

**Something We Need to Get Back To:
Mythologies of Origin and Rituals of Solidarity
in African American Working Families**

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My title, “Something we need to get back to,” is taken from a speech delivered at an African American family reunion held in the Atlanta area during summer 2001. Arnold Tower, a man in his late 30s serving as Master of Ceremonies at his extended family’s reunion, observed during his opening remarks:

I think we should get together more, we should learn more about ourselves. ‘Cause in order for us to build--and be positive in life --that may be a key. And that’s something we need to get back to.¹

At one level, Arnold’s statement seems a self-evident call for returning to get “together more.” Many of the cousins present had not seen one another in years, and this was the extended Thompson family’s first formal family reunion. Yet, in other respects, that which he called for getting “back to,” was more subtle and broad ranging. Over the course of the reunion, participants were to recall the hard times of slavery and Jim Crow, the dangers and trials of the Great Migration north, rural and urban poverty, and incidents of violence and intimidation by the Klan. At the same time, participants celebrated more recent successes in professional careers and at raising middle class families, and proudly emphasized that the whole family had “come up” in the world. Amidst carefully recitations of family history and genealogy, they noted educational achievements, breakthrough jobs in management and the professions, and other accomplishments of noted family members. Yet, for all the pride taken in recent worldly success, speaker after speaker echoed Mr. Tower’s call for “getting back to” the shared values of earlier times, returning simultaneously to “the way our family really is” and to “the way we once were.” The “family,” all emphasized, is not simply a matter of the here and now. It exists as an enduring fact and sentiment across the generations. In its fullest sense, “the family” exists most particularly in its place of origin, the “old home place” at Thompson Circle, where “Dahma [Grandma] Saunders” had presided over an extended family household from the 1880s to the 1920s, built on land she had purchased from her former master after emancipation.

I take Arnold’s evocation of “something we need to get back to” as my point of departure for considering myths of origin, within modern American families in general,

and within African American families in particular. I seek to relate the recent proliferation of formal narrative and ritual practices oriented around family memory and history—especially textualized genealogy and marked family reunions—to relatively recent changes in the internal configuration of American families, with particular reference to race, class, and gender dynamics.

In the paper's first half, I seek to characterize and explicate two linked, processes that appear to have taken place broadly in many different U.S. families, independent of race: (1) as North American women have become less materially dependent on kinship bonds and the family has become less organized according to the material interdependence of its members, there seems to have been a deepening emphasis on what I term "myths of family origin" and on marked rituals that bring that mythic, originary time into the present; (2) as women have moved more extensively into the full-time middle class labor force, and sought to balance a new set of work and domestic responsibilities, there has been a corresponding routinization, formalization and commercialization of familial remembrance, a domain that had earlier been primarily the taken-for-granted, informal responsibility of women. The development of elaborate family trees (increasingly relying on computers and laborious internet searches) and the staging of organized family reunions have been driven, more and more, by a work-like compulsion to produce according to schedule, and have been organized along increasingly work-like or corporate lines in terms of committees, work teams, quarterly meetings, and the like.

In the paper's second half, I consider how much of a difference race makes in organizing the particular forms taken by these widespread memory processes. Have the particular historical trajectories experienced by many African American families – including the legacies of slavery and American apartheid, close dependence on white families for domestic labor and related employment, the relative historical infrequency of women's exclusion from the labor market, long-term matrifocal tendencies in many Afro-American families, and growing income disparities between middle class and lower class kith and kin – contributed to rather different configurations of mythic and ritualized family memory?

PATTERNS OF LOSS: DEVELOPMENT CYCLES AND RUPTURED INTERDEPENDENCE IN THE DUAL INCOME AMERICAN NUCLEAR FAMILY

In many respects, the modern family reunion and the growing emphasis on text-based genealogical research would appear to be ritual solutions to a pervasive structural problem within the contemporary North American family system. As Bradd Shore (2001) has observed, U.S. nuclear families are inevitably oriented towards their own destruction; it is widely expected that upon reaching maturity children will move away and form "their own families." Rather than being absorbed within wider descent organizations, the elementary family in the middle class North American context is generally elevated to the status of being a person's "real family." American kinship is thus characterized by a deep structural tension between loyalty to ego's natal family and ego's affinal family: which one is a person's "real family", the family that one is born into or the family that one establishes? Other kinship and descent systems do not pose this particular dilemma,

although all human kinship systems, one might argue, do pose one kind of dilemma or another about the primary focus of a person's ultimate allegiance. The modern American cultural ideals of neolocality, childhood purity, individualist adult autonomy and romantic companionate marriage, combined with reduced childbearing rates and the concomitant centrality of each specific parent-child relationship, virtually guarantee endemic structural tensions between a given person's natal and affinal family allegiances.

As they mature, most Americans thus experience a sense of loss over the initial unity of their initial family, associated with love for their parents and their siblings (perhaps extended to favored uncles, aunts and cousins). This sense of loss is not simply a function of individual personal experience but is a pervasive theme in mass culture, propagated in popular fiction, magazines, television, film, and other genres. Thus even those persons who insist that they did not themselves have happy affective relations with parents or siblings may insist that emotional relations within families were once more close and authentic.

To some extent, this problem has been a general one in Euro-American kinship since the bourgeois nuclear family took on its present form in the mid and late 19th century. (Gillis 2000) Yet widespread apprehensions of this destructive cycle seem to have intensified since the 1970s, as millions of women have moved into middle class, professional and corporate workplaces. This is partly a function of the shrinkage of time available for re-enacting family practices and scenarios remembered from prior generations. Scheduling family "quality time" (itself a relatively novel concept) and rites of kinship solidarity have become increasing challenges for nearly all families. It is far from clear there really are less integrative family rites now practiced than in the past. However, the ubiquitous apprehension of a middle class "time famine" and the frenetic pace of work-family scheduling contribute to the widespread popular sentiment that families are less coherent and "united" than they once were.

More fundamentally, popular perceptions of the underlying material organization of the family have altered. At least at the level of ideal types, the classic white middle class family from the mid-19th century onward was founded on the material interdependence (hierarchical interdependence for the most part, to be sure) of male breadwinner and female homemaker. This interdependence has been largely ruptured as women have moved into the workplace on part or full time bases, and, in principle at least, are not dependent on their husbands' income for their basic survival.

There is, in short, much less of a visible, clear-cut economic basis for the nuclear family's continuity. To be sure, profound psychological interdependence may exist in terms of companionship, erotic attachments, and other non-material desires, and parents may depend on one another (to varying extents) to share childcare. Yet, the core material exchanges --of money for domesticity, of fiscal security for the affective security of the household-- that once ideologically constituted the essence of American conjugal bonds have been altered. Women are increasingly understood as potentially independent labor units, whose career and lifecourse options can be reckoned outside of the framework of marriage.

