social Administration, soon to be transferred to the Charles S. Blockson Collection at Temple University. Viewed on 5/21/2009.

¹² Ransom-Sease Family, “Ransom-Sease Family News,” Volume 5, Issue 3, July 2008, p. 1

¹³ Although black and white southerners share a southern past and historical sense of place as Jimmie Lewis Franklin, “Black Southerners, Shared Experience, and Place: A Reflection” *The Journal of Southern History* (Vol. 60, No. 1 [February 1994]), 3-18 argues, white families did not experience the dispersion of slavery and had more economic and political resources for combating the familial dispersion they experienced from subsequent social systems than did their black counterparts.

black family reunion that emerges on a large-scale at the end of the twentieth century deserves its own investigation. While the role of black family reunions in mediating familial dispersion may be quite obvious, the ways in which family reunions were resources to fight poverty and racism may be less apparent. This chapter will provide historical context for the black family reunion explosion of the late 1970s and the characteristics that made it distinct. It also explores the role of national leaders in contradicting negative images of black families through the family reunion model. An investigation of recent shifts in reunion culture, including tensions surrounding increased commercialization and decreased historical-specification within reunions rounds out the chapter. The relationship between family reunions and representations of black identity is a central theme, from which important conclusions emerge.

“POWER TO YOUR ROOTS”: DESEGREGATION, CULTURAL NATIONALISM, AND THE POST-HALEY BLACK FAMILY REUNION EXPLOSION

Researchers have indicated several reasons why formal reunions blossomed among black families in the late 1970s. Crichton notes that the genealogical fervor surrounding the 1978 dramatic presentation of Alex Haley’s *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, starring Levar Burton, inspired many lineage pilgrimages. *Roots* traced Haley’s maternal line to “Kunta Kinte,” a young African ancestor of Haley’s who was kidnapped and sold into slavery in 1767. A partly fictional familial narrative, it traced Haley’s ancestry back several generations to Mandingo ancestors on the West Coast of Africa. In addition to the impact of *Roots*, Crichton suggests that increased social and economic openings of recreational accommodations in the post-Civil Rights Movement era may account for the recent explosion of family reunion activities among African

American communities.¹⁴ Crichton is correct to root the black family reunion explosion with the première of *Roots* and the opening up of recreation facilities in the post-desegregation marketplace; however, additional historicization is necessary to understand the appeal of family reunions to African American kin groups in the late twentieth century.

Some contemporary observers attributed the increase of reunions among African American to the dispersion of migration. Indeed, there would be little need for families to hold formal reunion gatherings if they were not dispersed. Sunday dinner at grandmothers' house could suffice. Great Society travel reforms and desegregation opened up opportunities for safer and more convenient travel south. Some migrant visitors took up ever permanent residence in the South to reclaim family property. Indeed, by the mid-1970s the trend of return-migration brought many migrants back home to the South. Sociologists William W. Faulk and Larry L. Hunt argue that the class dynamics in this period of migration were reversed from the trends only 50 years earlier, when poorer populations left the South to gain access to more economic resources in the North. Many return permanently only to reclaim family property as Carol Stack has argued. Others preferred to visit for family reunions. Post-desegregation many migrants might have felt that the South was a more pleasant place to visit and in which to live ten to fifteen years after desegregation.¹⁵

¹⁴ Jennifer Crichton, *Family Reunions: Everything You Need to Know to Plan Unforgettable Get-Togethers* (New York: Workman Publishing, 1998) 13-16

¹⁵ William W. Falk and Larry L. Hunt, "Return Migrations of African-Americans to the South: Reclaiming a Land of Promise, Going Home, or Both?," *Rural Sociology* Vol. 69, Iss. 4: 2004, 490-5. See Carol Stack, *Call to Home: Africans-Americans Reclaim the Rural South* (New York: Basic Books, 1996); Johnson, 1

To understand the African American family reunion movement and the impact of *Roots* in post-desegregation America amid the return-migration shifts, one must first understand the cultural milieu of Black America during this era. The reunion movement developed at the tail end of the “black power” and Black Nationalist momentum that marked the decade after the passing of the Civil and Voting Rights Acts. In the late 1960s a reinvigorated “Black Power” ideology garnered thousands of supporters and evolved from various experiences within black America.¹⁶ Active protest emboldened scores of black people who had participated in the Civil Rights Movement as well as those who watched and supported it from the sidelines with a new sense of dignity. Many were also disillusioned with white liberals and weary of white supremacy. Black Power advocated racial unity, self-determination, and insisted that black people appreciate their unique cultural contributions to society.¹⁷ Black Americans “need not beg and plead for what white Americans” took “for granted.”¹⁸ Black power rhetoric also encouraged African Americans to begin looking for ways to celebrate a history that was “too often been treated as stigma and degradation.”¹⁹ Such sentiments did not necessarily denote a desire for separatism from white, but rather a longing to be comfortable with oneself. However, Black Power’s varying interpretations were filtered through generational and political differences. For many African American leaders within the weakening integrationist civil rights vanguard, black power appeared to be a dangerous and futile pursuit of black hate and black violence – an African American

¹⁶ Black Power of the 1960s had antecedents throughout African Americans’ long freedom struggle. For example, the Garvey Movement of the 1900s-1920s expressed a type of black power ideology that advocated self-determination, racial pride, and black economic empowerment. See Daniel W. Wynn, *The Black Protest Movement* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1974), 153 for an extensive contemporary listing of possible origins for the term in this era.

¹⁷ Wynn, 153

¹⁸ Charles Payne, *I’ve Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California Press, 1995), 389

¹⁹ Payne, 389

counterpart to the tendencies they were seeking to eradicate in white supremacists.

White allies often saw black power as an offensive rally to separatism.

Younger activists understood black power as invoking a collective positive self-image and economic and political empowerment, which could be achieved through Black Nationalism. This young group was a part of the restless generation of activists who believed that the civil protections of the late 1960s were not addressing the poverty, chronic unemployment and powerlessness oppressing urban African American communities. Willie Ricks first shared the term “black power” with the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee’s Black Nationalist chairman Stokeley Carmichael, who is credited with popularizing the slogan. He was arrested for the twenty-seventh time in June 1966 after SNCC joined other organizations in completing James Meredith’s “March against Fear” from Memphis, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi. Upon his release, Carmichael charged the enraged crowd who was tired of being attacked by dogs and beaten by billy clubs. “The only way we gonna stop them white men from whippin’ us is to take over...what we gonna start saying is ‘black power,’” Carmichael told the weary protestors who rallied back with cries of “black power!”²⁰

A native of Mississippi, Roger Wilkins, nephew of civil rights leader Roy Wilkins, articulated the impetus of the youngsters this way: “They were purging themselves of all of that self-hate, asserting a human validity that did not derive from whites and pointing out that the black experience on this continent and in Africa was

²⁰ Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1981), 208-210 asserts that black intellectuals, including Paul Robeson and Richard Wright used the term throughout the 1950s and argues that Ricks, Carmichael and other SNCC activists strategized for opportunities to popularize the term in 1966. See also Steven Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in American Since 1941*, Third Edition (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2009), 120-21; Payne, 327, 376-77

profound, honorable and a source of pride.”²¹ The Black Panthers, founded in Oakland, California in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, epitomized the militant impulse within this generation of freedom fighters. Their extensive community enrichment agenda, including health clinics and breakfast programs and system of armed self-protection against brutal police forces, empowered African Americans who had endured racial discrimination for decades.

The sentiments of black women within the black power movement are particularly important to note in light of the role they played in organizing black families. As the movement grew, black women began to argue for an articulation of Black Power that recognized their ability to have political thoughts of their own without being an affront to black masculinity. Black women thinkers were not “emasculators” as public images began to portray them. Rather, the liberation of black womanhood went hand in hand with the liberation of black men. Black families were collectives of oppressed people who had to be liberated as a unit. Black women could have an active and vocal role in the liberation struggle and still be the partners of black men.²² To be sure the gender-based tensions within the Black Power movement would also influence the approach black men and women later took to reshape the image of the black family in the public eye. Many black women took leadership positions in organizing and planning local family reunions and it was a leading woman’s organization that would first employ the black reunion model in a national campaign to combat negative black family stereotypes.

²¹ Roger Wilkins, *A Man’s Life: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982) 184

²² Stephen Ward, “The Third World Women’s Alliance: Black Feminist Radicalism and Black Power Politics” in *The Black Power Movement: Rethinking the Civil Rights-Black Power Era*, edited by Peniel E. Joseph (New York and London: Routledge, 2006), 124-125

Even as black men and women activists endeavored to define their roles in the collective struggle, a national debate on the nature of poverty helped to popularize negative depictions of the black family. Anthropologist Oscar Lewis' accounts of the "culture of poverty" among Latino Americans became bestsellers and influenced public policy makers like Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan who published *The Negro Family in America: The Case for National Action* in support of President Johnson's War on Poverty agenda. The "culture of poverty" thesis argued that "the poor not only had poor skills; they also had poor attitudes:"²³

They lived for today and had little capacity for deferred gratification. They had no faith in existing institutions and were often in trouble with the law. Their sexual patterns were irregular; their families were unstable. They were apathetic and seldom shared interests and causes with others. Their "culture," moreover, was enduring. It was passed down from parents to children and consigned each successive generation to the same dismal poverty trap.²⁴

Although he advocated more jobs for underemployed black men to help eradicate poverty among black families, Moynihan argued that the culture of poverty and its perpetuation within American ghettos existed independent of racism. Once his federal report was leaked to the public it became the quintessential example of "blaming the victim" for stigmatizing black men as perennially absent and unable to support their families and marginalizing black women as emasculating matriarchs.²⁵ Influenced by Moynihan, Great Society reformers believed that they could best assist America's poor through education, and that no redistribution of resources was necessary. Wealthier Americans would not have to diminish their economic advantages, through this

²³ Irwin Unger, *The Best of Intentions: The Triumphs and Failures of the Great Society Under Kennedy, Johnson and Nixon* (New York; London; Toronto; Sydney; and Auckland: Doubleday, 1996), 29

²⁴ Unger, 29

²⁵ Ward, 124; See William Ryan, *Blaming the Victim* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1971) for a discussion dedicated to the concept of accusing disadvantage groups for their own problems.

method, which “also appealed to the endless faith of [many] Americans in the possibilities of schooling and teaching as a way to transcend one’s personal origins.”²⁶

Such interpretations of poor people fueled frustrations among black nationalists, including artists formally and casually connected to the movement. Cultural nationalists, as they were called, believed in reclaiming the minds of African Americans through their artistic expression. Like African American artists in years gone by, they purposely infused their art with political meaning and encouraged African Americans to embrace their physical beauty, cultural distinctiveness, and rich heritage, especially their African roots.²⁷ In an age when black figurines and dolls were virtually non-existent and public images honoring the beauty of women of African descent were nowhere to be found, poet Nikki Giovanni reminded black women that they were descended from African royalty. Such artists also sought to produce new forms of black writing and oral performances that challenged the “white aesthetic,” and stressed black beauty and pride. Moreover, cultural nationalists often articulated the frustrations of the people. For example, in 1969, the year the United States first placed astronauts in space in 1969, Gil Scott Heron rapped “My sister Nell’s baby just got bit by a rat, and whitey’s on the moon,” voicing the rage of poor urban communities dying in poverty and filth with little aid, while the nation made aeronautical advances in competition with the USSR.

