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Requiem for Cassandra:
a Black Feminist Examination of Black Sitcoms
from Before the 1990's

By

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Abstract

From rollbacks in health care policy, to regressions in the ways everyday people have been engaging with conversations on relationships, the World post 2020 has been marked by a retrenchment of the *Familial Order*. For many the idea of a family conjures feelings of comfort and care, while for others it can conjure feelings of trauma and abandonment; however, rarely, does anyone hear “family” and think world building, child trafficking, or systematic and routine murder. This all-spells particular danger for Black people who have become largely entranced by the American farces of hope, redemption, and worst of all, representation especially as they seem to be enabled by proximity to or location in a legitimized family. The impetus of this project was the recognition of a need for an intervention which synthesized the research on *the Family* while providing a framework and a set of accessible references that could together, help rewrite our knowledge on this problem.

Requiem for Cassandra draws on both Afropessimism and Black Feminism to interrogate the notions of *the Family* which animated 3 popular shows that emerged within the first era of Black sitcoms— *Good Times* (1974-1979), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and *Family Matters* (1989-1997). The selection criteria for these sitcoms were simple: they had incredibly high viewership, lasting cultural impacts, and emerged following a similar yet not-too-distant moment of national crisis—the Civil Rights Movement. Following said crisis, certain individuals took it upon themselves to construct these shows as interventions to the general conscience. Iteratively, they sought not only to ameliorate the relationships between Black and white people, but to do so through comforting and recognizable structures. These shows were to put the entire American public at ease and usher in a new era of social integration; however, if what Black Feminists have suggested about *the Family*, and what Afropessimists have suggested both about representation and the epistemically antagonistic relationship between Blackness and whiteness, is correct, what does that suggest about the true potential this type of intervention? What is the ontology of *the Family*, especially when situated in these sitcoms, such that it was to have such great power?

The argument proposes that, following moments of national crisis, “the Family” reemerges to reestablish and secure the interests of the Western ruling class. For Black people, these interests, include a reminder of our enslaved origins and the thinly veiled hope that we may take pride and joy in “returning.” With these considerations in mind, this project makes use of the Trojan Horse as a metaphor for falsely ameliorative war strategies, but focuses on the location of Cassandra in the story in order to construct a framework with the potential to clarify, the roles of the mother, the father, and the children as they are sequentially and propagandistically positioned both on *and* off screen in relation to these shows. In so doing *Requiem for Cassandra* presents a revelation on the ways that *the Family* in the modern era not only takes its cues from Atlantic slavery, but particularly and systematically serves to (1) situate the Black mother as a *corporeal ruse* which distracts from (2) the Black cis het male’s attempt to develop himself according to a hegemonic and humanizing form of masculinity, that is empowered specifically by and through the trafficking and sexual exploitation of the girls positioned as daughters. To intervene on this clear and present danger, the third movement of the project suggests a turning away from this *Familial order*, toward a *choral praxis* which essentially emphasizes what so many Black Feminists have been telling us all along: abolish the patriarchy, queer your politics, and go find you some real community.

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**Intro –
Statement of the Problem**

The argument proposes that the struggle of our new millennium will be one between the ongoing imperative of securing the well-being of our present ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human, Man, which overrepresents itself as if it were the human itself, and that of securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioral of the human species itself

– Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom”

Actually claiming the monstrosity (of a female with the potential to “name”), which her culture imposes in blindness, “Sapphire” might rewrite after all a radically different text for female empowerment

– Hortense Spillers, “Mama’s Baby Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book”

She was fighting. They were fighting. They were fighting with each other. And I had become the difference between them.

– June Jordan, *Soldier: A Poet’s Childhood*

Requiem for Cassandra pulls from war mythology and music theory to create a metaphor for the work of this paper. In Greek mythology Cassandra represents a harbinger of doom. The beautiful daughter of King Priam who was cursed by the god Apollo to prophesy but never be believed is an archetypal literary device that is used to signal to the reader that an apocalypse—which the other characters will be none the wiser to—is approaching. Her condition and her placement in the story of the Trojan horse is particularly interesting because it is reminiscent of the ways Black feminists and others who critically engage with Anti-Black world orders have been naming the conditions of the world as war, and the specific mechanisms by which that war is waged, only to be ignored or never believed. As I invoke the word requiem, I speak to a song for the mass in the wake of a death. The death in question is not simply of the character Cassandra, but of the people and the stories she represents. Among many other lines of thought to be revealed, the argument proposes that in the time when we need them most, Black feminist

epistemologies have been abandoned if not killed off, and that we must sing for them a requiem not only for the simple sake of remembrance or recovery, but the survival of impending doom.

For the past few years, we have been seeing a resurgence of nuclear family ideals. In policy, clumps of cells are being given more rights than people who've already been born often at the risk of the lives and freedoms of those who're already in the world in addition to divorce being made more difficult; across the country femicide is on the rise and queerness is under siege; and the question of child rearing has become all but abandoned save for the few power hungry maniacs who wish to control the future of the country through the bodies, minds, and (potential) labor of the youth. At the same time Black people have become even more insulated in their identities. To build on the sequence of labels Hortense Spillers outlines in the intro to her iconoclastic 1987 work, "Mama's Baby Papas Maybe: An American Grammar Book," I name the alpha man, pick-me, boy mom, girl dad, divine feminine and masculine, and the sassy man as those identities which have become emblematic of the ways that we orient ourselves and understand each other, all in relation to a certain familial ordering and naming convention. Similar to Spillers in her time, it would seem as though our critical discourses push us further to the consideration of gender undecidability, yet it would also seem as if there are a number of interlocking identities, becoming more visible especially within Black digital communities, which would instead prefer to attend to traditional modes of identification and relation, and namely those which can be triangulated to the roles of the mother, the father, the child, and the home.

This is troubling for a number of reasons. First, the institution of neoliberalism has disrupted the historical relationship between the family and Western political theory¹ which has

¹ Eichner, Maxine. 2010. *The Supportive State : Families, Government, and America's Political Ideals*. Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press.

obscured its role in Western political ontology. However, if we were to recall the family's prior station, dating back even to the time of Aristotle² (if not further), not only has it traditionally been regarded as the cellular unit of the state³, but even the paradigmatic order of/for fascism⁴. If the threat of fascism wasn't clear enough, we should remember that every modern particular expression of fascism has taken its cues from if not been wholly based in Atlantic Slavery⁵ and its legacies. Recognizing the stakes of such a resurgence, Critical Black scholars and especially (but not exhaustively) Black feminists at least beginning in the 1970's took specific care to challenge and even upend nuclear family ideals. By focusing on the recovery of a Black female subject "with the capacity to 'name'"⁶, thinkers like Spillers went so far as to challenge the assumptions of Black gender which American policy makers like Daniel Patrick Moynihan took as fact. In "Mama's Baby Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" which is still one of the most salient critiques of gender and the family almost four full decades later, she worked to outline the impossibility of Black identity formation except that which remains ripe for the degradation and exploitation by colonizing Western interests and ideologies, and how one of those primary interests seemed/s to be the instantiation of the Western patrilineal kinship structure coupled with the monogamous nuclear family. Thinkers like Patricia-Hill Collins, Saidiya Hartman, and June Jordan executed similar plans by also recovering the Black female subject to disrupt the separatist perception of the Western world, as exemplified by the public private/private separation of and the hierarchical (enslaving) conditions within the Family⁷, through descriptions

² David, Joseph E. 2020. *Kinship, Law, and Politics : An Anatomy of Belonging*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

³ Engels, Friedrich. (1884) 2000. *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Marxist Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>.

⁴ David, Joseph E. 2020. *Kinship, Law, and Politics : An Anatomy of Belonging*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

⁵ Mbembe, Achille. 2019. *Necropolitics*. Durham: Duke University Press.

⁶ Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

⁷ Engels, Friedrich. (1884) 2000. *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. Marxist Internet Archive. <https://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1884/origin-family/index.htm>.

of the treatments of *captive flesh*⁸ in the form of the Black woman's body. Respectively, they demonstrated the collapsibility of various dimensions of the Western world⁹, as well as the ways the domestic and its conscripted labors can act as a prison¹⁰, if not a war zone¹¹. The second challenge seems to be in the large-scale rejection or abandoning of *these* ideas.

