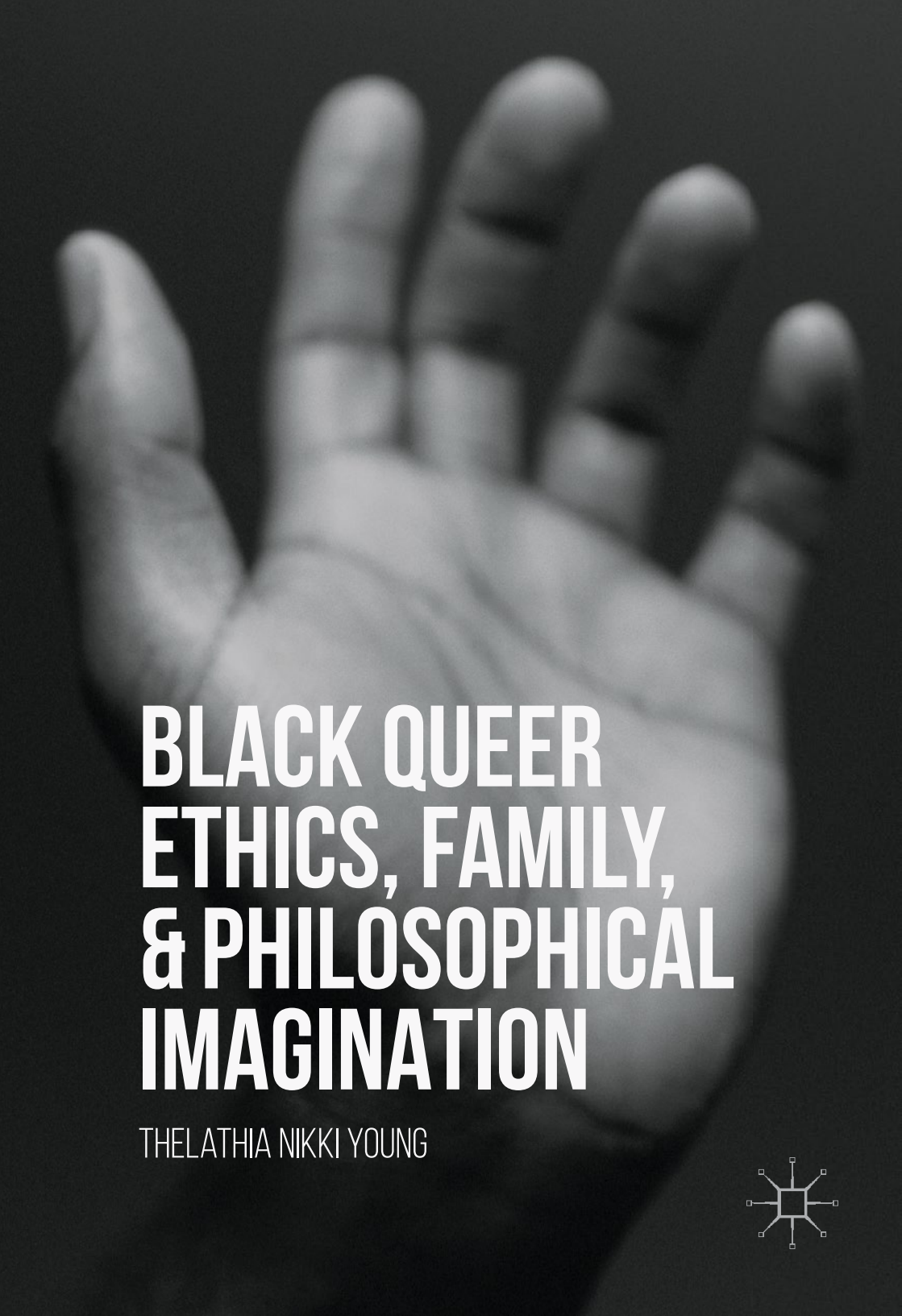

BLACK QUEER ETHICS, FAMILY, & PHILOSOPHICAL IMAGINATION

THELATHIA NIKKI YOUNG

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For my mother, Marian Young, who showed me how to live a life filled with trust in human goodness, adventure that leads to self-transformation, diligence that honors goals whispered in the secret of my heart, and laughter that strengthens my core.

Preface

In the Beginning

My own experience of human relationships drives me to this work. I am a black queer woman whose story of family has been shaped by a number of realities, including the presence of black queer Atlanta folks whose love, commitment, fortitude, and daily survival reaffirm to me the notion that relationships and families are creative and formative things. But my story begins before that. It begins, as do many stories of relationships, with my mother's stories.