For many among the masses black power’s cultural articulations were a means to help black people value themselves, discard the degradation and humiliation of slavery

²⁶ Unger, 29-30

²⁷ Lewis, *The Harlem Renaissance* argues that the artistic flourishing among African Americans in the 1920s was in part a political movement to demonstrate black people’s ability to contribute to the literary and visual arts and to help black people see positive images of themselves. Some artists and strategists advocated highlighting African aesthetics.

and segregation and reclaim an appreciation for their beauty as a people. Men and women stopped processing their hair and began sporting “Afros” and clothing made from African prints. Black people changed their names from their “slave names” to names with African, Swahili, and Islamic origins and gave their children names that heralded African heritage. Inspired by Malena Karenga who conceived Kwanzaa in 1966, many began celebrating this explicitly “Afro-American holiday” — “a time for the gathering in of our people, celebration of ourselves and our achievements and rededication to greater achievements and fuller more meaningful lives in the future.”²⁸ Masses of people were also influenced by popular vocal artists like Aretha Franklin and James Brown who popularized a new genre of music — “soul music,” which often combined rhythm and blues, gospel, and the earthy sounds of struggle with politicized lyrics like “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” and “R-E-S-P-E-C-T.”²⁹

The impetus to embrace African and African American heritage eventually brought about a revolution within traditionally white institutions of higher learning. Black students took over buildings, led marches, and wrote declarations demanding courses on African American life, degrees and departments in Black Studies, and

²⁸ M. Ron Karenga, *Kwanzaa: Origins, Concepts, Practice* (San Diego, CA: Kawaida Publications, 1977), 12

²⁹ Nelson George, foreword by Quincy Jones and Introduction by Robert Christgau, *Where Did Our Love Go: The Rise and Fall of the Motown Sound* (Urbana and Chicago: University Of Illini Press, 1985, 2007), 127 argues that Berry Gordy copyrighted the term “soul” which he intended to use as the name of a gospel label. George also argues that by the late 1960s within black communities “soul” had come to denote a certain essence that blacks possessed that whites did not and “soul music” described songs with secular lyrics that contained the passion of gospel music. See also, Peter Guralinick, *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (New York; Cambridge: Harper & Row, 1986), 1-20 for an extensive discussion of the definition of “soul music,” which he differentiates from the simultaneous development of the Motown Sound because soul music was not directly marketed to a “pop, white, and industry-slanted kind of audience.” Guralinick considers “soul music” to be a “far less controlled, gospel-based, emotion-baring kind of music that grew up in the wake of the success of Ray Charles from about 1954 on and came to its full flowering, along with Motown, in the early 1960s.”

increases in the numbers of black faculty and student enrollments.³⁰ In universities across the country including NYU, Yale, Rutgers, and San Francisco State, Black Studies departments emerged and courses on African American history and culture were added to curriculums. These programs encouraged more scholarly evaluations of the experiences of African Americans and produced scholarship that aimed to remove African Americans from the margins of academic study. Historians John Blassingame, Herbert Gutman, and others re-envisioned the experiences of enslaved families through empowering narratives.³¹ And other social scientists, including Carol Stack and Andrew Billingsley, argued for the resilience of black kin networks.³² Researchers also investigated the nature of American poverty, especially as it related to problems in urban areas and historical challenges to black families. Such scholars called America into question by addressing areas that had been neglected in the national narrative and

³⁰ Among many historically black colleges and universities of course, black enrollments, faculty and course content were already commonplace.

³¹ Herbert G. Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Vintage Books, 1976) challenged Moynihan by arguing that black families were generally made up of two-parent homes under slavery and well into the first two decades of the Great Migration; John Blassingame, *Slave Community: The Plantation Life in the Antebellum South* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1972) demonstrated the complexity of enslaved populations and the ways in which they revisited the dehumanization of slavery. See also Genovese, Eugene, *Roll, Jordan, Roll: The World the Slaves Made*. New York: Vintage Books, 1974; Peter H. Wood, *Black Majority: Negroes in Colonial South Carolina from 1670 through the Stono Rebellion* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1974), Albert J. Raboteau, *Slave Religion: The "Invisible Institution" in the Antebellum South* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978)

³² Maxine Baca Zinn, "Family, Race, and Poverty in the 1980s" in *Family and Society in American History*, Joseph M. Hawes and Elizabeth I. Nybakken, editors (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001) 305-321 provides an excellent assessment of the "cultural deficiency model" as well as welfare to work debates from the Great Society to the present and argues for a model of understanding poverty that "directs attention away from psychological and cultural issues and toward social structures that allocate economic and social rewards" (p. 317). Carol Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Harper and Row, 1974) identified "fictive kin" networks that characterized African American families, in which individuals who were not blood-related or legally bound considered one another as family because they fulfilled the obligations of family members. Rather than a breakdown of a nuclear or traditional family structure, Stack observed wide family systems among African Americans that helped communities survive their lack of economic resources. See also Kenneth and Mamie Clark, "The Present Dilemma of the Negro" (*Journal of Negro History* Vol. LII [January, 1968, No. 1]); Andrew Billingsley, *Black Families in White America* (Englewood Cliffs, CA: PUB, 1968); Joyce Ladner, *Tomorrow's Tomorrow: The Black Woman* (New York: PUB, 1971; Robert Hill, *The Strengths of Black Families* (New York: PUB, 1972); Robert B. Hill, *Informal Adoption Among Black Families* (Washington, DC: National Urban League Research Department, 1977)

making African American history a “powerful weapon in the intensifying struggle for social justice.”³³

Critics of the cultural nationalist movement were concerned that it did not address the economic imperatives that were at the root of many civil rights protests and black power frustrations. The famous 1963 March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom was in large part a coalition between civil rights organizations, labor unions and other economically disaffected sympathizers. During the March John Lewis, chairman of the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee asked: “‘What is in it [Kennedy’s civil rights bill] that will protect the homeless and starving people of this nation? What is there in this bill to insure the equality of a maid who earns \$5.00 per week in the home of a family whose income is \$100,000 a year?’”³⁴ The frustrations of others manifested in forms much different from the civil disobedience of non-violent activists like Lewis. The urban uprisings of the late 1960s were also products of the frustrations born of poverty and the lack of governmental attention to it. Did cultural nationalism make an impact on the economic situations of Black Americans as it alleviated the psychological damage of poverty and racism? This question is important in light of the economic growth among African Americans from 1960 to 1980. Over those twenty years the number of African American families of middle class status (then calculated at \$20,000) rose only eighteen percentage points, from twelve to thirty percent. Most of the growth occurred during the ten years between 1960 and 1970, with only a three-point percentage increase for black families throughout the 1970s. In the late 1970s as African Americans began to explore

³³ James Horton, provides this elegant assessment in his survey of African American history *Hard Road to Freedom*, 339

³⁴ Frances Fox Piven and Richard A. Cloward, *Poor People’s Movements: Why They Succeed, How They Fail* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979), 256

their roots in greater numbers and segments of the black population grew more affluent than any of their foreparents, the economic divide between the wealthiest and poorest among them widened. Indeed, throughout the 1970s and 1980s, economic justice remained an imperative for most African Americans.³⁵

Most television depictions of African American families in the late 1970s and early 1980s varied from the mildly empowering to the disheartening. “Good Times,” which ran from 1974-1979 was one of the highest ranking series on CBS for several seasons. Upon her death, *People Magazine* deemed Ester Rolle, the sitcom’s lead protagonist, “t.v.’s quintessential black matriarch, a stereotype she tried to debunk throughout her career. “Good Times” was a spinoff of “Maude,” on which Rolle played a non-subservient maid. “Good Times” centered around Rolle’s character Florida Evans and her family in what was supposedly public housing on the South side of Chicago. Rolle refused to allow her character to be a single mother, noting that she grew up with a “wonderful father” and “‘couldn’t bear the fact that television virtually ignored black fathers.’”³⁶ As such the sitcom depicted a loving black family unit with a strong maternal figure who was still the partner of her husband. Yet, the loving and capable husband was often unemployed and the family was constantly struggling to make it out of the ghetto, even as their cohesive two-parent home and solid work ethic belied their being there. The soulful theme song to “Good Times” denoted black people who were barely making it and were grateful to be doing so, but who had little hope of life improvement:

³⁵ Cloward and Piven, 256; James D. McGhee, *A Dream Denied: The Black Family of the Eighties* (Washington, DC: National Urban League, Research Department, 1982), 1, 8-9

³⁶ Guthrie, Zutell, and Brooks, “Rolle Model”

Good times/Anytime you make a payment/Good times/Anytime you meet a friend/Good times/Anytime you're out from under/Not getting' hassled/Not getting' hustled/Keeping your head above water/Making a way when you can/Temporary layoffs/Good times/Easy credit rip-offs/Good times/Scratching and surviving/Good times/Hanging in the joint/Good times/Ain't we lucky we got 'em/Good times

John Amos, who played "James Evans" the father on the sitcom, is said to have left the show because he was tired of the family never being able to get a break. Both he and Rolle consistently voiced their dissatisfaction with the character of "J. J. Evans" whom they felt presented stereotypical images of black buffoonery.³⁷ With the mixed reviews of shows like "Good Times," *Roots* provided a refreshing alternative.

Alex Haley seemed to be somewhat aware of the economic resonance of African American extended kin networks as he enjoyed the popularity of *Roots*. At the 1977 Greater Washington (DC) Business Center Opportunity Fair, Representative Cardis Collins (D-IL) introduced Haley, the keynote speaker, as "a great American...who has provided us with an invaluable reaffirmation of our black heritage."³⁸ Congresswoman Collins noted that as of 18 February that year *Roots* had "sold 999,454 copies, with another 250,000 copies back-ordered and yet to be printed."³⁹ The acclaim his work received humbled Haley. He hoped his work would help shift popular negative perceptions of African Americans and help them view themselves as contributors to American society. More importantly, Haley identified himself as only a mere "channel - a conduit that has been used at this particular time to tell the story of a people," who

³⁷ Guthrie, Zutell, and Brooks, "Rolle Model"

³⁸ Joseph D. Whitaker, "Alex Haley Says 'Roots' Helped to Dispel Myths on Race," *Washington Post*, 24 February 1977, B1

³⁹ Whitaker, B1

were plagued with “the self-perpetuating myths that blacks were less than” others.⁴⁰ He acknowledged his family’s educational achievements as part of the motivation for writing *Roots*.

Haley himself “suggested that families save their old trunks of memorabilia and hold annual family reunions at which a family’s genealogy could be discussed” with family elders.⁴¹ Haley’s successful historical foray, encouraged African Americans across the country to believe that they could trace their lineages. Although it was not written as an academic monograph, *Roots* was part of the empowerment historiography of the late 1970s, which gave black people new ways to envision their past and instilled reunion traditions with new meaning. As African American cultural critic Michael Eric Dyson wrote:

Haley’s quest for his roots changed the way black folk thought about themselves and how white America viewed them. No longer were we genealogical nomads with little hope of learning the names and identities of the people from whose loins and culture we sprang. Haley wrote black folk into the book of American heritage and gave us the confidence to believe that we could find our forebears even as he shared his own.⁴²

As new heritage-seekers African Americans sought to address questions of ancestral identity and affirm the contributions of their families in a world in which most families were becoming less interdependent and black families in particular were being marginalized as pathological.⁴³

⁴⁰ Whitaker, B1

⁴¹ Whitaker, B1

⁴² See Michael Eric Dyson, Introduction to Alex Haley, *Roots: The Saga of an American Family*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York: Vanguard Books, 2007)

⁴³ Whitaker, B1

African Americans desire to present positive images of African American life to themselves shaped the culture of black family reunions in this era. The elements of family identity that became most prominent within reunion celebrations were products of efforts to embrace empowering aspects of African American history that would allow black families to hold positive views of themselves. The impact of this motivation on family reunion culture was at once helpful and problematic for African American life improvements.