To begin thinking of a potential solution, the first challenge is locating the or at least a site of rejection and abandonment, for which I propose the examination of a time a little before the 80s when a moment of national crisis threatened the familial paradigm. As Alexis de Tocqueville notes in his work, *Democracy In America*, any movement by a previously oppressed group for their rights, constitutes a national crisis¹². Through every American national crisis, familial analogies used by philosophers and politicians¹³ alike confirm that the response has been a return to the paradigmatic order. One of the clearest expressions of the utility of nuclear family values was in the 1950s when the nuclear family reached its peak in the midst of Cold War anxieties¹⁴. The uniform structuring helped to regulate and cohere the fearful society. Black people have always existed under siege so logically the potential for Black liberation has always meant war, which is to say that in at least 2 ways, the civil rights movement would have constituted a national crisis, and especially one worthy of a rearticulation of the genocidal paradigm. What's troubling in this pattern is not simply the return to nuclear family values in moments of crisis, but the fact that Black cis het men seem to have cosigned this order to some

⁸ Spillers, Hortense J. 1987. "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book." *Diacritics* 17 (2): 64–81. <https://doi.org/10.2307/464747>.

⁹ Collins, Patricia Hill. 1998. "It's All in the Family: Intersections of Gender, Race, and Nation." *Hypatia* 13 (3): 62–82. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1527-2001.1998.tb01370.x>.

¹⁰ Hartman, Saidiya. 2020. *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Social Upheaval*. S.L.: W W Norton.

¹¹ Jordan, June. 2009. *Soldier*. Civitas Books.

¹² Tocqueville, Alexis de. (1835) 2003. *Democracy in America*. London England: Penguin Books.

¹³ Re: Lincoln and his successor in Levine, Robert S. 2021. *The Failed Promise: Reconstruction, Frederick Douglass, and the Impeachment of Andrew Johnson*. W. W. Norton & Company.,

¹⁴ Re: the soc textbook

degree¹⁵ in spite of recognizing how it relegates them and the rest of the race to positions of persistent childhood¹⁶ which is to say subjugation based on a totalizing assumption of mental and physical inadequacy. Their counter adoption of nuclear family values as well as its assumptions (which later Spillers upended), led to nationalistic movements, such as the Black Panthers, which were left vulnerable to counterinsurgency tactics most notably in the body of the FBI's Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO).

COINTELPRO took as one of its primary methods the dissemination of disruptive propaganda through various media channels¹⁷, which became so effective that entire movements collapsed, and some individuals were killed, made into political prisoners, or even exiled from the country. All it took to destroy what was supposed to bring about Black liberation, was the introduction of the true form of what Black people had attempted to imitate and expand upon in vain. While individuals such as Martin Luther King and Malcolm X, as well as organizations, such as the Black Panthers, established an aesthetic paradigm COINTELPRO perfected A logical model for the disruption of Black liberation movements, so long as they had not effectively interrogated the ways they identified and organized themselves according to pre-existing and dominant orders. What this all suggests is that Western political authorities were and are well aware of how to disrupt any and every Black liberation movement (or even just attempt at community), and one of their most effective efforts has emerged at the intersection of Black aesthetics, popular media, and the instantiation of the nuclear family as obscured by neoliberalism. It is my belief, that this effort is what gave form to the Black sitcom which emerged after and in response to the civil rights movement.

¹⁵ Re: "Black women need to learn how to raise black men for the 21st century" in White, Deborah Gray. 2007. "Matter out of Place: Ar'n't I a Woman? Black Female Scholars and the Academy." *The Journal of African American History* 92 (1): 5–12. <https://doi.org/10.1086/jaahv92n1p5>.

¹⁶Re: Frederick Douglass feeling like an abandoned child in Levine, Robert S. 2021. *The Failed Promise: Reconstruction, Frederick Douglass, and the Impeachment of Andrew Johnson*. W. W. Norton & Company,

¹⁷ Newton, Huey P. 2001. *War against the Panthers : A Study of Repression in America*. London: Writers and Readers.

The Black sitcom is typically not brought up in the same conversation as counterinsurgency movements, because it has been so lodged behind the veil of the domestic in the neoliberal public/private separation. Instead of being regarded as something potentially incredibly dangerous, most research has focused on questions of the importance of Black representation, and the mostly positive feelings people have about comfort shows such as *Good Times*, the *Cosby Show*, and *Family Matters*. If they have not been focused on the good feelings that these shows provide, the questions which have critically approached these shows, have largely not done the work to understand the specific dangers of relying on the family as an ordering structure. Therefore, most if not all interrogations involving the Black sitcom have failed to *effectively* address its potential for socialization.

Literature Review

At issue is the retrenchment of nuclear family ideals, which as a pattern points to a reinvigoration of the *Familial order*. This is occurring unsurprisingly but still alarmingly in the wake of a number of national and international crises. The argument proposes that by investigating the cultural products of a similar if not precedential time in recent history, where the ontology of the western polity was also in jeopardy and where therefore the Familial order was invoked, we can not only come to deeply understand the significance and implications of this resurgence, but potentially happen upon a model of how to effectively respond. To foreground this investigation, I intend to first establish and develop the meaning of the Familial order which is to frame the question of the family as one of ontology. This is a necessary intervention for my research because then it opens the space for me to understand the family as something vested in world building rather than just biological or socioeconomic organization. Next I will introduce to the paper the key concepts which will largely structure my analytical framework: *Pornotroping* (Spillers 1987), *Genres of Man* (Wynter 2003), and *The Chorus* (Hartman, 2019). These concepts, developed over time by Critical Black Woman Scholars, speak to the ways power is invested or disinvested in individuals due to their relationship to the Familial order. As I will demonstrate by putting them in conceptual conversation with one another here, and practical conversation with one another in Chapter 5, they mark a paradigmatic developmental pattern for the subjects of and captives in the Anthropocene, which transcends the immediate contexts in which their works emerge. Taken together, they help to diagnose and prescribe and intervention for the emergence this paper's problem. Finally, I will work to elaborate on the rich pedagogical potential of my study's medium by discussing the general meaning of representation for Black people, as well as the specific meaning of representation in an following the Civil Rights Movement, and the even more specific meaning of representation

on and through Black sitcoms. Taken together, these sections should not only ground the research but help to further emphasize the present necessity of this investigation.

The Family as a Locus of Being
Trends in Family Research

In research regarding families, we are typically considering characters such as the mother, the father, and the children. The parental roles over time have become associated with a number of different archetypes, especially as they relate to Blackness. *The mother*, for example has come to be associated with archetypes such as the *mammy* and the *matriarch* (Sewell 2012). In the family the mother's role is typically defined as she who cooks and clean and takes care of the home and children, while the father's role is typically defined as he who goes out to work and “brings home the bacon.” Though these roles have shifted a lot in reality, these characters hold particular station within the traditional *nuclear family*, which can be defined as “‘traditional’ family units, meaning there is a mother figure, whose primary role is caretaker of the family; a father figure, whose primary role is to provide financial stability; and the children (Canetto [1996](#); Sukach et al 2019). Among all of its relational prescriptions one of the most significant is that it prioritizes cisgender heterosexual individuals with their own unimpeded productive and reproductive capacities.

It should be noted that the nuclear family is not the only type of family, nor is it the only system of relation that exists. The *extended family* for example can include “extended family members, such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins” (Sukach et al. 2019) Even further, we could discuss the significance of *kinship networks* not necessarily defined as family. The concept of *fictive kinship*, defined as “an individual who is not related by birth, adoption, or marriage to a child, but who has an emotionally significant relationship with the child”

(American Legislative Exchange Council 2017), has historically held particular station within the Black community due to the ways that Atlantic slavery worked to disrupt African systems of relation.

Families are not under researched by any means. Sociologists and policymakers are generally especially concerned with what is going on with these insulated units especially as it pertains to child welfare and intimate partner violence. However, as the key concepts and topical issues demonstrate, much of the current research regarding families is overrepresented by the idea that the family, and particularly the nuclear family, is almost purely a legal and biological organism, as well as a socioeconomic ordering unit. Additionally, most considerations of and for families, are about how those with power can intervene to *support* their formation and *improve* their functioning, often toward the goal of self-sufficiency. How the family, and again particularly the nuclear family, fits into the state is always an open question, but of late, research has largely failed to make the connection between how the individuals in and aspiring toward the family are symbolically called to attend to broader ideals regarding the *Familial Order*. We can define the Familial Order here as define here as nuclear family ideals generally, but this specially in relation to affiliation, socioeconomic and political enfranchisement, and divine redemption. This is to say that, in spite of the plethora of books and articles regarding the family, few have addressed it according to its true station in the world. To stretch the meaning of the Family, my research intends to investigate it as a Locus of Being, which is to frame the family as a question of ontology.

