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Abolish Which Family?

> "Although our families may have taken a somewhat different form from that of whites, the socialization that was necessary to maintain the state was carried out."
>
> —"The Black Woman as a Woman,"
> Kay Lindsey, 1970

At this juncture, perhaps you are thinking, okay, this is all very well, but the term "abolish" seems provocative and toxic in this context, not to mention needlessly misleading in 2022. Come on, we don't want to do with families what we want to do with prisons, do we? Certainly not Black and brown and Indigenous and/or queer working-class families! Isn't family abolition (especially without the "white family" or "bourgeois" qualifier), when we really get down to it, a fantastical indulgence for relatively affluent white socialists or queer settlers or at least atheist feminists at the imperial core? Otherwise, how could one possibly talk about "abolishing the family" in, say, a Palestinian organizing context, in which the indigenous family is always already pre-abolished by the genocidal occupying power? How can one say "abolish the family" to the detainees in refugee camps, separated purposively from their kinfolk, fleeing El Salvador, Guatemala, Sudan, Colombia, Syria, Yemen, Afghanistan? In what sense would one expect LGBT people to sign up to an agenda that sounds like a demand to forgo access to the same hospital kin-visitation rights and procreative technologies straight people have? Perhaps it would be better to call for an *expanded* family, or a *reformed* version of the family, rather than an abolished one. It makes no sense to run the risk of appearing to compare the downsides of colonized people's kinship practices with … the carceral state. Surely it is reckless to seek to defend a politics that might be construed as saying that

families—the *very thing* that often works tirelessly to protect Black, migrant, and Indigenous youth from violence, hiding them from cops and freeing them from jails, and so on—are equivalent somehow to their enemies: cops, courts, and jails.

As you can see, I'm semi-fluent—almost impassioned— when it comes to reeling out points against becoming a partisan of "family abolition." They are compelling, these counterarguments, even to me. Since publishing *Full Surrogacy Now*, they have given me pause and stretched my thinking, spawning too many discussions to count. Even now, I am almost persuaded that saying "abolish the family" is too risky, too unstrategic, utopian in the wrong sense of the word. I am *almost* persuaded, but not quite: which is why, in this chapter, I will do my best to mount a case for a critically utopianist position, assembling arguments from Hortense Spillers, Tiffany Lethabo King, Jennifer Nash, Hazel Carby, Paul Gilroy, Kathi Weeks, Kay Lindsey, Lola Olufemi, and Annie Olaloku-Teriba. As all these teachers of mine know, there have been noxious white versions of family abolitionism in the past. And there remain bad white versions of soi-disant "family abolition" discourse now. (Some such came out of the woodwork under the lockdowns of the COVID-19 era, as it happens. On social media, I observed, a small number of privileged women and young queers briefly appropriated this radical terminology to rail against physical distancing and shelter-in-place directives, resenting being deprived of the domestic help and of queer sexual freedom, respectively. From what I saw, the blips in question were rightly teased, chided, and refuted.)

For well over a century, as we will see in the next chapter, socialists, feminists, and revolutionaries in the United States have argued over the best orientation to take toward forms of family that aren't (or at least don't seem to be) bourgeois or white. The fight hit the mainstream when, in 1965, the US secretary of labor officially diagnosed the (female-led) "Negro family" as "a tangle of pathology," galvanizing an entire critical tradition back into action. In the thirties, Black socialist sociologists like E. Franklin Frazier had set out to discover—and appropriate for the purposes of a politics of Black respectability—a true pastoral Black family within the archive of slavery. Naturally, the violently anti-Black Moynihan report revived this

tradition. This time around, though, a skeptical left-feminist counter-tradition emerged, too, which peaked with philosopher Hortense Spillers's epochal account of the production of Black un-motherhood in ante-bellum America, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe." Unimpressed with the reconciliatory misogyny embedded in pro-Black protestations (like Frazier's) that enslaved people had always aspired to the patriarchal family as best they could—with the implication that, hence, their descendants can and will uphold it—Spillers wanted to take the violently produced "kinlessness" of Black people seriously enough to necessitate the crafting of a whole new kin-equivalent way of relating.

She writes: "Whether or not we decide that the support systems that African-Americans derived under conditions of captivity should be called 'family,' or something else, strikes me as supremely impertinent." The point, for Spillers, is that "African peoples in the historic Diaspora had nothing to prove," given that it is "stunningly evident" that they were capable of modes of care "at least as complex as those of the 'nuclear family' in the West." Rather than orienting toward the "family" as a measuring-stick (or aspiration), Spillers focuses on the fact that Black women in the wake of slavery stand "*out* of the traditional symbolics of female gender," and what this means for political struggle—namely: "it is our task to make a place for this different social subject." A place, in other words, that one might call a family, or not. So, whereas Frazier's "good revisionist history" (as Spillers acidly calls it) of "The Negro Family" is ironically quite close to Moynihan's—both agree that a "matriarchate" is something obscene—Spillers discards both options, proposing that the existing "grammar" of American life is unfit for purpose, especially for Black women: "We are less interested in joining the ranks of gendered femaleness than gaining the *insurgent* ground as female social subject."[1]

Spillers's text can be read as family-abolitionist, and Tiffany Lethabo King does read it that way in a 2018 essay, to great effect.[2] But apart from "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," King notes, Black scholarly and feminist/womanist responses to the Moynihan report rarely go this far; "rarely [do they] interrogate the viability of the notion of the family itself." Rather, arguments are typically made for "expanded," "extended," "non-sanguinal,"

"queer," and "intergenerational" alternatives. The problem, for King, with these "modifications and revisions to the family" is that they "still retain attachments to the liberal humanistic concept of the filial,"[3] meaning that they refer back to the human "subject" of liberalism who has *not* been ungendered via slavery, and so don't quite break free of the definition of kinship (*kinship-as-property-relation*) that Spillers, in the eighties, exposed as elemental to white American culture (its racial/gender *grammar*).

The rubric of Black motherhood, for those of us who would defend it against the necropolitical forces that crush and denigrate it, inspires celebratory, even ecstatic queer-utopian theorization. As a result, it has to be said, we don't always leave ourselves much room to challenge possible patriarchal and proprietary violences *by* mothers (of any gender) within Black families, or room to note the violence that the celebratory model potentially does to those mothers themselves. The 2016 anthology *Revolutionary Mothering* co-edited by Gumbs, Martens and Williams—which seeks to queer the expanded-Black-kinship field associated with Carol Stack's touchstone ethnography, *All Our Kin* (1974)[4]—oscillates between revaluing devalued motherhoods in a language of queer euphoria, and flirting with the idea that, while mother*ing* is revolutionary, mother*hood* is part of what has to go. Rereading the anthology recently with Tiffany Lethabo King's perspective in mind, I reflected on how tenaciously the family, as a naturalized form of human organization, persists in the shadow—*as* the shadow—of its beautiful alternates. I feel deep appreciation for *Revolutionary Mothering*, which has changed my life and, in their own words, the lives of several of my students. Lately I've been wondering, though, if we can go further.

So, it seems, has the theorist of sexuality Jennifer Nash, who recently applied her critical powers to the subject of Black motherhood specifically, including in an essay reviewing *Revolutionary Mothering*. "As a black feminist scholar," Nash confesses carefully, "I remain both seduced by and skeptical of the representation of black motherhood as radical and revolutionary, as spiritual and transformative."[5] Contemporary visionaries like Alexis Pauline Gumbs are building the knowledge that "Black

mothering is queer"[6] on strong foundations laid by that earlier giant of queer studies Cathy Cohen (who proposed to combat the defanging of queerness by tethering it to "Punks, Bulldaggers and Welfare Queens"). But even when welfare austerity and prisons are centered in the analytic frame —as mentioned—I don't know if the discourses we tend to assemble under the headers "queer," "Black," and "reproductive justice" help us to name oppressive structures that queer Black mothering milieus themselves, or queer Black mothers themselves, might be upholding.

Revolutionaries must welcome and enable potential challenges *from within*—challenges from children, for example, who may have their own ideas about how to be in relation, or from women who do not feel that their mothering (or refusal of mothering) has yet reached the level of revolutionary. We must hear the grown women, non-binary people, and men who fall within the tent of "queer Black mothering" by virtue of their class, care responsibilities, gender nonconformity, and/or transness, and yet hate the work, desire something else, and simply do not find themselves in the romance. We must stay vigilant in asking: when does the "queer" pose no challenge to property? To what *end* are we queering motherhood? To what end (King dares us to ask) redeeming and uplifting the queer figure of the Black Matriarch? What would happen to our politics, were she not redeemed? I take King's point to be that valorizing Black mother-ers simply on the terms of "motherhood" risks foreclosing other possible forms of identity and sidelining subjects who might not be all that interested in redemption anyway. The question is, are we willing to countenance a *destructive* queer Black female subject, rather than a merely productive one? If so, what non-redemptive pathways might we help blaze, in more interesting directions— collective subject-positions after the family, and beyond motherhood?