HONORING THE FAMILY NAME, IDENTITY FORMATION AND MAINTENANCE: FAMILY REUNIONS IN THE EARLY YEARS OF THE MOVEMENT

Many of the early reunions, from the mid-1970s through the end of the 1980s, began as small-scale events oriented toward specific family histories. They were often held on rural family homesteads and welcomed migrants and their descendants to the places where their ancestors had been enslaved or worked as sharecroppers. The Dobson family of New York City and Dobsontown, North Carolina held typical black family reunions for the period of the mid-1970s to 1990. Wanda Hickson Dobson is among the many migrants who participated in Dobson reunion activities. She re-ignited her family reunion in 1974 after the annual meetings they began in the early 1960s began to diminish. She spearheaded the gathering through the 1990s at the time of her interview with Ray Allen of the African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project.

Many of the dimensions that color the early Dobson Family Reunion made it typical for the era. First, the Dobsons centered their reunion around a particular elder. Because elders occupied Southern homesteads, took care of so many different extended

kin members at different points in their lives, and performed the legacy-maintenance work of distributing family traditions, many reunions were held in their honor or in honor of the traditional extended and adoptive kin networks they represented. Wanda Dobson told Ray Allen that her grandmother was the center of their weekend-long celebrations, which she always opened with a ceremonial prayer. The elderly woman's incantation offered thanks for the family being united together in one place, recounted in detail "who's going through what," so that everyone learned the recent situations of the family members they had not seen, and ended with a plea for the youngest generations, like thousands of other elders in her cohort.⁴⁴

African American southern women, who remained behind, and their male counterparts although they often died earlier, played critical roles on the back-end of the migration trail. Elderly southerners' contributions as child-care givers, property-holders, and heritage-keepers are so intertwined that I cannot speak of them separately. Black grandmothers, grandfathers, aunties and uncles facilitated migration and the persistence of a southern heritage through their support of children. By occupation of ancestral lands they provided displaced migrants with a physical reference for home. And, they helped keep families connected by instilling and re-instilling family traditions in migrant children. When the Benton Family held their third reunion in 1987, the closing note of the program recognized this role: "THE ENTIRE WEEKEND

⁴⁴ Wanda Hickson Dobson, interview by Ray Allen, 28 June 1993, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, (Schomburg Library, New York, NY), 21

CELEBRATION OF THE THIRD BENTON FAMILY REUNION, WAS HELD IN MEMORY OF TIM AND EASTER BENTON," from whom the family descended.⁴⁵

The second characteristic the Dobson Reunion shared with common gatherings of the period is the appreciation for ancestral land and traditional foods. In many families, having reunions on family property became essential to celebrating familial heritage. For migrants who moved into crowded dwellings in northern cities, family property was an immense source of pride. In fact, some families initiated reunions through discussions about the best use of ancestral lands. In 1967, members of the Bazemore Family dedicated a memorial park on their family land to secure a permanent place on which to host their reunions.⁴⁶ The one hundred fifty to three hundred participants in the Dobson Family Reunion preferred the "home atmosphere" to moving the reunion around the country. Wanda Dobson explained that it was important for the family to have the reunion in North Carolina at her grandmother's home, so they could eat the traditional meal, a roasted pig, grown on the family farm. In the golden days of the Smoot Reunion in West Virginia, the family ate "home-grown, home-cooked dinner" at their yearly gatherings.⁴⁷

Third, like hundreds of other gathering families, Dobson family reunions displayed an appreciation for the family's spiritual legacy and included elders who led the family in spiritual devotion.⁴⁸ Dr. Ione Vargus of the Family Reunion Institute at

⁴⁵ Benton Family, "The Third Benton Family Reunion: Family and Friends Day" (5 July 1987, Middle Swamp Baptist Church; Original in the collection of Dr. Ione Vargus in transition to the Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA)

⁴⁶ Bazemore, 5

⁴⁷ Sherwood, 10

⁴⁸ Mary Daymon Hickson, interview by Ray Allen, 10 December 1992, New York, NY, transcript, The African-American Migration and Southern Folkways in New York City Oral History Project, (Schomburg Library, New York, NY), 29; Wanda Dobson, 4-5

Temple University identifies the spiritual component of black family reunions as one of their most distinguishing elements.⁴⁹ Most reunions of this era and the latter fifteen years of the movement hold family worship services and usually reference a family church. The program for the Annual Reunion-Picnic of the Rambo-Shepard Families in 1986 listed an explanation of the family crest, which included “crosses in the crest because of the Christian tradition and the involvement of the family in the church. The Aberdeen Baptists Church in Cass County was founded and well attended by members of Rambo family. The Bethlehem Baptist Church which was in Marion County was founded and well attended by members of the Shepard family.”⁵⁰ Because of the role churches played in individual family histories, many families held reunions in conjunction with church anniversaries or church homecoming celebrations.⁵¹ The 1987 Benton Family reunion program was titled “The Third Benton Family Reunion: Family and Friends Day” and held at New Middle Swamp Baptist Church where the “Benton Family Choir” sang, the family chanted the names of deceased relatives during the “Benton Family Memorial Service” and a relative, the Rev. George L. Benton, was the guest minister.⁵² Likewise, the Shockley family held their 1984 meeting at Wesley United Methodist Church in Slaughter Neck, Delaware. In 1988, St. James Presbyterian Church on James Island, South Carolina celebrated its 122nd anniversary, with what seemed to be a big church family reunion. A St. James representative made announcements and recognized distinct visitors by name, proclaiming them “always a

⁴⁹ Vargus interview

⁵⁰ Rambo-Shepard Families, “Twenty-Fifth Annual Reunion Picnic of the Rambo and Shepard Families and other Families of the Rambo Community of Cass and Marion Counties, Texas,” 2-3 August 1986, (Long Beach, California), 1

⁵¹ Many of the families in Dr. Vargus’ collection of family histories, produced by family reunion committees, mention family churches and their long history of involvement with them. Most of the family reunion programs in the collection also list visits to family churches.

⁵² Benton Family, “The Third Benton Family Reunion: Family and Friends Day”

part of our family” and welcoming them home. The pastor preached about the church’s role in helping people find their family members after emancipation and asserted, “The church was the focal point. And all of those who were lost, all of those who were lost, if they found their way to the church, they would be found,” to which the congregation responded with intermittent shouts of “Amen!” “Praise the Lord!” and “Glory!”⁵³

Fourth, typical family reunions, in the years between 1975 and 1990 incorporated celebrations of African American history into those of local families. The 1986 Rambo-Shepard reunion program lists a “History of Reunion-Picnic” section explaining the adoptive kin relationship between the two families throughout two Texas counties and years of interaction. For their 1984 reunion the Bowser family met in Philadelphia, PA, where they toured its “Afro-American history museum” and punctuated their Saturday evening program by joining hands in a “family circle and singing “We Are Family.”⁵⁴ The Robinson Family held their ninth reunion in 1985 and opened their Saturday banquet with the Negro National Anthem and a “How Well Do You Know Black History” contest.⁵⁵ The 1984 Schockley Family reunion printed the lyrics to the Negro National Anthem, Langston Hughes’ “The Negro Speaks of Rivers,” and “A Black Man

⁵³ Bobby Auld, *Low-Country Church Services Collection*, CSC #16, St. James Presbyterian Church, James Island, South Carolina, 122nd Anniversary Sermons, 23 October 1988 at the Avery Research Center, College of Charleston, Charleston South Carolina; Dona Irvin dedicated an entire monograph to the discussion of a church community she joined in the 1950s, which held a reunion in 1991. See Dona L. Irvin, *The Unsung Heart of Black America: A Middle-Class Church at Midcentury* (Columbia Missouri: The University of Missouri Press, 1992), 229

⁵⁴ Bowser Family, “Bowser Family Reunion: Family Unity” (10-12 August 1984; Sugarloaf, Philadelphia, PA; Original in the collection of Dr. Ione Vargus in transition to the Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA)

⁵⁵ Robinson Family, “The 9th Robinson’s Reunion 1985” (31 August-1 September 1985 Philadelphia, PA; Original in the collection of Dr. Ione Vargus in transition to the Charles Blockson Collection, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA)

Talks of Reaping.”⁵⁶ Poetry was only one of the ways in which black families celebrated African American history.

The culture of these early reunions also included music that celebrated the family. Several artists produced what have become black family reunion anthems. The O’Jays reunion anthem “Family Reunion” on the album of the same name heralded African Americans’ efforts to reinvigorate their extended networks and celebrated the family of mankind as it reached #7 on the 1976 Billboard chart. Sly and the Family Stone’s, “It’s a Family Affair” became a recurring favorite at black family reunions along with the Sister Sledge pledge “We Are Family,” which reached number two on the Billboard chart by 1979. Such songs frequently appear on family reunion rosters today.⁵⁷ These popular reunion ballads became staples at national gatherings as well.

MOTHERS OF THE NATION: NATIONAL MOBILIZATION AND NEW BLACK FAMILY IMAGES

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the National Council of Negro Women and the Family Reunion Institute employed the family reunion model to help revive, strengthen, and celebrate extended family traditions within African American communities. The NCNW, led by distinguished activist Dr. Dorothy I. Height initiated the National Black Family Reunion in 1986. Dr. Ione Dugger Vargus founded the Family Reunion Institute at Temple University and initiated the National African American Family Reunion Conference⁵⁸ the same year. NCNW and the FRI understood that the extended black family was more than an emotional support network. It was also an economic support

⁵⁶ The Shockley Family Reunion, 13-15 July 1984, Sheraton Inn, Dover, Delaware; Delaware State College, Dover Delaware, Wesley United Methodist Church, Slaughter Neck, Delaware

⁵⁷ Fred Bronson, “Chart Beat: Europop Sells, But Radio Turns Deaf Ear,” *Billboard* 25 March 2000; “Homefront,” *Billboard* 31 January 2009

⁵⁸ Four the last four years of its existence (with the exception of 2005) the conference was billed as the “National Family Reunion Conference.” See below for a discussion as to the nature and significance of this name change.

system. The eighteen-year history of the Institute's conference is important to understanding shifts in the black family reunion movement. By 1993, both the Institute and NCNW's Celebration reported over a 200% increase in attendance since their inception.⁵⁹ Their nation-wide family reunion initiatives were not only instrumental in getting black people to visit with one another more frequently through reinvigorated reunion activities. They also helped to refine the public image of the black family and to economically empower black people through their extended kin groups.

Both Dr. Height and Dr. Vargus were inspired to act by their disappointment with the images of black families in the late 1980s. NCNW took inventory in the late 1960s and regrouped themselves "to implement the goals of each affiliate national program through collaborative efforts" and their annual operating budget increased from "a few thousand dollars" in 1965 to "several million" by 1986.⁶⁰ That year, they put their collaborative effort into creating a new vision for Black America by reinvigorating an earlier image of family life in commemoration of their first fifty years of service and in response to "The Vanishing Family" report.