The Family as a question of ontology

As indicated in the statement of the problem, prior to the instantiation of neoliberalism, the family was persistently situated as a question of ontology, rather than of purely biological or

socioeconomic ordering. And though clearly the Familial order has come to overrepresent the conditions of Being in the western world, western thinkers largely refuse to consider this reality, instead preferring to consider individuals as individuals rather than in consistent and symbolic relation to one another even at the metaphysical level. Claude Meillassoux (1991) challenges the modern location of the family, toward the goal of establishing if not affirming the understanding of the Familial order, in his piece titled *The Anthropology of Slavery: The Womb of Iron and Gold* where he discusses the relationship between slavery and kinship; most relevant to this investigation is his discussion of “growing up together.”

In his piece, Meillassoux uses the term *aliens* to describe those who did not “grow up” with the kinship group who they have come into contact with usually through war and capture. While one could easily misread this discussion as a question of where one literally grew up in their lifetime, what Meillassoux is actually suggesting is that aliens are set outside of the entire historical tradition established by a kinship group especially as they have come to understand their own evolutionary process as well as their relationship to other material and conceptual resources. This is significant to my research because it helps to establish how ones exclusion from. The family structure, especially on the basis of something like Blackness, is vested in more than just the physical.

To Whom Much is Given...

In *Necropolitics* (2018), Achille Mbembe discusses how the primary order of power in the Anthropocene is called *Necropower*. We can here define that term as the power to decide who lives, but more importantly the power to decide who dies. it is established and defined especially by the ability to wage war for fun and dictate the terms of other people's harms as a

method of personal self-definition. The absolute achievement of this power represents an impossibility for the socially dead (Patterson 1982) and ontologically excluded (Warren 2018). These conditions have been attached to Slaveness, which as understood by Afropessimists is inseparable from Blackness (Wilderson III 2017). Keeping with the pre-neoliberalist assertion that the Familial order is a world building order, especially as noted by Friedrich Engels in *Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* where he says that “the family is the cellular unit of the state,” a question emerges of how Necropower figures in the world established by the Familial order. As gendered subjects, Black women scholars since at least the 1970’s have made it their mission to approach answers to this question which go to bat with the problem on its own turf. Of particular interest are Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, and Saidiya Hartman who in three movements diagnose the problems of the familial order (as pornotroping and the overrepresentation of man as the human) and prescribe a potential intervention (as turning away from said order and into spaces of communion unbounded by colonial systems of relation).

Pornotroping

Pornotroping, an essential American grammar isolated by Hortense Spillers in her 1987 work “mama's baby Papas maybe: an American grammar book” answers the question of where the power of the Familial order is *not* vested. The work emerged in response to Daniel Patrick Moynihan’s 1965 report titled “The Negro Family: The Case For National Action,” colloquially known as the “Moynihan Report.” In said report, the American scholar and then Assistant Secretary of Labor essentially named the problem of the Black family as its improper attention to the colonial systems of relation which would assign roles and modicums of power to certain individuals both in and out of the home, according to what he assumed were their genders. As Spillers notes, his assertion was just that, an assumption and even further, the imposition of a

mythological order which could hold no real weight when applied to Black people due to their history of ontological fragmentation/subjugation as a result of Atlantic slavery.

She takes particular issue with the indictment placed on black women and girls when Moynihan says that their high achievement is emasculating black “men.” In essence, Black people had collectively been left behind in relation to the human race, or as Meillassoux would say, made aliens and therefore slaves¹⁸, because of Black women. To counter what could be regarded as a declaration of metaphysical war, Spillers defined pornotroping as the objectification of a person on the basis of their race and gender so they become perfectly ready for enslavement. Her essential assertion, which holds true today, is that Black people, and especially Black gendered subjects, cannot so easily redeem themselves according to the prescriptions of the western patrilineal kinship structure. In fact, it was the imposition of said structure which relegated her, and the subjects of her work, to objects and available equipment, in the first place. As I intend to demonstrate in the first movement of my analysis, it's not enough to simply acknowledge this condition the way Moynihan does. As Spillers articulates, this is a totalizing condition which establishes the condition of Being, or should we say nonbeing of the Black gendered subject of the Anthropocene. Her prescription in response is to claim the black female subject with the capacity to name which I build on in my analysis as the work of locating the *Feme Sole*.

Genres of Man

In “Unsettling the Coloniality Being/Truth/Power/Freedom,” Sylvia Wynter develops the concept of the Genres of Man, to outline the human developmental process wherein the Western European Man came to overrepresent itself as The Human. As she writes, the Theocentric or

¹⁸ Meillassoux, Claude. 1995. *The Anthropology of Slavery : The Womb of Iron and Gold*. Chicago: Univ. Of Chicago Press.

Christian man was transformed into his first stage (Man1) through a process of “degodding” which was initiated by the scientific discovery that the universe was in fact homogeneous in its parts. With the knowledge that the universe was homogeneous, Europeans stopped mapping their ideals on the stars and began to map them on themselves and one another creating a feedback loop that helped to ossify their notions of identification and relation, toward the initiation of two subsequent human epochs. These human epochs would be defined by the Europeans’ ability to differentiate themselves from others on the basis of “manhood” which had initially been subordinated under the notion of the divine, but which transcended and replaced the idea of God, such that everyone under the new human orders would have to aspire toward the same redemption according to the ideals established in each epoch by the Europeans. The 2 stages following the degodding of the theocentric man were that of Man1 (man as the subject of the polity) and Man2 (man as the subject of bioeconomics). Unsurprisingly, these emergences subordinated all the “people of color” in the world, but especially Black people as race became more and more fossilized in and through Atlantic Slavery. Their subordination was also unsurprisingly not simply raced but also gendered in the sense that all the “people of color” of the world and their associated lands became feminized and ripe for penetration and exploitation by the European man (Scully 2005). This follows the trend of how gendered subjects, and especially those who can carry children, have been treated throughout history in relation to the Familial order. As Friedrich Engel notes, families in the early stages were not established on the basis of total agency for all involved parties. Many early wives of monogamous families were victims of capture and kidnapping. What the literature suggests is that gendered subjects whether at the individual or at the national level, are vulnerable to mutilation, as Spillers notes, but also capture and kidnapping, because their sexualities are figured as ripe for exploitation by their

captors, toward the propagation of their captors' world building and self-making interests. As I intend to demonstrate in my analysis through an attention to the traditional ideals the women who are sent to the background are meant to uphold, black people collectively develop under the literal and figurative shadow of western manhood, where the power of the family is and has been vested through the demonstration of Necropower.

The Chorus

In the final chapter of *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments* (2019) Saidiya Hartman employs her method of Critical Fabulation, in order to construct an anthology of stories from Black women in what she calls *the chorus*. The metaphor is built around the idea of centering the individuals who have not only been pushed to the social margins, but narratively fragmented such that they appear as moments in time but nothing more. It then turns them toward each other and makes them “sing” together. In so doing, the method recovers the fuller life of the Black women and girls whom the Familial order—especially as embodied by the prisons of Marriage and the Domestic in the book—captured and sought to destroy. Her assertion is that by telling these stories in conversation with one another and resituating them into their realities especially through sociological insight and imagination, we discover a world outside of and beyond the hells of the prescriptions of the Familial order. This is useful for my research because Spillers and Wynter have diagnosed the same problem from 2 different directions and while they both decree that we must find ways to upend our relationships to the Familial order, their works are more descriptive of the problems than the solutions. What I see in Hartman's work, in concert with the others of course, is a potential answer or source of relief and space for strategizing.