SOCIAL SEGMENTATION, MYTHS OF ORIGIN AND RITUALS OF SOLIDARITY: AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL VIEW

At this point, let us consider the classical anthropological insight that when one form of social solidarity is ruptured or called into question, there tends to be corresponding intensification of mythic and ritual efforts to assert an underlying sameness among all members of the once-united group. Beginning with the early work on segmentary societies --typified by Fustel de Coulanges' The Ancient City and Robertson-Smith's Religion of the Semites -- anthropologists have argued that the centrifugal tendencies of small-scale descent-based societies are often counter-balanced by ritual enactments of social solidarity. In blood sacrifice, for example, a consecrated beast may come to stand for an entire lineage, who collectively consume this icon of their mythic solidarity, especially at times when the group's practical coherency seems to be in doubt. In collaboratively shedding blood at sacrifice or initiation, male actors who are not consanguineously related may produce themselves as "blood brothers," forever united as one flesh. (Jay 1992) Similarly, masquerade performances have long been understood, in part, as remedial undertakings, enhancing cross-cutting ties across opposed descent groups, as members of differentiated social units embody, through ceremonial masks, the personas of mythic immortal beasts or ancestors.

Such performed "cultural imaginaries" become, if anything, more pronounced with the rise of urban-based civilizations, when diverse social networks and differentiated persons are recruited into formal hierarchical collectivities. Dynastic states are organized around core mythic imaginaries made socially real by the periodic performance of civic ritual. For example, myths of temporal continuity, such as the immortality of the kingship, are constituted through elaborate rites of coronation and entombment (usually structured as reversible images of one another). The fundamental mythic sameness of each spatial site within the (geographically variable) realm is ritually asserted by ceremonies such as First Fruits rites, in which the sovereign's consumption of a token example of the land's produce metonymically is extended to all the polity's produce and its lands. As Benedict Anderson (1991) argues, even ostensibly secular modern nation-states are organized as "imagined communities," in which deeply opposed regions and interest groups are united through shared symbolic and ritual practices, often evoking the epic drama of mass sacrifice and bloodletting in war and revolution. Cenotaphs and tombs of unknown soldiers, evoking the anonymous citizen of the modern polity, come to embody the mythic temporal and spatial continuities that make possible the diffuse enduring solidarity that girds the nation-state.

Modern dual-income families, to be sure, are neither dynastic realms nor nation-states. They are not composed of millions of differentiated persons who will never meet one another face to face. Yet they too are composed, in a formal sense, of persons, who are not generally united through common economic pursuit or material interdependence. The continuation of any given "family" is thus more and more dependent on overt, marked narrative and ceremonial practices that assert a fundamental sameness and continuity, across time and space, of the institution of the family. An interdependence lacking at the level of income is reinstated at the level of myth and ritual.

This, I suspect, is what John Gillis (2000) is getting at in his assertion that we have seen in recent decades the rise of "virtual families." In many families members self-consciously enact a set of "family-building" practices, hoping to evoke or reproduce all of that what used to be constitutive of the domestic unit.

For example, Alice, one of the primary organizers of the Thompson family reunion told me after the opening addresses,

You know, these days, you can't take anything for granted. If you want the family to stay together, to make all these kids grow up right, you know, you have to work at it. It just isn't gonna happen on its own. You gotta make sure the family gets together, if you want it stay together.

Her cousin Arthur chimed in,

Yeah, that's why I keep on saying we need a motto for our family. Or maybe like a logo? (Laughs) Something to put on these T-shirts here. Something about us, that's just about us. So we can be saying, see, we are special, we're a real family, we are serious about staying together. Like cousin Alice says you gotta keep working at it.

Simply being a family isn't sufficient anymore. Advertising and other commercial techniques, the pre-eminent narrative acts of our era, are needed to assure us that family still matters.

HISTORICAL CONSIDERATIONS: FAITH AND FAMILY REUNIONS IN VICTORIAN CULTURE

Two of the most important practices through which modern middle class families work to produce this "virtual" continuity are genealogical research and the staging of family reunions. Both kinds of acts assert what I have termed a "cultural imaginary," a shared set of symbols and common images that transcend any particular person's individual experience, while establishing a commonly apprehended, meaningful horizon of common participation and experience.

In small scale, descent-based societies, interest in genealogy is nearly universal, since descent and kinship comprise the basic calculus for reckoning all social relations. With the rise of civilization and dynastic states, deep genealogical reckoning is increasingly monopolized by elites; feudal aristocracies tend to assert that only they themselves have truly enduring titles and deep family lines, and that these continuous lines constitute the basic armature of the entire polity. Bourgeois democratic societies, founded on ideal of individual equality and mass participation tend to be associated with the re-democratization of genealogy. Inasmuch as middle class consumer culture is predicated on the popular appropriation of formerly aristocratic signs and practices (ranging from suburban "mansions" ringed by lawns evoking European stately homes to "white weddings" recalling royal nuptials) it is scarcely surprising that genealogy has been a pervasive American middle class habit for at least a century and a half.

I am uncertain as to precisely when the term "family reunion" entered the English language as the marker of a specific institution. My impression is that prior to the Civil War, the phrase "family reunion" was used to signify events (such as Thanksgiving, Fourth of July, weddings or funerals) at which family members were co-present. A mid-nineteenth century newspaper editorial argues for the adoption of Thanksgiving as a

national holiday in these terms: "Let this day, from this time forth, as long as our Banner of Stars floats on the breeze, be the grand THANKSGIVING HOLIDAY of our nation, when the noise and tumult of worldliness may be exchanged for the laugh of happy children, the glad greetings of family reunion, and the humble gratitude of the Christian heart." (Godey's Lady's Book [Philadelphia] November, 1858. Vol LVII:463) Similarly, an 1859 review of a published poem describes the text: "Descriptive of New England life, the scene of the poem is laid in the mansion of an old Puritan farmer, on Thanksgiving evening; and the action consists of the sayings and doings of the persons therein assembled in family reunion." (Godey's Lady's Book January, 1859 [Philadelphia] Vol LVIII: 83)²

At times, extended family groups would come together in commemoration of a specific historical event. For example, an 1855 newspaper notice announces, "A FAMILY GATHERING. The members of the Cushman family, descendants from Robert Cushman, the Puritan, will have a family gathering on the 15th of August, at Plymouth, Mass., to celebrate the 225th anniversary of the sailing of the Mayflower." (The National Era. [Washington, D.C.] August 9, 1855. Vol. IX No. 449: 125)

When not specifically occasioned by annual calendrical events or historical anniversaries, weddings or funerals, North American family reunions in the mid-nineteenth century were often memorial undertakings, through which living family members gathered to commemorate recently deceased relations. For example, a Christian newspaper printed a lengthy memorial poem to the beloved departed, preceded by the following explanation:

These lines were written for a joyful family reunion in memory of those who have passed from the "circle" during the sixty years of its existence. These were the beloved and honored parents of the household - four dear ones who, before the age of twenty-five years, had laid aside the sweet attire of wife and mother on earth, for angel-ropes in heaven - and several who, in infancy or early childhood, were transplanted, as we believe, into the garden of the Lord. (The Christian Recorder, [Philadelphia], September 14, 1861)

The poem concludes with a telling image of family members re-united beyond death,

Bless we God with song and prayer
That our hand, though parted here,
Gathers where the ransomed are -
In a happy, sinless sphere.
Bless we God that all may gather,
Passing over one by one,
In the kingdom of our father,
Fair and shining as the sun.
Tenderly, think tenderly
Of the rare and noble-hearted;
Joyfully, speak joyfully
Of the sainted ones departed.