In 1986 CBS, the same network that aired *Roots* nine years earlier, premiered "The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America," a special report from journalist Bill Moyers, who argued that a generation of children was suffering in families with rampant pre-adult pregnancy, absent fathers, and welfare-dependency.⁶¹ His documentary virtually restated the culture of poverty thesis in its investigation into the

⁵⁹ Vernon M. Herron, "Family Reunion," *Philadelphia Tribune* (23 July 1993, Vol. 110, Iss. 65), 1B

⁶⁰ Dorothy Height, *Open Wide the Gates of Freedom: A Memoir*, foreword by Maya Angelou (New York: Public Affairs, 2003), 206

⁶¹ In 1991 journalist Nicholas Lemann published *The Promised Land: The Great Black Migration and How It Changed America*, portions of which appeared in a two-part article series in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1983. In this national bestseller, he rearticulated claims that poverty among black people was intrinsic to their culture and family structures.

lives of teen-aged parents, who were raised by teen-aged parents in Newark, New Jersey. To his credit, Moyers mentioned that racism helped create the conditions of hopelessness, unemployment, and low-self-esteem that permeated the ghetto. And, overall, the facts of his report were true. The major complaint from Moyers' critics was that he portrayed very few positive aspects and very little diversity among black family life. He gave a nod to Cosby-like black families in which parental authority, discipline, and morality remained central to the lives of children and insisted that such was not the case in the ghetto, in which he depicted only one possible example of positive parenting. Moyers also highlighted two black men and one black woman who were working to help instill life-affirming values in disadvantaged young people, but left the viewer with a dismal sense of dire emergency. He noted that half of black teenagers became teenage parents, but only interviewed one young man who did not fit this category. Both Moyers and the young man's mother suggested that it was highly likely that the youngster would fall into the trap of the streets—early parenthood, hustling, and neglect of responsibilities. Moyers found few hopeful people to interview and he also seemed to recognize little hope for positive change. Even as they recognized the problems of America's "underclass," many black Americans were offended by Moyers' piece and its incomplete portrait of black family life.⁶²

"We didn't think Mr. Moyers' piece was about the black family at all," Dorothy Height argued.⁶³ "It was about teenage pregnancy," but portrayed black youth only and "completely overlooking the fact that the majority of pregnant teens are white."⁶⁴ Dr. Height explained to an interviewer, "We're not drawing one single picture of what the

⁶² Bill Moyer, "CBS Reports: The Vanishing Family: Crisis in Black America," 1986

⁶³ Height, 215

⁶⁴ Height, 215

Black family looks like... We have to change the negative view that if a family is headed by women there's something wrong."⁶⁵

Unlike Moyers' depiction, Dr. Height and many of the women in NCNW could point to memories of supportive black communities that were vested in children despite experiences of poverty. Height explained, "Every adult in our town looked out for every child. All the adults felt they could correct or encourage any child because each child's parents gave tacit permission to do so."⁶⁶ Height and NCNW were convinced that they had to create a formidable presence to help negate the damage of Moyers' report and address the crises they observed within black America. She recalled in her memoir:

I knew we couldn't counter Moyers' documentary with mere words. We needed to do something bigger to show *the promise of family restoration as a fundamental strategy* for overcoming black poverty and underachievement. It was time to take action. (emphasis added)

Height consulted "our national family values hero," Bill Cosby and his wife Camille Hanks Cosby, who referred her to their publicist. With his motivation, she and NCNW organizers imagined "an enormous, embracing family reunion that could reconnect people, bring together those who had advanced and those who had been left behind, reunite elders with youngsters and nuclear families with their relatives across the country."⁶⁷ They enlisted the sponsorship of the "National Park Service of the U.S. Department of the Interior, the Smithsonian Institution and the government of the District of Columbia," and announced the NBFRC as celebrating the "traditional values"

⁶⁵ McKinney, 1

⁶⁶ Height, 215

⁶⁷ Height, 15

of African American families and addressing “current areas of concern” for Black America.⁶⁸

However, the Council wanted more than a feel-good family fun festival. NCNW identified their most important objective: “to create an umbrella by which government, public and private institutions, corporations, community-based organizations, the media and concerned individuals could work together on family-related issues.”⁶⁹ They planned Congressional lobbying efforts, seminars on education, employment, and physical and emotional health, and a “film series exploring images and portrayals of Black families on the screen.”⁷⁰ They featured high profile black performers, public intellectuals, politicians, and professional athletes, including the O’Jays, Leronne Bennett, Jesse Jackson, Betty Shabazz, Lou Rawls, and Arthur Ashe, over two days of activities in the nation’s capital.⁷¹ NCNW invited esteemed author Alex Haley to lead a symposium entitled: “The Black Family: a Historical and Personal Perspective” and Coretta Scott King hosted a discussion on “Families in the Struggle for Justice & Equality.”⁷² In one article, Dr. Height noted: “This may not be half as exciting to the media as the idea of the vanishing Black family.”⁷³ The event ran from 13-14 September

⁶⁸ “Black Family Reunion Sets Records” *The Skanner* (25 February 1987, Vol. 12, Iss. 21), 25

⁶⁹ “Black Family Reunion Here This Weekend,” *Washington Informer* (16 September 1987, Vol. 23, Iss. 48), 1

⁷⁰ McKinney, 1; NCNW likely petitioned Congress for sanctions in the “Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986,” Public Law 99-440—2 October 1986; 22 USC 5001, l. 100, pp. 1-1140 Pubic Laws; 100- STAT. 1086; United States Statutes at Large; 99th Congress 2d Session.

⁷¹ Gwen McKinney, “Reunion Seeks To Debunk Myths,” *Washington Informer* (17 September 1986, Vol. 22, Iss. 48), 1

⁷² “D.C. Site of Black Family Celebration,” *The Skanner* (10 September 1986, Vol. 11, Iss. 49), 6

⁷³ McKinney, 1

1986 and “exceeded even the organization's own expectations” with over 200,000 attendees.⁷⁴

A variety of activities were available to visitors to the five main tents on the National Mall set up to host the grand family reunion:

Visitors to these pavilions had an opportunity to participate in blood pressure, eyesight and other free health checks; to learn bricklaying from union masons; to get advice from the American Federation of Teachers for home lessons; to hear octogenarians and centenarians speak about cultural aspects of health and its bearing on longevity; to watch performances by rap, folk and jazz groups; to see demonstrations of traditional children's games such as “Double Dutch”; among the many other events of the program.⁷⁵

Some observers valued the Reunion Celebration because it presented a varied portrait of African American life. Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund was enthused about the event::

This “Reunion” did not seek to sweep our family's problems under the rug. Instead, it gave us hope and showed us ways we can cope with them. In one tent, members of a teen theatre group “rapped” to other teens about the problems of teen pregnancy and the importance of being responsible about sex and of communicating with their parents. A special unit provided warnings about the dangers of drugs... Like any reunion, this one brought together diverse segments of the Black community public of officials, church leaders, artists, educators, and families of all kinds, rich and poor. It included two-parent families, single parent families and extended families.⁷⁶

She was thrilled that passing tourists were made privy to “the Black family, with its long and proud tradition of achievement” instead of “the stereotype of Black family life,” that had “become popular in the press.”⁷⁷ NCNW and their collaborators were well on their way to helping create a new image for black America that would

⁷⁴ Marian Wright Edelman, “Child Watch: *Black Family Reunion*: Timely Reminder of Our Heritage,” *The Skanner* (Portland, OR: 5 November 1986, Vol. 12, Iss. 5), 5

⁷⁵ “Black Family Reunion Sets Records,” 25

⁷⁶ Edelman, 5

⁷⁷ Edelman, 5

encourage African Americans to see themselves differently and hopefully provided a bargaining position from which to advocate for social and economic improvements among black people. This national publicity would also help to demonstrate the variety of families within African America. Edelman agreed, "The Black Family Reunion helped remind all of us and our nation" of African Americans' rich familial heritage, for which, she suggested, "All of us owe Dorothy Height a word of thanks."⁷⁸ Dr. Height was also pleased with the "true sense of unity and pride," the event engendered. She confirmed, "It gives us a momentum for dealing with our problems by building on the strengths of the Black family."⁷⁹

From 1986 to 1992, the Celebration hosted over 10 million attendees with 900,000 attending the Los Angeles satellite Celebration alone in 1992. One source projected that sixty percent of African Americans would attend the 1993 Celebration in "seven major consumer markets."⁸⁰ The estimates included, "100,000 in Memphis, 150,000 each in Chicago, Philadelphia, and Atlanta, 200,000 in Cincinnati, 500,000 in Washington, D.C., and 900,000 in Los Angeles."⁸¹ "Believe it or not," the reporter wrote, "*Black Family Reunions* are gaining momentum."⁸²

Inspired by the success of its first National Black Family Reunion Celebration, NCNW decided to expand their efforts the following year and hosted celebrations in Atlanta, Los Angeles, and Detroit. Philadelphia joined the list in 1988 and Cincinnati in 1989. Business and industry demonstrated their interest in tapping into the millions of

⁷⁸ Edelman, 5

⁷⁹ "Black Family Reunion Sets Records," 25

⁸⁰ Herron, 1B

⁸¹ Herron, 1B

⁸² Herron, 1B

dollars generated by African American family reunion culture and the potential to draw even more by their sponsorship of the Celebration.. By 2008, the Celebration claimed an annual gathering of 500,000 participants and sponsorships from Kraft, Kodak, Coca-Cola, Amtrak, Wal-Mart, and several hotel chains, all pledging their allegiance to the black family in six locations.

Corporate sponsors played an important role in the Council's efforts to serve its constituency and insure that events remained free to the public. "On loan from P & G [Proctor and Gamble]," the events major corporate underwriter, Dr. Vanessa J. Weaver served as the national executive director of the National Black Family Reunion Celebration in 1987. That year the corporate sponsors for the event included Anheuser Busch, Eastern Airlines, Sears, Roebuck & Co., Eastman Kodak, Xerox, Sara Lee, Johnson Wax, and Campbell Soup.⁸³ As in other years, an article describing the 1996 Celebration maintained that the Council served "as a caucus for government agencies, private and public institutions, corporations, community organizations, and families to collaborate on self-help solutions to issues that affect the Black family."⁸⁴ By 1996, sponsors also included Equal Sweetener, Coca-Cola Bottling Company, Nike, Inc., Burger King, and Delta Airlines.⁸⁵ Major corporate players like McDonalds, AT&T, Ford, and Wal-Mart were on the sponsor roster in 2008.

The National Black Family Reunion, sponsoring companies and agencies, and the Family Reunion Institute, all benefitted from the increased exposure of black family reunions. On the one hand, such exposure helped to spur greater reunion interest

⁸³ "Black Family Reunion Here This Weekend,"¹

⁸⁴ "National Council Of Negro Women Announces The *Black Family Reunion* Celebration," *Atlanta Inquirer* (14 September 1986, Vol. 36, Iss. 7), 5

⁸⁵ "National Council Of Negro Women Announces The *Black Family Reunion* Celebration," 5

among black families. The Family Reunion Conference and National Black Family Reunion Celebration grew each year with sponsors helping them to reach their goals as they increased market prospects for their sponsors. On the other hand, increased exposure has often come with increased commercialization of black family reunion events, which bring mixed results.

The corporate and governmental support created a conundrum for the goals of the Council. Following their list of 2008 corporate sponsors on their webpage, NCNW printed a disclaimer:

The Black Family Reunion Celebration (BFRC) is held on the National Mall, which is governed by the U.S. National Park Service (NPS). Unfortunately, the NPS does not allow merchandise sales of any kind which prevents our accommodation of merchandise vendors (e.g. T-shirts, art, crafts, jewelry, etc.) or any sort of BFRC Marketplace. We appreciate your support and interest in the 2008 Black Family Reunion Celebration and hope that you will still come out and participate in our fun-filled, family event. Thank you again.⁸⁶

This prohibition meant that the BFRC could not invite local black vendors to sale their wares, which decreases the Council's ability to support African American economic empowerment.