On Representation

Black sitcoms emerged in and around the end of the civil rights movement with the explicit goal of ameliorating social relations between Black and white people. When they came about, newspapers magazines, and radio shows all agreed that Black Sitcoms represented “television’s promise to consign Jim Crow to the grave.” That idea of Black representation being largely positive that carries across the literature on black sitcoms. One of the key actors in this project was the infamous producer of the show good times, Norman Lear. Affirming the hopes of the media commentators, when questioned about his motivations for creating Black TV sitcoms remarked that “Black people needed to be visible beyond the service and sidekick roles they usually occupied on television” (Cochrane 2019). As Cochrane further remarks “Most importantly, Lear was the first creator/producer to center the Black family and Black stories on television, giving white viewers some of their first insights into the challenges – but more importantly the normalcy – of black families.” Black sitcoms were supposed to normalize Black people, through the depiction of their lives in relation to the Familial order. It was supposed to be an act of redemption but given what has already been established, and what I will go on to discuss, I would actually argue that this actually an act of “ontological negation”

Reading against the potential for positive black representation, especially toward the goal of amelioration of social relations or even integration into the society, I invoke Hartman’s discussion of the fungibility of the slave in *Venus in two acts* where she says “the fungibility of the commodity makes the captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others’ feelings, ideas, desires, and values; and, as property, the dispossessed body of the enslaved is the surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion”(Warren 2018; Hartman 2008). In her incredible Book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiblack World*, where she argues for an

aspiration toward something other than human, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson develops the following argument which expands on this point of:

The regulating terms of the dominant grammar of representation (re)produce black(ened) mater as always and already trapped within immanence, burdening black (maternal) female figures in particular, but not exclusively, with functioning as a material metaphor that points to what Sylvia Wynter terms “demonic ground” or what is foreclosed from representability: the nonrepresentable beyond dividing what is sensible from what is nullified and precluded from representability (“Miranda” 110). This foreclosed space in discourse and dense material content, black mater, organizes and stabilizes the hierarchical arrangement of being.

I end this final section and my literature review with her argument because not only does it name the stakes of Black representation as enslavement at the ontological level, but it so perfectly names the specific stakes of representation for the Black female subject in the sitcoms under investigation. Shaping her argument to my own, the “accurate” representation of the Black mother is an impossibility, yet in the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, it remained a key aspiration toward the affirmation of Black people’s ability to attend to the Familial—which is to say humanizing—order.

Research Questions

To approach a more salient analysis of this ****entire**** situation and its outcomes, my investigation asks 2 questions:

- (1) Given that the Family represents a locus of Western Being, while Blackness constitutes a zone of non-Being, what emerges in the space where they seem to converge?;
- (2) Given that the sitcom represented a new mode of mass socialization, what does the emergence of the nuclear family focused Black sitcom suggest for the goals of dominant Western social and political agendas especially in and around the 1980's?

Bringing Hortense Spillers' discussion of *Pornotroping* and Sylvia Wynter's *Genres of Man*¹⁹ into conversation with one another I aim to demonstrate how Black people in the modern day can be re-enslaved in and through popular media. Preliminarily, I propose that the outcome of Western socialization especially as demonstrated in and enacted by the aforementioned shows, is meant to be, the enslavement of the Black population through the obscuring of an enslaving order through the illusory pursuit of a corporeal ruse. In mapping the ways the characters appeared in different plots, and actors argued for and against these appearances, I aim to elucidate the stakes and outcomes of the continued pursuit of the impossible organizational structure that we call understand as the family. Though Black sitcoms continued far beyond the 80s, I limit my scope to those three shows which occur in and around that time for the sake of feasibility.

¹⁹ From "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be "Black"" in 2013. *National Identities and Socio-Political Changes in Latin America*. Edited by Mercedes Durán-Cogan and Antonio Gomez-Moriana. Vol. 23. Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315052717>.

Theoretical Framework –

For the Consideration of the Family:

My project rests heavily on the idea that “the word *familia* did not originally ... refer to the married couple and their children, but to the slaves alone. *Famulus* means a household slave and *familia* signifies the totality of slaves belonging to one individual” as spoken about by Friedrich Engels in *Origin of the Family, Private Property, and the State*. In discussing how I intend to understand the emergence and invocation of a Familial order, I take the family as nothing less than an ontologically structuring and restructuring paradigm which situates some people as slaves while others become vested with the power extracted from their socially and generally reproductive labors.

For the Consideration of the Televisual:

To understand how the familial paradigm is taking shape, I draw on Irving Goffman’s dramaturgical analysis. In the first order, I am concerned with understanding the impression management that the sitcoms engage in, in order to confuse and distract the average viewer from critically engaging with its arguments. In the second order, I’m concerned with the front stage and backstage expressions of the actors both as characters and as conscious individuals who are contending with the narratives their bodies are being used to corporealize.

Methodology –

Under investigation is the Familial order (also referred to as the “western patrilineal kinship structure” and the “nuclear family ideal”) as it was situated in Western political ontology prior to the instantiation of Neoliberalism. I draw on the perspectives of Black Critical Scholars who identify as everything from Black Feminists to Occidentalists. Data will be drawn from 3 shows – *Good Times* (1974-1979), *The Cosby Show* (1984-1992), and *Family Matters* (1989-1997) – as well as cast interviews from a number of different digital archives.

Sampling and Procedure

Section 1 of my analysis focuses on the impression management each show attempts to engage in. In this section, I deploy close reads of popular and lauded episodes of each show to challenge the prevailing understandings of these episodes and how they informed assessments of the shows overall. To inform this effort I started by watching season one of each show to get a baseline understanding of the important characters, then I isolated certain episodes based on how and how much people talked about them on/in internet forums, media reporting sites, academic literature, and magazines. I pulled quotes which exemplified the effort of each episode.

Section 2 of my analysis focuses on the relationship between the frontstage and backstage construction of these shows and their characters. In this section I stitch together information from various cast interviews and situate their personal accounts within a broader context of what I could see by watching each show all the way through. In addition to YouTube, I pulled the interviews from 2 digital archives called ‘The Portal to Texas History’ created and maintained by the University of North Texas Libraries; and ‘The Interviews: An Oral History of Television’ housed by The Television Academy Foundation.

Analytical Framework

Bearing on the Theoretical Framework of the 2nd Chapter, I sought to either find or construct an analytical framework that would keep with the assertion that Familial paradigm is a part of a mythological order, while drawing on the implication that its instantiation is an act of ontological warfare. This led me to the metaphor of the Trojan Horse as discussed by the poet Virgil in his famed Aeneid. It has also more recently been discussed by Arvidsson *et al.* (2021) in their article “The Trojan-horse mechanism: How networks reduce gender segregation.” In said article the researchers expanded on the ways the Trojan horse can be used as a framework to ameliorate relationships between groups at different levels of social hierarchies.

Simultaneously, attending to the metaphor specifically of *the chorus*, I sought also to structure my analysis according to music theory’s ‘Sonata Form.’ ‘Sonata form’ is the normal structure of a concerto which can be an even smaller portion of a Symphony. It employs a pattern of exposition, development, and recapitulation. In the exposition the themes of the movement are introduced; in the development, the themes are warped in various ways; and finally in the recapitulation, the themes are reintroduced, often with some variation. To integrate the two, I considered the progression of Cassandra's story, in relation to the progression of the story of the Trojan horse, and considered each stage in a separate section of the discussion. The first section establishes the overall guiding principle of the sitcoms based on a close examination; the second section expands on how this guiding principle materializes on screen as well as who is at risk and for what; and the third section (which is also the overall section's conclusion), reflects on the missed opportunities and possible points of intervention for the issue under examination.

Results –

Research Questions

Q1) Given that the Family represents a locus of Western Being, while Blackness constitutes a zone of non-Being, what emerges in the space where they seem to converge?;

When Blackness and the Family met to make these shows, tensions both on and off screen underscored different levels of familial attention. At one level was the *corporeal ruse* which served as a mask for the true familial form. The corporeal ruse of the familial order can be understood as the idea that a Black father completes a family, and that a family in its totality includes a parental (especially married, cisgender, and heterosexual) unit, and their children (typically at least 2). Show runners like Norman Lear and Bill Cosby used this fairly uniform structure to give their programs form and this is where most individuals involved in the structuring of these shows sought to intervene. At a deeper level was the systematic and routine set of *appraisals* which were constantly happening both on and off screen to situate individuals in relation to the family. These appraisals were particularly concerned with locating individuals according to the ontological paradigm of enslavement which engenders Blackness, but which also (according to Engels) defines the Familial order. Unlike the rest of their cast mates the power of appraisal was typically only in the hands of the star of the show, who I refer to later as the ‘bread winner.’