The family reunion, in effect, ritually re-enacted the hoped for gathering of all the family in the “happy, sinless sphere” of the Victorian Afterlife. The reunion of the living, like the poem itself, culminates in a performative utterance, enjoining the living to “Speak joyfully/Of the sainted ones departed.”³

By the 1850s and 1860s, even religious revivals, which in an earlier era had been conceived as transcending or superseding obligations to one’s biological kin, were increasingly evaluated by clergy and civic leaders in terms of their effect on feelings of solidarity among family members. One of the greatest clergymen of the period, Henry Ward Beecher, published a telling commentary, “The Family and Revivals”:

[G]ood as are religious excitements, they have evils and dangers, which must be watched against; and this is one of them: when they do not spring as the proper streams out of the family; or when they go forward only as church movements, and not as family movements. The divinity of revivals may be testified by their effect on the family. If they turn the hearts of the parents towards their children, and the hearts of the children towards their parents, they are of God. If they increase the love of the family; if they cause the tendrils of love to draw the members of the family closer and closer to each other; if under their influence blossoms and clusters of love hang in abundance on the family tree, then you may be sure that it is the true religion that is revived. But if the family has no blessing, and the dew is on the church, you may be in doubt whether it is a divine blessing, or any blessing at all. If religious excitements make home dull, and parental and filial duties and relations tame or tasteless, they may be suspected of being spurious, carnal, worldly. (The Christian Recorder [Philadelphia]. June 7, 1862)

Revivals, increasingly, were understood as occasions for sanctified family gatherings that would properly inculcate a profound sense of “family feeling.”

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. For example, an 1881 volume is entitled, “Proceedings, or Memorial Volume of the First Palmer Family Reunion held at Stonington, Conn., Aug. 10 & 11, 1881, the Ancestral Home of Walter Palmer, the Pilgrim of 1629.” (Brooklyn, 1881). A 1901 article in the *Montgomery County Journal*, entitled, “A Family Reunion” states that “A reunion of the Tate family took place July 1st, at the residence of C. W. Tate, 5 miles south of Mineola (Missouri). The meeting was held under an arbor prepared for the occasion near the house, and the exercises of the day consisted of shaking hands with relatives and friends.” By the second decade of the Twentieth Century, newspapers routinely listed such reunions, with programs and lists of prominent participants.

RITES OF FAMILY REAGREGATION SINCE THE 1970S

How do we account for the mass explosion of interest in genealogy and family reunions in the United States since the 1970s, among a vast range of different kinds of families? Some point to the popularity of Alex Haley’s Roots in 1974 as the “starting point” of the current craze, but the book and television miniseries alone do not account

for this significant cultural and commercial movement. Why, after all, were these texts so enormously popular at a particular moment, and why does interest in genealogy by all indications (number of websites, family history firms, how-to genealogy books and videos) grow dramatically each year?

The answer, as I have suggested, would appear to lie largely in the changing structure and functions of the nuclear family. As the institution's economic rationale becomes ever more tenuous, and as its capacity to establish the meaningful coordinates of experience is correspondingly diminished, many persons have longed for deeper encounters with stable, enduring horizons of experience, intertwined with their nuclear families yet also distinct from those discrete units. Consider how Andrew, a retired engineer in his late sixties, characterizes his deep love of genealogical research:

I can't explain it really. I just don't know...when its goin' right, you understand, that feels so right. So satisfying. When you finally find, right there on that microfilm, a marriage, or a death date, or when you see a name you've been looking for on a will, well, it just all comes together. People saying it's the thrill of the chase and its like solving a jigsaw puzzle and that's satisfying too, yes. But it's more than that. I guess it just means more. Because this puzzle isn't just something out of a box, that you just bought somewhere. It's about you. Its about your family, you know what I'm saying? Its about being part of your family, even though you didn't know them, or even know about them, you're connected to them, in here. (Places his hand on his chest, then laughs)

Sam, another retiree devoted to his family's genealogy, said in a similar vein,

Well, I just feel so alive when I'm working on it, I'd say. I know, my wife thinks I'm crazy going on like this. How can you feel alive in a dark room staring at microfilm or surfing on the web? But when you make a connection its like—it's like the way it's supposed to be. You know, right then, and there, this is who I am. This is someone who helped make me. You feel it then, being part of a family. And frankly, we need more of that in this world.

Both men, like virtually all of my informants who work seriously on family history, continually link their interior state of emotional being to the distant persons they discover through their text-based research. The coherency and continuity imperiled in differentiated households is contrasted with the enduring solidarity and sense of essential continuity they sense in unearthed family lines.

Similarly, the widely noted proliferation of family reunions in the U.S. over the past three decades needs to be understood in terms of the declining functional economic integration of the nuclear family.⁴ The family reunion allows its participants to argue, in effect, that the structural cycle of family destruction, discussed above, is reversible, that primary experiences of unconditional inclusion within a close family domain can be fully recovered. The family reunion rite, like many kinship rituals the world over, is anti-entropic, aiming to reconstitute that which has been dispersed by migration and other centrifugal forces. Furthermore, it asserts that the same common state of mind that

existed when families were more coherent and role-bound, can be recovered. Thus, at the Thompson family reunion, Alice observed during her opening speech,

I know all my cousins, but there a lot of cousins here that don't know, they're cousins.

I know every family here.

'Cause Tina [Alice's mother] made sure
When I was coming up as a child

We visited our cousins and we went to Covington to stay with you
And ...

The sad part is in my generation, the children that they had we don't know them, because as everybody became adults they just went their own separate way.

So I'm just glad everybody came today.

And uh let's really make sure we meet each other.

Alice evokes a baseline time period in which she knew all her (matrilateral) cousins, all the children of her mother's siblings.

In similar terms, Lucy, a middle age business executive, explains why she devotes so much energy to the formal planning of her extended family's reunion, working with her family's "Atlanta Committee":

Our lives are just so busy these days. We just don't have time to see all the cousins the way we used to do when I was coming up, my mother, my aunts everybody just made sure we always were up to date. We knew all each other's business, you know? Without even trying. We had to be in and out of each others houses, everybody's business, you know. Just to survive, I mean... But now, if I don't get organized, and plan all this out in advance, with the committee, to really make this reunion happen the way it's supposed to, then it just isn't going to happen. My children could just grow up and never really know their cousins. They won't really know who they are.

Yet, for all the bureaucracy and pre-planning, participants insist that these activities are fundamentally different from work, since all are motivated not by economic concerns, but by love. At one reunion, a woman laughingly told me, "They say you can't go home again. But seeing all this love, I don't know, it sure looks like home to me!" During another reunion, a man in his fifties stated enthusiastically, "I can just feel the love here. There've been some hard times for lots of people here, since we were children, you know. But this is really getting back to it all, to the love, you know, we used to have for one another."

CONJUGAL LOVE AND CONSANGUINEOUS LOVE: COMPARING WEDDINGS AND FAMILY REUNIONS

What kind of “love,” then, is being celebrated in modern family reunions? In his classic study American Kinship: A Cultural Account, David Schneider (1968) argues that American kinship as a cultural system rests upon a distinction between two kinds of love: romantic love, exemplified by the conjugal bond and associated with sexual intercourse, and love based on blood, exemplified by the parent-child bond and associated with intensive prohibitions on sexual interaction. Of the varied family rites in modern American culture, the family reunion would seem to be the one that places most ideological emphasis on love based on common blood, transcending ties through affinity.