Marian Blakeney Young, my mother, was born in upstate South Carolina in 1954. She was the youngest of ten children, and her mother was about 35 years old when my mother was born. By the time my mother was four or five years old, my grandmother, Janie Mae, had died, leaving my grandfather to provide for, raise, and discipline their children. My mother and the rest of the brood that were young enough—about eight of them—moved to the low country of South Carolina, an area known for its rich and conflicting dialects of slow, melodic drawls and the Anglo-patois called Geechee/Gullah. In a small town called Walterboro, which is the gateway between the coastal area and South Carolina's piedmont, my mother and her siblings settled with my grandfather.

My grandfather built roads for South Carolina's Department of Transportation and was away from home quite often, leaving the brothers and sisters to learn, teach, care for, and fight with one another. Soon enough, he remarried, and my mother's siblings nearly doubled in size. My grandfather's new wife had nine children of her own! As soon as they were mar-

ried, my mother moved with my grandfather to live with the stepkin, while her own brothers and sisters remained at my grandfather's house around the corner. I remember my mother saying that she was terribly lonely at the house with her stepkin and that she missed her family—the folk who lived on Springwood Drive with whom she shared the loss of a mother, the ongoing struggle for economic survival, the internal and external wounds of physical abuse from an overworked and underpaid father, the love of dance and music, and the prospect of being a young, black radical in Walterboro's newly integrated school system. The stepkin, whose love and respect or even kindness she never received were *not* family; they were relatives.

My mother's notion of family was a complicated one. On one hand, it was deeply rooted in her close relationships with some of her own sisters and brothers, founded upon shared experiences, and driven by shared values. Some of the values included communal economic support; pride in the face of racial subjugation; survival against the strong odds of abuse, cancer, and heart disease; and laughter—gut-jiggling, mind-emptying, tear-jerking laughter. Implicit in her stories about family was a deep appreciation for experiences of love, care, kindness, and safety. On the other hand, her notion of family was pierced by the experiences of abuse, meanspiritedness, and neglect that were familiar to her as a child and teenager. Hers was not a story that included an image of a loving mother, providing father, with one or two siblings and a pet. My mother's reality of family was certainly not featured in the 1950s American dream picture, so she knew that that image was not an accurate representation of what she and most of her community experienced.

Despite her own family's different reality, my mother still caught the aroma of traditional all-American family values in the air. She did not miss out on the patriarchy—rendered passively *and* violently—the maternal instruction and expectation of girls, forced labor for boys, cultural subjugation for black people, and sexual repression and silencing for unwed individuals. Even with her family's divergence from the white middle-class norm, she learned the acceptable social norms provided by narratives of race, gender, and sexual realities in her context.

My reality was considerably different from my mother's, though similar in its departure from the norm. As a baby and toddler, I was raised with both my parents in the home, but we lived in California, away from the Jamaican shores of my father and from the marshlands of my mother. Still, we created family with other international families and continental migrants and found ourselves in a hugely diverse setting. Eventually we moved, first

to South Carolina, where I experienced the great wonders and comforts of living amid numerous cousins and aunts and uncles where I could feel safe and cared for in a world of strangers. Then we moved to Cincinnati, Ohio, where my paternal grandmother and some aunts had recently migrated from Jamaica. There, I experienced two very important family realities. First, I experienced the actuality of my father's desire to live uninhibited in the world. This meant, for him, sans wife and child. Second, I experienced a family of women—only women, and it totally shaped my life.

My mother and I forged deep and important bonds with my paternal family in the years that we lived in Cincinnati. My parents never legally divorced, but they were no longer together. The shifting around of papers was not necessary for them, as the paper did very little to define the parameters of their relationship in the first place. My paternal family remained quite loyal to my mother, continuing to treat her as a valued daughter, sister, and auntie. They were unquestionably our family. Though my mother and I lived in a different suburb than them, where we were basically a part of a totally white world, our familial (and familiar) world was filled with black women. In our own house, my mother and I were the standard of "normal," and when we were with my paternal family, our lives, speech, stories, duties, joys, pains were all filled with the "stuff" of black womanhood. I watched my grandmother, mother, aunts, and cousins fulfill every job and role necessary to sustain the American dream of upward mobility and social, political, and cultural acceptance. I saw a non-normative family stretch to fill every corner of the American family norm and simultaneously remain recognizable to itself.

Eventually my mother and I moved back to South Carolina, and my image of family changed again. Once more, many relatives, long-time family friends, and folk that knew each of my family members by name surrounded me. My mother even eventually engaged in a common law, long-term relationship, again changing the face of our household. I had a step "father" and step "brothers" for a few years, new relations whose meaning I only understood in the context of normative family language. We even got pets. Aside from our blackness and working-class reality, we were looking more and more like the American dream.