Across all three shows, Black men and boys were the bread winners in the sense that they carried the power of appraisal. The power of appraisal was conferred upon an individual and their character based on who was best able to make the audience laugh. Whoever was able to make the audience laugh the best and the most consistently not only became the star of the show,

but over time became the deciding factor in who would stay on the show and who wouldn't. The one with the power of appraisal, increasingly had more and more power to determine the symbolic lives and deaths of the characters on the screen, and to inform the mainstream conceptualizations of Black people in real life.

Without a framework for mapping the progression of power distribution, we could easily overestimate the complexity of this task. However, Sylvia Wynters' *genres-of-man*, proved to be particularly informative in understanding what each bread winner was doing and how that would affect their cast mates. Each character's schtick or particular goal was almost immediately clear based on their order of appearance in relation to each genre's order of appearance. *Good Times* emerged during the question of "universal" heterogeneity not only to affirm said heterogeneity, but to catalyze the creation of the families which would support the "man" of the era, as it worked to overrepresent itself. For Jimmie Walker, as JJ, this meant an emphasis on physical comedy insofar as it emphasized his immediately available physical and functional differences as if he were being appraised on African shore. His self-appraisal spoke to his understanding of how he was *actually* being situated on the show even if the show *said* it was about the corporeal ruse. By demonstrating this understanding, he was able to express some power over the valuations and mobilities of his castmates in addition to himself.

While *Cosby* didn't employ the same method of physical comedy, he expanded on the power for appraisal with the construction and perfection of the Huxtable family which he lead as the atypical jovial yet firm on screen father figure. While Walker couldn't express much power over his castmates off the screen, *Cosby* had the power to traffic those under his screen name across shows, which could be thought of as worlds, as well as to noticeably regulate the situations of the actors even when they were away from his production sets. As society reformed

and shaped itself, Cosby pruned his characters until they were ideal depictions of what could be desirable about and expected from Black people in the real world. Unlike Walker, Cosby could even send out a hit on someone's character to have them phased out of a program.

Jaleel White's character Urkel, which attended to biocentrism as its hegemonic masculine prescription, marked the automation of the symbolic deaths of his fellow castmates. His ability to make science fiction reality, especially by transforming his DNA toward the goal of finally impressing his long-term crush, Laura Winslow, drove the show and became the thing to find a way to relate to on screen. Unlike his predecessors, he didn't begin within the corporeal ruse. His use of a schtick that positioned him as representationally useful to a Wynterian genre of man, was demonstrably potent enough to transform him not just into a breadwinner but from alien to kin.

Overall, the contact point between Blackness and the Family revealed an enslaved and enslaving common ground whose terrain could be clarified and navigated by means of a sequential attention to Wynter's genres-of-man. This attention could and did produce the necropolitical power to catalyze if not call for the symbolic deaths of certain cast mates, which was/is not out of step with the treatments of their real-world counterparts especially in moments of crisis.

Q2) Given that the sitcom represented a new mode of mass socialization, what does the emergence of the nuclear family focused Black sitcom suggest for the goals of dominant Western social and political agendas especially in and around the 1980's?

If these representations were part of how millions of viewers were learning to make sense of the world for years, it suggests that not only was the US still in the business of conquering and colonizing expansive terrestrial and psychic geographies through the affirmation of an enslaving

Requiem for Cassandra

ontological paradigm for Blackness, but that it had a uniform process for doing it which could be deployed when the country was truly at risk. In essence, Black family sitcoms following moments of crisis, act as ameliorative agents in the social psyche and are successful insofar as they are able to capitalize on the corporeal ruse to mask the necessity of remapping of Slaveness onto the Black body.

Discussion—

In the same way the fall of Troy was contingent on the success of the Greeks' equine method of deception, the success of a Black family sitcom came from its ability to capitalize on the *corporeal ruse* as a method of masking an enslaving ontological paradigm. In order to see through the family's farcical projections, to its dangerous implications, I focused on the Black women, mothers, and girls who on and in relation to these shows continually struggled to be heard, seen, taken seriously, and protected. By understanding their stories and resultant strategies as parallel to that of Cassandra's, I recover a way-of-seeing that privileges and honors the perspectives of individuals who are usually silenced and discarded by the whole of society.

The Curse – A Brief Land Acknowledgement

As established in the Intro, and affirmed here, Cassandra, our Black Feminist Archetype, was *cursed* by the *gods*, to be able to prophecy, but never be believed. Her presence signifies impending doom to the reader, however, as she emerges in the literature, she's just a nag. Reading further into the meaning of the word curse, we can call upon Calvin Warren's discussion of Blackness as “the execration of being.” If the family is a locus of Being, and execration is synonymous with curse (which is to say problem or annoyance) we can enact a simple substitution to understand Warren's statement to also imply that that Blackness is the curse, problem, or annoyance imposed on or in relation to the family. We can say that when Blackness emerges it spells trouble for the Familial order, so the question becomes in whom Blackness is vested and how they are treated. Here we must pause and ask what it means to be black and for this we can call on Hortense Spillers and her discussion of pornotrope as established in the literature review.

Recognizing their various discursive contexts, these shows intentionally included certain episodes which could be regarded by the public as attending to Black Feminist or at least Feminist ideals in the sense that they explicitly seemed to address the situation of the woman/wife/mother, however, these episodes do not speak to the general situation of the women/wives/mothers in the shows.

Case 1: Florida Evans in S3E22 – “Florida The Woman”

“i've got a job too, and i've got to get to work on time. Now, if you want that button sewed, you sew it yourself. And if you want breakfast, make it yourself. Then make the lunch for the children, wash the dishes, do the laundry, make the beds, and sweep the floor. And see how you would like being mother, housewife, diplomat, referee, counselor, cook, seamstress, and sparring partner, with no pay and no fringe benefits.”

Case 2: Clair Huxtable in S2E4 – “Cliff in Love”

“Listen, Elvin. I'm not serving dr. Huxtable. Okay? That goes on. In a restaurant. I'm bringing him coffee. Just like he brought me coffee this morning. Marriage is give and take. If you don't drop these macho attitudes you'll never have anybody bringing you anything ever.”

Case 3: Harriet Winslow in S1E2 – “Two-Income Family”

“It says, Mrs. Harriette Winslow. I worked here full-time, and I was a full-time mother. You wanna talk management? I managed a home, a household budget and a family. And, Mr. Seeger, I'm talking about a job you can't call in sick for... You never get a raise or overtime. And you can't take vacation. Every day I'm a leader, an organizer, and a mediator. Those are my qualifications. You want references? Call Eddie, Laura and Judy Winslow... And ask them about my work. You know the number.”

In Florida's episode her family was pulling her in direction exactly as they normally did. When she stormed out after her speech, she went to work and found refuge and peace in the company of her boss who showed her a literal whole new world. When she came back home, and her husband recognized the threat to his position, as a husband, he threatened violence against the boss and began yelling at Florida. The episode resolves with her asking if he sees her as a

woman, and if he actually appreciates her or if she is a habit. The question remains unanswered because he doesn't actually speak his mind, he only responds with a kiss. We should note that before he did this, she was very clear that she wasn't looking to be affirmed romantically or sexually. She wanted to know that she was more than available equipment to him. This is a theme which repeatedly comes up in the show, but it's only addressed in a few episodes where the tensions between the parents seem to reach a breaking point.

In the case of Claire Huxtable, her eldest child Sondra has brought home a misogynistic young man. He believes that it is the woman's job to serve the men and the wife's job to serve her husband. These views were not unlike those of James Sr, as revealed in a previous episode of *Good Times*. In any case, throughout the episode what we see is Cliff trying to get Sondra to date a young man who is actually just like him in looks, and in employment aspirations. It's not until the end of the episode when the misogynist comes to pick Sondra up that we see Claire do her famous feminist speech which actually takes a less than two minutes of the entire episode. One is called to ask what sort of meaningful resolution or sense of presence *that* argues for.

Harriet's speech comes when she attempts to get a higher paying job, but her boss doesn't believe she's qualified because her resume doesn't reflect any sort of coherent experience. In response to his assumption that she could not do the job (which would require her being able to manage people) she remarks on her role as a mother and all the different managerial hats she must wear.

