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But I Love My Family!

> "There are other ways of naming each other as relations."
>
> —Tiffany Lethabo King[1]

Abolish the family? You might as well abolish gravity or abolish god. So! The left is trying to take grandma away, now, and confiscate kids, and this is supposed to be progressive? What the fuck!?

Many people experience a reaction something like this, upon first encountering the phrase "abolish the family." And that's okay. I will neither deny nor shy away from the slogan's explosive emotional freight. My purpose in it is partly, to be sure, to clarify and correct the many possible *aghast* misapprehensions one can easily form about family abolition; for example, that it means forcibly separating people. But ultimately, I don't want to deny that there is something "scary" (psychologically challenging) about this politics. This same scariness is present in all real revolutionary politics, in my view. Our trepidation is our reflexive response to the premonition of an abolition of the *self*.[2] All of us—even those of us who own no property, who receive no guaranteed care, and who subsist at the blunt end of empire, whiteness, cis-hetero-patriarchy, and class— will have to let go of *something* as the process of our collective liberation unfolds. If the world is to be remade utterly, then a person must be willing to be remade also. We sense this. And it is difficult, perhaps impossible, right now, to imagine *not* being manufactured through the private nuclear household and the oedipal kinship story (mother figure, father figure, child). Yet personhood was not always created this way, which means we could, if we wanted to, create it *otherwise*. In the meantime, if your kneejerk reaction to the words "abolish the family" is "but I love my

family," you ought to know that you are one of the lucky ones. And I am happy for you. But everyone should be so lucky, don't you think?

Loving the people in your family, mind you, is not at odds with a commitment to family abolition. Quite the reverse. I will hazard a definition of love: to love a person is to struggle for their autonomy as well as for their immersion in care, insofar such abundance is possible in a world choked by capital. If this is true, then restricting the number of mothers (of whatever gender) to whom a child has access, on the basis that I am the "real" mother, is not necessarily a form of love worthy of the name. Perchance, when you were very young (assuming you grew up in a nuclear household), you quietly noticed the oppressiveness of the function assigned to whoever was the mother in your home. You sensed her loneliness. You felt a twinge of solidarity. In my experience, children often "get" this better than most: when you love someone, it simply makes no sense to endorse a social technology that isolates them, privatizes their lifeworld, arbitrarily assigns their dwelling-place, class, and very identity in law, and drastically circumscribes their sphere of intimate, interdependent ties. But I am getting ahead of myself.

Most family abolitionists love their families. It is true of course that it is usually the people who have had bad experiences within a social system, and who feel things *besides* love for that system, who initiate movements to overthrow it. But loving one's family in spite of a "hard childhood" is pretty typical of the would-be family abolitionist. She may, for instance, sense in her gut that she and the members of her family simply aren't *good* for each other, while also loving them, wishing them joy, and knowing full well that there are *few or no* available alternatives in this world when it comes to providing much-needed care for everybody in question. Frankly, loving one's family can be a problem *for anyone*. It might put extra weights around the ankles of a domestic battery survivor seeking to escape (especially given the economic punishments imposed by capitalism on those who flee commodified housing). It might hinder a trans or disabled child from claiming medical care. It might dissuade someone from getting an abortion. Right now, few would deny that reproductive *rights*—let alone justice—are everywhere systematically denied to populations. Austerity policies

purposively render proletarian baby-making crushingly unaffordable, even for two or three or four adults working together, let alone one. Housework is sexed, racialized, and (except in the houses of the rich) unwaged. It is unsurprising, in these global conditions, that large numbers of humans do not or *cannot* love their families. Reasons range from simple incompatibility to various phobias, ableism, sexual violence, and neglect.

Let me tell you a secret: people get really angry when you suggest to them that they deserved better than what they got growing up. And I've noticed that a lot of people have the "*but I love my family*" reaction with the most startling vehemence immediately after they've spent a long time talking freely to me about the strain, tragedy, blackmail, and care-starved frustration that characterized their "biological" upbringing. Angry opposition to the idea that *things could be different* comes, I've found, right after we have voiced the wish that relatives of ours could have been less alone, less burdened by caring responsibilities, less trapped. Those people are quite another matter, this defensive spasm seems to say: I, myself, don't need any family abolition, thank you very much. Sure, it may be a disciplinary, scarcity-based trauma-machine: but it's MY disciplinary, scarcity-based trauma-machine.

Listen. I get it. It's not just that you're worried about your dad getting all upset if he sees you with this book. It's that it's existentially petrifying to imagine relinquishing the organized poverty we have in favor of an abundance we have never known and have yet to organize.

What is the family? So deep runs the idea that the family is the exclusive place where people are safe, where people come from, where people are made, and where people belong, it doesn't even feel like an idea anymore. Let us unpick it, then.

The family is the reason we are supposed to want to go to work, the reason we have to go to work, and the reason we *can* go to work. It is, at root, the name we use for the fact that care is privatized in our society. And because it feels synonymous with care, "family" is every civic-minded individual's raison d'être par excellence: an ostensibly non-individualist creed and unselfish principle to which one voluntarily signs up without thinking about it. What alternative could there be? The economic

assumption that behind every "breadwinner" there is a private someone (or someones) worth being exploited for, notably some kind of wife—that is, a person who is likely a breadwinner too—"freely" making sandwiches with the hard-won bread, or hiring someone else to do so, vacuuming up the crumbs, and refrigerating leftovers, such that more bread can be won tomorrow: this feels to many of us like a description of "human nature."

Without the family, who or what would take responsibility for the lives of non-workers, including the ill, the young, and the elderly? This question is a bad one. We don't hesitate to say that nonhuman animals are better off outside of zoos, even if alternative habitats for them are growing scarcer and scarcer and, moreover, they have become used to the abusive care of zoos. Similarly: transition out of the family will be tricky, yes, but the family is doing a bad job at care, and we all deserve better. The family is getting in the way of alternatives.