Consider the striking contrasts between the wedding rite and the family reunion. Weddings generally argue for the transcendent value of the conjugal bond, as ultimately transcending ties based on blood. Over the course of the “traditional” wedding ceremony, the bride and groom are ritually removed from their natal family and united as “one flesh.” In contrast, family reunions argue, at least within their proximate ritual frame, for the transcendent value of consanguinity (ties through blood) over affinity (ties through marriage). Legitimate participation within the reunion depends on a recognized degree of common genetic inheritance among participants. Spouses of members of the extended family are usually welcome at reunions, but are usually considered to be second-tier participants. In-laws of extended family members would usually be considered inappropriate participants (or might be classified as “guests.”)

The wedding ceremony’s primary emphasis on the unity of the conjugal couple is nicely exemplified by the wedding cake, which often features small figurines depicting the bride and groom. It is expected, in principle, that all participants in the wedding will partake of the wedding cake, consuming in effect an iconic sign of the matrimonial unity that they have ceremonially witnessed. The married couple, in turn, is often expected to freeze and store a slice of the wedding cake for a year before consuming it, evidently as a sign that the conjugal unity symbolized by the cake has endured over time (and will continue to endure over time.)

In contrast, if a cake is featured at a family reunion (as it was at the 2001 Thompson family reunion) it will not, in my experience, feature any miniature figurines. This is presumably because the cake symbolizes the unity of the entire extended family, a social unit that cannot be represented by specific images since it is by definition expansive and beyond specific enumeration. As at wedding rites, it is expected that all participants will at least take a bite of this cake, but the symbolic unity that they partake of is not one based on affinity but rather based on “common blood.”

Similarly, the treatment of sex is rather different in the two rites. The traditional wedding rite often concludes with allusions to procreation; wedding toasts are often expected to allude to sex and future offspring. Throwing rice at the departing couple is often glossed as an expression of the hope-for fruitfulness of the marriage. Tossing the wedding bouquet at the unmarried women emphasizes future matrimonial unions. The popular media is full of tales of couples first meeting at weddings. In contrast, ritual allusions to eroticism and conjugality tend to be subdued at family reunions (although underlying sexual tension between distant relations may be relieved by jokes about “kissing cousins.”)

To be sure, the formal emphasis on blood ties is partly balanced by respect for married couples. (In all my interviews, I have yet to hear about a family reunion from which spouses were excluded.) Spouses, especially wives, who are not blood members of the celebrating extended family may do a great deal of the labor needed for a successful reunion. But the formal organization of the rite itself does tend to emphasize the supreme value of blood as the key sign of “family unity.”

When questioned, all my informants acknowledged that the biogenetic link between various members of a family reunion, or between present day descendants and those listed in a family history database, may be extremely distant. But they tend to insist that, at the end of the day, blood is still blood. In Alice’s words, “it doesn’t matter if you like them, or even if you haven’t met them, there still you’re family and we’re connected. That’s the way it is, we’re all connected, all from the same stock, all from the same bloodline you could say (laughs).” A pre-eminent sign of essential sameness and commonality in modern American culture, blood and its associated rites thus help constitute a particular kind of “cultural imaginary”, establishing sameness and solidarity precisely where they are most imperiled.

CONSIDERING RACE: AFRICAN AMERICAN REUNIONS

Thus far, I have not specifically discussed race, but my sense is that race is nearly always at issue, explicitly or implicitly, in American family reunions. In many respects, white family reunions can be conceived of as boundary-maintaining mechanisms, actively involved in reproducing racial distinction or, in Grace Hale’s term, in “making whiteness.” (Hale 1998) In some cases, these rites help ground the family in a unitary, geographically-oriented Euro-American ethnos (“We are Swedish,”; “We are Irish”). In other cases, they signal affiliation within a more generic, pan-ethnic sense of “whiteness,” celebrating normative integration into secure, mainstream middle class networks.

To consider how different African American family reunions might be from their white equivalents, let us examine, in turn, how the various dynamics discussed above play out in many African American family networks. How different from the typical “white” mainstream are African American engagements with patterns of loss, developmental domestic cycles, assertions of genealogical trans-historical continuity, and the symbolism of sex and incest? How much of difference, in other words, does race make?

THE HISTORICAL PROBLEM: TRACING EARLY AFRICAN AMERICAN REUNIONS

I am uncertain as to when marked African American “family reunions” first took place. The first published references I have seen date to the 1890s. (See, for example, Williams Family Circle 1995) In some instances, early reunions were organized by former slaves of a specific plantation. For example, the surviving members of the 383 former slaves of John Randolph, who had traveled en masse from Virginia to Ohio in 1846 (following a series of court cases through which the will freeing them was upheld)

held their first reunion in July 1900 at Midway Park near Piqua, Ohio. At this reunion they formed the Randolph ex-Slaves Association; they continued to hold annual reunions at various Ohio venues until at least 1906, averaging 100 to 300 persons in attendance. To this day, the Piqua, Ohio community celebrates an annual event known as "Randolph Freedom Day." (Lodge 1998 As noted below, at least one long-standing African American family, the Goulds of New Jersey, also held elaborate, extended family reunions during the first decade of the Twentieth Century. (Steward & Steward 1913)

So far as I can determine, the widespread emergence of marked African American family reunions appears to be associated with the Great Migration of approximately four million persons of color north from World War I into the 1960s. For many decades, African American residents of Detroit, Chicago and other cities of upper Midwest have remarked upon automobiles returning from southern gatherings, marked by the distinctive red soils of rural Alabama, Mississippi or Georgia. Homecoming celebrations often based in rural churches, to this day occasion great gatherings of extended family from around the country. Organized family reunions are sometimes scheduled to coincide with annual church homecoming days and collective visits to local cemeteries. (Wiggins and Natale 1993:40-41) Even when family reunion celebrations are held outside of the South, they are usually consciously modeled on remembered southern rural homecoming. Markedly "southern" type food is prepared and consumed, stories of the "old homestead" are recounted, tales of childhood summer spent "down home" may be exchanged. Recent patterns of African American return migration to the urbanized South, especially to such metropolitan centers as Atlanta, appear to have only increased nostalgic allusions to agrarian southern homeplaces at reunions.