In a 1992 *Washington Informer* editorial, Lillian Wiggins complained that there were hardly any black vendors at the National Black Family Reunion that year in Washington, DC. African American vendors claimed that "for various reasons, they have been systematically excluded," she wrote. "If this is a fact," Wiggins asked, "why then are African-Americans being disrespected at this Black Family Reunion. It's an

⁸⁶ National Council of Negro Women, Inc., "24th Annual National Council of Negro Women's Black Family Reunion Celebration: Sponsorship and Advertising," (<http://www.ncnw.org/events/reunion.htm>, Retrieved 9 January 2009)

ethnic occasion and ethnic foods, traditionally African-American, should only be prepared and served by African-Americans just as it is at other ethnic occasions.”⁸⁷

Whether or not the assessment was accurate, the sentiment might have been one of concern for other people, who like the members of NCNW, recognized economic distress as a major root of problems within black families. Scant evidence suggests that the black vendor experience may have been different at BFRC satellite locations by the new millennium. In a 2003 article celebrating the impact of the BFRC on the black community and the city at-large, the *Cincinnati Inquirer* reported that the Mid-Western BFRC pumped sixteen million dollars into the local economy, but made no distinction as to the role of black entrepreneurs.⁸⁸

If local African American merchants could not capitalize on the collective of black patrons that appeared at each BFRC, national corporations seemed to find their participation in the Celebration worth their investments. A 2006 announcement and picture caption in *Jet Magazine* read:

FAMILY REUNION TOUR WINNER: John Cater, EBONY Magazine VP Midwest advertising manager (2nd, l), congratulates Patricia Davis (2nd, r) of Charlotte, NC, the 2005 sweepstakes winner of the EBONY Black Family Reunion Tour at the new Wal-Mart super store in Charlotte...As the grand prize winner Davis received an expense-paid family reunion for a family of 15 (valued at \$ 20,000); \$ 5,000 cash; eight hotel rooms (four nights).⁸⁹

Representatives from Proctor & Gamble, Family Dollar, and Wal-Mart stood by to offer their congratulations. The family also won roundtrip flights from the Delta Airlines and the mention of their names in *Ebony* and *Jet Magazines*.⁹⁰ The annual *Ebony* Black Family

⁸⁷ Lillian Wiggins, “From the Desk of Lil: Black Family Reunion: Some Concerns,” *Washington Informer* (30 September 1992, Vol. 28, Iss. 50), 14

⁸⁸ Maggie Downs, “‘Family’ Members Travel Long Way,” *The Cincinnati Inquirer* (17 August 2003)

⁸⁹ “News Makers: Family Reunion Tour Winner,” *Jet* (23 January 2006), 23

⁹⁰ “News Makers: Family Reunion Tour Winner,” 23

Reunion “city touring symposium of simulated themed household rooms presented by product sponsors” offered “a concert, prizes, sample products, and a food preparation demonstration to all those that attend” in addition to its sweepstakes.⁹¹

On the surface, such initiatives seem like important recognition for black family reunions, but a closer look reveals strong contradictions to the goals of the reunion movement as they are articulated by national leaders. The national average for reunions is fifty participants. Black family reunions average seventy-five to one hundred people at the gatherings of their extended networks. While, providing funding for a vacation for fifteen people, is a kind gesture it does not necessarily advance the goals of empowering and strengthening the extended black family. Advertisers, who might get their products used at black family reunions, are not necessarily vested in alleviating stresses on black families.

“MORE THAN A PICNIC”: NATIONAL ORGANIZING FOR GRASSROOTS REUNION INITIATIVES

Four years after NCNW began their national reunion celebrations, Dr. Ione Vargus opened the Family Reunion Institute at Temple University’s School of Social Administration, where she served as the University’s first female and first African American dean.⁹² She had been working with families since the 1960s, when she developed a sociological approach that helped black families “overcome their problems and weaknesses” by capitalizing on their strengths.⁹³ With her years of research on the strengths of black families, Dr. Vargus was very disappointed with Bill Moyers’ “Vanishing Family” presentation and his prediction that the black family would have

⁹¹ “News Makers: Family Reunion Tour Winner,” 23

⁹² Ione D. Vargus, Interview by Author, 19 May 2009, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA (Original digital recording in Author’s possession).

⁹³ Vargus interview

vanished by the year 2000. His report featured a black family reunion, but very few of the positive aspects of it. When Dr. Vargus first began to see “family reunions coming about,” she “saw this as another strength,” and began to study the gatherings as well.⁹⁴ Dr. Vargus amassed a massive collection of reunion ephemera through offerings from families and research visits to local family reunions across the country for her forthcoming work *Finding the Rest of Me: African American-Family Reunions*.⁹⁵

Dr. Vargus, affectionately named the “mother of family reunions,”⁹⁶ maintains that “family reunions spanning the generations help to revive the role of the extended family” by transmitting values, passing on traditions to younger generations, sharing family history, and providing close positive role models. By helping to reinstate communication between family members, reunions also affirm identity and belonging. As a result, Vargus argues strengthened family networks encourage intra-familial economic growth.⁹⁷ Vargus’ analysis of the functions of contemporary reunions encourages more research into the earlier patterns of kinship that contemporary practices seek to expand or reinstate.⁹⁸ Her findings also reinforce the premise of this dissertation by arguing that contemporary black family reunions help to strengthen the black family.

⁹⁴ Vargus interview

⁹⁵ Dr. Vargus’ collection documenting the family reunion movement is now housed in the Charles Blockson Collection at Temple.

⁹⁶ Dr. Vargus mentions that someone gave her this name in her 20 May 2009 interview with the author and Vernon M. Herron, “Family Reunion,” *Philadelphia Tribune* (23 July 1993, Vol. 110, Iss. 65), 1B names this person as Philadelphia journalist Claude Lewis.

⁹⁷ Vargus, “A Foundation in Family”

⁹⁸ See earlier chapters of the dissertation for explorations of earlier patterns of extended and adoptive kin within African American communities.

The Family Reunion Institute (FRI) and its National Black Family Reunion Conference grew out of Dr. Vargus' research and the wide interest it engendered.⁹⁹ She envisioned the conference as a way of supporting families that were already demonstrating their strengths through hosting reunions, which she identified as "capturing that earlier thing that had existed in communities where families really took on each other and took care of each other, etc."¹⁰⁰ She believed the conference could also encourage families "to take on new things within the family and to bring back some of the old roles in a different way."¹⁰¹

The "old roles" to which Dr. Vargus referred included those of social, political, and perhaps most important, economic support. Dr. Vargus included economic topics in each of her conferences from 1990 to 2007. The writers of a 1994 article on the difference between a "family business retreat" and a "family reunion," might have appreciated the workshops at the Family Reunion Conference. These *Black Enterprise Magazine* contributors noted:

It is important to note that a family business retreat is not the same as a family reunion. Reunions are usually held for a day or two and are designed for relatives to get reacquainted. Aside from each other's company, family members enjoy elaborate meals, planned games, and fun activities. Family business retreats, however, are gatherings in which family members also enjoy each other's company but, more importantly, focus on ensuring the family's inheritance and legacy. Group sessions are designed around specific subjects (e.g., household budget, insurance policies, medical concerns, education, and living trusts).¹⁰²

⁹⁹ Vargus interview

¹⁰⁰ Vargus interview

¹⁰¹ Vargus interview

¹⁰² Fonda Marie Lloyd and Alfred Edmond Jr. "Checkpoints: Bringing Family Together For a Business Retreat Is the Secret to Achieving Long-Term Plans and Short-Term Goals," *Black Enterprise*, Vol. 24, No. 12 (July 1994), 22

The authors recognized that white Americans tended to address issues of family legacy in the “context of family financial planning. They have meetings in the context of trusts, growing endowments, and charitable contributions that they’ve been making for years.”¹⁰³ The experts advised readers that a financial planning retreat should precede a reunion if families intended to conduct them in the same span of time. Since Black Americans had “not gotten to the point where we’re doing more at our family reunions than just getting together and talking about where we come from and who graduated this year,” the writers encouraged the readers to “deal with the business” before having fun.¹⁰⁴ It was not necessarily the intention of Dr. Vargus or the Family Reunion Institute to address the economic needs of families as much as it was to encourage family members to relate to one another in meaningful ways. However, recognition of the financial obstacles that often impeded family reunions and observation of popular trends among families, coupled with the requests of conference participants, encouraged the development of economic empowerment topics at the Conference.

For eight different years the Conference offered a workshop entitled: “Family: An Association,” which addressed the economic potential of families. The workshop explained how families develop themselves into more organized structures “over time.”¹⁰⁵ One program description explained:

They [families] incorporate, develop bylaws and scholarships, form family businesses, invest collectively and organize themselves into chapters. Self-help becomes a byword. This workshop will examine various methods of family reunion decision-making and empowerment.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰³ Lloyd and Edmond, 22

¹⁰⁴ Lloyd and Edmond, 22

¹⁰⁵ “Conference Agenda: 2005,” 21

¹⁰⁶ “Conference Agenda: 2005,” 21

Here conferees were encouraged to use their family reunions as mediums for creating business structures within their families that would help address economic duress. Families would fund young people going to college, build collective and sustainable wealth, and pass a legacy of financial health to future generations through their organized efforts. Moreover, family associations would bring relatives together across class and regional boundaries that would otherwise divide them. By using the family name as a basis for pooling resources, black families could take care of the “least among them.”

To facilitate its goal of strengthening families, the Institute presented a standard line-up of workshops to which they intermittently added new topics. From its inception in 1990 through the 2000s the Conference hosted sessions on planning, expanding, and funding reunions, youth involvement and bridging generational gaps, organizing and strengthening the extended family unit, relaying family history, and “documenting your roots.”¹⁰⁷ As they responded to the requests of conferees and observed the needs of the wider African American community, the Institute expanded its workshop offerings. They added discussions on incorporating special cultural events into reunions, family philanthropy, family diversity, quilting, scrapbooking, creating family wealth, “preserving land and historic resources”¹⁰⁸ and a session regularly hosted by Edith Wagner, editor of *Reunions Magazine*, called “Speak Out” to cover topics not broached in the workshops.

¹⁰⁷ Family Reunion Institute, “African Family Reunion Conference” Conference Program (16-18 March 1990, Mount Carmel Baptist Church, Philadelphia, PA), 2-3

¹⁰⁸ Family Reunion Institute, “The Thirteenth Annual Family Reunion Conference, 2003”

Conference workshops from the 2000s indicate several ways in which reunion organizers and conference planners imagined the possibilities for the extended family group to address the impact of racism, familial dispersion, and poverty among black families in the new millennium. Mid-2000s Conference workshop topics reflect twenty-first century shifts in African American identity and approaches to combating racism. In 2006, the conference introduced, “The Multicultural Family: Raising “ISM” Proof Children” workshop, which was advertised with the following blurb:

Preserving our individual cultural heritage, respecting and appreciating the cultures of others, and seeking opportunities for positive relationships builds cultural and family strength. Young people encounter negative messages, teasing, bullying and put-downs. This hands-on workshop involves participants in creative activities and skill building exercises to help protect a young person’s self-esteem that can be used at your reunion.¹⁰⁹

This workshop served as a resource for families raising children in family units that included non-black parents, siblings or cousins, a reflection of the cultural expansion of black American families. Employing the activities suggested in the workshop at family reunions would help family leaders instill a strong sense of identity and connection across class and regional boundaries because children would be shaped within the context of their wide extended kin networks present at reunions. By suggesting that families address racial and class prejudice and their impact on children’s self-esteem within the context of a wide heritage-affirming group of kin members, the Institute proposed a powerful method of combating discrimination in the lives of children.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁹ “15th National Family Reunion Conference,” 5

¹¹⁰ The 2005 Conference workshop which the author attended had an all-female audience, but there was very little discussion of gender bias during the session which focused on combating cultural and racial biases.

The Institute offered a workshop to address the “new wrinkles and new concerns” in “Caring for Our Children” in 2006.¹¹¹ The workshop program noted that “African Americans have always shown resilience in caring for and adopting our own,” but asserted the need to gear up for new challenges “because African American children are also disproportionately in the public child welfare system.”¹¹² This workshop encouraged families to cross class boundaries by engaging all family members in taking care of children whose birth parents may be unavailable. The session empowered conferees to strategize for ways to take responsibility for children in foster care programs, including intervening in their lives before they enter the care of the Department of Social Services.

The Conference also designed a 2006 session to help meet the needs of elders who were taking care of grandchildren and great grandchildren. Although grandparents and great grandparents often serve as primary caretakers, court systems across the country are often reluctant to grant this group custody rights for the children they parent. Legal and social work panelists discussed ways for grandparents, older family friends or relatives to navigate court systems and gain assistance in taking care of the young people they incorporated into their homes. By talking about the challenges they faced, the group empowered one another to keep serving the population of young people for whom they were making significant sacrifices. By hosting the workshop the Family Reunion Institute highlighted another demonstration of how the extended family continued to serve Black America in the twenty-first century.