In part, the vertiginous question "what's the alternative?" arises because it is not just the *worker* (and her work) that the family gives birth to every day, in theory. The family is also the legal assertion that a baby, a neonatal human, is the creation of the familial romantic dyad; and that this act of authorship in turn generates, for the authors, property rights in "their" progeny—*parenthood*—but also quasi-exclusive accountability for the child's life. The near-total dependence of the young person on these guardians is portrayed not as the harsh lottery that it patently is, but rather as "natural," not in need of social mitigation, and, furthermore, *beautiful* for all concerned. Children, it is proposed, benefit from having only one or two parents and, at best, a few other "secondary" caregivers. Parents, it is supposed, derive nothing so much as joy from the romance of this isolated intensity. Constant allusions to the hellworld of sheer exhaustion parents inhabit notwithstanding, their condition is sentimentalized to the nth degree: it is downright taboo to regret parenthood. All too seldom is parenthood identified as an absurdly unfair distribution of labor, and a despotic distribution of responsibility for and power over younger people. A distribution that could be changed.

Like a microcosm of the nation-state, the family incubates chauvinism and competition. Like a factory with a billion branches, it manufactures

"individuals" with a cultural, ethnic, and binary gender identity; a class; and a racial consciousness. Like an infinitely renewable energy source, it performs free labor for the market. Like an "organic element of historical progress," writes Anne McClintock in *Imperial Leather*, it worked for imperialism as an image of *hierarchy-within-unity* that grew "indispensable for legitimating exclusion and hierarchy" in general.[3] For all these reasons, the family functions as capitalism's base unit—in Mario Mieli's phrase, "the cell of the social tissue."[4] It may be easier to imagine the end of capitalism, as I've riffed elsewhere, than the end of the family. But everyday utopian experiments *do* generate strands of an altogether different social tissue: micro-cultures which could be scaled up if the movement for a classless society took seriously the premise that households can be formed freely and run democratically; the principle that no one shall be deprived of food, shelter, or care because they don't work.

Family values are bourgeois economics writ small. As Melinda Cooper demonstrates, under the sign of the family, starting in the late seventies, neoliberals and neoconservatives both essentially reinvented welfare along Elizabethan "poor law" principles: rendering kin, instead of society, responsible for the poor. Even in the original legislation four hundred years ago, concepts like "market freedom," "the liberal individual," and debt were slowly erected on the plinths of kinship obligations and family bonds. Without family, in short, no bourgeois state. The family's function is to replace welfare and to guarantee debtors. Masquerading as the choice, creation, and desire of individuals, the family is a method for cheaply arranging the reproduction of the nation's labor-power and securing debt repayments.

But wait, the family is in danger!—or so legend has it. *Kids these days, they won't procreate, they don't look after their folks, they live at home, they don't call home, they don't aspire to homeownership, they won't marry, they don't put family first, and they aren't founding families.* Guess what? The family has never not been critically at risk. As Cooper puts it in the opening sentence of *Family Values: Between Neoliberalism and the New Social Conservatism*, "The history of the family is one of perpetual crisis."[5] Imminent collapse is an integral part of the deal, although look around, and you'll quickly

notice, reports of the death of the family have been greatly exaggerated. To attack the family is as unthinkable in liberal-democratic politics as it has ever been. Nowhere on the party-political spectrum can one find proposals to dethrone the family, hasten its demise, or even decenter it in policy.

"Family values" and Politics—with a capital "P"— have long been synonyms. When Margaret Thatcher, the "milk snatcher" of the eighties, said "*There is no such thing as society, there are individual men and women and there are families*," she wasn't so much (alas) winning an argument against anti-family foes as triumphally making a capitalist reality explicit. That which is "social" is not simply anti-profitability but anti-family, she implies. The family—that is, the family *shop* or *seed fund*—is the great anti-social institution. And indeed, in a landscape laid to waste by Thatcherite anti-solidarity policies, it really can feel as though there are *only families*, or races (macro-families), at war with one another or, at best, in competition.[6] Taxes, benefits, wills, deeds, curricula, courts, and pensions are everywhere at work, functioning as technologies of the family. Even at the architectural level, a visiting stranger in such a land faces an endless sea of front doors—each neatly attached to a mortgage and a (real or implied) "Private" sign, each harboring its micro-collection of individual self-managing consumer-entrepreneurs. Meanwhile, most public or common spaces are not only dedicated to commercial leisure, but designed to cater pointedly to the couple-form or the nuclear brood.

And yet, even as the family, as a mode of governance, is a brutal economic fact, the family *as a lived experience* remains a bit of a fiction. Not very many human beings actually live in one—and/but this doesn't matter. Millions of us cohabit in ad-hoc, odd, creative, warehoused, forced or partially communalized ways; further millions upon millions live entirely alone. It doesn't make a difference, though, because, at the same time as seeming chosen and optional, the family consigns those outside its frame to social illegibility. All of us are seduced, or at least disciplined. We can't escape it, even when we individually reject it. And even when we reject it, we worry that its much-vaunted disintegration presages something worse.

Everybody loses. For all purposes except capital accumulation, the promise of family falls abjectly short of itself. Often, this is nobody's "fault"

per se: simply, too much is being asked of too few. On the other hand, the family is where most of the rape happens on this earth, and most of the murder. No one is likelier to rob, bully, blackmail, manipulate, or hit you, or inflict unwanted touch, than family. Logically, announcing an intention to "treat you like family" (as so many airlines, restaurants, banks, retailers, and workplaces do) ought to register as a horrible threat. Instead, to be metaphorically "family" in someone's eyes makes-believe that one has something quite … *unfamilial*. Namely: acceptance, solidarity, an open promise of help, welcome, and care.