GEOGRAPHIC LOSS: THE IMAGE OF AFRICA

In some respects, this longing for an agrarian home resonates with broader American cultural patterns. Modern middle class African American families share with virtually all other modern middle class American families the general apprehension that "the family" is less coherent and integrated than it once was. As with other groups, this perception is heightened by the developmental cycle of the middle class nuclear family, which is simultaneously geared towards its glorification and periodic self-destruction. As anthropologist Gwen Neville has argued, medieval pilgrimages were transformative affairs of novel rupture; they took the individual out of local agrarian contexts and exposed him or her to the disturbing and exciting vistas of the wider world and the celestial city. In contrast, modern American protestant pilgrimages, such as family reunions or revivals, function in the opposite way, taking the (usually urbanized or suburbanized) modern person back to "lost world" of kin and land, back into secure, confining structures of tradition, kinship, village and farm, or at least back to their symbolic equivalents. (Neville 1987)

Yet issues of loss often tend to take on particular poignancy in African American families. In a nation of immigrants, virtually all families are aware of a sense of rupture from a remembered homeland (this is true as well for most Native American families, who often painfully recall violent rupture from local lands and communities). Jews, Armenians and others may carry especially disturbing memories of violent separation

from long-term communities in the Old World. Yet the depth and extent of such ruptures experienced by African Americans as a group really is unparalleled in the American experience. Because of the historical circumstances of the Atlantic Slave Trade, very few African Americans can confidently trace direct links back to any specific community or family grouping in Africa

In recent decades, many African Americans have undertaken trips to West Africa or elsewhere in the continent, and report having gazed into the faces of those they encounter, seeking traces of kinship and common genetic heritage. On a recent study abroad trip to South Africa, one student was asked by an African American friend back in Chicago to carry a beloved necklace, and to “give it the first person you see who looks like me.” Such gestures, however powerful and heartfelt, emphasize an enormous gulf in specifiable kinship links, a vast sense of rupture between the self and one’s Old World kin.

To be sure, many Americans who are not of African descent have little direct knowledge of where in Europe or elsewhere their ancestors “came from,” but my sense is that most whites, Latinos, Native Americans and Asian Americans have the sense that with sufficient time and resources this knowledge could reasonably be ascertained. With the exception of Native Americans, nearly all non-black Americans can have reasonable confidence that it is possible to determine the time and place at least one of their ancestors first arrived in what is now the United States. Many thousands of non-black Americans routinely invite non-American relatives (from Europe, Latin America or Asia) to participate in family reunions, or travel to somewhere in the “Old World” to participate in such celebrations. The same, of course, holds true for recent African immigrant families, who tend to maintain close ties with kin “back home.”

Yet for the vast majority of African Americans, who trace their descent back to those held as chattel slaves, such links to a specifiable Old World homeland are tenuous at best. For all the advances made in the field, tracing a family line back to specific slave ship is considered a significant accomplishment by most African American professional or amateur genealogists. It is considered a triumph to be able to trace a lineage back to a specific African community or region. At the Thompson’s first reunion, James proudly noted that genealogists among friends and families had pushed back the family’s knowledge of its own history to an enslaved woman born in 1820. “I predict that one of these days, we’re going to trace our family’s roots all the way back to Africa.” His assertion was greeted with smiles and applause by those around him, but it did emphasize how extraordinary such discoveries still are for most African American families.

Under these circumstances, the wearing of kente or dashiki at an African American family reunion takes on rather different resonances than wearing national dress at, say, a Greek-American, Mexican-American or Korean-American family reunion or celebration. Afrocentric apparel would seem to evoke a particularly triumphant sense of endurance in the face of rupture, a forceful collective identification with those with whom one has been denied the specific affiliations of knowable kinship. All diasporic nationalisms, to be sure, rest on a cultural imaginary that is somewhat distinct from specifiable geographical sites, but the Afrocentric imaginary, I suggest, has especially tenuous links to knowable regions or landscapes.

It is probably in this context that the peculiar features of Kwanzaa, a rite developed by Maulana Ron Karanga in the 1960s, should be understood. In the eyes of many African American practitioners the relatively recent “invention” of Kwanzaa does not undercut its legitimacy. The fact that the rite draws on putative sources from various African cultures, and is emphatically not practiced in any specific Swahili-speaking locale, seems to deepen its appeal: by virtue of its generic, non-localized characteristics, and its marked origin within the United States, it is perceived as a particularly appropriate practice for Americans of African descent who lack specifiable bonds to precise ethno-linguistic groups or locales on the mother continent.

At the same time, it should be acknowledged that Afrocentric practices such as Kwanzaa are in many respects peculiarly American ritual processes. Rather like a Christmas tree, which has been manifestly uprooted from the soil to create a temporary yet tangible aura of family solidarity, the easily transportable kinara (candleholder) of Kwanzaa may be especially well suited to a highly mobile society. Just as the Christmas tree distantly evokes the putative mythic homeland of normative (white) Americans amidst Northern European forests while signaling an avowedly American identity (it was grown here, after all) the kinara signals a generic connection to Africa while re-emphasizing the American nature of its practitioners. Most of the Kwanzaa celebrators I’ve worked with are quite happy to have purchased their kinara from an African American source, and haven’t expressed any interest in acquiring an actual African art object to serve this function. To Karenga’s dismay, many African American families are quite satisfied with using a Jewish-American menorah. (This is even true in some African American families that are deeply committed to collecting and displaying African art in other contexts.)

“I ONCE WAS LOST”: NEGOTIATING SLAVERY AND FREEDOM

Although slavery as such is not explicitly mentioned at most African American family reunions, the deep patterns of loss associated with a history of enslavement, and the corresponding triumphs of emancipation, are deeply woven into these rites. As many classic African American texts emphasize, slavery systematically fractured many African American kinship networks.. For example, at the opening of his autobiography, Up From Slavery. Booker T. Washington states,

Of my ancestry I know almost nothing. In the slave quarters, and even later, I heard whispered conversations among the coloured people of the tortures which the slaves, including, no doubt, my ancestors on my mother’s side, suffered in the middle passage of the slave ship while being conveyed from African to America. I have been unsuccessful in securing any information that would throw any accurate light upon the history of my family beyond my mother. She, I remember, had a half brother and a half sister. In the days of slavery not very much attention was given to family history and family records – that is, black family records. (Washington 1901:2)

African American family narratives recount quests to rediscover long-lost relations, in the wake of sales, escape or formal emancipation. In his now-classic work The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, Herbert Gutman (1976) describes many such family reunions in the years immediately following the Civil War and the end of slavery. As faces, bodily marks, voices, physical characteristics, personal names, and place names were recognized, shattered kinship links were re-forged and scattered households were gradually reconstituted. In the years following emancipation, African American newspapers were filled with appeals by ex-slaves seeking long lost family members and moving accounts of reunion. An 1889 account in the Cleveland Gazette, for example, entitled "Finding his Family," begins with the words, "One of the most remarkable family reunions on record occurred at Dennion, Texas." The story recounts the culmination of a former slave's twenty-three year search to locate his children and his continuing quest to locate his wife, who had been sold away from him decades earlier. (Cleveland Gazette, April 27, 1889)

These poignant quests for re-encounter have, not insignificantly, featured prominently in recent African American literature (most notably, perhaps, in Toni Morrison's Beloved.) It may well be that many modern African American reunions continue to re-enact, at complex levels, these initial post-emancipation reunions, tinged as they were with simultaneous expressions of pain and exultation. I have often heard African Americans proclaim at family homecoming or family reunion celebrations, "It is a miracle that we're still here," or "We are survivors", or (quoting the song Amazing Grace), "Grace has seen us safe this far." Such phrases, of course, are at times used at white family reunions, but not in my experience with same fervor, frequency or freighted significance. At times, family members may even use phrases that carry recognizable allusions to slavery and emancipation, such as "Stony the road we trod" or "the place for which our fathers sighed" (from James Weldon's Johnson's "Lift Every Voice and Sing.")