When I was in college, my mother passed away from a long-term illness, and I was thrust into a type of solitude that was eerily unfamiliar. Our connection was deep and necessary in my life, and only my belief in her sustained love from another realm guaranteed my survival. In addition to the traumatic loss of my mother, I experienced a change in the

ties with my biological family. At one point very strong, they were tested by distance and also by the changed woman that I was becoming. By the end of college, I was in my first same-sex partnership, and my family had to orient themselves around the notion that my life would look differently than what they assumed and even planned.

My partner (at the time) and I moved to Atlanta, where I discovered black queer community. People who had been exiled from familial, religious, and even community spaces found themselves creating bonds and fostering relationships that turned into familial ones. I participated in this movement of relationship creativity, and my partner and I found ourselves with friendships turning into family relationships. We started to experience the reality that biological ties were not the only things that could sustain family members, and thus, we lived into the bonds of love, commitment, justice seeking, and spiritual nurturing.

When my partner and I transitioned our relationship into a family-oriented one rather than a partner-focused one, we shifted focus from a relationship based on our romantic partnership to one based on our familial bond. During this time, I again experienced the reality of metamorphosis. Being family meant opening our queer perceptions of relationships to new possibilities. When I partnered with someone new and she partnered with someone new, the elasticity of family ties stretched and reshaped and transformed. Even my new partner found herself becoming acclimated to the diverse possibilities of relationships and family that she had not previously experienced or even desired.

Now, I am taking a second stab at biological family connections, while also moving past their limits. I have discovered and created relationships with my father's children by other women. I call them family. I have revisited and sustained relationships with my maternal and paternal relatives. I call them family. I have renewed and re-grounded my relationships with my former partners and Atlanta loved ones. I call them family. I even adopted two dogs. I call them family. And with all these relationships—created, renewed, restructured, and re-visioned—I realize one thing: mine has been a black queer family all along.

Joining the Ranks

My work on family is complicated not only by the fact that family is a broad topic but also because I began this project with no working definition for it. Rather than a standard definition of family, I proceed through

this book looking to determine ways that womanists and feminists, queer theorists, and black queer people discuss, value, and experience family, and this process includes seeing, hearing, and experiencing the range of definitions, instantiations, and notable values within those experiences.

"Family" is a flexible term. It has always been used to signal sets of relationships, but these sets have been bound by different ideas that have made transitions and transformations over time. What family is supposed to *do* has transformed over time. Since family forms are responsive to the social forms in which we live, we can trace language and conceptions of family through those themes and find that they, in addition to our enactment of family, are ever-changing, adaptable features of social, economic, cultural, and even moral discourse.

Because my endeavor to think critically and morally about family in this project operates out of these continuously developing frameworks, I want to point to a few of the themes in our history of discourse.[1] To be clear, I am not providing a full history of the term or its surrounding terminologies; rather, this very brief foray is an exercise in illustrating some of our linguistic, conceptual, and even social adaptation to "family."

Family and the Role of Economy

Until recently, family history could be told as a narrative about economy and labor, its production and its producers.[2] One way to frame that story, relevant to this project, is the role and understanding of "family" as units of people sharing in and producing that labor, thereby organizing themselves in economically driven (or responsive) groupings. In this way, family acted as an economic unit with particular material constraints and realities.[3] For example, agrarian life called on the labor of individuals within families to support the well-being of each member by literally contributing to the production of food, shelter, and clothing. Families survived based on what they were able to produce.

From early social scientists like Charles Darwin, Lewis Morgan, and Friedrich Engels through classic sociologists like Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim, on to feminist social theorists like Jennifer Hochschild and Susan Okin, we can find a discourse of "family" that reflects the economic foundation of family. Their work centers on the development of human social systems as economically poised units. The notion that resources could be produced, maintained, and controlled affected, for these thinkers, the idea that economic factors play a significant role in the transforma-

tion of familial (and subsequently larger social) structures and functions over time.

Often, in Western contexts, we make distinctions between "nuclear" and "extended" families. Aside from being able to categorize family members in these two systems based on gender and generation, we employ these two categories to point to ways that we organize our living arrangements and economic resources and responsibilities. For the most part, in our context, nuclear families have been understood as those units of kinship consisting of parents (typically a mother and father) and children who share living space with one another. In comparison, extended families consist of the nuclear family members in addition to grandparents, aunts and uncles, cousins, nieces and nephews, and grandchildren. American households have varied in embodiment, containing both nuclear and extended families and, sometimes, additional kindred (like close friends, members of faith, and communities).