Of course, the administrative grid of the family does organize where certain forms of help (are legally obligated to) come from. But this has nothing to do with solidarity. The family—predicated on the privatization of that which should be common, and on proprietary concepts of couple, blood, gene, and seed—is a state institution, not a popular organism. It's at once a normative aspiration and a last resort: a blackmail passing itself off as fate; a shitty contract pretending to be biological necessity. Think about how (on TV, or in your own life) a *reminder* of family ties and obligations is often a cruelly repressive move. Think about how, in mafia movies, loyalty to and love for "the family" is enforced among members via penalties worse than death—and this only feels like a mobster exaggeration of the general, civilian logic of the family. Think about the British royal family and the deadly logics of eugenicism, lovelessness, and property-worship that govern its internal affairs, even as it is held up as a prototype for the family around the world and exoticized (albeit criticized) for an international audience on the ongoing 2016 Netflix series *The Crown*. Think about honor killings, femicides, and the deaths of children like English six-year-old Arthur Labinjo-Hughes, whose murderers, in the words of Richard Seymour, "thought they were his victims."[7]

How, given all this, does the family still serve as the standard for all other relational possibilities? I don't know: perhaps because, to quote Seymour again, the family "can be, though it isn't necessarily, the heart of a heartless world."[8] I suspect the religion of family revolves around this glowing hope that it *will* be. We are grasping at a chance of guaranteed belonging, trust, recognition, and fulfillment. The family dream is our

dream of a haven—the very opposite of hunger or straitjackets. Idiomatically, to say that someone is "like family" is meant to convey in the strongest possible terms: "I claim you, I love you. I consider our fates bound up together." We have no stronger metaphor! But why use *this* metaphor?

Tolstoy famously opened his magnum opus with the truthy formula "All happy families are alike; unhappy families are each unhappy in their own way." It sounds good, concedes Ursula K. Le Guin: "It's a great first sentence."[9] So many families are extremely unhappy! And this extreme unhappiness feels unique, because its structural character—like the structure of capitalism—is cunningly obscured from view.

In fact, Le Guin suggests, the reverse of Tolstoy's apothegm is ultimately closer to the truth. She knows of what she speaks, having herself grown up "in a family that on the whole seems to have been happier than most." She finds it "false—an intolerable cheapening of reality— simply to describe it as happy." To her, the very phrase "happy families" bespeaks a fundamental incuriosity about the nature of happiness, which—under capitalism especially—comes with enormous costs. Those who breezily deploy it forget that there is a "whole substructure of sacrifices, repressions, suppressions, choices made or forgone, chances taken or lost, balancings of greater and lesser evils," at the foundation of familial happiness. They ignore "the tears, the fears, the migraines, the injustices, the censorships, the quarrels, the lies, the angers, the cruelties." Yes, families can be happy, Le Guin maintains, poker-faced and only possibly joking, "for quite a long time—a week, a month, even longer." The happy families Tolstoy "speaks of so confidently in order to dismiss them as all alike," though?—"where are they?" What if *unhappy* families are all alike, in a structural sense, because *the* family is a miserable way to organize care—whereas happy ones are miraculous anomalies?

As a child, I used to play a card game called "Happy Families" with the other members of my far-from-happy nuclear family. The deck was illustrated in 1851. Each set bears a name like Pots, Bun, Dose, and Tape, and has four components: a male head of the household (who plies his trade: painting, baking, doctoring, tailoring), one wife (who helps him),

and two children, representing both binary gender options—boy and girl. *Dad: may I have Master Bung, the Brewer's Son?* I'd ask, guessing a card I wanted, hidden in my target opponent's hand. If I had guessed correctly, I claimed the card, with the Bung Boy's grotesque portrait on it, and then asked for another, and another: *Thank you! Now, Mum, may I have Mrs. Grits, the Grocer's Wife? Much obliged. Now, Mum again: may I have Miss Dip, the Dyer's Daughter?* It was great fun; devilish. I recall the gleeful vindictiveness of the game, above all (or alternatively: droll, powerless dismay). Until one makes an error and cedes control, one is on a roll, imperiously stripping the cards from everyone's hands in a triumphal progress of family-reunification. *Boom, that's the Boneses complete*. It's their togetherness, I suppose, that makes the happiness. Could it work for us? We, the players, were generationally and gender-apportioned in the same quartet—Dad, Mum, Ben, and me.

The sensibility in "Happy Families" is refreshingly mocking (the individuals depicted are all daft, nasty, pathetic, ridiculous, vain-looking characters). At the same time, the game evokes a powerful fantasy: every human being is in her cosmically pre-destined place in a perfectly symmetrical genealogical grid. Barbers beget little barbers, who grow up to marry, what else, barbers' wives, and so they beget more barbers in turn. Each person inherits an economic vocation—the family's natural business—that presumably harmonizes perfectly with the wider Happy Society's ecology of useful trades. All the Dips have dye on their happy hands, not just Mr. Dip. All four of the Soots are sooty. And clearly Miss Soot, with her duster, has no thought in her head of ever being something other than the Daughter of the Sweep (except, one day, no doubt, a different dustman's wife). The conflation of the individual and the family is absolute, as is the conflation of the family and the family *business*. Members of society who do not *work* are unthinkable within the famous card-deck's schema. "This is a fantasy of an economy," to quote what Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh had to say about family ideology in the eighties, "in which the actions of self-seeking 'economic men' add up, through the 'unseen hand' of the market mechanism, to an optimal pattern of production and consumption."[10]

Lo and behold, decades later, in 2021, the best-selling author and economist Emily Oster published *The Family Firm*, a "data-driven" handbook for "running your family like a business." Oster's book unironically assesses the "human resources" dynamics of the private bourgeois home vis-à-vis the wider economy, all the while providing a handy "management" toolkit for the would-be competitive player in today's fast-paced parenting decisionscape. "How much extra happiness will more money buy you?" Oster proposes asking yourself during a budget meeting. "It's worth considering not just the *number* of dollars but the *marginal utility* of those dollars."[11] You may, as a parent, decide that happiness lies in working less and spending more time with the kids, but the rationale for this, in Oster's matrix, still makes its way inexorably back to productivity: "I value that time," she vouchsafes, "in part to get to hang out with them and, honestly, in part because I do not think anyone else is tough enough on supervising violin practice."