Ten years after "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," the British feminist critical race theorist Hazel Carby published a very different landmark intervention entitled "White Woman Listen!" Whereas Spillers had judged the family as potentially beyond redemption, Carby's target was, instead, the women's movement's rigid antipathy to the family. Most Black feminists "would not wish to deny that the family can be a source of oppression for

us," she wrote; yet many still felt frustrated at white feminists' overemphasis on it as a site of oppression. "The black family has been a site of political and cultural resistance to racism," Carby stressed.[7] It's true, of course. There can be no family-abolitionism without an appreciation for everything the family affords by way of *resistant* ethnic and communitarian identity, pleasure, and (above all) survival. We must face the question: whose family are we abolishing? Still, the answer may not be what we expect.

The answer might be, in fact: *my family first, please*! Tiffany Lethabo King, for example, writes of her "commitment to the ongoing life of the Black intramural" (Black internal/indoor life) as it is lived within her "own extended Black diasporic family":

> While I exist blissfully and sometimes uneasily within a formation that must constantly be reshaped—and eventually even abolished—in order to be capacious and loving enough to address its own violence and continue to invite in all of those that desire its embrace, it may be necessary to go "beyond" it. While I critique the family and am committed to addressing its limitations—even its elimination—I celebrate the creative ways that Black descendants of captive communities continue to reinvent and conceptualize relationships. To this Black endeavor, I will always be committed.[8]

Manifestly, then, it is possible to love one's Black family while grasping that the family emerged historically as a category of "violent forms of humanism."[9] In fact, it is probably *because* of such a love that one might wish to fight, like Tiffany, against the family-form: that "site of violence and dehumanization that threatens to engulf Black sociality."[10]

The debate between family "reform" or "expansion" and family abolition is "not a mere semantic quibble," then, as Barrett and McIntosh observed in 1982. I agree with them: while we might not have all the answers right away, ultimately, "it will be important to determine whether the positive ideals and satisfactions that we hope to strengthen spring *from* the family or—as we shall argue—survive in spite of it."[11]

All of this is maximally difficult political terrain. If the family is a combined-and-uneven form of thriving, denied to some, while being a combined-and-uneven mechanism of violence, concentrating power in the

hands of others, it is foolish to imagine that there is an interpellative strategy we could "safely" choose that would also be adequate to the magnitude of the problem that is the family. One option is to specify, when we talk about abolition of the family, that we mean the white, cisheteropatriarchal, nuclear, colonial family. This might feel safer, but might actually pose more dangers in its invitation to excuse or romanticize the political character of all nonwhite, mixed, gay, and/or indigenous homes, while neglecting most people's family-abolitionist needs and excluding them from family abolitionist politics!

Another option is to cleave to the infinitely harder line and say that for historical reasons no other family than this family exists—*the* family. Obviously, nonwhite households represent a planetary majority. Many families aren't straight, nor even cis-sexual, nor part of a program of colonizing settlement. But while whiteness, empire, and heterosex have lots to do with the family, the family's most fundamental feature, as Kathi Weeks insists,[12] is that it privatizes care: a process of enclosure in which all kinds of families unintentionally participate. So, if we plump for the second option, then the family is to be abolished even when it is aspired to, mythologized, valued, and embodied by people who are neither white nor heterosexual, neither bourgeois nor colonizers. And this latter position, as you can see, is the position I believe to be correct. While there is no equality or justice in the distribution of "kinfulness" between humans on this Earth, and while there is no sense in which white, straight and/or bourgeois people *deserve* to reap the rewards of everybody else's courage in abolishing the family, it is yet only in collectively letting go of this technology of privatization, the family, that our species will truly prosper.

At present, it is standard among practically all communities to fête the family as a bastion of relative safety from state persecution and market coercion, and as a space for nurturing subordinated cultural practices, languages, and traditions. But this is not enough of a reason to spare the family. Frustratedly, Hazel Carby stressed the fact (for the benefit of her white sisters) that many racially, economically, and patriarchally oppressed people cleave proudly and fervently to the family. She was right; nevertheless, as Kathi Weeks puts it: "the model of the nuclear family that

has served subordinated groups as a fence against the state, society and capital *is the very same* white, settler, bourgeois, heterosexual, and patriarchal institution that was imposed by the state, society, and capital on the formerly enslaved, indigenous peoples, and waves of immigrants, all of whom continue to be at once in need of its meagre protections and marginalized by its legacies and prescriptions" (emphasis mine).[13] The family is a shield that human beings have taken up, quite rightly, to survive a war. If we cannot countenance ever putting down that shield, perhaps we have forgotten that the war does not have to go on forever.

This is why Paul Gilroy remarked in his 1993 essay "It's A Family Affair," "even the best of this discourse of the familialization of politics is still a problem."[14] Gilroy is grappling with the reality that, in the United Kingdom as in the United States, the state's constant disrespect of the Black home and transgression of Black households' boundaries, as well as its disproportionate removal of Black children into the foster-care industry, understandably inspires an urgent anti-racist politics of "familialization" in defense of Black families. Both the British and American netherworlds of supposedly "broken" homes (milieus that are then exoticized, and seen as efflorescing creatively against all odds), have posed an obstinate threat to the legitimacy of the family regime simply by existing, Gilroy suggests. The paradox is that the "broken" remnant *sustains* the bourgeois regime insofar as it supplies the culture, inspiration, and oftentimes the surrogate care labor that allows the white household to imagine itself as whole. As a dialectician, "I want to have it both ways," writes Gilroy, closing out his essay. "I want to be able to valorize what we can recover, but also to cite the disastrous consequences that follow when the family supplies the only symbols of political agency we can find in the culture and the only object upon which that agency can be seen to operate. Let us remind ourselves that there are other possibilities."[15]

There are other possibilities! Traces of the desire for them can be found in Toni Cade (later Toni Cade Bambara)'s anthology *The Black Woman*, published in America in 1970, not long after the publication of the US labor secretariat's "Moynihan report," *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*. The open season on the Black Matriarch was in full swing.

And certainly not all of the anthology's feminists, in their valiant effort to beat back societal anti-maternal sentiment (matrophobia) and the hatred of Black women specifically (more recently known as "misogynoir"), make the additional step of criticizing familism within their Black communities. But one or two contributors do flatly reject the notion that the family could ever be a part of Black (collective human) liberation. Kay Lindsey, in her piece "The Black Woman as a Woman," lays out her analysis that: "If all white institutions with the exception of the family were destroyed, the state could also rise again, but Black rather than white."[16] In other words: the only way to ensure the destruction of the patriarchal state is for the institution of the family to be destroyed. "And I mean destroyed," echoes the feminist women's health center representative Pat Parker in 1980, in a speech she delivered at ¡Basta! Women's Conference on Imperialism and Third World War in Oakland, California. Parker speaks in the name of The Black Women's Revolutionary Council, among other organizations, and her wide-ranging statement (which addresses imperialism, the Klan, and movement-building) purposively ends with the family: "As long as women are bound by the nuclear family structure we cannot effectively move toward revolution. And if women don't move, it will not happen."[17] The left, along with women especially of the upper and middle classes, "must give up … undying loyalty to the nuclear family," Parker charges. It is "the basic unit of capitalism and in order for us to move to revolution it has to be destroyed."

Forty years later, the British writer Lola Olufemi is among those reminding us that there are other possibilities: "abolishing the family…" she tweets, "that's light work. You're crying over whether or not Engels said it when it's been focal to black studies/black feminism for decades."[18] For Olufemi as for Parker and Lindsey, abolishing marriage, private property, white supremacy, and capitalism are projects that cannot be disentangled from one another. She is no lone voice, either. Annie Olaloku-Teriba, a British scholar of "Blackness" in theory and history, is another contemporary exponent of the rich Black family-abolitionist tradition Olufemi names. In 2021, Olaloku-Teriba surprised and unsettled some of her followers by publishing a thread animated by a commitment to the

overthrow of "familial relations"[19] as a key goal of her antipatriarchal socialism. These posts point to the striking absence of the child from contemporary theorizations of patriarchal domesticity, and criticize radicals' reluctance to call mothers who "violently discipline [Black] boys into masculinity" *patriarchal*. "The adult/child relation is as central to patriarchy as 'man'/'woman,' " Olaloku-Teriba affirms: "The domination of the boy by the woman is a very routine and potent expression of patriarchal power." These observations reopen horizons. What would it mean for Black caregivers (of all genders) not to fear the absence of family in the lives of Black children? What would it mean not to *need* the Black family?

In the next chapter, we will race through the complex, dual-strand history of family abolitionism (in some cases, the movements avowed themselves as such; in others, they have been glossed that way by me). On the one hand, we'll see, people dreamed of erotic town planning, kitchenless architecture, nationalized childcare, ectogenesis, children's political emancipation, gay liberation, post-housework pleasures, and radical welfare activism. On the other, people were stealing away, refusing to breed, birthing in secrecy, eluding marriage, maintaining ties, remembering ancestors, and springing people free. On the one hand, there was an uneven, disorganized movement, from within the matrix of state-sanctioned kinship, seeking to burst free of its confines by mounting experiments in counter-social reproduction: women's strikes, lesbians' custody battles, free schools, communes, men's childcare collectives. On the other hand, in parallel, people arrived at ways of being—forms of maroon (fugitive ex-slave) togetherness that have sometimes also been called "the undercommons"[20]—capable of surviving successive attempts to impose the familial property regime.