Interestingly enough, the distinction between nuclear and extended family marks an important detail in the story of family as an economic building block of society. In seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Europe, for example, early capitalism and the genesis of industrialization enabled smaller units of kinship that could self-sustain by participating in a market-oriented economic system. This transition from agrarian society not only garnered and redirected resources and individual work energy for production, it also reoriented family structure to reflect new, smaller financially viable social units. Of course, by specifying the context or historical period in American history, I find that family as a cog in the economic/labor wheel manifests differently as class, race, and gender become the critical focal points. As a brief consideration, and to continue reflecting on the transformation of the term across themes, I want to reflect on "family" in the context of American slavery and mid-twentieth-century households. Each of these contexts impact notions of family that black queers have inherited over time. Even more, black queers' lives and experiences represent the often competing and conflicting contexts within which family as an economic unit might be understood.

I point to the context of American slavery for three reasons. First, in a period marked by both agrarian and market-oriented economics, slavery and slave families acted as tools for continuing economic goals emerging among white landowners and the growing American nation. As the market for crops (rice, tobacco, cotton, etc.) grew, so too did the need for and size of enslaved families. Slave marriages and subsequently enslaved

children provided an ever-growing labor force that was the foundation of the Southern, and even the national economic system. Second, and simultaneously, American slavery worked to draw hard distinctions between the economic stability of white slaveholders and the labor-producing, economy-driving enslaved black people. While laws of land inheritance, economic resources, and property distribution responded to the growing American landscape due to the economy, these laws specifically did not include the work, time, labor, or progeny of enslaved blacks. Tracing lines of ownership—regardless of the ambiguous parentage of many enslaved blacks—was limited to the "family" ties legally and socially acknowledged by the white slave and landowners. The products and financial benefits of the slave economy, therefore, distinguished between personhoods and family units of enslaved black people and whites.

Third, the circumstance of slavery itself disallowed enslaved blacks from living into the same norms and trends of family that white American families were experiencing. Enslaved blacks generally experienced kinship units as continually morphing (with sales, inheritances, and deaths) and contingent upon masters' needs to replenish or grow, shed or diminish his labor force. Thus, in enslaved families, the idea of relatives—in a nuclear or extended family context—did not reflect the same type of living arrangements as was evident in white lives.

After World War II, the push toward the "American Dream" rejuvenated interest in the image and proliferation of nuclear family units as well as a clear focus on the "home" as an important part of our social institutions. Undoubtedly, these white middle-class nuclear families no longer needed the labor of the extended family, and even more, it was expensive to share living space with and provide financially for such a large group of people. The locus of production, here, shifted very specifically from varying family members' contributions to the father's labor outside of the home. When it became possible and socially desirable for the father in the family to provide financially for the family, the nucleus became a symbol of security and a return to traditional gender roles. In this construction, developed through the changing economic landscape, labor production and benefit was downsized, and fathers became the sole "bread winners." As such, the distinctions in a family between nuclear and extended seemed to act as relative gender, race, class, and generational signifiers *as well as* markers for financial provision and responsibility.

The development of the nuclear family owes much to the transition in economic production and sustainability from land and farming to facto-

ries and business. As the means of production shifted, so too did family needs and gender roles. As men and women left the fields for the factory/office and kitchen, respectively, the norm of "nuclear" came to reflect the anchoring position of the "mother at home." By early twentieth century, the popularity of the nuclear family in the American context grew even more—especially in middle class white society. More families could afford to be single-income households due to the proliferation of new businesses, growing job markets, and even workplace changes like Henry Ford's limited workday and weekly salary.

Family and Religio-cultural Value Systems

As the economic significance of family diminished, its religious and cultural role became more prominent. According to Don Browning and contributors to The Religion, Culture, and Family Project at the University of Chicago, religious and cultural value systems are the instigators for the formations of modern families. Drawing on Max Weber, Alan Macfarlane, and Peter Laslett, they claim that modern family formations in our contexts are products of Judaic, early Christian, Roman Catholic, and Protestant Reformation values. I find it particularly import to notice some ways that religio-cultural values have impacted family through public and private discourse around childcare and provision and gender/sexuality regulation.

The ways that we delineate ownership, responsibility, influence, accessibility, and resource allocation have directly impacted our language about and understanding of family. Concepts of "family" have acted as regulating devices, in which units of relationality garner and perpetuate specific rules and assumptions regarding the progeny in a family unit. Additionally, family has been understood as site of practicing "parenthood" and rearing skills. Indeed, "raising a good child" has moved into the central role of family activity and become the prerogative of private and public social units.