The family is an ideology of work. In the early twenty-first century, as Oster shamelessly details, its credo has become the optimization (via violin-playing and other forms of so-called human capital investment) of a population of high-earning, flexible entrepreneurs. Previously, as we saw, the workers crafted by the family were imagined more along the lines of the trades-guild avatars depicted on the "Happy Families" playing-cards: Mr. Chip or Mr. Bung (a petty bourgeois earner) and his hardworking but unwaged wife and children. Indeed, ever since the European labor movement *won* the male-breadwinner household for itself in the 1890s, socialists have cleaved to the romantic idea of the working-class "provider" whose dependent nest-mates (grandpa, grandma, woman, brats, unwed sister-in-law) are all happily identified with what he does by way of work.[12] Today, Mr. Waitress, in contrast, will probably re-train at least twice—becoming Mr. Tech Support, Mr. Nurse, Mr. Uber Eats, and so on, sometimes all at the same time. In the so-called advanced or overdeveloped economies which academics like to call "feminized" (on account of the higher proportion of female workers employed, but also the traditional "gender"—service, hospitality, support, computing, affect—of the key profit sectors) almost everyone has to try to be a "male breadwinner." From

this precarious vantagepoint, there is something attractive, pseudo-utopian even, about the fictive Miss Soot's perfect absence of anxiety about who she is. To be a "working family," an artisanal team ordained by the cosmos itself, is a deeply seductive idea; an evocation of security, of harmony, and "right reproduction." No wonder consumers, voters and pundits love the notion of a "family business," a "mom 'n' pop shop," despite clear evidence that workers' wages, benefits and working conditions are worse, not better, within such establishments.

Emily Oster might be an exception to this claim, but it seems to me that capitalist societies, once they'd invented family values (that is, *work* values), on the whole failed to advance them with a consistently straight face. Everybody knows that not everybody (to put it mildly) experiences the family as a blissful state; that not everybody (to put it mildly) loves their work. Some of us have always known. To be sure, humorless, straightforward, quasi-fascist paeans to the heteronormative hearth and the aspirational industriousness it breeds exist in great numbers, from sentimental Victorian fiction to patriotic Hollywood thrillers and, increasingly, Christian-nationalist policy platforms. But an overwhelming amount of equally mainstream art and literature is also about family ideology's "discontents." Anti-family politics isn't unthinkable, in other words—it's everywhere! Art and writing about family life is usually at the very least satirical, and often downright dark. Think of *King Lear, Tristram Shandy, Jane Eyre*, *Middlemarch*, *Madame Bovary*, *Beloved*, *Twin Peaks, The Sopranos*, *Game of Thrones*, *Breaking Bad*, *The Simpsons*, or Alison Bechdel's *Fun Home*, to name only the first (forgive me) "household names" that come to my mind. Realist and gothic traditions alike view family as a field of howling boredom, aching lack, unhealed trauma, unspeakable secrets, buried hurts, wronged ghosts, "knives out," torture attics, and peeling wallpaper. Yet in "cli fi" and related representations of national emergencies and the apocalypse, authors insist on family as the core relationship we will *need* to rely on, when all else is stripped away.[13]

It bears spelling out that satire does not by itself unsettle power, and probably sometimes offers the consolations of "relatability" *instead of* inciting audiences to mount a less-tolerant response to what they see. Yet

the fact that culture routinely questions the morality of work—and shines a light on the nihilism of the precept "family first"—*matters*. It matters that admitting how disappointing family life is—how irksome, unjust, and exhausting at best, and crushingly traumatic at worst— represents one of the dominant established tones of the classical novel, family cartoon, drama, sitcom, and memoir. Sure enough, familiality and coupledom are sometimes satirized so subtly one can barely tell. Such moves are in themselves canonical: the happily-ever-after "script" subjected to heart-felt critiques by the characters in a novel or mini-series, only to then unfold anyway (to the characters' delighted surprise and bemused embarrassment!) for a plot resolution of maybe-this-time-it'll-be-different quiescence. "Down with love" is never the conclusion of a narrative: it is, however, sometimes the view espoused by our heroes at the beginning. The literarily self-aware characters in a Sally Rooney novel know all of this. When one semi-serious answer to the question *Beautiful World, Where Are You* turns out to be: *in the bosom of the conventional family you have decided to form with your childhood sweetheart*, there is no doubt: the novel is trolling us![14] Yet readers still consume the experience of political and existential anguish melting away as Alice and Felix and Eileen and Simon stop worrying about capitalism and embrace their desire to marry.

Genres of family critique other than the bourgeois novel do exist, but they aren't necessarily pretty. I'm thinking of the medium crawling with moms turned murderers, blood-spattered dining-rooms, incest revenges, and homes set ablaze: *Hereditary, The Shining, Society, Goodnight Mommy, Psycho, The Stepfather, Us.* Critical cinema scholars have long identified a latently insurrectionary desire at play in horror movies, especially those that depict attacks (often from within) on the propertied white family, the patriarchal regime of housework, or the colonial homestead.[15] Books like *Hearths of Darkness: The Family in the American Horror Film* argue that violent and scary movie-making is, more often than not, a popular vehicle for mass anti-family desire.[16] Think of the menacing domestic interiors, hostile kitchen appliances, creepy children, murderous kin, and claustrophobic hellscapes of your favorite horror flick. In slasher, home-invasion, and feminist horror canons, the narrative pretends to worry

nationalistically about external threats to the family while, in fact, indulging every conceivable fantasy of dismembering and setting fire to it from within. From gore to so-called "psychological" horror, diverse genres openly implicate the family-form in the tortures it is enduring. In these movies, the suppressed, disavowed violence of the home is returning home. The monster is coming from inside the house.

Wow, who am I calling *monsters*—dads and moms and great-aunt Trish? No: family abolition is not "puerile" politics (albeit children must be on the front lines of imagining it). Family abolition does not expect a state of perfect, uninterrupted, universal happiness. Rather, I would ask you to flip the script and consider that it is *the family* that is unrealistic and utopian. The family, right now, is supposed to make everybody happy. We are all supposed to be avatars of our little biological team of competitive social reproduction. When we are delinquent, we are a burden on the family: an experience which, ideally, reforms us by making us remember (like it's a good thing) that family is all we've got. Even when we are exceptional, we are, in a sense, chips off our biogenetic clan's block; something for blood relations to be proud of.