3
A Potted History of Family Abolitionism

"We are already outside the family."

—Gay Liberation Front Manifesto[1]

Family abolitionism has by no means been a continuous or even consciously coalitional campaign, but people have been arguing for—and sometimes building—alternatives to the family for two thousand years at least. In Book V of *The Republic*, Socrates concludes that the family must be abolished because, well, it is obviously unfair. (In the dry formula of one contemporary political philosopher, "families disrupt fair patterns of distribution and, in particular, equality of opportunity."[2]) Whether to abolish the family or preserve it is thus not just an essay question on Plato to be assigned to sophomores. It is one of the most strictly classical debates in philosophy, pursued earnestly in juridical journals to this day.[3]

Abstract philosophizing has not been the whole story, however. Over the course of the last two centuries, militants and radicals of various kinds have been manifesting—and writing manifestos about—experimentally abolishing the family from northern France, to occupied Palestine, to settler-colonized Chicago. What follows is a necessarily non-comprehensive whistle-stop tour, not of legal position papers, but of lived and struggled-for versions and visions of family abolition, focusing on Europe and the US.

Charles Fourier

Besides inventing the word "feminism," the French silk merchant Charles Fourier is the reason "utopia" is often associated with seas of lemonade (an early climate ecologist and geoengineer, he really predicted

these). More to the point, Fourier identified the single-family dwelling as one of the chief obstacles to improving the position of women in the world. This fundamental insight inspired an international movement of utopic land projects, including some that sought to abolish the woman-crushing norm of the private kitchen in favor of so-called "kitchenless" cities—neighborhoods furnished with open common kitchens and superb free canteens.[4] Unquestionably sensible as this was, many of Fourier's ideas were unusual: for instance, he opposed bread (being in favor of pastry) as well as the number ten; and expected that sharks and lions would be evolutionarily replaced by "anti-sharks" and "anti-lions." As Dominic Pettman explains, he had a complicated physical account of how "we live in the worst of possible worlds, but are only a few months away from flipping this scenario on its head."[5]

Fourier clearly got a lot wrong—and was moreover a racist colonialist who wasn't at all sure about abolishing wealth inequality. But he also developed powerful theories of human alienation and of repression many years before Marx and Freud. By attacking the family as the cornerstone of market domination and "civilization," he has helped countless people to recognize, in the words of one biographer, "the contradictions, the wasted opportunities and the hidden possibilities of our own lives."[6] Starting in the 1840s, the Fourierist movement founded intentional communities throughout America and Europe based on his polyamorous, anti-work visions.[7] By some measures—given that all these communes petered out, succumbed to state repression, or imploded nastily— Fourierism clearly failed. By other measures, one might say it's too early to tell.

Born into the petty bourgeoisie in the north of France, Fourier was about eighteen years old at the time of the French Revolution. Electrified by the momentum of history, he abandoned his plans to become an architectural engineer and dedicated himself instead to writing, one might say, an architecture of the future. He wrote at night while continuing to be a tradesman by day, and came to hate intensely everything he called "civilized" (meaning, primarily, work, and bourgeois culture, that is, hypocrisy, private property, and markets). By the time he died in his sixties,

he had published several tracts—notably *The New Amorous World* and *The Theory of the Four Movements*—laying out elaborate designs, right down to the last meticulous detail, for a post-capitalist human society whose essential features remain pretty convincing to many people today. What exactly did he prescribe? Among other things: universal basic income, escape from markets, nonmonogamy, excellent food, and varied recreation for all generations. All living is communal (in vast buildings called "phalanxes" or "phalansteries," numbering 1,600 people).[8] There are covered walkways for when the weather is bad, and a guaranteed sexual pleasure minimum. All labor is fully deprivatized (tasks are shared among all children and adults, as well as organized according to the human personality's established "Laws of Passionate Attraction"). Work thus transmogrifies into a libidinal art, or joyful play. Regular carefully curated sex parties are presided over by special "Fairies."

Fourier's obsessive notes constitute the first known detailed blueprint for a European utopia. The utopia in question, to quote McKenzie Wark, is "an amorous order for women, the elderly and perverts," advanced via a kind of "systems theory porn"[9] that anticipates Paul Preciado's pharmacopornographic account of capitalism. Fourier dubbed this world-to-come "Harmony," and an inordinate amount of calculation and tabulation was involved in programming the blend of spicy discord and sweet compatibility that science showed was key to Harmonian happiness. Alas, Fourier's forte was not political economy, but his analyses of gender, ecology, bourgeois morality, and marriage were rightly taken seriously by dissidents throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries—from Owen, Bebel, Marx, Engels, Kropotkin, and Lenin to Walter Benjamin, André Breton, David Harvey, and contemporary sex radicals like Wark and O'Brien. "His spirit," it has been said, "entered the conceptual groundwater."[10] Most impressively, Fourier understood that men "even debase the female sex by their flattery of it."[11] Fully committed to female sexual freedom, he promulgated an orgiastic proto-queer theory *avant la lettre*. The original feminism, then, is inseparable from family abolition,

queer sex, and socialist utopianism. Good to know, right? *Vive le phalanstère!*

The Queer Indigenous and Maroon Nineteenth Century

It is vital at this point to note that pre-colonized and Indigenous populations—for instance in Africa and North America—by and large did not develop the form of private property "the family." Rather, they had it imposed on them as part of the process of disciplining them into capitalism.[12] And while assimilated modes of life have certainly taken significant hold among First Nations throughout the Americas (a function of the ongoing catastrophe that has been the past four hundred years, from their perspective), familialization is also an ongoing, not just "historic," process of colonization. As "The Critical Polyamorist"—Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate scholar Kim TallBear—says of the Indigenous experience: "colonial notions of family insidiously continue to stigmatize us as they represent the normative standard against which we are measured."[13] For example, eighteenth-century British colonists endeavored explicitly to destroy the systems of sex equality, involving female political power ("petticoat government,"[14] in their eyes), operative among Native peoples such as the Cherokee. In the nineteenth century, the US and Canadian federal governments' Indian policies typically demanded marriage as a way of dissolving tribal models of collective ownership that went along with gender-nonbinarism, non-monogamy, and/or matrilocal open marriage: they instituted private property and then concentrated it in the hands of "heads of household," that is, husbands.[15] It is in this sense that we can say that family abolition—as a project of resistance to and flight from bourgeois society and a *defense* against colonization—was a horizon raised via the practices of stolen, captive, colonially displaced, and/or formerly enslaved people who defied the institutions and modes of citizenship the US attempted to acculturate them to, namely: private property, secularized Christian monogamy, and the marriage-based private nuclear household.

A couple of hours' drive west of my Philadelphia home—in Carlisle, Pennsylvania—a so-called "Indian Cemetery" contains the bones of two

hundred very young Indigenous prisoners-of-war: children whom US settler-colonists stole from their people and imprisoned in the Carlisle Indian Industrial School (1879–1918). At Carlisle, the Native children were educated by civilizers, anthropologists, and gentle maternalist genocidaires like Alice C. Fletcher, who inculcated what TallBear has called "settler sexuality." Between 1879–1900, the Bureau of Indian Affairs opened twenty-four such off-reservation schools, by the end of which time three-quarters of all Native children had been enrolled in boarding schools, on- or off-reservation. Army memos from the period show that holding the tribes' youngest members hostage in this manner was an explicit bid to dissuade adult Native warriors from mounting armed counter-offensives ("make them behave themselves") as well as a method of imposing "the" family by breaking kinship ties. Shifting attention away from direct slaughter to the destruction of tribal relationships and ways-of-being, the American government's Indian Schools policy marked a transitional moment in the settler-colonial process, the passage from the military maxim "The only good Indian is a dead Indian" to the new, reform-minded motto of Carlisle's founder, Richard Henry Pratt, aimed at remaking human identity in the oedipal grid: "Kill the Indian, save the man." Attempts—by kin and living ancestors of the stolen children—to claim them back, to contest new genocidal legislation, to raise consciousness about the schools as academies of death, and later to ensure the young ones' proper burial and remembrance, have not ceased since 1879.

Some Indigenous diplomats and philosophers became great enforcers of Christian morality and patriarchy (such as the Seneca leader Handsome Lake, who precipitated what has been called "the Iroquois's own version of Salem" in 1803, for example).[16] However, especially before colonization—and sometimes continuously, into the present—most Native tribes practiced few or no forms of patriarchy; raising children collectively, honoring more than two genders, placing only loose social strictures on sexual pleasure, counting nonhuman relatives among their kin, and sometimes conceptualizing mothering-practices (such as breast-feeding) as gender-inclusive and diplomatically important.[17] Indigenous American two-spirit gender subjectivity, Indigenous philosophical traditions, and

Indigenous cultures of sexual freedom have inspired and educated gender-dissident settlers for four centuries; in the sixties and seventies, entire communities of Gay Liberationists sought to emulate "queer" indigeneity. "There have been glimmers of interconnectivity across Indigenous life and gay practice," summarizes the Navajo writer Lou Cornum, in "Desiring the Tribe," a 2019 essay about the history of utopianist gay and lesbian interactions with (and appropriations of) Native practices. Refusing to simply condemn what is "cringey" (in their own words) about these glimmers, Cornum sees promise in them, and wonders if "a lens as large as communist thinking might direct this wavering light forward" in the twenty-first century.[18] With Cornum, my hope is that non-indigenous and Indigenous communists today could move together toward some kind of collective reckoning with this legacy of kinship-erasure and -reinvention, and develop a shared language of *abolition of the family as a decolonial imperative*.