¹¹¹ “Conference Agenda: 2005,” 20

¹¹² “Conference Agenda: 2005,” 20

The Conference also addressed health care disparities, areas of major concern for African American families in the Information Age, and ways in which the family could help alleviate them. The program suggested “sometimes we don’t ask enough questions from medical staff when we are ill.”¹¹³ The facilitator provided ways to help family members “understand how to communicate with medical personnel to get information,” and proposed methods for facilitating health seminars at a reunion.¹¹⁴ The health seminar also promised “fun with hearing about old-fashion remedies that really worked,” acknowledging tradition African American folk treatments that fortified the health of earlier generations who suffered from a greater lack of health care and monetary resources.¹¹⁵

After the Conference’s first few years, convention, visitors’, and business bureaus were the first major commercial entities to demonstrate interests in and be recruited by the FRI Conference. These entities wanted to sell their properties and packages, but gained more than potential clients. Dr. Vargus taught them about “the importance of the family...beyond their marketing interests” and many became students of the Conference and its workshops.¹¹⁶ Eventually, the several bureau representatives, who were themselves members of families that held reunions, began to feel connected to the Conference. As a result, several visitors’ bureaus throughout the country now have their own family reunion specialists who cater to out-of-town reunion collectives.¹¹⁷ At the

¹¹³ “Conference Agenda: 2005,” 20

¹¹⁴ “Conference Agenda: 2005,” 20

¹¹⁵ “Conference Agenda: 2005,” 20

¹¹⁶ Vargus interview

¹¹⁷ Vargus interview; The Philadelphia Business and Visitors Bureau has a Multicultural Affairs Congress that offers a personal consultant to African American family reunion planners. Their advertisement contends, “With literally hundreds of African American cultural and historic attractions, world-class theatre and dance companies, renowned jazz and heritage festivals and award-winning restaurants, it’s no surprise that in Philadelphia, We Are Family!” See Philadelphia Business and Visitors

2006 conference representatives from the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission and the National Archives and Records Administration Mid-Atlantic Region provided attendees with a workshop entitled “Historical and Cultural Resources for Reunion Presenters,” designed to provide information about “about the rich cultural and historic activities that exist in PA and your own state.”¹¹⁸ Attendees perused the display tables of historical sites and special tourist packages in Pennsylvania, especially the Underground Railroad references, but also kept in mind the challenges of keeping local family histories central to their gatherings.¹¹⁹

Although its target audience and participant base largely remained the same unchanged, in response to requests from potential sponsors the Institute changed the name of the Conference and generalized some of the language describing it in 2003. The conference was originally billed “The African-American Family Reunion Conference.” By 1992, brochures add the subtitle “African-American Family Reunions: Much More Than a Picnic.” In 1999, the theme was “African American Family Reunions: Reconnecting” (the same theme for the 2005 conference). However by 2003, the conference was once again billed without a particular reference to African Americans or any other ethnicity. The February/March 2005 addition of *Reunion Magazine* the conference is listed as “2005 African American Family Reunion Conference: Reconnecting, March 4-6, 2005, Hilton Atlanta Hotel.”¹²⁰ While she changed the name to gain a wider sponsorship for the Conference, Dr. Vargus and the Institute maintained

Bureau Multicultural Congress, “Family Reunion,” retrieved 7/23/2009

(<http://www.philadelphiausa.travel/philadelphia-page.php?tid=765&pageid=288>); The Atlanta Business and Visitors most prominently featured images of African American families on its “Reunions” webpage and offers similar consultation services, <http://www.atlanta.net/reunion/reunions.aspx>.

¹¹⁸ “15th National Family Reunion Conference,” 5

¹¹⁹ Author, National Family Reunion Conference, 2005 conference notes

¹²⁰ “Conference Agenda: 2005 African American Family Reunion Conference: Reconnecting” *Reunions Magazine* (Vol. 15 No. 4 February/March 2005) 20

their focus, as the 2005 advertisement read: "Conference goal is to enhance the strengths of the African American extended family."¹²¹

On the one hand, although Conference planners aimed to attract tourists, the commercial sector helped to strengthen families in important ways. Tourism agencies and companies offered free family reunion planning workshops, websites, and reunion packages demonstrations, which could bring positive results for families.¹²² As far as the FRI and Dr. Vargus are concerned, "that kind of commercialization is okay" in as much as it helps to get family members together and helps to enhance the time they spend relating to one another.¹²³

On the other hand, commercial entities help to shift traditional reunion activities in ways that bring mixed results. The cruise industry, for example, has adjusted to the needs of the reunion planning committees.¹²⁴ They "have learned more about family reunions and have structured more things for the family" that allow members to celebrate togetherness, rather than scatter to different activities during their gatherings.¹²⁵ Other comprehensive reunion packages that include hotel rooms, restaurant vouchers, t-shirt prizes, local history tours and discounts at amusement parks often facilitate planning and help maintain the interests of younger family members.

¹²¹ "Conference Agenda: 2005," 20

¹²² The website Family-Reunion.com, which was advertised in *Black Enterprise Magazine* offers free webpages, planning guides, and a newsletter. It lists books with references to African American reunions, but makes no reference to African Americans or any other American subset. <http://www.family-reunion.com/> See Leslie E. Royal and Monique R. Brown. "Family Reunion Fun," *Black Enterprise* Vol. 31, No. 6 (January 2001), 102; FRI has tried not to hold conferences in locations where free workshops have been presented.

¹²³ Vargus interview

¹²⁴ As early as 1992 *Black Enterprise* listed J. Sales Inc's "'A Taste of Blackness,' cruise as one of the early African American marketed cruises. It offered "a seven-night luxury cruise on board the M/S Caribe" that celebrated the contributions, culture and heritage of African-Americans." See Evette Porter, "Celebrating Family Heritage," *Black Enterprise*, Vol. 23, No. 2 (September 1992), 94

¹²⁵ Vargus interview

However, these kinds of commercial reunions decrease the kind of interdependence that characterized the extended family networks they seek to recreate.

Perhaps NCNW and FRI should combine their efforts. Dr. Vargus recognizes that “presently family reunions just help the specific families,” but believes that family reunions could have an even stronger impact on African American culture if thousands of families across the country combined their efforts by agreeing to concentrate on particular issues at the same time through the work of their individual reunions.¹²⁶ This idea is akin to NCNW’s goal of bringing attention to problems within African American communities at their Celebrations. If the FRI were planning another Conference, perhaps they could combine their grassroots organizing work with the national mobilizing platform of the NCNW Black Family Reunion Celebration.

“LOVE, LAUGHTER AND FUN”: MARKETING THE REUNION MODEL

In the second half of the movement, after 1990, dozens of lesser-known black organizations employed the family reunion model to unite black communities and garner their economic support. In 1993 the Indiana Black Expo hosted a “National African-American Family Summit” in Indianapolis, asking black families to celebrate their reunions at the Expo. The Expo’s marketing chairman, Al Hobbs said they chose their theme because “over the past three decades we have witnessed the deterioration of the African-American family.”¹²⁷ The Expo catered to black businesses that put money back into black communities. By soliciting black people under the reunion umbrella with which they were very familiar, the Expo was able to bring attention to important areas

¹²⁶ Vargus interview

¹²⁷ “Family: Record Crowds Celebrate at Indiana Black Expo’s National Family Summit,” *Jet* (26 July 1993), 28

of concern for black families while also encouraging them to spend their money with black vendors.

The Community Empowerment Association in Pittsburgh began hosting its Black Family Reunion Festival in 2002. The two-day celebration was “designed to uplift the community through workshops on health awareness, social responsibility and violence prevention.”¹²⁸ “It’s not for show,” said Martell Covington, who along with Adam Golden organized the 2006 Festival while working as summer interns at the Association. “We’re hoping that it forms bonds,” the two agreed, confirming that the Festival was not about the needs of individual neighborhoods.¹²⁹ Rather, “It’s about the Pittsburgh family,” one of the young men explained.¹³⁰ Although it was not a “family reunion” in the traditional sense, the Festival was intended to galvanize the community for positive change.

In the 2003, the nationally syndicated radio personality Tom Joyner of the “Tom Joyner Morning Show,” began the annual “Tom Joyner’s Family Reunion” which he produced through his company REACH Media in conjunction with Disney Theme Parks. He invited his “radio family” to join him and the cast of his radio show, which reaches eight million listeners over 120 stations, for five days of festivities. “Reunions are an important part of the fabric of the American family,” Joyner said.¹³¹ “They’re about reconnecting to enjoy each other’s company with love, laughter and fun. And that is

¹²⁸ Ervin Dyer, “Two Young Collegians Are The Force Behind The Black Family Reunion Festival This Weekend: Proud Men,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette.com* (4 August 2006; Retrieved 9 January 2009)

¹²⁹ Dyer, “Two Young Collegians Are The Force Behind The Black Family Reunion Festival This Weekend: Proud Men”

¹³⁰ Dyer, “Two Young Collegians Are The Force Behind The Black Family Reunion Festival This Weekend”

¹³¹ “Entertainment: Tom Joyner Family Reunion Held at Disney World,” 53

what this event is all about.”¹³² The Joyner reunion mirrored traditional black family reunions with a Saturday cook-out and a Sunday worship service.¹³³ However, Joyner’s Reunion also touted an all-black celebrity line-up, theme park tickets to SeaWorld, Universal Orlando and/or Disney World, access to a live broadcast of his radio program, and daily reunion activities. A four-person package for Joyner’s 2008 reunion could be purchased for \$2388.¹³⁴ For this sum, a family could frolic and network with a host of “radio family” members and collectively fund the Disney Empire in addition to the Reunion sponsors.¹³⁵

Without the sponsors, of course, the event would have been impossible or at the very least imposed higher costs on its guests. Moreover, Joyner’s Reunion included a variety of sponsors that catered to specific African American markets. Ford often advertises in major African American magazines, including *Ebony*, and *Jet*. Splenda and Lactaid offer products for individuals with diabetes and lactose intolerance, both of which affect African Americans in disproportionate numbers. Southwest Airlines advertises itself as offering some of the lowest rates in the airline industry, attracting low income flyers, among which black people are also disproportionately represented. Nickelodeon, Cracker Barrel, TBS, and M&Ms also sponsored Joyner and joined the rest of the vendors in engaging the feel-good, fun, family-friendly atmosphere of the collective vacation. For example, Nickelodeon sponsored a children’s night of fun and games and Allstate held a

¹³² “Entertainment,” 53

¹³³ “Entertainment,” 53

¹³⁴ Joyner’s website Black America Web.com is the host site for Joyner’s reunion, which is now billed as “The Allstate Tom Joyner Family Reunion.” See “The Allstate Tom Joyner Family Reunion: Prices and Packages” (<http://www.blackamericaweb.com/familyreunion2009/price/html>) for listings of the 2009 reunion fees, which are the same as 2008.

¹³⁵ According to one source, Joyner originally hosted the reunion at Disney World because he was under Disney distributors in 2003, but eventually he moved the event offsite.

discussion on safe teen-driving. Nevertheless, the fact remained that the companies were interested in growing markets, not relationships.

Dr. Vargus argues that strengthening inter-family relationships is the most important role of family reunions. For this reason she resists the idea that wide-scale activities like the National Black Family Reunion Celebration and Joyner's event really support family reunions. She contends that the NBFRC meant "bringing all black people together, it didn't mean reunion in the way that I use it...It's just being in the same place. It doesn't mean networking together, *really* being responsive to each other in any simple way."¹³⁶ The Family Reunion Institute's approach seems to be a more direct way of empowering families. Even if it was not intentional, by strengthening family bonds, through teaching family members how to use their reunion as a way to better care for one another, Dr. Vargus and her team helped to shift economic situations. Families could leave a Joyner or NCNW reunion having been empowered by a financial, genealogical, or physical health seminar, but without the small-scale organizing structure of a purposeful, local family reunion, they were less likely to employ what they might have learned.