In this light, it is not surprising that some African American family reunions have become explicitly linked with "Juneteenth" celebrations, dedicated to the anniversary of the day, June 19th, 1865, when Union Forces announced and began to enforce the Emancipation Proclamation in Texas. In recent years, Juneteenth celebrations have spread far beyond regions where the June 19th date initially had local significance. African American military families stationed in Germany, for instance, hold annual Juneteenth rites explicitly framed as family reunion. A website announces a Bitburg celebration:

Let's have an "Old Fashion Family Reunion" for the Juneteenth Celebration. Complete with BONES, cards, basketball, and education about Juneteenth. And what would a Reunion be without the grub.... Watch out there now, your crazy Uncle will be on the grill!!!!
(<http://www.juneteenth.com/international.htm>)

Similarly, on Guam, the Andersen Air Force Base Black Heritage Council sponsors a "Juneteenth Family Reunion." The national organization, "Juneteenth America, Inc." refers to its annual gathering as the "Annual Juneteenth Family Reunion Celebration." I've heard several African Americans explicitly describe Juneteenth as a "huge black

family reunion.” Nearly always associated with picnics and commensality (especially barbecues) the Juneteenth rite now evokes widespread associations with family or quasi-family solidarity; each gathering, in effect, reproduces the mythic moment of newly gained freedom and restored familial solidarity.

GENEALOGICAL DISRUPTION: THE 1870 “BRICK WALL”

As noted repeatedly by African American commentators, the historical peculiarities of chattel slavery pose particular challenges for African American genealogists. (See Burroughs 2001) The 1870 Federal Census (sometimes known as the “Freedmen’s Census”) is the first document that explicitly lists all African Americans by name. Prior to that date, slave schedules only listed the approximate ages, sex, and skin color of each slave, under the name of the slaveholder. Thus, to trace African Americans ancestry before 1870 for families who did not have free ancestors before 1865, genealogists must depend on slave bills of sale, court records, estate and probate records, letters, diaries oral testimonies, and related sources, through which they can, in some cases, assign names to the anonymous persons listed in the slave schedules. When consulting court-ordered inventories, among the most common sources of the actual names of enslaved persons, readers usually see a dollar value listed alongside the name of each slave. In most cases, written sources were produced by white commentators who were at best deeply condescending in their characterizations of African Americans. Inevitably, such investigations take African American family history researchers on powerful, often disturbing, emotional journeys.

Many who work in black genealogy refer to the “1870 Brick Wall,” and emphasize that the 1870 date is both a practical and emotional barrier. Simon, an experienced family history researcher, remarked on the eve of his family’s reunion,

You know, each time I find something new about the family that dates back into slavery times, I’m excited, it is such a wonderful feeling. You have to be so careful, and work so hard, just to pin down one little fact; it really is a triumph, each time. But then I know I’m gonna have to gear up, to get all geared up. Because, you know how it is, a lot of them, a lot of us I should say, just don’t want to hear about that sort of thing. It’s just fine to talk about us coming up, going north, getting fine degrees and all that. But slavery? It can be a problem. Now, the way I look at it, these are our ancestors. We need to proud of them. But I realize that for some, especially the older folks, there’s still that sense...that stigma you could say, this isn’t what we need to be talking about.

To be sure, many African American families have lovingly and proudly preserved stories that date “to slavery times” but my sense is that a great deal of care and delicacy is usually exercised in recalling these narratives. Stories of escape or successful subterfuge are rather more likely to be recounted than tales of torture or forced separation. Stories of a free family member purchasing the freedom of enslaved loved ones are more likely to be publicly recounted than accounts of recapture or enumerations of slave prices as such. Even Simon, who at times expresses frustration with those who prefer he not mention slavery at all, commented,

Well, I wouldn't actively keep everything I find out from anyone who is really interested of course. But if I have to prepare a report for the family history booklet, or give a speech at the reunion, obviously there are certain things it just wouldn't be right to say, not out loud, not in print. We need to treat those that came before us with respect. We have to honor their dignity. A reunion is a celebration, after all. Our people have seen terrible things, terrible things. Obviously. But that isn't what a reunion is for; we're getting together to celebrate the fact that we're still here. I want everyone to take pride in our accomplishments. There's a lot to be proud about.

Simon, like many other African American family history researchers, devotes a good deal of thought to pondering the precise nature of family relations under conditions of slavery. He has carefully read Gutman and the WPA ex-slave testimonies of the 1930s and tries to keep up with more recent historical work on slave families. He acknowledges that slave marriages and family relations were often violated by slaveowners and the slavery system, but insists that nonetheless there were "real marriages" and "real families" under conditions of enslavement. "Our family history doesn't stop before 1870 or 1865," he says, "It's just harder for us to see it now. We were still a real family back then, I'm sure of that."

THE PROBLEM OF INCEST: SLAVERY, MISCEGENATION, AND THE VIOLATION OF FAMILY STRUCTURE

As suggested above, for David Schneider and his students, the problem of incest is at the heart of American kinship as a cultural system: the enormous emphasis placed on the nuclear household as the primary site of socialization means that the dangers of parent-child and sibling-incest are correspondingly fore-grounded. Hence, as the nuclearization of American families has increased, so has cultural anxiety over cousin marriage or potential sexual and romantic links among consanguineous kin. At all family reunions, actors to some extent must manage this underlying tension, emphasizing firm divisions between erotic and consanguineous love. This general anxiety, I suggest, takes on particular force for those African Americans who are deeply committed to tracing genealogical links to enslaved ancestors.

Simon once commented to me,

Our forefathers and foremothers had respect for themselves. Sure, they were sometimes forced to do terrible things. But whenever they could, they only married who was proper to marry. They kept their marriage vows and they looked after their children. They were Christians and they valued family above all else. They might have been treated like animals by the masters, but they never acted like animals. There was usually somebody on the plantation, sometimes an old woman, and she'd keep track of things; she'd know who was a brother or sister or cousin, and everyone would consult her before any marriages took place.

At other times, Simon and many other African American genealogists acknowledge that the structure of the slavery system led to widespread interracial sex under highly coercive conditions. As Simon remarks with a smile, “Well, just look at us. There had to lot happening on every plantation all over the South!” Anne, a woman in her upper seventies, states, “Well, all I can say is we is all mixed up. You can’t stop human nature. That was true in slavery times and its true now. Everybody in this county is to everybody else, I always say!” James, in turn, privately notes that the nature of power relations in the rural South at times made incest inevitable:

It wasn’t like you were given a choice. You might be told you had to sleep with your sister. It was that or be whipped or what have you. Or a master might take a favorite slave to his bed: she couldn’t refuse. And one of these days, the child born from them was going to grow up and she’d be a beautiful girl. I heard stories about that. And the son of the master, he’d look at her and say I want her, I want her right now. You think he cared that was his sister, his slave sister? He wouldn’t stop himself. Happened all the time. That’s real history. That’s where we come from.