People newly emancipated from chattel slavery in the US also pursued heterogeneous, anti-propertarian versions of kinship. Before the Civil War, a diversity of covert romantic and sexual codes—including nonmonogamous and loose marriages dedicated to the care of "sweetheart children"—developed among the captive laborers who had been stolen (or birthed by those stolen) from their African communities, and transported over the Atlantic via the Middle Passage.[19] Slavers systematically raped slaves (adulterously) and impregnated them (concubinage) even as they were supposedly modeling the human—that is, white—values of frugality, hard work, and lifelong, monogamous, biologically fruitful marriage, oriented toward heritable property accumulation, as master pioneers of the New World. Meanwhile, for the people they had artificially rendered "kinless," sometimes it was desirable to practice forms of counter-familiality, solidarity, and connection (*family is as family does*) among themselves: mothering young people who happened to be in the same slaver's household; making and revising claims about biological paternity, as needed; "returning" a wife or a husband to their former wife or husband when circumstances permitted, and so on. Customs such as these laid the ground for an ongoing tradition of Black non-nuclear kinning and

"polymaternalism" that scholars from Cathy Cohen to Alexis Pauline Gumbs have described as structurally queer.[20]

Mothering outside of motherhood—and outside even of *womanhood* as it was defined in white supremacist law and science—became a collective art which, while born of necessity and survival, nevertheless consciously manifested abolitionist desire and alternative visions of social reproduction. This is not to romanticize: sometimes comradely mothering in the context of slavery meant brutalizing, heartbreaking refusals to reproduce enslaved life. Pregnant Caribbean captives, for instance, found secret herbalist ways to stop manufacturing new human commodities, or to extinguish them once they were born.[21] More generally, trafficked humans, young and old, were compelled to adapt their commitments to one another to surviving long periods of sudden separation. Nurturing relations was thus a form of *marronage* (stealing-away, forming maroon communities)—a stealing-away of the captive person's kinful, related self. Unsurprisingly, then, after Reconstruction, freedmen, -women, and children did not on the whole jump head-first into the family.

Historians have found that newly emancipated Americans still maintained "diversity of relationship and family structures greater than their white contemporaries on farms or in factories."[22] That is, from the state's point of view, too many freedpeople still tended to cohabit promiscuously, raise children non-monogamously, and take an alarmingly relaxed approach to the meaning of marriage. It was this worrying "failure" of the freed population to seek access to the wages of private familiality that prompted a raft of social workers, church ministers, police, and lawmakers to aggressively mandate legal marriage and to begin prosecutions of African American "violations" of marital decency.[23] These same actors had previously been unsure whether they even wanted to instate a marital Black family (or for that matter an indigenous, Latino, or Chinese one), on account of their concern that this might interfere with eugenic nation-building. But the American state's policing of the post-Reconstruction Black marital bed laid the basis for twentieth-century welfare officers' "man-in-the-house" rule, which denied benefits to any mother caught "living"

(even just for a couple of hours) with a member of the opposite sex.[24] If you, a Black woman, had a "man in the house" of any kind, the law declared, then that man, not the state, ought to be the one paying your child support.

Those who have dug critically into the archives of antislavery caregiving, loving, and sexual or gender self-expression have tended to find a willfully deviant profusion of anti-genealogical fugitivities: all kinds of ways of negating, pre-dating, ignoring, and/or provincializing the private nuclear household. Beginning in the late nineteenth century, in *Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments: Intimate Histories of Riotous Black Girls, Troublesome Women, and Queer Radicals*,[25] Saidiya Hartman documents criminalized "unwed mothers raising children; same-sex households; female breadwinners; families composed of siblings, aunts, and children," sex workers, prison-saboteurs, bulldykes, and more. Hartman resists, however, the urge to romanticize the unruly lives of the punished, constrained, and oppressed turn-of-the-century women who interest her, even while calling their experiments in refusing respectability *beautiful*. For her, "the generosity and mutuality of the poor" shines forth from all these various manifestations of what I want to call family-abolitionism-from-below. "Here is the abolition of the working-class family without its naturalized reinscription," comments M. E. O'Brien appreciatively, about a similar archive.[26]

The Era of the Communist Manifesto

Family abolitionism is, despite what some socialists say, orthodox Marxism. According to the hallowed fathers of proletarian revolution, communism calls for the "abolition of all rights of inheritance." Indeed, unlike several of the revolutionary philosophers of their time—notably the anarchists Proudhon and Bakunin—the nineteenth-century Germans Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels were completely opposed to the family by 1844. As we have seen, they were hardly the instigators of the politics. Besides Fourier, in France, "libertarian" communists like Joseph Déjacque, in France, believed in "Abolition of the family, the family based on marriage, the authority of father and spouse … The liberation of woman, the

emancipation of the child."[27] Meanwhile, in Manchester, England, and Lanark, Scotland, the Welsh socialist and philanthropist Robert Owen was promulgating family-abolitionism on a "cooperative," group-marriage based model.[28] Sharing the weakness of these other analyses, unfortunately, Marx and Engels's gradual arrival at their anti-family position was not informed by thinking about slavery's simultaneous destruction of the family and imposition of it on its victims. Rather, it was explicitly indebted to (among other things) Marx's time spent in Paris and exposure to Fourier.[29]

Marx and Engels were greatly critical of Fourier's (and all utopian socialists' and anarchists') overall project. Nevertheless, the very first footnote to *The German Ideology* states the following: "That the abolition of individual economy is inseparable from the abolition of the family, is self-evident."[30] Despite being so self-evident, family abolition was included in the Communist Manifesto: it is, famously, the "infamous proposal of the Communists" that makes "even the most radical flare up."[31] This passage is where Marx and Engels deride "bourgeois claptrap about the family and education (*Erziehung*) … the hallowed co-relation of parent and child"; and where they state that the ruling class has "reduced the family to a mere money relation" and "torn away the sentimental veil" that once shrouded it. A common misreading of this passage insists that Marx and Engels would like to reverse the process of "reduction" and "unveiling." In this view, the authors are only noting that capitalism has already basically abolished the family; and they are actually *defending* themselves against the false accusation that they want to finish the job!

In reality, it wasn't only the families of the bourgeoisie that Marx and Engels wanted to abolish. They did consider it gruesome that capital accumulation so relentlessly undermined, degraded, and fragmented proletarian kinship. Nevertheless, they explained, the male-breadwinner family *aspired to* by large sections of the working class was irreducibly bourgeois in form. It was one of three interrelated enemies of Communism the two friends referred to as "the Parties of Order," namely: Religion, Family, and the State. They even chided their comrade Hermann Kriege for failing to advocate elimination of the family. In his *Economic and*

Philosophic Manuscripts, Marx reflected movingly that the "positive supersession (*Aufhebung*) of private property" would necessarily "return" people "out of religion, family, state, etc."—returning us to our proper, "human, i.e., social existence."

For Marx, our collective "return" to our human, i.e., social existence is, at the same time, a transcendence of nature and an exit from the institutions of order. He isn't saying that the family is natural (and natural = bad), nor is he saying that there's nothing natural about the family (and unnatural = bad). Rather, he's saying that there's nothing immutably *natural or unnatural* about *us*. Marx's and Engels' position—which is far more attuned to the "dialectical" relationship of nature and culture, in this respect, than Fourier's—was "a decisive move away from the naturalism of their predecessors," according to Richard Weikart. In a communist society, "even if people had a natural bond to their children, no provision would be made for this … No compulsion would interfere with relationships. Thus, theoretically, any sexual relationship between mutually consenting persons would be possible. What would *not* be possible would be the security of a life-long marriage. This sexual relationship could not be chosen."[32]

To achieve this postfamilial communist society, the Communist Manifesto proposes to "replace home education by social." For some contemporary Marxists—notably Jules Joanne Gleeson and Kate Doyle Griffiths in their 2015 text "Kinderkommunismus: A Feminist Analysis of the 21st Century Family and a Communist Proposal for its Abolition"—the means to implement this social education is necessarily "coercive" even if one of its central purposes is to "destroy coercion." The institution that is required, in these authors' view, is a compulsory transgenerational revolutionary crèche: "There is no such thing as a libertarian upbringing. At present, children are taught to feel desperation and to accommodate themselves to capitalism by parents and other care workers living under capitalist conditions. The crèche would be a communist institution, driving children instead to forge themselves into the face of a new society."[33] For others—in this case, China Miéville— "Advocating social education, rather than privatized and familial education, is not to propose indoctrination, but countering the doctrines of the ruling class."[34] I sympathize with both

positions. I wonder if, in the era of the Communist Manifesto—when socialist texts met with a non-negligible audience—we might posit that a popular appetite existed for a certain kind of collective *self*-indoctrination: a desire to be remade entirely as a self, outside of the bourgeois family story.