Modern familialism is not so far off from the psychology of Miss Soot as we might like to think. It's as though we've forgotten that her happiness, like *her very name*, is a self-conscious fiction. To make the flesh-and-blood Misses Soot of this world happy—*truly* happy—we have to accept that human beings are actualized neither in work nor in reproduction. We have to find out one another's real names and struggle together against the system that makes arbitrary data on birth certificates shape people's fates. It should be elementary socialism, not some fringe eccentricity of queer ultra-leftists, to be striving toward a regime of cohabitation, collective eating, leisure, eldercare, and childrearing in which no one, to quote M. E. O'Brien, "is bound together violently any longer,"[17] like sets in a ghoulish deck of playing-cards.

I'd wager that you, too, can imagine something better than the lottery that drops a neonate arbitrarily among one or two or three or four individuals (of a particular class) and keeps her there for the best part of two decades without her consent, making her wholly beholden to them for

her physical survival, legal existence, and economic identity, and forcing her to be the reason they give away their lives in work. I'd wager that you, too, can imagine something better than the norm that makes a prison for adults —especially women—out of their own commitment to children they love. Together, we can invent accounts of human "nature," and ways of organizing social reproduction, that are not just economic contracts with the state, or worker training programs in disguise. Together, we can establish consensus-based modes of transgenerational cohabitation, and large-scale methods for distributing and minimizing the burdens of life's work.

Even then, I seriously doubt we will have found the *blueprints for happiness*. Ursula K. Le Guin's question still gives me tingles, though: those happy families Tolstoy was so uninterested in, *where are they*? Contrary to the trendy cynicism and faux-radical realism of the canonical litterateurs who considered misery to be somehow *truer* than happiness, Le Guin treats happiness as the rarer, more interesting, more pressing, challenging collective artform. Family abolition, she might agree with me, is an important vehicle for such curiosity about—and desire for—happiness.

Those of us assigned to so-called reproductive labors on this earth know especially well that happiness is a clumsy art, a Sisyphean effort, a messy choreography that, by definition, cannot leave anybody out. No doubt, a world in which most members of most households are deeply and truly happy most of the time lies mostly in the future, part of a yet-to-be-written history. It feels like the horizon toward which speculative fictions like Le Guin's are reaching. But like all utopias, too, that world already nestles latently in the present. It has its wispy sprouts in nooks and crannies wherever people, against all odds, are seeking to devise liberatory and queer —which is to say, anti-property—modes of care. (The word "queer" has widely been emptied of its communist meanings, yet here and there, and certainly in this writer's heart, it still carries some abolitionist freight, signifying resistance to capitalism's reproductive institutions: marriage, private property, patriarchy, the police, school.) Queerly, then, the best care-givers already seek to unmake the kind of *possessive love* Alexandra Kollontai called "property love" in their relations with children, older

relatives, and partners. The comradeliest mother-ers already seek to deprivatize care. So, in a strict sense it may be true, as Michael Hardt asserts, that the production of real happiness is doomed under current conditions: "only once property love is abolished can we begin to invent a new love, a revolutionary love, a red love."[18] But it also seems indisputable that many of us are getting on with the abolishing.

As we'll shortly see, the idea of abolishing the family is very old (Plato wrote *The Republic* around 375 BC; and Charles Fourier first imagined "feminism" and the "phalanstery" two hundred years ago). There have been certain periods, including the sixties and seventies, when relatively many people were familiar with it. In a minute, in chapter 3, we'll dig into the history of family abolitionism, which includes nineteenth-century French utopians, Marx and Engels's "infamous proposal," thwarted Bolshevik commissars like Kollontai, revolutionary feminists like Shulamith Firestone, mid-century Gay Power activists and children's liberationists, rowdy welfare recipients, queer Indigenous and Black militants, and twenty-first century trans Marxists. But before this potted history, our attention will turn—in chapter 2—to the pros and cons of opting for the (unnecessarily inflammatory, some say) terminology of "abolition" as opposed to the available alternatives: "reform," "expand," and so on. What does abolition even mean, in this context? Should family abolitionists take pains to specify that they mean the "white" or "bourgeois" or "nuclear" family— not, perish the thought, *your* complex, financially struggling, queer and/or racially marginalized kinship network? Or should we insist that there is no family other than the white, nuclear, bourgeois family, in a structural sense? To answer this, we dig into the differences between white ruling-class and, on the other hand, Black proletarian (or colonized) people's relationships to the family. Why might it make sense to describe "the Black family" as an oxymoron? Why do some people reject the idea that "abolishing the family" is desirable for nonwhite groups and oppressed classes? Is calling for family abolition compatible with treasuring techniques and traditions of mutual survival developed by colonized, or formerly enslaved, people? Finally, in chapter 4, I consider what a movement of *real families against the family* might look like, and then make an argument for going beyond that

metaphor: letting go of kinship altogether and pushing forward the relations we might call comradeship, or kith, or words that have not been invented yet.

4
Comrades Against Kinship

> "Any critique of the family is usually greeted with, 'but what would you put in its place?' We hope that by now it will be clear that we would put nothing in the place of the family."
>
> — Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh[1]

When economic crises and/or pandemics strike, it is paradoxically our scarcities that we want to hug to ourselves, lest they be taken away. So engrained is the logic of the private household, for example, we almost did not need to be told, back in February 2020, that a person's first line of defense against the coronavirus is her private property with its roster of registered relatives. The state's presupposition in tackling the COVID-19 pandemic has been brutally clear: there is no alternative to the family. Populations were mandated to keep a "social distance" (from everyone … except family) and to "shelter in place" (in whose place? our family's, of course). Many adults "boomeranged," as the papers called it: moving back into their parents' homes during the pandemic.[2] But how could a zone defined by the asymmetries of power—of reproductive labor, marriage (often), and patriarchal parenting, by rent and mortgage debt—benefit health? Abusers everywhere predictably battered and molested their partners and "dependents" with increased impunity, in the privacy of their apartments, since it was more difficult than ever, physically and financially, to exit a home.