To be sure, such assertions are hardly ever made in public at family reunions, beyond oblique jokes that “we [are] all messed up in this family.” Yet, it may be that even the partial knowledge of these tangled histories casts a complex shadow over many African American family reunions, especially in the South. Speculatively, perhaps this history accounts in part for the careful articulations of kinship relations at some African American reunions. Many such rites are marked by a climactic moment in which senior family members recite at length precise genealogical relations of cousinship and affinity among those present. These speech acts, carefully classifying all members of the extended family within an articulated structure may function as a kind of ritual shield, counteracting the troublesome specter of coerced incest associated with the distant past.

MULTIRACIAL HISTORIES IN AMERICAN FAMILY REUNIONS: EXCLUSION, PASSING, AND ATTEMPTS AT RECONCILIATION

Although the possibility of past incestuous or consanguinous sexual relations casts a painful shadow over some African American family reunions, my impression is that black participants at such rites are considerably more willing than their white counterparts to acknowledge multiracial family histories. As was widely reported in the media, in 1999, thirty-five descendants of Thomas Jefferson and his enslaved mistress Sally Hemmings (half-sister of Martha Washington) were for the first time invited to the annual Jefferson family reunion at Monticello.⁵ Yet at this reunion, the all-white membership of the the Monticello Association (an organization of recognized descendants of Jefferson’s white daughters) voted to exclude the Jefferson-Hemmings descendants from membership in the Association (which carries with it rights to burial in the family cemetery near Monticello, in spite of recent DNA test data suggesting Hemmings’ descendants were also descended from Jefferson. (Philadelphia Inquirer, May 17, 1999)⁶ Subsequent Jefferson family reunions have continued to include Hemmings’ descendants, although some white Jefferson descendants remain reluctant to

extend formal acknowledgement of a family bond and some Hemmings descendants refuse to attend out of outrage over their exclusion from the Association. Matters have been further complicated by genetic data suggesting that descendants of Hemmings' son Thomas Woodson may not in fact be biologically descended from Jefferson. (Detroit News, May 3, 2000; Cincinnati Enquirer, May 6, 2000; Lanier and Feldman 2000; see also, <http://www.woodson.org/>)

One of the most intriguing multiracial family histories in American letters is the book by Rev. Theophilus G. Steward and William Steward, Gouldtown, A Very Remarkable Settlement of Ancient Date, (Lippincott Philadelphia, 1913)⁷ The book carefully records the history of the African American community in New Jersey in which the authors were born and raised. Careful attention is given this extended family's black and EuroAmerican ancestry. While recounting with pride the extensive accomplishments of many black members of the family, the authors also discretely allude to those relatives who have chosen to pass for white in mainstream society:

Some of the branches [of the family], for obvious reasons founded on well-known American prejudice, will not be given here. They are white people and happy, prosperous and some of the distinguished, and it would add nothing to the happiness or comfort of them to let their children even know of their descent. I received last week a letter from a lady in the West, the daughter of a man who was a close boyfriend friend in our bygone days, asking me if I knew her father's relatives.... He was not the only one from this place (Gouldtown) whom I had known in the same capacity, who, having gone west, lost their identity of color, and become soldiers and officers in the war, and had raised honored families. Others I have known in other spheres of life as well. If their posterity can be called "deceived" I would not undeceive them. (Steward & Steward 1913: 216)

The book also contains several detailed accounts of early 20th century family reunions held by the extended Gould family within Gouldtown, accompanied by formally posed photographs of these celebratory gatherings. One reprinted local newspaper story reads,

The Gould Reunion. One hundred and thirty took dinner at the Gould family reunion yesterday, and the Gould descendants were present from the surrounding country, from Salem County, Philadelphia, New York, Boston, Atlantaic City, Cape May, Millville, and from the West. There was an abundance of chicken pot pie, fried chicken, roast meats, etc and melons, fruits, grapes and ice cream. A delightful day and evening were spent. Service took photographs of the group. (Steward and Steward 1913: 157)

Another reprinted local newspaper account of a Gould family reunion in the book notes that the family is poor but not prone to inherited diseases, and that "While all these people are truly Americans of several generations, they are all of mixed European and African descent—they are all colored people." (Ibid)

WORK, GENDER AND GENERATION: ASSESSING MATRIFOCAL ORIENTATIONS

In the first half of this essay, I suggested that the growing proliferation of routinized genealogical interest and family reunions across the American middle class over the past three decades needs to be understood with reference to the widespread entrance of women into the workforce since the 1970s. As the domestic unit has played less and less a direct role in meeting the economic and material needs of its members, the idealized family as a cultural imaginary has come to occupy increasingly prominent position in American ritual and narrative life, through such practices as genealogical research, online family history chatrooms, and organized family reunions. As informal, unmarked practices of “kinwork” long performed by women have been subsumed or pressured by women’s paid labor responsibilities there seems to have emerged a corresponding idealization of an earlier imagined moment of deeper, more “authentic” family solidarity centered on nurturing mothers.

How precisely have these dynamics played out in most African American families? Historically, African American women were rarely enclaved from the wage economy. They did not as a group undergo the collective experience of being solely homemakers or of then being thrust en masse into the workforce. Taken as a group, African American women have for many generations juggled home and work responsibilities. They often recall with pride their foremothers’ skills at providing financially, materially, spiritually and emotionally for their extended families. As she took a break from the kitchen during the Thompson family reunion, Alice remarked, “We come from a long line of strong women. They always worked, never shirked. Always got a job, whatever it took, to put food on the table.” In that sense, the ideal-typical image of the white family’s historically progression, re-oriented from the stay-at-home mom to the working mom, holds little direct resonance for most African American families.

However, since the 1970s African American women have experienced, like many of their white women counterparts, a general process of increasing incorporation into professional, managerial and executive workforces. This process has complicated, but not necessarily altered, the long-term matrifocal tendency in the organization of many African American families. Alice, an assistant vice president in a local service company, commented,

Well, if you ask me, black women just have to work harder than ever these days. It isn’t enough just to feed and clothe the kids; we need to get them ready for the real world. That means educational opportunities, it means SAT review sessions, after school activities, all that. And we have to show them in our own lives what it means to be a proud black professional. You know, we can’t always count on our men for that, these days, with all the problems. Sometimes we can, but not always. So we just have to do it all! (laughs)

Her cousin Janet agreed, noting,

Let’s get real. Not every African American man can deal with a sister who’s a successful executive. Plus there’s always that pull, you know, towards a less

savory lifestyle. So who's going to look after everything? It has to be women; we've always been the foundation of the African American home.

To a significant extent, African American family reunions may be viewed as dramatic performances emphasizing the central significance of women, especially senior women, in the history of the family. In virtually all the reunions I've observed, at least one older woman is placed at the front of the gathering, to recount stories of the old days and recite genealogical connections. (In the one instance when this did not happen, the matriarch remained furious at the organizers for weeks.) Often these speeches are entirely devoted to praising the speaker's own foremothers. At the Thompson reunion, Susan, a woman in her upper sixties, described her memories of the maternal grandmother who had raised her,

She taught me how to cook, iron. She's the one who taught me those things. She was mean! (Laughter) She was something else! I remember who raised me!

When Arnold, acting as the Master of Ceremonies, playfully told Susan, "You told me you was the black sheep of the family," she responded, "I'm the one that kept 'em all straight," to much merriment from the women present.