Alexandra Kollontai and Early Bolshevik Utopianism

In her 1920 pamphlet "Communism and the Family," the Soviet family abolitionist Alexandra Kollontai fleshes out Marx and Engels's horizon of post-familial life: "society will gradually take upon itself all the tasks that before the revolution fell to the individual parents." The obligations of parents to their children shall "wither away gradually," she reasons hopefully, "until finally society assumes the full responsibility."[35] Empathetically and repeatedly, Kollontai reassures her readers that they have "no need to be alarmed":

> Communist society takes care of every child and guarantees both him and his mother material and moral support. Society will feed, bring up and educate the child. At the same time, those parents who desire to participate in the education of their children will by no means be prevented from doing so. Communist society will take upon itself all the duties involved … but the joys of parenthood will not be taken away from those who are capable of appreciating them. Such are the plans of communist society and they can hardly be interpreted as the forcible destruction of the family and the forcible separation of child from mother.

Kollontai is, however, demanding something magnificent from the "working women" addressed here. "The narrow and exclusive affection of the mother for her own children must expand," she declares, "until it extends to all the children of the great, proletarian family." Kollontai, in sum, envisions a planetary insurgency of *red love*, "a social love: a love of many in many ways."[36]

Comrade Alexandra was born into a liberal aristocratic household in St. Petersburg in 1872 but was helping organize textile workers strikes by her early twenties.[37] In order to escape her family, she married a gentleman called Kollontai in 1893. Five years later, she left him and their child to study Marxism in Zurich (where women were allowed to study), becoming

an expert on the Finnish class struggle. In 1908, Alexandra began her first period of exile from Russia because the Tsarist government had issued a warrant for her arrest, following a decade of her propagandizing for international—particularly women's—labor revolution with her faction of the Social Democratic Labour Party. She campaigned against WWI throughout Europe. In 1915, she even toured the United States. Kollontai, albeit a feminist by any reasonable standard, always made it clear that she did not consider herself a feminist because the word "feminist," in her milieu, signified classed self-interest on the part of ladies (that is, mere bourgeois-individualist suffragism). In her pamphlets "The Social Basis of the Women's Question" and "Love and the New Morality," she theorized the family as a labor division, and sexuality as a comradely matter—a concept later articulated as "winged Eros." In her "Letter to Working Youth" on this proposed new erotic ideal, she denounced the couple-form: "Bourgeois morality demanded all for the loved one. The morality of the proletariat demands all for the collective."[38]

The February 1917 overthrow of the Tsar enabled her to return to Russia and—who knows!— contribute to an erotic revolution and the positive supersession of the family. Having joined the Bolsheviks, Kollontai helped strategize, on the party's central committee, toward the October uprising. She helped, thereafter, draft a law on marriage, which allowed women to get divorce on demand, even without the husband's permission, and to receive alimony. Aged forty-five, divorced, and at the helm of a possible planetary metamorphosis, she briefly went AWOL before turning up married to a sailor seventeen years her junior (Pavel Dybenko, who was executed under Stalin in 1938). A powerhouse, polyglot, and philosopher, she wrote many wonderful speeches on the subjects of sex, love, war, child welfare, parenthood, and the nexus of gender and class. She traveled constantly to myriad congresses while also writing propaganda novels about the complicated psychology of the sexual "New Woman" (*Red Love, Great Love*, *The Love of Worker Bees*). Notably, her hope for human sexuality was expressed via the "glass of water" theory: the hypothesis that sex would come to be as abundant and necessary to everyone in society's eyes—but also as *unremarkable*—as drinking a glass of water.

As chronicled in the legendary title *Autobiography of a Sexually Emancipated Communist Woman* (1926), party support for her agenda of liberating sex from reproduction, equalizing men and women's pay, setting up free crèches, and abolishing the family was very lacking: in particular, "my efforts to nationalize maternity and infant care set off … insane attacks against me."[39] Nevertheless, for a brief moment, Kollontai managed to force the politics of proletarian reproductive liberation—espoused too by figures like Inessa Armand and Clara Zetkin—onto Lenin's desk. For a brief moment, after all—before she resigned in left-communist protest of her comrades' ratification of the Brest-Litovsk treaty, which ceded Finland to the whites—Alexandra was the People's Commissar for Social Welfare in the first Soviet government. Her most celebrated accomplishment was her founding, in 1918, with Armand, of the Zhenotdel—the women's department of the Party—which legalized abortion but also, wrongheadedly, sought to liberate Muslim women from their burqas.

Unlike Fourier and unlike Marx (but like most Marxists of her day), Kollontai considered work to be the key to liberation, and the worker the subject of post-capitalism. Work, work, and more (revolutionary) work ought to have occupied the bulk of her own female life, she lamented in her autobiography—instead of all that pointless bloody love. Productive labors, not caring ones, ought to be the life's mission of women, in Kollontai's view. Socializing care is a sine qua non of socialism; but this is because, for Kollontai, work, not care, is what ultimately makes history.

In 1921–22, Alexandra stood with the anti-authoritarian Worker's Opposition, a dissenting faction internal to the Party, and courageously signed the so-called Letter of the Twenty-Two (which likewise sought to resist the entrenchment of a despotic leadership). Thus, by the mid-1920s, she was exiled from her country once again—this time, under the guise of decades-long diplomatic postings overseas, including a substantial stint in Mexico—by the revolutionary USSR she had helped create. Tragically, Alexandra Kollontai seems to have abandoned her liberationist, syndicalist beliefs, serving Stalin from afar for the rest of her life, even as he reinstated the most anti-communist (not to mention gender-conservative and patriarchal) forms of social order. She never criticized Stalin publicly,

survived, and died in Russia in 1952. There is no ignoring her capitulations, yet one can still derive, I feel, considerable pleasure from the fact that for several decades, the best-known ambassador for the USSR around the world was not just *one of the first women ever to hold diplomatic office* (a fact that never seems to come up in histories of the girlboss) but a glamorous high femme libertine and family abolitionist. Even as Kollontai's "red love" imagination failed to question sufficiently the edifice of wage labor and its compatibility with a free human future, her prole sexual liberation politics and "debauched" personal mores inspired millions of human beings around the world, and continue to do so to this day. They may have made her the subject of frenzied smears throughout the media as well as, shamefully, her own party, but, one hundred years later, her name is held in honor among sex-positive reds everywhere.

Red Love: A Reader on Alexandra Kollontai is a giant tome of neo-Kollontaian manifestos, letters, struggle bulletins, interviews, plays, and essays, published in 2020 in Berlin.[40] That same year, the Spanish artist Dora García published *Love With Obstacles* (or in the original: *Amor Rojo*), a textual compendium of all her collaborative research on Kollontai's life and legacy, to accompany her film of the same name.[41] I encountered García's "red love" archive and film-making in the context of her 2022 Kollontai-themed exhibition in Brooklyn ("*Revolution, Fulfill Your Promise!*"), towards which I contributed workshops alongside the trans revolutionary M. E. O'Brien. The links García draws between the Bolshevik's family-abolitionism, contemporary Mexican transfeminisms, and abortion-defense street militancy moved me to tears.[42] We will never know, all these anthologies and moving images suggest, what Kollontai might have accomplished with her comrades on Russia's domestic front in terms of the transformation of bourgeois love into "winged eros" and "love-comradeship," had the counterrevolution not prevailed. For it bears repeating that Kollontai's family abolitionism was actively thwarted by other Bolsheviks. Michael Hardt narrates:

> For the 8th Party Congress in 1919, Kollontai prepared an amendment to affirm in explicit terms the withering away of the family, but Lenin, although

sympathetic to her aims, claimed that it was not yet the right time: "we have in fact," he is reported to have responded, "to save the family."[43]

Shulamith Firestone, Revolutionary Feminism, and the Limits of the Kibbutz

Saving the family has been the mission of a huge number of history's feminists—which is partly why Kollontai (who, again, did not even see herself as a feminist) often opposed movements calling themselves feminisms. But it's time now to skip over almost fifty years, moving from Leningrad to the Lower East Side, and meet the Jewish New Yorker, Chicago art-school graduate, and messianic feminist Shulamith Firestone, whose hilarious and readable yet densely philosophical Freudian-Reichian-Marxist-Engelsian-Beauvoirian manifesto for family abolition (published in 1970) she composed at the advanced age of twenty-four.[44]