Nevertheless, the dearth of alternatives meant that COVID-19 also exacerbated the exclusion and marginalization of the disowned, the propertyless, the unhoused, the warehoused, the web-illiterate and those without preexisting privacy—in short, those of us we are encouraged to think of as (unlike oneself, or at least *more so*) homeless. It's no joke, having

no "place," no municipally legible place to shelter in, under a policy of shelter-in-place. In my town, it was the vagrant, Black, sex-working, substance-using people, the young street queers, and the unpropertied generally who were systematically brutalized by police for defying COVID-19 directives. Nevertheless, it was far from clear, in my town—particularly in light of high reported contamination rates in the prisons and so-called homeless shelters—that sleeping under bricks and mortar with one's legal relatives was epidemiologically (or otherwise) prudent. Indeed, the whole framing of the indoors, sticking with one's "folks," and so on, as the key to the lockdown, appeared upon closer inspection deeply equivocal. It depended on a public/private double standard that went, for the most part, unexplained.

Stay within your clan and dwelling, ran the edict; but whereas, when it comes to the public realm, the vaporous mass of your always-partially-aerosolized body must strive to remain outdoors, in the private realm, conversely, it must be kept indoors as much as possible. A household breathes and dies together in its owned or rented property. If you live at no fixed address, in the cracks between commodified buildings, under bridges, or in parks, you are defying virus-management directives, even if your exposure risk is vanishingly small. The virus is a stranger danger. Your pod is your safety. Do not, do *not*, riot all summer long in the open air.

I learned something disorienting from the months-long 2020 tent encampment on the scenic Franklin Parkway, a boulevard in central Philly, variously dubbed Camp Maroon, Camp Teddy and Camp JTD.[3] What was Camp Maroon? An occupation, complete with a kitchen, distribution center, medical tent, substance use supply store, and even a jerry-rigged standing shower—a militant village led by unhoused Philadelphians and working-class rebels like the indomitable, one-in-a-million Jennifer Bennetch (rest in power).[4] The encampment was composed of hundreds of people willing to live together side by side, in tents, to struggle for free housing, migrant freedoms, the right to the city, and more. Even I, standing on the periphery, felt transformed. It was that summer that taught me this: *all beings exploited by capital and by empire are basically homeless*.[5] All of us have been driven from the commons. Everywhere, humans have woven

enclaves and cradles of possibility, relief, and reciprocity in the desert. But the thing that would make our houses *home*—in a new, true, common sense of the word—is a practice of planetary revolution.

It might seem a bit vertiginous to draw such huge conclusions from a localized camp-out in the middle of Pennsylvania's capital city.[6] But if you have experienced, even just for a few days, the alternate social world that brews in the utopian squatting of a city boulevard, you probably know. It's trippy: people acquire a tiny taste of collective self-governance, of mutual protection and care, and suddenly, the list of demands, objectives, targets and desires becomes much longer and more ambitious than simply "affordable housing." That's why M. E. O'Brien thinks "the best starting point to abolish the family" is the protest kitchen: "Form self-organized, shared sleeping areas for safety. Set up cooperative childcare to support the full involvement of parents. Establish syringe exchanges and other harm reduction practices to welcome active drug users."[7] Expand from there, and never stop expanding.

Toward the end of 2020, the City of Philadelphia made some substantial housing-related concessions, then forcibly cleared Camp Maroon. As its memory—as well as that of the city-wide George Floyd insurrections—started to fade, the media hurried to emphasize the supposedly universal reality of attrition into fully-remote, podded, stay-the-fuck-at-home life. Pandemic insurance benefits gave a material reprieve to hundreds of thousands. Confirmed infections citywide approached 150,000. Health workers and other sacrificial "front liners," as well as home-based care-givers, began burning out. As 2021 dragged on, fully housed yet underserved students and workers—especially of color—turned increasingly to suicide. In the age of lockdowns, many met a fate worse than forced time with family, namely: not having a family.

I am writing this, in early 2022, almost a year into a period of job-quitting and work-stoppage widely known as "The Great Resignation" or even "The Great Refusal." In many parts of the US, proponents of forced gestation have succeeded in destroying the right to stop performing gestational labor. Christian-nationalism is on a rampage, proposing that trans children, for instance, shall be kinless (legislators in Texas this year

equated trans-affirming childcare with child abuse and proposed it be grounds for child removal).[8] The family is being re-disciplined. What will happen next?

So far, this little book has introduced the emotional panic and political promise of family abolitionism, argued against setting aside a particular kind of family to be saved from abolition, and surveyed its history to date. My hope is that you now agree that moving beyond the family—as opposed to "expanding" it—is desirable. It is time to grasp the nettle, then, and consider what *abolition* means in practice. The answer is surprisingly complicated, even though the word is lately being broadcast around the world and spelled out in giant letters once more on the tarmac outside police precincts via the movement of hundreds of thousands of feet.

From where I am standing—a viewpoint which, admittedly, is likely to be Anglocentric—it seems as though the specific term "abolition" has been taken back up in a big way. We have entered a moment of abolition fervor and generalized abolitionism on a scale that was last seen in the nineteenth century. This upswell represents a magnificent outcome of at least ten years of grassroots agitation in the belly of the beast of American empire, in tandem with other struggles: Palestine's, for example. "Abolish prisons," "abolish ICE," and "abolish the police" became familiar demands and credible concepts attached to popular platforms. To be sure, some pundits cannot believe their ears. You can't possibly mean *abolish*!? Because, on its face, the answer to this question is almost comically self-evident: what do abolitionists want? Abolitionists want to abolish. We want things not to be. We want an absence of prisons, of colonizers. We desire the nonexistence of police.