These episodes all emphasize the ways women and mothers on these shows and in the world were often treated as if they had no purpose or place outside of domestic labor and the support of their husbands and families. Each wife's challenge was in demonstrating how she saw herself in relation to her family and especially how she sees herself as participating in the labor

that preserves it. The shows manage impressions by seeming to let the subaltern speak, but given the fact that the challenges they seem to face were ongoing and that these are simply spaces of momentary if not anomalous release, we're sort of left wondering what the point of the addresses even were. Was it that difficult to imagine a world, and especially a home life, that wasn't so heavily reliant on the exploitative labor of the mother figure in the home?

Whether shows directly sought to address Blackness or not (and progressively they sought to less and less) they continued to essentially open their stories with episodes that would directly address one of the oldest enslaving orders and locations: the family and the domestic. The urgency can be said to come from the fact that if the issue of an exploited individual is not given some pressure release, and Blackness is a contributor to their situation in the world, there's no safety net or support for another reality. That person will be seen as a slave regardless of how a show tries to position itself away from that system of relations. From that point, there's nowhere the show can go without the stain slavery. Its hands will always be bloody And its motives always read as murderous such that there's no potential for socialization through its narratives or forms. For people to attach to these shows in the ways they did, they needed to be framed as safe spaces which meant finding a way to conquer slavery, which meant paltry interrogations of the situations of the mothers all around.

This paltry treatment, in spite of the breadth of research and accounts from both captors and captives that spoke about the historical relationship between the black woman and the home acts as a tool of silencing. The allure of mainstream representation cursed Black women and girls in the shows to be intimately and acutely aware of the mechanics of the family and the domestic, yet unable to actually contend with this historical reality on screen. In short, the mother on the black sitcom became representative of an individual who had been captured in order to

contribute to the production and reproduction of the family, however, the understanding of their contribution had to be set outside of and away from her own historical traditions, constituting an act of natal alienation that would render her a slave whether the shows wanted to talk about it or not.

The Prophecy – Of Moms and (Genres of) Men

The second point of contact between Cassandra and the Trojan horse is her prophecy where she indicates her knowledge of the dangers of the “gift” from the Greeks. The prophecy, which did indeed spell doom for the trojans came after she was, like the black mothers of the shows, cast outside of historical tradition through her ability to know but not name. If Black women were very clearly being situated outside of their historical narratives and kinship traditions, but there was an intentional attempt to distract from this reality, what did that suggest for the organization of the rest of the family—especially the girls? Could it be possible that it was only the mother being shown visions of the “past,” or did others in the family also sense a warped reality? And perhaps more importantly, what was the nature of these visions? What did they suggest such that they had to be silenced and distracted from?

In addition to tracking relations of power through episodes, backstage workplace politics also reveal quite a bit about the assertions of these shows. On screen we could see what final decisions production made and therefore who was given what kind of power in the structuring of these “families” but behind the scenes we could see how the actors, and namely the mothers, contended with the ideas which undergirded the makings of their characters and their positions in this emerging market. On the screen, the trend was that certain men and boys became the focal points of the shows, in different ways and for different reasons but which all aligned with a Wynterian developmental sequence indicating their aspiration toward hegemonic manhood as

humanness. While they didn't necessarily achieve the exact same sorts of powers they aspired toward, that which they did acquire was more than enough not to only uplift themselves but to dictate the movements of others around them, especially the girls. Meanwhile, behind the scenes we heard the voices of the many women and mothers who tried to intervene on this uneven distribution of airtime and narrative coherence. In their interviews and arguments with production teams, we can see how they attempted to express a protective power over their on-screen daughters and wards in order to limit and prevent their trafficking by the newly made breadwinners.

The Creation of [the Sambo]
Esther Rolle as "Florida Evans" v. Jimmie Walker as "JJ"

Good Times was initially built around Rolle's character on Maude by the same name. In that space she played the traditional role of a domestic in the home of a white woman. For the first time in history however, fans and producers alike enjoyed her performance so much that after only a year and a half in the role, people were hungry for more. Enter Norman Lear, and his goal of showing the world that Black people weren't that different from their white counterparts. In Rolle he saw the ability to intervene on the heterogeneity of their world by casting Black people in familial roles with her at the helm. Rolle, who had come from humble familial origins, and had become a student of the theater and social justice, also saw this as an opportunity to intervene on the degraded status of Black people at the crucial site of the family. In interviews she expressed her particular concern for the treatment of single mothers in America, indicating that she was aware of and taking issue with how she might show up in this system of organization and what her participation in the project might suggest for Black people both on and off screen going forward. She knew to be careful.

While the show was in development she emphasized that if the writers and producers could not give her a husband and father to help her raise the three children she was slated to have, then she would not appear. Given the time, where the Black family had already taken hits from people such as Daniel Patrick Moynihan largely because of what seemed like Black women and girls refusal to let the Black father materialize to guide the Black population to true social and economic liberation, she recognized that perhaps the best vehicle to carry forth the redemption of Black people may have been in the body of a stable and fully intact Black family headed by a strong Black father, instead of the stereotypical single mother. The assumption was that if the Black father's missing body was able to appear on screen in his rightful place as the head of the household, the Black family would be granted narrative coherence in the white world. This couldn't have been further from the truth.

To appease Rolle and "complete" the family unit, up and coming actor John Amos was cast as James Evans Sr., a firm handed and tenuously employed Black father and husband. For three seasons Rolle and Amos led the show and kept ratings high until in he was written off in season 4 due to "creative differences." On screen, in "The Big Move," viewers were told that James had died from a car crash in Mississippi while seeking stable employment to better support his family. The death felt contextually abrupt but given how adamant Rolle was that the family must appear complete, this seemed to be the only way to truly rid the show of his presence. Following his exit, reports and interviews surfaced that made it clear how strained his relationship had been with the writers of his story. For the most part, what he tried to uplift was how as an actual Black father, his on-screen portrayal seemed unrealistic at best. His complaints were often met with pushback that caused him to ask if the white writers wanted to go outside, indicating that he was willing to back his words up with blows. Instead of allowing him to help

shape the character his body was being used to corporealize, they killed him. Just one season later, Rolle would follow in Amos' footsteps but instead choosing to leave rather than being fired. Her reasons were a bit more complicated. In addition to the need for a Black father, Rolle had been particularly concerned with the situation of each of her children. Her driving issue had become how Jimmie Walkers' character, JJ, had come to overrepresent the show as if he was it's one true star especially in the wake of her on screen husband's death.

Like his cast mates, Walker was well aware of the stakes of a show like *Good Times* but he fully did not care. He was much more concerned with making sure that he stayed employed indefinitely. Additionally, he was trained as a stand-up comedian, not an actual actor. Not having had the same training or the politics as his cast mates, he relied on relatively alternative but highly effective ways of making sure he was taking up space in the show. Many have come to regard his character JJ as a coon because of how reminiscent it is of the minstrelsy which dominated Black representation prior to the arrival of the Black sitcom. And while I would agree that though he was not technically a white man in Black face and that his performance was reminiscent of what many probably would have thought of as a bygone era, I would set his performance even further back in history.

JJ's strength as a character was situated both in his vocal and physical delivery. From the way he relied on absurd and disruptive lines and catch phrases to the ways he would emphasize the movements and shapes of various body parts, Walker took great care to set himself apart from his cast mates through ways that forced the scenes and the audience to focus on him. This is because, as he notes in his interviews, a sitcom needs someone to orient itself around. It needs someone who is willing to be the butt of the joke both to lead the show and to allow other characters to develop themselves. This character becomes the head of the household, and the

symbolic *breadwinner*. In the real world, his depiction carried a power that would keep him and the rest of the cast employed as viewership had dropped off with the exit of the parents of the show. And on the note of financials, the way he would scream or flail himself around to emphasize his abnormal shape and size in comparison to his onscreen family was eerily reminiscent of the inspections completed on captives and enslaved people at the auction blocks to determine if they were functional enough for sale. Both in interviews and on screen, he fashioned himself as a captive who had studied the markets and learned to complete a self-appraisal according to the existing Familial order. Regarding the Familial order, Engels explicitly told us, that “the word *familia* did not originally...refer to the married couple and their children, but to the slaves alone. *Famulus* means a household slave and *familia* signifies the totality of slaves belonging to one individual.” What Walker actually recognized, was that the path of least resistance and most reward was the one which affirmed the inseparability of Blackness and Slaveness, as *that* would most quickly align him with the truth of the values of the American family. Across 6 seasons, he demonstrated that simple presence and mimetic organizations of what seem to be similar biological structures, were not enough to legitimize people as a family in the modern understanding of the word, however the bodies could provide meaningful cover for and enslaving work. As JJ emphasized the body is a ruse and which when misunderstood as having the potential for certain redemptive modes of organization, could mask Blackness as a marker of Slaveness. The spectacle of Walker’s performance, which emphasized his physical difference, mental incapacity, and moral delinquency, became an indomitable force that degraded the narrative potentials for his siblings and affirmed a precedent for Black representation in popular media for generations to come.