While, oddly, this manifesto never mentions Kollontai by name, its author does suggest—alas, without elaborating—that "The failure of the Russian Revolution is directly traceable to the failure of its attempts to eliminate the family and sexual repression."[45] Hungry for clues as to how better to restart the attempts, Shulie Firestone traveled to Israel to study life on a settler-socialist kibbutz, pored over Philippe Ariès's controversial history of the invention of the child, *Centuries of Childhood* (trans. 1962), and scrutinized the international "free schooling" or "unschooling" movement more generally, especially the "radical approach to childrearing" enacted by A. S. Neill in his fee-paying pseudo-commune for children, Summerhill, in Suffolk, England.[46] Disappointed by her experiences, she reported back to her American sisters that the "far left" kibbutzniks were almost exactly as sexually conservative and patriarchal as their non-left counterparts and, indeed, wider society. All in all, she said, "the kibbutz is nothing more than a community of farming pioneers temporarily forced to sacrifice traditional social structures to better adjust to a peculiar set of national conditions."[47]

The self-appointed founder and theorist of the American women's liberation movement, Firestone advocated for "the abolition of the labor

force itself under a cybernetic socialism" and "the diffusion of the childbearing and childrearing role to the society as a whole, men as well as women." Ectogenesis—the machine uterus—is notoriously a part of this speculative picture.[48] But above all, she contends, women must liberate children and themselves from the capitalist patriarchy—seizing control over technology, eradicating the tyranny of work, automating labor (even reproductive labor, as far as possible), and shedding the incest taboo such that play, love, and sexuality might "[flow] unimpeded."[49] This is why the stakes of the (unsurprising) failure of kibbutzim to abolish the family on occupied Palestinian land could not have been higher for many US women in 1970. As Kathi Weeks affirms in the opening of her wittily titled essay "The Most Infamous Feminist Proposal," the "infamous proposal of the communists" briefly became the position of the women's liberation movement.

Yes, women's liberation, at its fiery peak, meant: abolishing the family. In 1969, Linda Gordon's extended statement "Functions of the Family" appeared in the self-published US movement mimeograph *WOMEN: A Journal of Liberation*, outlining the revolutionary-feminist position that "the nuclear family must be destroyed, and people must find better ways of living together. Furthermore, this process must precede as well as follow the overthrow of capitalism."[50] It was the following year that the mainstream publication of *The Dialectic of Sex: The Case for Feminist Revolution* shook the world. Firestone's magnum opus voices scalding refusals of almost every "natural" premise of American society ("almost," because its chapter on race is woefully racist; and because no queer people appear in it).[51] It advances a vision of a future in which children and adults together— having eliminated capitalism, work, and the sex distinction itself—democratically inhabit large, nongenetic households. You see, Shulie deemed the overthrowing of class, work, and markets to be a self-evidently necessary task, barely worth defending. What really interested her was the abolition of culture and nature, no less: starting with patriarchal "love" and its "culture of romance" on the one hand, and pregnancy on the other.

The scale of Shulie's ambition was startling to readers. But in 1970 readers at least had some contexts for her proposal to abolish the sex and generational distinctions. At that time, practically all feminists, from Kate Millett to Toni Cade Bambara, were condemning the family as oppressive to women and children, anti-erotic, and/or white supremacist.[52] "Patriarchy's chief institution is the family," Millett wrote in 1968.[53] Even Betty Friedan, before recanting her anti-family positions a decade later, called the private home "a comfortable concentration camp" in 1963. Free universal 24/7 community-run childcare was a *middle-of-the-road* feminist demand. If today many of us don't know this history of the women's demand for family abolition, it is because it was first defeated, then actively erased. By 1981, Cheryl Clarke was sounding a little more isolated from mass movement, and perhaps a little unsure of herself (despite the bravado) when she wrote in the famous women-of-color anthology *This Bridge Called My Back*: "As far as I am concerned, any woman who calls herself a feminist must commit herself to the liberation of all women from coerced heterosexuality as it manifests itself in the family, the state, and on Madison Avenue."[54]

Ever since the capitalist victory over the long sixties, the shout for abolition of the family has been buried beneath a strange kind of shame: in Weeks's phrase, "feminists have tried to walk it back."[55] In a long cover feature for *Village Voice* in 1979, "The Family: Love It or Leave It," the revolutionary feminist Ellen Willis explicitly sets out to address this phenomenon: "the mentality that inspired veterans of the Sixties to say things like, 'We didn't succeed in abolishing the family. This proves we were wrong—the family is necessary.' "[56] The about-face was driving her nuts, she reported: at the close of the seventies, resigning themselves to their defeat, leftists were lapsing en masse into nostalgia, romanticizing the family and blaming capitalism for its collapse (when just ten years earlier they had been trashing the family and blaming capitalism for its persistence). Among her erst-while comrades, she found there was suddenly an appetite not only for coupled bourgeois isolation but also for print justifications of it in the form of pro-family books such as *Haven in a*

Heartless World: The Family Besieged (1977) by the erstwhile "neo-Marxist" and conservative moralist Christopher Lasch.

Willis's piece argued that the Left impulse to chest-beat and declare failure, albeit understandable, is indulgent. She reminded us, her people, that the experience of failure per se is a poor reason to decide the goals of the sixties were incorrect: "That we did not manage in a few years to revolutionize an institution that has lasted for thousands, serving indispensable functions as well as oppressive ones, is hardly something to be surprised at or ashamed of." We should not, in other words, be ashamed. Nor should we be surprised that the process of material and imaginative defeat that Willis was already documenting in the *Village Voice* before Thatcher came to power in Britain—and then Reagan in America—grew more entrenched in the years that followed. We would do well to remember: no matter how many neo-Laschian voices spring up around us —no matter how many fascoid ("red-brown") alliances and pseudo-Marxist-feminist "defenses of patriarchy"[57]—the thread can always be picked up, turned into a fuse, and lit.

Even deep in the desolation of the Eighties, Marxist feminists collaborated to keep the possibility of abolishing the family, alive, at least discursively. In 1983, Lynne Segal gathered and edited a collection entitled *What Is To be Done About the Family?* through the Socialist Society in Britain, which comprised sober reflections on contradictions in neoliberal childcare and the length of the road ahead from Mica Nava, Denise Riley and others.[58] In 1991, Barrett and McIntosh scandalized many on the British Left, firstly by speculating that "caring, sharing, and loving would be more widespread if the family did not claim them for its own,"[59] then by pointing out that the Labour Party's "familism" had lately actually exceeded that of Thatcher. McIntosh and Barrett's jointly authored book, *The Anti-Social Family*, mounted an enduringly powerful modern argument for the fundamental incompatibility of socialism and familism. "Privatized family collectivism tends to sap the strength of wider social collectivism," they explained painstakingly; "the stronger and more supportive families are

expected to be, the weaker the other supportive institutions outside of them become."[60]

These feminists at this point were swimming against the current: most of their peers were pivoting and hastening to reassure distressed and outraged audiences that we aren't anti-family; in fact, we want more family, not less![61] This cowardly sleight of hand is understandable. I myself have participated in it on occasion, for instance, by agreeing that my first book, *Full Surrogacy Now: Feminism Against Family*, could be understood merely as a demand for more kinship. After all, when "family," at the very level of language, is synonymous with human connection, opposing it is taken to mean that you hate love.[62] Shulie, it has to be said, was not cowed by this charge. Even more so than Kollontai before her, she was prepared to say "down with love"[63]—actually existing love, that is—while yearning for the post-heterosexual, post-homosexual "healthy transsexuality" to come, which, she surmised, would transform the meaning of eroticism by diffusing it throughout society. Like Kollontai, this comrade had her sights set on a better, as-yet-unthinkable kind of love; red love. Firestone was a lover. By her friends' affectionate accounts, she loved sex with men very much. However, within present historic conditions, fighting for love necessarily means being a hater. Shulie helped sabotage bridal fairs, assailed beauty pageants, and earnestly floated the tactical possibility of a "smile boycott" (because "*the smile [of] the child/woman … indicates acquiescence of the victim to his own oppression*"[64]). "Her detractors," notes Susan Faludi dryly, "accused her of homicidal tendencies."[65]

Besides editing and producing the short-lived, self-published militant (and millenarian) women's liberation journal *Notes*, our utopian killjoy forebear cofounded several revolutionary groups. New York Radical Women, Redstockings, and New York Radical Feminists sometimes carried out direct actions targeting, for instance, the offices of *Ladies' Home Journal*, copies of which Shulie ripped up in its editor's face. Fractious as these formations were, they changed uncountable women's lives forever. Heartbreakingly, immediately after the *Dialectic*'s release, however, Firestone deserted the world of politics for good. By some accounts, she

came to believe feminism had "ruined her life."[66] Her big second book, intended to "lay the foundations of a powerful new women's art— with the potential to transform our very definition of culture"—never arrived. In 1998, a follow-up text appeared at last: *Airless Spaces*, a tiny, fragmentary collection of stories about the psychiatric incarceration of Shulamith and other inmates.[67] In 2012, Shulie died alone in her apartment. Thousands and thousands of her former comrades, gathered at memorials for her, recalled how impossible she was, in every sense.[68] Even those who couldn't really stand her bore passionate witness: Shulamith Firestone changed the world.