Simple, right? Not according to the earliest originators and modern philosopher-activists of abolition (and we should now briefly register the word *abolition*'s weighty original German form, *Aufhebung*). In English translations of the early nineteenth-century writings of German idealist G. W. F. Hegel, *Aufhebung* is sometimes translated as "positive supersession," and intriguingly, this rather stiff bit of jargon unites the ideas of lifting up, destroying, preserving, and radically transforming, all at once. These four components can be illustrated with reference to slavery, the earliest example

of a radical cause calling itself "abolitionist" in history. The successful global fight for the abolition of slavery meant that the noble ideal of humanism, trumpeted in the French Revolution, was simultaneously lifted up (vindicated), destroyed (exposed as white), preserved (made tenable for the future) and transformed beyond recognition (forced to incorporate those it had originally excluded). Slavery was overturned in law and eventually more or less done away with in practice. What we must understand, however, is that our very capacity to understand these events was generated *by them*. In the "before" times, the ideals that governed slave-trading societies really *were* human rights, life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. The world manifested those ideas as they existed then, until, at the end of an enslaved person's rifle, the self-styled inventors of "freedom" in these societies learned at last what real freedom (a *more real* freedom, for the time being) looked like. Humanism: negated, remade, born, buried, prolonged. By winning the struggle against slavers, abolition gave the lie to those societies, and supplied those brave ideals with their first-ever shot at becoming more than words.

That is *Aufhebung*, as I understand it, and it's an understanding I owe to the expansive teachings of, among others, above all, Ruth Wilson Gilmore. The abolition of prisons and of the police, rather than constituting a simple deletion of infrastructure, is better understood as a world-building endeavor, a collective act of creativity without end, giving rise to real justice where, before, there had been Justice with a capital 'J'. At its most basic level, says Gilmore, abolition "is not the absence of something; it's the presence of something. That's what abolition actually is."[9] To practice abolition, we are required to "change one thing: everything."[10] While Gilmore does not focus on kinship questions, there is no question in my mind that the horizon of abolition entails changing everything about the family, too. *What would it mean to not need the family?*

So, what can we say, now, about the destruction-preservation-transformation-realization of the family, in light of these brief thoughts on how struggle unfolds? We might remark, first of all, that a process of "changing everything" *could not* leave the family intact even if it wanted to. Secondly, we could seek to isolate that which is liberatory about the

kinship-ideal, buried within the material misery that is familialized society. What is it that is presently travestied, yet worth realizing? In the case of familiality, the latent utopian kernels seem to be: reciprocal care, interdependence, and belonging. These are the mass desires buried inside a casket labeled "exclusivity," "chauvinism," "race," "property," "heredity," "identity," "competition." Anyone can glimpse them, these ideal versions of family values smothered in everyday life. They're iterated emptily in everything from fashion branding to ecological ethics symposia. All around us, we can glimpse the filaments of the family's dialectical explosion: *Maria our cleaner is part of the family,*[11] *here at Olive Garden* <u>*everyone*</u> *is family, we're all family here at TrustAir™ (because we care), say hello to the great family of humanity, we use 30% renewable energy because the island's endangered birds are family, the great planetary family, family is as family does, welcome to the city of brotherly love, we believe in kinship between all living things.*

Bullshit. Imagine what would have to happen in order for the staff at restaurants and airlines to be welcome to input your name as a guarantor for their student debt. Consider what would make the fashion retailer Kinship™ (whose website currently celebrates "the bond we share," and states that "we are all kin") turn up to an eviction defense on your behalf. Ask yourself what needs to change before Maria the cleaner is able to add her name to the children's birth certificates if she wants to. Then ask yourself whether birth certificates are really necessary. If these thought experiments seem silly, we have to consider the possibility that kinship, as a value, isn't worth all that much. Let me be more direct: I don't particularly like what kinship affords us, ethically or politically. I don't think it is doing a lot of good. What is worse, I think it is getting in the way of better possibilities.

Don't get me wrong: I appreciate that our quasi-universal desire for kinship mediates a desire for care, no more no less. It is not our collective desire for care that I am criticizing; it is the insufficiency of the vehicle we have at our disposal for that desire's realization. Without wading into the weeds of anthropological debates around definition of kinship—or, for that matter, anthropological debates about *whether* it is important to define kinship—I submit that kinship, at least right now, is always a reference to

something that is imagined to be inerasable; to "nature." Perhaps one day it will be fit for purpose again, who knows? Perhaps because the concept of nature has itself been turned inside out. But right now, even when it is conceptualized as practice-based (as it is in many Indigenous cosmologies), kinship functions as a linguistic appeal to something *non-contingent* that can ground a relation. And I am asking: can we suspend that fantasy of something non-contingent? Can we let go of it?

Before the twenty-first century, Donna Haraway—the philosopher to whom I owe my feminism—was not advocating "kinmaking." Quite the contrary, in fact. "I am sick to death," she said in 1997, "of bonding through kinship and 'the family'":

> and I long for models of solidarity and human unity and difference rooted in friendship, work, partially shared purposes, intractable collective pain, inescapable mortality, and persistent hope. It is time to theorize an 'unfamiliar' unconscious, a different primal scene, where everything does not stem from the dramas of identity and reproduction. Ties through blood—including blood recast in the coin of genes and information— have been bloody enough already. I believe that there will be no racial or sexual peace, no livable nature, until we learn to produce humanity through something more and less than kinship.[12]

Just as I am changing my tune here with regard to the line "real families against the family" (a distillation I started offering audiences of the thesis of Full Surrogacy Now, which Haraway generously read), Haraway's recent work on "making kin" is a departure from her own conclusions—above—about the material semiotics of kinship. Not for the first time, I am plumping for the earlier Haraway.[13]

The kinship-value, despite its potentially radical aspiration to encompass the whole world and all the beings in it, is functionally unusable, I think. It is, in the current moment, just a cute frontispiece over the family. When you drill down into it, *blood being thicker than water* is always and perhaps inevitably kin-talk's central referent and underlying metaphor. Thus, I submit, taking family abolitionism seriously requires a serious and concerted effort to loosen, unseat, and unlearn the thought, practice, and language of "kinship." It is a simple argument, and one others

before me have expressed more pithily: "It is the belief that kinship, love and having nice things to eat are naturally and inevitably bound up together that makes it hard to imagine a world in which 'family' plays little part."[14] These, as you may know already, are the words of Michèle Barrett and Mary McIntosh, whose tremendous answer to the question "What would you put in the place of the family?" was, simply: "Nothing."