Both Rolle and Walker have spoken about how Michael, aka the militant midget, was written to be the breakout character of the show. From the beginning the show as an intervention positioned *his* attendance to Black issues as that which would undo the heterogeneity of the world. As long as the family was there to orbit around and support him, he would act as remedy to the anti-Black world order which had drawn Rolle to the show in the first place. As viewers of the show will remember however, this did not happen. Instead, on screen, we watched as Michael's character became less and less concerned with explicitly political issues, and much more concerned with being attractive to the girls in his peer group. Because of how Walker was driving the show away from more heavy hitting topics, the Michael we knew and were supposed to know was essentially killed and replaced with a less abrasive side character who wouldn't have as much power to influence the messaging of the show.

What we also saw on screen especially in the earlier seasons was how Thelma seemed to only be able to make her home in the bathroom. Despite being Juilliard trained, the writers and producers of good times initially struggled to make proper use of Bern Nadette Stanis and her character. Until Rolle spoke up for her at a table read, her character was typically barely seen and primarily only heard bickering with her brother, JJ, while she incessantly preened in the bathroom. Recognizing his power, Walker proposed an intervention that was initially rejected but which would foreground the treatment of Black girls in this order going forward. Like in the case of Michael, he would not step back or suggest greater visibility. Instead, having seen a pinup shoot of another pretty Black female celebrity at the time, he suggested that she perhaps do the same thing to boost her image. Unlike Ralph Carter who he could easily see was talented but who he said had simply stopped working hard enough to make himself seen, Stanis was only valuable insofar as she was willing to turn herself into a fetish object for the hungry American

population. Rolle and the rest of production was absolutely appalled by this idea and refused to let their onscreen daughter go that path. And while years later, Walker would speak on how imprudent he thought their decision and judgement was, The TV mother's protective power would become a monument of the past. In any case, as viewers could observe and as Stanis noted in an interview decades after the show wrapped, there still wasn't much the producers and writers could imagine for her. Even though she'd made her way out of the bathroom she didn't stand a chance on screen against JJ's idealizing performances.

During her tenure on the show, Rolle did what she could to speak out about and intervene in Walker's work. However, though his strategic emphasis on difference would absolutely impede the degodding *she* tried to catalyze, he located a contact point with the family which would empower him and inform those who would follow in his breadwinning wake. His stronger claim to the ontological prescriptions of the Familial order especially in relation to Black people, which is to say his better ability to emphasize his Slaveness in new markets, made sure a show which was supposed to balance the scales for Black people both intramurally and in relation to the broader society, primarily served to affirm their status as available equipment for the white world. And the family's corporeal ruse, helped him do it.

Easy, Breezy, Beautiful...[Fancy] Girl!

Lisa Bonet as "Denise Huxtable" v. Bill Cosby as "Cliff Huxtable"

About a decade after the start of *Good Times* came another groundbreaking insertion to the general consciousness. In 1984, NBC producers reached out to Bill Cosby to build a show which would reinvigorate the sitcom and save a dying TV network—without agitating the Order of Things by interrogating antiblackness or any other issue in meaningful ways. To do this, and unlike in the Evans family, the parents of his show would be white collar workers. The husband

would be jovial but firm and his helpmate would be demure but assertive. Unlike the shows of the time, they would give off a modestly egalitarian unified front where the parents were in charge. The parents would cultivate a home run like so tight a ship that the children never really stepped out of line, let alone get into the type of trouble that is unresolvable by the show's end. Everyone would have big dreams and better morals. Following the Legacy of Good Times, Cosby was called on to enter a simultaneously material and metaphysical contact point, but this time he was to do it from the safety of a body which seemed to have been made whole through affluence and which was maintained by tight control.

Aside from its necessary prescriptions, from the beginning, the show was a deeply personal affair. It's chartering principles were corporealized by actors specifically selected for their similarities to Cosby's real-life family. Additionally, much of the show was improvised by and between the characters which made shooting days run very long at times with all the different takes that would be had sometimes of the same scenes. The lines were always intentionally blurred between real life and the life of the Huxtables but being that the show was still meant to serve a certain purpose, Cosby maintained an iron grip by expressing a deeply paternalistic control over his cast as if they were truly his family. This pattern emerged especially in relation to the regulation of the sexualities and aspirations of the Huxtable children and none in more pure form than his second on screen daughter, Denise Huxtable, played by Lisa Bonet.

Denise Huxtable was the second daughter and child over all in the Huxtable line. Lisa Bonet brought the role to life as an artsy, free spirited, beauty who would not be beholden to any responsibility or organization that she did not choose. Early on in the show she was seen breaking from her father's hopes for how she would express herself and pick partners. About a third of the way into the Cosby Show, Bonet took on a role that did not align with the squeaky-

clean Huxtable image Cosby had tried to create. To be specific she starred in the controversial film *Angel Heart* which engaged with themes of witchcraft and nudity in ways that made her connection to Denise Huxtable tenuous according to Cosby. He had already been pushing for her character to continue on a normal aspirational path. Denise was graduating high school, so she *had* to go to college. If she *had* to go to college and what other college would she attend but her fictional father (and mother's) alma mater? Additionally, Denise would never have sex on screen or pose topless for a magazine cover but Bonet would and did. Denise had a legacy of relation to the world to uphold and Bonet was expected to shape her entire life around it. This was in conflict with how Bonet saw herself as an artist and an individual and so we heard reports from the set of some inklings of rebellion before her departure from the Cosby show with her showing up late to work and building tensions with Cosby. In spite of her purported independence however, on the film's press run, she was sure to emphasize how she had asked her TV father to participate in the other film and he had consented if not supported.

Many were not convinced but the issue of how her image seemed to heavily depend on his opinion wasn't pushed again much until Bonet became pregnant while filming *A Different World*. On the show, she pulled director and producer, Debbie Allen, to the side and revealed how not only had she gotten pregnant but how she was married to now ex-husband Lenny Kravitz. Allen took Bonet's life changes in stride and recalls how she fought to keep Bonet on the cast of *A Different World*. She was concerned about how Cosby would take the news because he was just as controlling off screen as he was on, but the new show had been taking it as its mission to challenge the old order of things in ways that would appeal to a younger generation, so perhaps there would be a chance for Bonet to remain in the space that would cultivate her. However, because she carried the Huxtable name, this wasn't possible for

Denise/Bonet. In fact upon learning of her pregnancy, Cosby pulled Denise back into the Cosby show and away from a different world, and then found a way to write her off the screen permanently. Becoming a part of the Huxtable family under the control of Cliff Huxtable, which was to say Bill Cosby in another form, allowed for Denise's trafficking across shows without much concern for what Bonet actually wanted. As both the on screen and real-life patriarch, he made it very clear at that moment that Denise and Lisa were no longer one and the same.

This moment of retaliatory disinheritance was critical. First of all, it emphasizes the power that Cosby had to unilaterally determine one's relation to a kinship structure. But secondly thinking back to Jimmie Walker's conclusions about what how power was distributed in this emerging market: the one who could skirt past the family's corporeal ruse and transform *themselves* into a vessel for its ontological prescription of enslavement, would rule the screen. Stories and environments would warp to fit them which meant that in an environment that was already very picky, they'd have a higher chance at longevity. Being a good object on screen meant a good life for the actor, but clearly and as Rolle recognized there would be consequences namely in how shows would be structured going forward and therefore what sorts of Black representations would be situated with in the society's consciousness following the 60's moment of crisis. By employing a method of physical comedy, Walker acted out a self-appraisal in his every contortion and 'dy-no-mite.' This gave him power over the screen but resulted in him being labelled a coon, the figurative deaths of all his cast mates, and the propping up of a white man in the creation of Black stories. Walker oriented himself as parallel but subordinate to the theocentric man, and through Cosby's treatment of his family but especially Denise, we see how he has done the same in relation to Man₁.