Gay and Lesbian—and Children's—Liberation

Few missed historic opportunities frustrate me more than the neglect of Shulie and her movement to link up—theoretically and practically—with Gay Liberation, the burgeoning parallel insurgency that championed the economic, sexual, and gender freedoms of young people, and attacked the private nuclear household "from the outside" (as Gay activists often put it). Opportunities for solidarity and conspiracy against the family had surely been presenting themselves from the early 1900s: the Euro-American family kept producing great numbers of fugitives in the form of girls and women fleeing rape, abuse, battery, or simply marriage, and homosexual, trans, or intersex youth kicked into the streets by their parents. Had the family abolitionism of Gay Lib collaborated, durably, with the family abolitionism of Women's Lib and Black Power, it seems to me, the lesbian-coined principle of "mothering against motherhood" (Adrienne Rich)[69] could have taken on new, gender- and whiteness-abolitionist potency. As it stands, we have largely disjointed genealogies of distinct oppressed communities' efforts to "learn to mother ourselves" (Audre Lorde's later phrase).[70] Writes queer historian Michael Bronski: "In the gay slang of the 1950s and '60s, an older gay man would be called 'mother' if he took on the task of guiding or advising newly-out young gay men."[71] The popularity of a positive (let alone utopian) theory of any-gendered *mothering* dwindled, however, as Gay organizing was forced, later in the century, into reacting to the

catastrophic state of exception, community emergency, and hospice care-scarcity that was AIDS.[72]

Officially, Gay Liberation kicked off at Compton's Cafeteria, San Francisco, in August 1966, when drag queens and trans women associated with a group called Vanguard rioted against the policemen who systematically bashed and persecuted them.[73] The movement then went global in June 1969 with the anti-police riot at the Stonewall Inn, New York. In 1970, Stonewall veterans and Gay Liberation Front militants Sylvia Rivera, Marsha P. Johnson, Bambi L'Amour, Bebe Scarpi, and others founded Street Transvestite Action Revolutionaries (STAR). Leaning on a Mafia acquaintance with real estate connections, they held a fundraiser and opened the transgender commune STAR House in the East Village, where the older transfeminine hustlers mothered dozens of newer refugees from the heteropatriarchal family at a time, building "Gay Power" and saving the lives of many transfeminine and/or queer youths they referred to as their "kids."[74] Meanwhile, back in San Francisco, the SDS organizer Carl Wittman was writing "Refugees from Amerika: A Gay Manifesto," in which he called on gays to aspire to more than "gay ghettos" and praised the emergence of "gay liberation communes," stating: "we must govern ourselves, set up our own institutions, defend ourselves, and use our won energies to improve our lives."[75] Concurrently, given their pathologization by experts (and even psychiatric torture and incarceration), gay and lesbian activists threw themselves into organizing "mad pride," patients' liberation and "anti-pyschiatry." A conference entitled "Schizo-Culture" united queers and neurodivergent "sickos" in challenging the power of parents and doctors.[76]

While precariously housed trans sex workers of color built technologies of survival in the cracks and margins of a homophobic and white-supremacist society, their immanent theories of gay liberation were going global. In 1971, the newly founded Front Homosexuel d'Action Révolutionnaire in France released a communiqué stating their intention to "explode the patriarchal family."[77] That same year, the GLF in London

hammered out its manifesto. "Our entire society is built around the patriarchal family," they stated in their analysis:

> The blueprint says "we two against the world," and that can be protective and comforting. But it can also be suffocating … Singly, or isolated in couples, we are weak—the way society wants us to be. Society cannot put us down so easily if we fuse together. We have to get together, understand one another, live together…. [But] our gay communes and collectives must not be mere convenient living arrangements or worse, just extensions of the gay ghetto…. We have to change our attitudes to our personal property, to our lovers, to our day-to day priorities in work and leisure, even to our need for privacy.[78]

As Gay Liberation gained momentum, these ideas began to concretize. In 1972, a group of activists drove down from Boston to the Democratic National Convention in Miami and leafleted attendees with their ten demands, many of which (abolition of the police, an end to US imperialism, among others) remain familiar today. Demand #6, however, is not something Democrats nowadays hear very often:

> Rearing children should be the common responsibility of the whole community. Any legal rights parents have over "their" children should be dissolved and each child should be free to choose its own destiny. Free twenty-four hour child care centers should be established where faggots and lesbians can share the responsibility of child rearing.[79]

Many movements of the day, from Crip Liberation to Flower Power, were explicitly thinking about how to create solidarity with children. The Black Panthers established schools and intervened forcefully in the public school system by providing free breakfasts and after-school programs. Dozens of flavors of lesbian and feminist daycare centers—as well as unschooling ventures like Summerhill, as we saw—proliferated, some of them hopeful of starting a dialogue with children about what their liberation might mean.

By Bronski's count, at least fifteen US mass-market books promoted ideas of children's liberation and children's rights (including the right to have more than just one or two parents) throughout the seventies,

including David Gottlieb's *Children's Liberation* (1973) and Beatrice and Ronald Gross's *The Children's Rights Movement: Overcoming the Oppression of Young People* (1977).[80] As Gumbs has shown, movement magazines like *Off Our Backs* included co-authored antiracist denunciations of "patriarchal ideas that say the children are owned by (property owning) parents." Interracial lesbian lovers Mary Peña and Barbara Carey, for example, declared: "[CHILDREN] WILL NOT BELONG TO THE PATRIARCHY / THEY WILL NOT BELONG TO US EITHER / THEY WILL BELONG ONLY TO THEMSELVES." In the same vein, at the National Third World Lesbian and Gay Conference of 1979—where Audre Lorde gave the keynote speech—a caucus of lesbians agreed on the statement: "All children of lesbians are ours."[81] In some cities, gay liberationists calling themselves Effeminists articulated the belief "that gay men should virtually place themselves in the service of women, taking on their traditional household tasks, including the raising of children, in order to foster women's rise to power." Some, following the example of the Women's Liberation movement's male militants, founded Men's Childcare Collectives.[82]

In the eighties, instead of standing up to the Reagan-era Moral Majority and Anita Bryant's homophobic "Save Our Children" crusade, which equated gay life with pedophilia, the bulk of the movement backed away from any connection with children and concentrated instead on surviving AIDS. The aim of exploding the nuclear family was replaced by a rights-only agenda that eventually gave renewed life to the nuclear family by reinvesting in its symbolic and practical necessity. Then, in the wake of the avoidable mass HIV-induced death wreaked among queers by Reagan's Plague, a new "homonormative" gay subject emerged on the American scene—erotically continent, creditable, productive, potentially parental. Today (exactly as with feminism) other than among the fringes of religious evangelism, the proposition that LGBTQ interests might threaten marriage or have anything to do with challenging the family is unknown. In some metropoles, the type of bourgeois homosexuality ("straight gayness") identified as an enemy by Gay Libbers early on is now quasi-hegemonic.

The gay family—which Gay Power hoped to render an oxymoron—has become a decisive factor in the family's salvation.

Wages for Housework and the National Welfare Rights Organization

A little after the time when Gay Liberation was kicking off in the United States, a group of "autonomist" Marxist feminists in Italy launched the Wages for Housework Campaign. The original group was spearheaded by Leopoldina Fortunati and Mariarosa Dalla Costa; soon enough, their comrades in Canada, England, and New York—including Selma James, Silvia Federici, Margaret Prescod and Nicole Cox—helped coordinate the proliferation of branches of the network, culminating in the International Wages for Housework Committee. Subgroups such as Wages Due Lesbians, the English Collective of Prostitutes, and Black Women for Wages for Housework soon formed. What was the task at hand? Organizing a planetary women's strike, a seizure of the means of reproduction (seizure of cold hard cash, at least to begin with). It didn't matter if society agreed that wages were, in fact, owed for women's labor. As the slogan enjoined: *Women of all ages, collect your wages!* Wages for Housework was "serving notice" to "all governments." They demanded the entirety of the money due to their sex "in full and retroactive." Wages for Housework came up with a remarkably precise dictum to convey their perspective on the activities performed by so many women in their own homes: "They say it is love. We say it is unwaged work."[83] Pointedly, they *did not deny* that unwaged childcare, eldercare, housekeeping, sex, emotional labor, wifehood, might be a manifestation of love. Rather, the militants argued that "nothing so effectively stifles our lives as the transformation into work of the activities and relations that satisfy our desires."[84] Put differently: the fact that caring for a private home under capitalism often *is* an expression of loving desire, while at the same time being life-choking work, is precisely the problem. That the "they" of the dictum—bosses, husbands, dads—are not wrong about this illustrates the insidiousness of the violence care-workers encounter (and mete out) in the family-form. It's the reason paid and unpaid domestics, and paid and unpaid mothers, still have to fight just to

be seen as workers. And why being recognized as workers remains only a precursor to—one day—ending their exploitation and, by extension, beginning to know a new and different form of love, just as Kollontai envisioned it: a love *beyond the family*.