At several times during this event, extensive praise was given by speakers to the women who organized the reunion and who had prepare and served most of the food. This food was explicitly compared to food prepared long ago by long-departed grandmothers. The modern technocratic skills of women are also often emphasized: many reunions feature beautifully word-processed and professionally designed family history pamphlets and booklets, nearly always produced by women.

At times, respect for senior women is expressed in a humorous form. Arnold, for example, declared as he gestured towards the family matriarchs, "We got some more food coming. We gonna shake down in a while. Them old folks can shake that body down." Hearing these words, the middle-aged women present shrieked, laughed and applauded, and then ran forward to embrace their aged female relatives.

WOMEN PROMOTING MEN: GENEALOGICAL RECOVERY AND THE RESTORATION OF MALE DIGNITY

Maya Angleou's 1998 film, Down in the Delta, frames one African American woman's search for her place in the world around a quest to recover the old silver candelabra for which her enslaved forefather was sold. Her great, great grandfather is forever lost, but the candelabra, named "Nathan" in his honor, endures; its restoration to the Alfie Woodward character, and the possibility of her passing on this object and its story to her troubled son, are key to her salvation.

These gender dynamics – in which women bear the burden of restoring shattered family lineal continuity (largely on behalf of their imperiled sons) -- are central to understanding the particular logic of family reunions in many African American households. For all the teasing and complaints, Alice, Janet and other women in the

extended Thompson family express enormous respect for economically productive and “decent” African American men. They proudly recount the occupational and educational achievements of their successful male relations. The women also noted that in principle, menfolk should take the responsibility for barbecuing and preparing brunswick stew, “like at a real homecoming.”

Although virtually all of the pre-planning for the first Thompson reunion was done by women, all these planners insisted that the Master of Ceremonies had to be Arnold or another man who held a high status, well-paid job. “After all,” Alice said, “the boys need a role model.” Don’t girls need a positive role model, I asked, suggesting that a woman could have MC’d just as well. Janet laughed, “Well, the girls know what their mothers have accomplished. It’s the boys we have to worry about. They need to see what responsible man is like.” Alice agreed,

Sometimes I think that’s the most important thing we’re doing at the reunion: helping our boys grow up to be proud black men. You can’t get far in this world without family and without discipline. I think this is reminding them of that, what it means to the head of a household and take care of their family.

For so long, the women emphasized, African American men were humiliated and denigrated by dominant white society. At reunions, as in churches, noted Janet, “a man can really stand up and be counted, as a leader of the community. That’s a beautiful thing to see.”

CONCLUSION: “SOMETHING WE NEED TO GET BACK TO”

What, then, was the “something” that Arnold Tower insisted, “we need to get back to”? In some respects, his call parallels those heard at virtually all modern American family reunions. He believes, like most Americans, that the past was once characterized by more authentic family bonds, by greater love and emotional security, by stronger discipline and firmer moral values. By gathering together, consuming common food and sharing old stories, we all hope to restore a frayed sense of togetherness and, perhaps, regain a lost covenant. As has been true since the mid-nineteenth century, the bourgeois domestic sphere is repeatedly contrasted with the unruly external zone of commerce and competition. As civil society is said to disintegrate, the family is touted as a secure refuge in an uncertain world. Genealogical inquiry, elaborate family trees, and organized family gatherings provide stable anchorings of self in a rapidly shifting social and cultural field. In an era when the family’s overt economic rationale continues to diminish, ritual enactments of the institution’s moral and symbolic significance strike most Americans as more urgent than ever.

Yet, clearly, the “something” evoked by Arnold is not precisely the same nostalgic space that is celebrated at many mainstream white family reunions. Arnold is well versed in the peculiar horrors of slavery and Jim Crow, the daily indignities of life before the Civil Rights movement, and the grinding poverty experienced by many of his ancestors in the rural South. Nor, in contrast to many of his white counterparts, does he look back nostalgically to a time when the women of his family were exclusively housewives, enacting only “traditional” gender roles. Like the women who spoke at the

reunion, Arnold emphasized the strength and economic resilience of his foremothers, many of whom, he emphasized, had worked as domestics, cooks, laundresses and farm workers to provide for their families.

For many African Americans, I suspect, genealogical narratives and family reunion provide more than just appealing zones of security and emotional validation; they appear to function as primary sites of creative self-fashioning and the social negotiation of community. Through complex poetic performances, family members allude both to the pain and terror of their common history, while enacting ritual narratives of fortitude and triumph. In so doing, they ritually reconcile diverse, even contradictory aspects of their history and identity. A woman may present herself both as heir to the culinary capacities of her rural foremothers while also accomplished in cosmopolitan and technological domains. A man may allude to horrific attacks on the masculinity of his forefathers, while presenting himself as a master of his own destiny. Historical and genealogical recitations may simultaneously imply past violations of family coherency while effectively enacting the positive restoration of proper kinship relations.

In this light, Arnold's admonition that family reunions and the process of "getting back to" a lost time are necessary, "in order to build and be positive in life" may carry deeper resonances than the standard American nostalgic exhortations for old-fashioned self-improvement. The cultural imaginary produced by him and his relatives is structured around a re-enacted mythic narrative of bondage and liberation, loss and recovery, sorrow and celebration. Subtly evoking the long historical shadows of racism and exclusion, African American family reunions are complex ritual arenas through which past adversity is dramatized, toyed with, and ultimately transcended.

NOTES

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¹ All informants and consultants cited in this paper are identified by pseudonyms.

² Similarly, the 1855 published memoir “Ada Gray” by Annie Read, contains the line, “Mrs. Read at first looked a little dissatisfied at the addition to the social circle, for, unlike her cordial husband, she was not inclined to have a stranger at the family reunion.” (Godey’s Lady Book [Philadelphia] December, 1855 Vol LI page 496)

³ This older memorial function of family reunions evidently endures in many families. Guests arriving at the 2001 Thompson family reunion, for example, all passed through an alcove in which were displayed many photographs, “in remembrance” of dead relations, including an adolescent young woman who had died the previous year. During the formal program, a prayer was offered in honor of the “foremothers and forefathers who paved the way for us, and who have been called Home.”

⁴ My impression is that large-scale family reunions, involving near and distant kin members who gather together for no other manifest purpose than to come together (in contrast to gatherings for such purposes as weddings or funerals) are primarily a North American phenomenon. The French “reunion de famille,” in contrast, typically involves comparatively close relations, within the first cousin range (Herve Varenne: personal communication). Gwen Neville (1988) suggests that American Protestant family reunions and collective religious revivals are largely patterned on Scots clan gatherings.

⁵ The invitation to the Hemmings' descendants had been extended by Los Angeles screenwriter Lucian Truscott, a white man, while appearing on the television show "Oprah." Truscott denounced white Jefferson descendants who had refused to recognize the Hemmings descendants' claims, asserting that his white relations were "acting like two-bit redneck diner owners in 1955 who are happily denying seating to black people..But I'm going to fight them. I'm going to make it so painful for them to keep the Hemingses out that it will be easier to let them in. I'm going to make their lives a living hell." (Washington Post, May 15, 1999)

⁶ See, as well, <http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/DailyNews/jefferson990516.html>

⁷ I am deeply grateful to Randall Burket for informing me of this extraordinary text.

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