If we hold hands, we can certainly be brave enough to step into the abundance that will be the nothingness that comes after the family.

No thanks, right? Don't we all have enough contingency going on, as it is, in the maw of the care crisis that is capitalism? Surely the last thing we want to do is ask our loved ones to embrace even *more* contingency! I have no doubt about it: so acute is our care scarcity, the only way we really know how to offer security to one another right now is by pretending that our love is non-contingent. When I say to you that you are "family," or that I think of you as "kin," I am saying "I love you, I care for you, I insure you, I hold you, I see you"—yes—and/but I am underlining this by using a metaphor that means I have no real choice about the matter. I am giving you a *guarantee* (*we are kin*) tethered to a metaphysical plane. And this feels good! At least, it is supposed to feel good. But obviously, an uncomradely hierarchy is baked right into this entire thought structure. *Real* kin will always be realer.

We can talk about extending kinship to the whole world all we want. If kinship were truly something we valued as *made*, not given, we wouldn't have to specify the word "chosen" (as in: "chosen kinship" or "chosen family") when we are talking about kinship that *isn't* imaginable as governmentally ratified (marriage or guardianship based), genetic, or bloodborne.

We need concepts with more bite, concepts like "comradeliness" or "accomplice." Or, if we want something intermediary, we could also consider resurrecting the defunct first half of the still-familiar Old English phrase "kith and kin." The concept of "kith" denotes a form of dynamic relation between beings, a bond similar to "kin," but one whose ground is knowledge, practice, and place, rather than race, descent, and identity. (In her essay "Make Kith, Not Kin!" McKenzie Wark speaks of *kith*'s "nebulous

senses of the friend, neighbor, local, and the customary."[15]) What if we reacquainted ourselves with it, and attempted to gently edge out the primacy of kinship, with which *kith* obviously massively overlaps? The family won't be unmade in language, but nor is the semiotic separable from the material (and I am not prepared to hammer out policy interventions in this chapter). We might be surprised by how much humanity becomes possible when we cease "treating one another like family." At the same time, Patricia Hill Collins is right to point out that the language and thought structure of kinship— "brother," "sister," "mama," "Father," "child"— occupies such a prominent place in liberation traditions, that "rejecting it outright might be counterproductive for groups aiming to challenge hierarchies."[16] There are no comfortable strategies here. As Ellen Willis suggests, "to refuse to fight for love that is both free and responsible is in a sense to reject the possibility of love itself."[17]

We do not have to reject the language of kinship outright. Collectively, rather, we can begin to torque it. It's time to practice being kith or, better, comrades— including toward members of our "biofam"—building structures of dependency, need, and provision with no kinship dimension.

Caring, sharing, and loving are at present to be sought, depended upon, and expected pretty much *only* in kinship contexts. This amounts to a tragic, intricate orchestration of artificial insufficiency, and it has made our appetite for utopia dwindle down to almost nothing. "It is very, very difficult," wrote Linda Gordon, "to conceive of a society in which children do not belong to someone or ones. To make children the property of the state would be no improvement. Mass, state-run day care centers are not the answer." Do we have answers? Do we know yet which kinds of relation are outside capitalist accumulation? Lou Cornum: "If the answer today is none, let us devise some by tomorrow."[18] Let us devise some by tomorrow while, at the same time, as Kathi Weeks says, meditating on "what it means to commit to the long game of radical structural transformation that family abolitionism requires; even if we might be among the agents that help to bring that different future into being, we will not be, and perhaps could not be, the subjects fully desirous of that world."[19] The people we currently call

children, whose "fertile" or "deviant" bodies are presently once more the standard and battleground for a violently queerphobic familism, must be among those at the very center of this long-haul metamorphosis.

"The nuclear family turns children into property," writes Lola Olufemi in her paean to diasporic Black revolutionary feminism *Experiments in Imagining Otherwise*.[20] As a matter of urgency, let us take this to heart, opening anew what Lola calls "the possibility that we could reorganize the family and the buildings we live in and the food we eat and the education we receive and start taking things for free in order to raise children in ways that make sacrifice or regret or biological drives or gendered alienation impossible."[21] I don't have to tell you this, but: it is good to protest and riot against "family separations" especially when young people and their companions are being ripped apart and warehoused in cages in their thousands rather than helped to make the crossing over arbitrary lines on the earth. Forced family reunification is not always a good thing, and can even be lethal to some people, but the separational techniques of the border of any nation-state are the very heart of the family regime. Border-torture tramples and even *targets* kin-relationships in part to uphold the fiction that the nation-state respects the integrity of families once they have been admitted. Border guards do not somehow abolish the family, they are its prime enforcers. Fighting the family regime might thus look like several different things: prising the state's boot off the neck of a "legal" family of "aliens," for instance, and at the same time offering solidarity to a queer kid in that same family, should she need it, against her parents.

What we are saying is that we have to do both at once: make the state return especially dependent humans to the arms of the few caregivers it tends to recognize *and* insist on deprivatizing care, contesting "parental rights," and imagining a world in which all people are cared for by many by default. What we are saying is that KEEPING FAMILIES TOGETHER and ENDING FAMILY SEPARATION are political imperatives and calls to action for all white race traitors, yet, still, they are not our horizon. *Being together as people* and ending the separation of *people*—this is a future that can be imagined, even if it cannot be fully desired yet, at least, not by us. I don't know how to desire it fully, but I can't wait to see what comes after

the family. I also know I probably won't see whatever it is. Still, I hope it happens, and I hope it is a glorious and abundant nothing.