Under capitalism, Wages for Housework perceived, "love" often serves the interests of the ruling class because it can be leveraged to depress wages (*surely you're not in this for the money*) or even withhold them altogether (*do what you love and you'll never work a day in your life*). The gendered injunction to care "for love, not money" obscures the grinding, repetitive, invisible, energy-sapping, confining aspects of the work involved in making homes of any kind. The principle that some things "should not be for sale" becomes a way to disguise the reality that, everywhere, on every street, they are— and to excuse underpaying those doing the "selling." Thus the Wages for Housework movement was not *for* housework at all. On the contrary: these workers were against it, against wages, and against all capitalist work for that matter. Their platform—which was rephrased and clarified by Federici in the formula "wages *against* housework"[85]—was in this sense far removed from the now-ascendant demand that we "value" care work and grant "dignity" to domestic labor. In my reading, it was family-abolitionist.

In parallel, and with the frequent collaboration of Wages for Housework, in the United States, welfare recipients organized in hundreds of local groups across the country, eventually coalescing under the umbrella of the National Welfare Rights Organization (NWRO), which at its peak represented as many as one hundred thousand people.[86] Between 1966 and 1975, the massed efforts of the NWRO—the majority of whom were African American women—reshaped the food stamps program, made the welfare application process more accountable, expanded programs available to poor women and children, and generally fought the ruling class in the name, not of work or of family, but of proletarian female deserving. "While it was certainly necessary for poor Black women to represent and classify themselves as families that were eligible for public assistance from the AFDC program to survive," writes King in "Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family," they simultaneously *contested* "the objectification of Black

households and Black people through the social scientific discourse of the family."[87]

One of the West Coast women behind the founding of NWRO was Johnnie Tillmon, a self-defined *middle-aged, poor, fat, Black woman on welfare*. In an article for *Ms.* magazine in 1972, Tillmon wrote: "For a lot of middle-class women in this country, Women's Liberation is a matter of concern. For women on welfare, it's a matter of survival." Welfare, she explained:

> is the most prejudiced institution in this country, even more than marriage, which it tries to imitate…. A.F.D.C. (Aid to Families with Dependent Children) says if there is an "able-bodied" man around, then you can't be on welfare. If the kids are going to eat, and the man can't get a job, then he's got to go.
>
> Welfare is like a super-sexist marriage. You trade in a man for *the* man. But you can't divorce him if he treats you bad. He can divorce you, of course, cut you off anytime he wants. But in that case, *he* keeps the kids, not you. *The* man runs everything.
>
> In ordinary marriage, sex is supposed to be for your husband. On AFDC, you're not supposed to have any sex at all. You give up control of your own body. It's a condition of aid. You may even have to agree to get your tubes tied so you can never have more children just to avoid being cut off welfare.[88]

Not only did Tillmon refuse to countenance the family as a true escape from the persecution of the state; she also rejected the idea that waged work could liberate women of her class. At a time when many feminists were concentrating their efforts on gaining access to the workplace, Tillmon and her comrades, just like Wages for Housework, demanded, simply, dollars: the freedom to *not* work. Sick and tired of exploitative jobs, poverty wages, and intrusive, paternalistic, stingy public programs, welfare activists took to the streets, picketed the welfare centers, and packed the courts, propelled by "the aspiration that women's lives would no longer be dictated by husbands, employers, government bureaucrats, and clerks," in the words of Wilson Sherwin and Frances Fox Piven.[89] Not content to defend the right to stay home, they challenged the notion that staying at home or working are the only options available to women.

In 1968, NWRO's vice-president, Beulah Sanders, a hell-raising New Yorker, had co-organized the Poor People's Campaign (which camped out on Washington Mall for six weeks) with Martin Luther King. In May 1970, Sanders and Tillmon together led a sit-in protest at the office for Health, Education and Welfare (HEW). According to the *New York Times* coverage of the takeover, Sanders sat in the relevant US Secretary Robert H. Finch's "leather chair for seven hours of 'liberation' with the title of 'Acting H.E.W. Secretary.' "[90] Beulah called, from this chair, for an end to the US military occupation of Southeast Asia, and a universal basic income of at least $5,500 per annum ("Give poor people enough money to live decently, and let us decide how to live our lives").[91] Equally, she began honing her critique of *commodified and uncommodified* housework, asking in 1972: "Is it fair to call a woman lazy who stays at home, cooks, washes, irons, cleans house, teaches her kids how to do things, and helps them with their homework? If she does the same work for somebody else for $2.00 or less an hour is she really a better woman? You tell me."[92] For this analysis, I have been especially inspired by King's and Sherwin and Piven's argument: that, while some in the NWRO did demand money on the basis of redemptive, *maternalist* arguments, many did not. I submit we view the NWRO, and Wages for Housework, as family-abolitionist organizations on the basis of their simultaneously (or combined) non-maternal and non-workerist accounts of what it is that a poor single mom needs and wants.

Twenty-First-Century Trans Marxism

There was a thirty-year lull in family-abolitionism between 1985 and 2015. While family abolition is still scoffed at by many people—including on the anticapitalist left—today, there are once more sincere conversations blossoming in diverse forums ranging from socialist ones like *Tribune* magazine's podcast "Politics Theory Other"[93] and *Jacobin* magazine's "The Dig"[94] to art galleries and mainstream media vehicles like Vice Media and the *New Yorker*. Speaking as a free-lance writer, I can attest that COVID-19's exacerbation of the care crisis played a big role in the openness of editors—if not the general public—to hear criticisms of the private nuclear household. (Even the *Times* columnist David Brooks was inspired to write

9,000 words under the heading "The Nuclear Family Was a Mistake" in *The Atlantic* in 2020—albeit Brooks only wanted to reform the historic "mistake" of the family ever so slightly.[95]) I am self-evidently not impartial, having published an attempted Marxian transfeminist family-abolition manifesto once before. Yet it seems clear to me that we, the exponents of "transgender Marxism" and "abolition feminism," are driving the resurgence.[96]

The current "wave"—if I can optimistically call it that— began, as far as I am aware, in 2015 with the aforementioned co-authored manifesto "Kinderkommunismus: A Feminist Analysis of the 21st-Century Family and a Communist Proposal for Its Abolition." The proposal, if you recall, is for a "revolutionary crèche": an institution of social reproduction that would feed all, abolish deprivation, and undo the people's capitalism-induced mindset of desperation and scarcity (Jules and Kate note ruefully that this "presupposes a communist revolution").[97] In 2018, the queer and gender studies scholar Tiffany Lethabo King's article on "Abolishing Moynihan's Negro Family" came out, as it were, for family abolitionism, arguing that practices of Black world-making "must envision life outside of the current categories that blunt efforts to re-craft what it means to be human."[98] M. E. O'Brien's ongoing work on the subject appeared in Commune magazine ("Six Steps to Abolish the Family"), Pinko ("Communizing Care"), and Endnotes ("The Working Class Family and Gender Liberation in Capitalist Development") throughout 2019, 2020, and 2021, as did mine[99] and that of Gleeson,[100] Katie Stone,[101] Alva Gotby,[102] Sophie Silverstein,[103] Zoe Belinsky,[104] Alyson Escalante,[105] and others. Much to my excitement, the celebrated philosopher of (anti-) work, Kathi Weeks, participated in an "Abolish the Family!" panel at the Seattle-based yearly festival Red May in 2020,[106] before releasing her scholarly paper on the contemporary relevance of family-abolitionism in Feminist Theory the following year.[107] Every other week, a study group, mutual aid cluster, DIY radio program, theater ensemble, art collective, or free university in Italy, Denmark, Norway, Slovenia, Greece, The Netherlands, Britain, Ireland, Portugal, Switzerland, Brazil, France, Germany, Japan,

Korea, Russia, and Spain, gets in touch to inform me about their "family abolition" programming. An online course I offered on Family Abolition, via the Brooklyn Institute for Social Research, was oversubscribed in 2021 and again in April of 2022.[108] The magnificent anthology Las degeneradas trans acaban contra la familia, or Trans Degenerates Abolish the Family, edited by Ira Hybris, has just appeared in Spain. Momentum is undeniably growing. The art world is seizing on these ideas (a development I welcome, albeit with a little apprehension, because the art world can be where insurgencies go to die).

Some of the most recent statements of twenty-first-century yearning take us, beautifully, right back to the beginning of this story. "Charles Fourier," for O'Brien, "was a delightfully kinky science fiction writer, and an inspiration to imagining pro-queer communes of the future." In her pamphlet-length piece on Fourier, she compares his phalanstery size of 1,600 people with that of a 2016 proposal from the London-based group Angry Workers of the World for "domestic units comprising 200 to 250 people." The Angry Workers estimate of around 200 people "strikes me as reasonable, perhaps preferable," O'Brien writes: "Two hundred could be a sizable apartment building, the stand-alone homes clustered immediately around a school or other center, or a block of small apartment buildings. The shared kitchen would create a natural initial size, given the logistics of cooking for substantial groups."

Amid present conditions of suffocating anti-utopianism, it strikes me as a matter of some considerable urgency to practice educating our desire by speculating concretely about the architectures, challenges, timelines, infrastructures and affects of family abolition—an endeavor O'Brien and Eman Abdelhadi pursue even more seriously in their co-authored 2022 novel *Everything For Everyone: An Oral History of the New York Commune, 2052– 2072*.[109] Rather than coming about as the implementation of an anal plan for absolute harmony, O'Brien knows, the inevitably chaotic commune "could arise spontaneously out of insurrection."[110]