This description of Tom Joyner's Family Reunion is not intended to imply that Joyner is exploiting black people. Indeed, it is important to note that Joyner is a noted philanthropist, with a demonstrated commitment to economic empowerment in the black community.¹³⁷ The Tom Joyner Foundation, which was established in 1998 funds

¹³⁶ Vargus interview

¹³⁷ *Black Enterprise Magazine* conducted extensive research over a period of eight months to compile their list of their nation's top African American philanthropists, among which they listed Joyner's Foundation third, on a list of twenty, after Oprah Winfrey's and Eileen Harris Norton's in 2005. See Carolyn M. Brown and Sheiresa McRae, "America's Leading Black Philanthropists," *Black Enterprise*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (August 2005), 105-125; Joyner shares part ownership of his REACH Media company with Radio One, the

students attending historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) as well as those HBCUs that are themselves underfunded.¹³⁸ In 2003, the same year he inaugurated his family reunion, Joyner donated \$3,064,119 to HBCUs.¹³⁹ He also ran the Fantastic Voyage fundraiser for his foundation in conjunction with Carnival Cruise Line, which helped him raise twenty million dollars in scholarships from 1997 to 2005.¹⁴⁰ Joyner intends for his Reunion to provide a positive atmosphere for black people to gain some important information and be encouraged by seeing healthy examples of black family life. In short, while the reunion does not directly challenge poverty in Black America, its important commercial impact should not be dismissed. National African American figures like Joyner and Dr. Height of the NCNW, who command a substantial commercial presence, were instrumental in promoting positive black family images to the mainstream media.

Depictions of black family reunions are now commonplace on television and film screens, in print advertisements and solicitations from the tourism and hospitality industries of America. Popular representations of black family reunions have come a long way since Bill Moyers' quick stop at a North Carolina reunion in his 1986 "Vanishing Family" special report. Cedric "the Entertainer" Kyles and Steve Harvey, popular comedians who starred in HBO's "Kings of Comedy" alongside D. L. Hugley and the late Bernie Mac, premiered in "The Johnsons Family Reunion" in 2004 with former Miss America, Vanessa Williams. The film followed a family including, a couple

black-owned radio station conglomerate, which owned seventeen of the 115 stations on which his show appeared at the time of their deal in 2005. See Sakina P. Spruell and Nicole Marie Richardson, "Joyner Strikes Deal With Radio One," *Black Enterprise* Vol. 35, No. 9 (April 2005), 27

¹³⁸ See Joyner, Tom. "Historically Black Colleges & Universities," *Ebony*, (September 2006), 36,

¹³⁹ Brown, "America's Leading Black Philanthropists"

¹⁴⁰ Brown, "America's Leading Black Philanthropists"

(Kyles and Williams) with a rocky marriage and disobedient teenagers, all of whom agree to present a united front at their family reunion in order to win the family trophy, which Kyles' older brother Harvey held the record for receiving. The sibling rivalry between the characters of Kyles and Harvey could be found in any American family. Their competitions play out in the context of a large family reunion, complete with elders who serve as mediators between the two. In the end the brothers stop battling and the immediate Johnson family recognizes that they need and love each other more than they need to win competitions. Within the context of the wide extended family, the sub unit finds its own strength.

African American playwright, screen-writer and producer Tyler Perry is known for his cross-dressing comedic portrayal of "Madea," a colorful, gun-toting, feisty Southern grandma, who readily expresses her thoughts at any moment. Released in 2006, his "Madea's Family Reunion" cost only six million dollars, but raked in \$63 million at the box office. Some have accused Perry of presenting a caricature of black women, but "Madea" does not readily fit into any particular stereotype of black women. Her large frame and oversize frocks, could present an asexual quality, yet Madea makes regular confident reference to her femininity and dispenses relational advice with the wisdom of experience. The most prominent feature of Perry's well-loved character is the tenacity and comic ruthlessness with which she defends her family and desires the best for them. "Madea's Family Reunion" is centered less on the reunion than the family drama of resolving conflicts between siblings and helping family members to release grudges. The family is supposed to gather for a reunion, but both a funeral and a wedding emerge the same weekend. This is only one of a series of films from Perry, who uses Madea as a foil

to address more pressing issues like domestic violence, drug trafficking, and other issues of moral concern for his loyal fan base among African American Christians and other populations. Perhaps, the attachment of spectacular family reunions to black family culture drew audience members from various backgrounds.¹⁴¹ Both “The Johnson’s Family Vacation” and “Madea’s Family Reunion” use the backdrop of black family reunions to simultaneously demonstrate African Americans’ familial distinction as well as their similarity to millions of other American families.

In 2008, TV One, a black-owned television network also featured black family reunions as a way to celebrate the distinctiveness of black American families while also demonstrating their commonality with others across the country. TV One’s eight-week reality series “Family Reunion” tracks the reunion gatherings of two families and awards \$25,000 in cash and prizes towards the winning family’s next reunion. As *Jet Magazine* described it, each week the show, hosted by comedian George Wilborn “peeks behind the scenes of a different African-American family as they gather together from all corners of the country to celebrate each other in that great Black tradition – the family reunion.”¹⁴²

One reporter credited TV One with “doing something very smart” by showing respect for the African American ritual. Upon observing the Williams Reunion, which featured “career and life guidance - medical advice, help in writing résumés - from experts and professionals,” the reporter contended that such a lineup, “underscores

¹⁴¹ Brooks Barnes, “Moviegoers in Seoul Will Love This Film,” *New York Times* (27 January 2008), sec. BU, 7; “South Africa: GO Granny Go” *Sunday Times* (29 October 2006)

¹⁴² “Family Reunion,” *Jet* (24 March 2008), 66

again how seriously family reunions are taken in the black community.”¹⁴³ He was impressed that rather than pitting families against one another so that “the best reunion might win,” the host arrives unannounced so that the families are shown operating as if their activities “would be happening with this same hundred or so people even if TV cameras weren’t following them around.”¹⁴⁴ In this type of depiction the meaning of the event to its adherents is not diminished. Moreover, TV One presented portraits of complicated black family life in which it would be “hard for anyone of any background or color not to see themselves and their relatives” in the featured families who “exhibit both the occasional exasperation and endearing fondness of almost every family.”¹⁴⁵

“YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND THE DIFFERENCE”: DEFINING THE FAMILY GATHERING, HOMECOMINGS, VACATIONS, AND REUNION

At the start of the twenty-first century, the commercial presence of family reunion images, technological advances and regional tensions affect black family reunion culture in important ways. The comments of a male attendee to the 2005 National Family Reunion Conference in Atlanta sum up a contemporary debate among reunion organizers and attendees. “See, you’ve got to understand the difference between a *homecoming* and a *reunion*,” he explained. “For a reunion, family members just get together, “but in the homecoming aspect, people return to the family property, stop by the graveyards, and go to the family church. That’s a homecoming.”¹⁴⁶ In the early years of the reunion movement, the two seemed to be one and the same. Shifts in the last fifteen years suggest that the “homecoming aspect” has become optional for many

¹⁴³ David Hinckley, “State of the ‘Reunion’ Has a Heartfelt Message,” *New York Daily News* 22 March 2008, 59

¹⁴⁴ Hinckley, 59

¹⁴⁵ Hinckley, 59

¹⁴⁶ Author, National Family Reunion Conference, 2005 interview notes

families who define “reunion” as simply gathering family members together to spend time with one another and bond through shared activities.

Let us revisit the Wright Family of Edisto, Island, South Carolina at the closing meeting of their 2003 gathering, during which they debated the location of the 2005 reunion and the difference between a *reunion* and a *vacation*. The 2003 reunion marked the first time the family met outside of the Charleston area for their biannual gathering. Their discussion reveals generational tensions and some of the differences among rural and urban family members that highlight the changing significance of the gathering tradition within African-American families. In their family meeting, elder Carrie Wright Smashum stood before the group as they pondered returning to Charleston for the 2005 reunion. “This is a family reunion, *not* a vacation,” she explained, “you go on vacation on your own time and do what you want to do. The reunion is for getting to know your family and your family history.”¹⁴⁷

Over the next two hours, family adults rehearsed the benefits and disadvantages of allowing the reunion meetings to travel to different locations. Most migrants with living parents in South Carolina wanted to come home. Others who had many deceased immediate family members preferred traveling. Residents of the small community of Edisto, Island, who saw family landmarks on a daily basis, were also interested in leaving the island for reunions and combining the family gathering with more substantive recreational activities. All of the elders believed the reunion should come home to the family homestead each year.¹⁴⁸ The Wrights finally came to a compromise. They agreed to permit the option to travel to an alternate location every other year, with

¹⁴⁷ Author, Wright Family Reunion Business Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, 2003 notes

¹⁴⁸ Author, Wright Family Reunion Business Meeting

the mandate that if they held the reunion outside of the Charleston-Edisto vicinity one year, the following meeting would have to be held in the home area. They added the measure to the family constitution.¹⁴⁹

Many families, like the Wrights, struggle with the tasks of incorporating activities that reinforce historical family identity with elements that attract and entertain young people and accommodate regional differences, such as the smaller number of metropolitan attractions in the South as opposed to those in the Urban North. Some families are very successful at keeping their reunions fun and attractive while still maintaining a sense of family history. Tennille Tatum of New York City is part of a large incorporated family reunion, which has successfully integrated family history with technological and recreational innovations that bring the family together. Tenille attends the Tatum Cousins Reunion in Roseboro, North Carolina to “connect with family members and family heritage” on her father’s side.¹⁵⁰ Of her maternal relatives from Bridgeport, Connecticut, Tatum cannot trace family lineage beyond her grandparents. She prefers the Tatum side, on which, she maintains, the reunion is very large, with over 150 attendees, “full of family pride.”¹⁵¹ The Tatum Cousins Reunion has a family website, newsletter, and scholarship fund for Tatums on their way to college, aspects that keep the reunion vibrant. Among the Tatumss, Tennille feels that “there’s just a consciousness of ‘where you have come from’ – knowing that others have paved the

¹⁴⁹ See minutes from Wright Family Reunion business meeting, Atlanta, Georgia, 2003 and Peter and Hattie Wright Family Reunion Constitution; None of the subsequent reunions in 2005, 2007 and 2009 were held outside of the Charleston, SC area.

¹⁵⁰ Tennille Tatum, interview with author, 15 June 1996, Charlotte, North Carolina; at the time of the interview Tatum was residing in Philadelphia.

¹⁵¹ Tatum interview

way; there's a sense of responsibility" to carry on the family named passed down from the elders.¹⁵²

This type of thriving contemporary model exists among others that are less successful at maintaining reunion momentum. The Dobson family reunion seemed to have been waning as early as 1993 when Wanda Dobson spoke to an interviewer about her dissatisfaction with southern culture and what she encounters at reunions. Some second and third generation migrants like Dobson, who are increasingly removed from the networks that sustained earlier generations are often less tolerant of the family patterns they find embarrassing, burdensome or backward. Dobson testified that while she appreciated the chance to get to know her family at these events, she believed that a sort of closed nature of southern culture prohibited family members from sharing on an honest level.¹⁵³ It is precisely the intricacies of kinship networks, many of which were further complicated during the Great Migration, which frustrated Wanda Dobson. She claimed: "You find out all kinds of stuff," like one sibling "giving away one of her six children" to a sister who was unable to give birth.¹⁵⁴ What might have once been brushed over as a pattern that was necessary to family maintenance, such as secretly adopting the children of unavailable parents, may now be more of an affront to contemporary family members.