Cosby's appraisal of Bonet was similar to Walker's of Stanis. Just as Walker's appraisal of Stanis was in opposition to Rolle's for the way it would sexually objectify the on screen daughter, Cosby's was in opposition to Allen's because of the way he situated her as a bad object. Denise being disowned on the basis of Bonet's pregnancy says that she was only valuable to Cosby insofar as he could demonstrate a staunch control over her social mobility and through her sexuality. When we consider that the mobility and sexuality came in the body of a young girl with light skin, loose hair, a small frame, immense talent, and demonstrated intelligence, we can see how she embodied the spirit of the Fancy Girl²⁰ whose capture and continued public display of false consent in the same form served to arouse the fetishistic fantasies of both her captor and other men in society who also sought to demonstrate their capacities for consumption and conquer. What Cosby sought to demonstrate through the formation of his family was the new and perfected slave models which would hopefully still have place in society and use as Man-as humans worked to rebuild their self-image. Bonet's role refusal precipitated her symbolic death in spite of Allen's attempted protection

Pavane pour une infante défunte

Jo Marie Peyton as "Harriett Winslow" v. Jaleel White as "James Evans Jr."

Initially when Family Matters, started it was supposed to focus on a normal Black family but the market at the time had become overly saturated with Family shows/sitcoms on top of the fact that at the time, The Cosby Show was still running and not slowing down in terms of ratings. Having nothing to set it apart, it carried low ratings and was at risk of being cancelled in the very first season...until the introduction of Steve Urkel. Initially meant only to be a one-off character, the nerdy next-door neighbor was such a presence and force that by the 2nd season, not only was

²⁰ As discussed in Alexandra J Finley, *An Intimate Economy* (UNC Press Books, 2020).

he a series regular, but the show would be reworked with him as the main character. This absolutely caused tension backstage as the other characters had already built a bond and a dynamic that blurred the lines between the personal and the professional. They truly had begun to believe that they were family.

In season 5, one of the main plot lines of the show began to take off: Steve's relationship with Laura. As a character, Laura's role was easy. She would play hard to get for a while with Steve until he went through the inevitable transformation that would exemplify his attention to the work orders of the Biocentric man, thereby turning him into a breadwinner (like JJ/Jimmie) if not a full blown trafficker (like Cliff/Cosby). This transformation meant especially but not exclusively creating an ultra-cool and super suave version of himself, Stefan Urquelle, using a few of his machines which could turn science fiction into “real” life. His belief that the only thing which could make him into someone that Laura could love, was a change at the genetic level, was a throughline that drove the show and kept the lights on for a total of 9 seasons. Steve as an intervention diminished the utility of Judy in the show.

Unlike Laura, Judy was much more difficult to map in the wake of Urkel's rise. She was too young for her own world building romance, and being that she wasn't a boy like Eddie (who eventually became something of a side character) or Richie (another eventual side character) or even 3J (an extra child brought on in the later seasons...and essentially a side character) there probably wasn't much they could imagine for her to do. As the show worked to mold itself around rising star Jaleel White, and the attempt at a certain form of hegemonic masculinity he would come to serve, producers and writers found it difficult to make space in the budget or the story for her. Because she couldn't be placed, one day she took a trip up the stairs, which symbolically became her ascent to the upper room as she was never to be seen, heard from, or

mentioned again. In the context of the Family Matters' aforementioned progenitors, this disappearance signals the completion of a trend that would not only underscore the progression of powered relationships both on and off the screen but affirm the same curse that made Black women the quintessential slaves in the first place.

In a 2022 feature about the show, Joe Marie Payton revealed how she would not be interested in a reboot unless they would give her back her third child. While the show was filming, she also expressed frustrations about this loss, but it's interesting that even decades later, she was still feeling the slight that Jaleel White only seemed to acknowledge as a business decision.

In Search of Refuge – Choral Reprise

While Troy burned, Cassandra took refuge in the temple of Athena, but was taken advantage of by the war hero Ajax. Only in this emergency did someone finally intervene on her condition of abandonment, but not a minute before. In the same way, based on the interviews and the final productions, it seems like it took emergencies in the form of appraisals and removals to get anyone other than the mothers to interrogate the ways black girls are/were situated in relation to the familial orders the boys and men were being given the power to (re)establish. They had no potential for narrative coherence outside of the depiction of their romantic and sexual relationships, but those relationships had to be approved of and controlled by the breadwinner of their respective shows.

In both *Scenes of Subjection* and *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments*, Sadiya Hartman expands on the idea that we need to move past only considering enslaving systems of relation as they appear in and through emergencies. She specifically considers everyday acts of resistance from girls and women who had been and are pushed to the margins of society, calling them and

their mobilizations the work of the *chorus*. Upon my examination of the shows and interviews, I sought to understand how and where the chorus materialized in these narratives.

On screen, I watched as Mother Winslow reminded Rachel not to follow her dead husband to the grave. She argued that Rachel should untether herself from the need to be deathly monogamous, and that she should instead enjoy herself and her life as freely as she could for as long as she could outside of and away from the clutches of the domestic. I watched as women from what seemed like a domestic abuse survivors group praised Florida when they believed she was beating her husband back. They clapped when they thought they understood her movements as returning the husband's violence and kind, and they gave her the language to talk about her experience in her home in a way that she had not had prior to their meeting. I watched as Claire's mother came to the Huxtable home to impart upon her how frivolous it would be to have another child, not because she would not enjoy having it or raising it or because she couldn't provide it with a good life but because she would be saddled with the primacy of the labor of raising and caring for the child. Another child would her underscore her exploitation in the home which her mother attempted to prevent. Off the screen and in the interviews I watched the mothers, female producers, and directors argue against and strategize around the developmental prescriptions of the breadwinners so that the girls would not be subjected to the same curse that they had been.

Women both on and off the screen were acutely aware of what it meant to be in the clutches of a man both literally and structurally. Though their methods of problem solving and conflict resolution typically tended to happen on the side or in the background or sporadically/anomalously I couldn't help but take seriously the through line which suggested that those women had for generations been compiling knowledge and sharing their stories between one another to strategize around their safety in, survival from, and retaliation against the Familial

order. It took more effort to find space where they could talk without listening ears connected to potentially punitive hands or tongues, but to find and connect with one another was no exhausting feat. This suggests that though the world is absolutely overrepresented by the prescriptions of the familial order, it's not impossible to locate oneself outside of its edicts. If the wages of the Family are slavery, perhaps we should consider what it would mean to sing and dance and connect in ways that are everything but family friendly.

Conclusion

The project began with a question of how to intervene on the retrenchment of the Familial order in moments of crisis. My particular concern was the risk for the reification of enslaving ontological orders through popular media which Black people are and were particularly vulnerable to. By isolating a moment in history, when the Familial order seemed to be in jeopardy and examining one of its most prized cultural products, the Black family sitcom, I hoped to understand how that medium could have contributed to the reinstatement of Familial order (which is still rearing its head today).

By placing the shows and interviews about the shows in conversation with the human developmental prescriptions of various Black Woman Scholars (again, everyone from Feminists to Occidentalists) I observed patterns of pornotroping, aspirations toward various forms of hegemonic masculinity, and the eventual fetishization, trafficking, and erasure of black girls on the shows. Rather than being comforted, I saw how the family's corporeal ruse made the way for the preventable reanimation of moments of capture, appraisal, sale, exploitation, and even death. More jarring than my own experience with this examination, was the eventual knowledge that as of 2022 at least 2 of the shows had been in talks for reboots and that by April of 2024, *Good Times*, had made its way back around. If my findings not just about the family, but about the black family sitcom are correct, I'm both interested in and concerned about what the US propaganda machine is cooking to keep everyone together in the wake of 2020.

In any case, my findings highlight the need for more stringent evaluations of the comforting and socially ameliorative cultural products that emerge as part of popular media. Future research could focus on the 90's and the developmental prescriptions of that era of sitcoms as it is a constant point of nostalgic reference among young Black people. As always, but

especially when it comes to the Family, we should be more critical about the places where we think we can go to hide or that we think we can lean on to improve our conditions in the world. More often than not Blackness places a limit on our ability to establish ourselves according to dominant prescriptions of order, so we must learn to strategize our ways out of captivity without reverting to the use of things that only serve to enslave us. In essence, we won't destroy the master's house with the master's tools.

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