Dobson's complaints also reflect the religious diversification and secularization of the nation and African American families. Reunion attendees at the Dobson meetings give divided attention to religious observances. For example, Wanda Dobson resists her

¹⁵² Tatum interview

¹⁵³ W. Dobson interview, 20-24

¹⁵⁴ W. Dobson interview, 30-31

family members' tendencies to have "everything focused around the church or around God." "I mean everything," she says, "even reunions."¹⁵⁵ While she identified as a church-going woman herself, Dobson was somewhat frustrated with what she saw as the hypocritical traditions of some of her family members, both in the South and the North.¹⁵⁶ On reunion weekend Sundays, while the rest of the family worshipped at her grandmother's church, Dobson's New York contingent would sleep-in, eat "hot biscuits and grits," raid the garden for fresh vegetables and head up the road back to New York.¹⁵⁷ This may have been due to travel constraints, but for some families the increasing religious diversification and secularization among them causes some not to be interested in church services.¹⁵⁸

On the one hand, like many other families, the Dobsons also faced the potential dilemma of declining participation after the death of a central elder, who may often be the only or one of a few relatives residing on southern family properties. Wanda Dobson believed that her family reunion should move from state to state after the death of her grandmother, but affirmed that she will not attend any more reunions after that funeral. Although the rest of the Dobsons may decide to continue their reunions, sans the "homecoming" model, many families dissolve or suspend their reunions after the death of esteemed elders without a strong conviction among younger members that the reunion gatherings should be sustained.

¹⁵⁵ W. Dobson interview, 16

¹⁵⁶ W. Dobson, 16

¹⁵⁷ W. Dobson, 22

¹⁵⁸ Author, National Family Reunion Conference, 2006 notes; The FRI Conference reflected this shift in 2006, when instead of hosting their regular Sunday worship service which recognized religious diversity among families, at least since 1992, they held a "Sunday morning jazz brunch" that included some of the soul of a worship service and a little "preaching" from the featured Philadelphia artist.

On the other hand, the impact of globalization is one of the strongest forces drawing younger generations to an interest in contemporary African American reunion culture. The impulse to reconnect with Africa is at least as old as the introduction of *Roots* into black family reunion culture, but the technology and travel opportunities available to contemporary African American families creates a new level of interaction with Black America's ancestral homeland. Families plan destination reunions to "reunite" with "family members across the sea" on the continent of Africa and other groups of African peoples throughout the Diaspora. They tour slave castles on the West African Coast, South America and the Caribbean isles. Others invite African scholars to present at their gatherings. African American families even purchase land in Africa, gain additional citizenship within African nations, and fund humanitarian projects abroad.

From the first time it was offered in 2005, Family Reunion Conference attendees consistently filled the DNA testing workshop, which explored tracing patrilineal lines from America to Africa.¹⁵⁹ At the 2005 Conference, this workshop was packed with individuals asking the presenter questions about the accuracy of the testing, what exactly it proved, and how expensive the procedures might be for a family.¹⁶⁰

In addition to this widespread interest in DNA testing, African Americans are increasingly re-interrogating their histories in wider contexts, which include the investigation of ancestry among white Americans. The Hemings family, descended from President Thomas Jefferson and Sally Hemings, a young woman enslaved on his plantation, are probably the most famous African American family to have verified their white ancestors through DNA testing. Although at the time they were refused

¹⁵⁹ "15th National Family Reunion Conference," 5

¹⁶⁰ Author, National Family Reunion Conference, 2005 notes

membership in the Jefferson Family Association, in the spring of 1999, *Jet Magazine* reported that “for the first time” Hemings-Jefferson descendants were invited to attend reunion festivities at Monticello, the president’s former home in Virginia.¹⁶¹ A number of white American families are now tracing their slave-holder heritage as well. Some of these families have invited their black American cousins to family reunions gatherings. Perhaps, such exchanges might result in a decrease in the wealth disparity between black and white families if these new relatives adopt the strident economic interdependence that increasingly characterizes black family reunions in the twenty-first century. Indeed, recent shifts in black family reunion culture reflect African American centrality to the history of national family culture.

CONCLUSION

Despite what its weaknesses might imply, the family reunion movement at the turn of the twenty-first century suggests that African Americans place great value on their kin networks. If not an economic imperative, there is at least a nostalgic longing to restore the former roles of their extended familial networks. That black families have nurtured the reunion tradition amid repeated dispersions speaks to their appreciation for the roles broad kin systems performed throughout their history. The black family reunion movement of the late twentieth century and early twenty-first century demonstrated both African Americans’ appreciation of their family members and the value they placed on their extended networks as having the capability to help improve their lives in the United States.

¹⁶¹ “National Report: Thomas Jefferson’s Black Descendants Attend Family Reunion at Monticello,” *Jet* (31 May 1999), 4; “National Report: Thomas Jefferson’s Black Kin Invited to Attend Family Reunion,” *Jet* (24 May 1999), 6;

The collective efforts of national leaders, like NCNW and their marketing-based counterparts helped to expand the awareness of black family reunions in mainstream audiences. While NCNW and Tom Joyner and less noted “reunion” organizers do not necessarily perform the direct work of strengthening individual families, they have had an important impact on public images of the black family. By identifying their efforts to unite black people as “family reunions,” these mobilizers made important statements about the value black people place on family and what it has traditionally meant to black communities.

If black people identify as being a part of one big family, made up of individual branches, then the success of those families are linked to that of others across the country. If that kind of “linked fate” mentality might have been widely applied across groups of African Americans, it was even more poignant within local kin networks. Strong relationships and significant patterns of interdependence enabled the survival of millions of extended and adoptive kin networks across the South. Those same networks facilitated the migration of thousands of family branches out of that region. Even as black Americans formed new kin networks in migration destinations, many of them maintained connections to their family groups, which created important political exchanges. Moreover, families affected by migration initiated reunion traditions that kept them connected and indicated the importance of family life to African Americans. When the stress of familial dispersion, lack of resources, and underemployment plagued black communities in the North, many of them again turned to the extended and adoptive kin networks that were significant resources in previous decades.

As African Americans debate the nature of their family regroupings in the Internet Age, opportunities for coming together more often and in greater numbers abound. With the increase in reunion activities comes the increase of marketability, which may have the impact of funneling money out of the black community. However, with the encouragement of organizers like the Family Reunion Institute, and their lay counterparts across the country, many black families are consciously once again empowering their extended kin groups and thereby providing greater economic resources that serve to bridge the gap between the wealthiest and most underfunded individuals within black families.

Moreover, the commercial presence of black family reunions at large nation-wide marketing initiatives, on television and film screens, in print media advertisements and in popular music helped to revise mainstream images of black families. The overall long-term impact of such images will be revealed at a later date. As more and more varied and positive images of the work of extended families in black communities emerge within public life, the legal sector may provide extended families with the recognition and support that will help them to fulfill their rolls. For example, the elder caretakers who parent young children may eventually be more readily recognized as eligible for parental rights as American culture is exposed to more and more images of such parenting relationships. African American workers in Corporate America might not have to work so hard to justify taking a day off to attend to dying elders who are not in their immediate family. Such a legacy would be in keeping with the trailblazing reformations African Americans have contributed to the nation in the past. For now, African Americans continue to celebrate the family and use their various interpretations

of it to fight racism, poverty, and familial dispersion even as that fight stresses the very familial networks that allow them to persevere.

Conclusion

“We Are Family”: The Centrality of Extended and Adoptive Kin Systems to African American Family History

The family, especially in its extended and adoptive constructions has been an important resource throughout the post-emancipation history of African America. Throughout this dissertation, I have demonstrated that extended and adoptive kin networks are largely economically based patterns with important political implications that have helped African American communities navigate poverty, racism, and familial dispersion. This dissertation proves that using the family as a site of historical inquiry as well as an analytical framework opens new avenues for understanding the economic and political impact of black family culture and allows students of black families to conceptualize their diversity in new ways.

Moreover, thinking of African American families in broad terms of extended and adoptive kin debunks stale discussions of black family pathology and disorganization and opens new questions about the impact of black families as they have existed over time. For example, when seen through the lens of a cross-regional family culture, the story of Emmett Till and his cohort becomes one that places the Civil Rights Movement in a wider context and broadens our understanding of the impact of migration on non-migrants. Furthermore, without an understanding of the impact of African American family culture on the Civil Rights Movement we miss an opportunity to see an important area of resistance and political participation. Indeed, conceptualizing and acting on family in different forms has proven to be one of the most valuable resources for a group that has been historically underfunded.

Still, African Americans' malleable interpretations of family also appear among African American elites who have gained material wealth, political prestige, and community stability. For example, African American fraternities and sororities, which require college attendance for membership, are prime examples of the impact of familial traditions on African American organizing patterns. For the majority of Americans inducted into college Greek-letter societies, fraternal and sororal affiliations are most important during undergraduate years. However, for black Greeks, affiliation with the brotherhoods and sisterhoods they join during college is most important for the networking and support they will need for participating in the political and social market of post-graduate life. In fact, many African Americans join black sororities and fraternities after undergraduate school for the benefits membership in such organizations provides. Black men and women members of any of the ten major African American fraternities and sororities are part of an elite group of political, social and economic leaders, who maintain allegiance to their organizations and its members in family-like devotion that is evident in the referrals and promotions with which they assist one another. This pattern is a testament to the enduring importance of family as an organizing concept for African Americans even among those without substantial economic lack.

Indeed, observing the ways in which African Americans have manipulated their family networks in order to improve their lives in the United States points to the tenacity of American racism. The social, political, and economic standing of the majority of Black Americans is in large part a product of systematic historical injustice. That African Americans have found resourceful ways to employ concepts and formations of family in efforts to alleviate suffering in the United States is a testament to the power of family —

in all its manifestations – within black communities. Yet, the inability of such varied concepts and formations to eradicate the injustices they fight points to the systemic nature of the problems African Americans have faced since they were first enslaved.

While this dissertation has explicated various methods through which African Americans employed their familial resources and constructions of family in combating the socio-economic and political legacies of slavery, it is not intended to suggest that such efforts are the responsibilities of African Americans alone. As sociologists have argued African American families are indeed inventive as well as resilient. However, institutional racism, poverty, and political marginalization are national problems, which can neither be rooted in black family deficiencies nor relegated to a “black freedom struggle” of which other citizens have no part. The ways in which black families translated their traditional patterns of sharing material resources with non-relatives into political power is instructive for all Americans. In the fight to create a more just and humble society, citizens of the United States and the world can be inspired by the creative and brave use of resources displayed by Black Americans.

This dissertation also highlights the constancy of extra-nuclear familial constructions to black family shifts over time, as it moves into post-modernity. The trajectory herein shows that extended and adoptive kin networks are central to the economic and political history of African American families from slavery into the Twenty-First Century. Family was integral to surviving the degradation of antebellum bondage, through which African Americans had few options not to be interdependent. At the turn of the nineteenth century, as they established their first institutions, African Americans continued to turn inward to their communities and the various interpretations of family, including church family that sustained them. With the Great

Migration out of the rural South and opportunities to engage the economic and political opportunities of the industrial North, many African American migrants and the family members that they left behind found that they were still dependent on one another for economic viability. Even people like author Richard Wright, who wanted to escape his family, were often unable to do so because of their intricate economic dependence. Moreover, the transregional culture created by migration families kept the political issues of the “backward” South on the lips and hearts of the newest arrivals to the “Black Metropolises.” As African Americans endeavored to end the political repression that kept them restricted from formal politics they infused new organizing opportunities with the traditional adoptive kin patterns that had sustained them for generations. And, at the turn of the twenty-first century familial traditions continue to inform the organizing strategies of increasingly modern and post-modern African American families.

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