Our notions of family, in modern America are not only evident in the numerous books on parenting needs and responsibilities in the self-help aisles at popular bookstores; we have also seen growing language about family emerge in our public and private assumptions and proscriptions about financial childcare, paternity testing, and even adoption proceedings. Indeed, what qualifies as a family has been at the center of debates on what qualifies as a proper unit of sustainability and moral value formation for young members of society. Paternity testing is not a growing feature

of our culture due only to our curiosity. Rather, we are concerned with the means by which our children will be financially supported. The relationship between parent and child, in this way, is as much an economic concern as it is a concern about general child welfare.

To be sure, the regulatory power of "family" has extended beyond the care and provision of children to include the stabilizing and normalizing—and even protection—of heteropatriarchal sexuality and gender roles.[4] Family has been understood as the site in which society entrusts a large portion of the responsibility of teaching and maintaining these roles. In turn, family has been understood in various contexts as the originator and perpetuator of highly valued social scripts related to gender and sexuality.[5] Family has acted as a stage on which sex differentiation, gender role and behavior, and sexuality identity and practices are played out, refereed, and protected. In thinking about the journey of "family" through the lens of gender and sexuality regulation, I am reminded of instances of protecting femininity and ensuring male superiority/potency, securing the purity of the body, and teaching about becoming husbands and wives.

A few years ago, I attended an undergraduate-sponsored event on Emory University's campus. The event featured a film and a panel discussion about whether or not we are gathering correct information about black men in our society. According to the panelists, the film, "What Black Men Really Think," actually depicted a view of what religiously, socially, and politically *conservative* black men offer to the conversation on race, gender, and political/social relations rather than a broad and diverse view of black male perspectives. The crux of the conversation rested with the event's advertised question: "Can a black mother really teach her son to become a black man?" While the responses to this question varied, based on social and political ideas of child-rearing and sociocultural transmission of identity, the lengthiest segment of the discussion focused on the values about gender and gender performance that could or could not be instilled in children raised in a single-parent home. Indeed, the question that plagued the audience as well as some of the panelists centered on the notion that ways of becoming a proper husband and father—who could protect, provide, and care for his family—needed to be instilled in a multiplicity of ways, including religious and cultural means.

As I sat in the audience, I was keenly aware of one very loud, but craftily unspoken concern underneath the questions and discussions: *haven't black men been emasculated enough?* I realized that the panelists and the audience members wanted to talk about the ways that the impact of slavery in

America did not stop with economic repression. Instead, it provided ongoing mechanisms of measurement that rendered black men inferior to white men in terms of *gender*. Thus, social structures and institutional support for single-mother or mother-run households represented both poverty forced by long-standing economic inequalities as well as the inferior masculinity that black men would learn within the context of woman-led home.

Unsurprisingly, one panelist pointed to the "very clear notion of family and gender roles" that are present for those of us who identify as Christian. In his estimation, the construction of family toward which black manhood and black sociocultural education ought to lead is biblically based, and as such, ought to be our standard of moral value training. Another panelist, who added that in addition to religious teachings, "there are social parameters that mark out what our behavior should be," bolstered his comments. He suggested that as black people who exist in constant struggle with a society that devalues our presence and culture, black manhood and the development of "good fatherly traits" helps to make us less vulnerable to moral ills. To no one's surprise, those moral ills primarily focused on undisclosed homosexuality. This fear of homosexuality points back to my claim above: folks were concerned that black masculinity was at stake, since it has been on the chopping (or auction) block from the beginning of American history.

The interesting thing about the conversation among the panelists and audience members is the way in which gender roles, male superiority, and the transmission of family values was so deeply tied to religious language. At stake was the stability of patriarchy as well as black male moral respectability. For many in the room, the idea that religion provided such an untouchable and unchallengeable notion of family structure was deeply appalling. For others, however, the presence of religious language was necessary to provide direction for the ways that our social community would expand out of a very specific family formation. The protection of and provision for the black woman, in the conversation, did not look the same as it does for white women, according to one audience member. Yet, she claimed, the need for us to "set our sights on what God has commanded is a colorless requirement."

Family Organized by Love and Relationships

One outcome of the development of the nuclear family is the notion of family as a group of people who share space with one another not only because of economy or responsibility, but also because of love and desire.[6]

Families have traveled—conceptually—from solely being the economic building blocks of society to the nuclei that act as our havens from the mean, nasty world.[7] For many, they are safe cocoons that have been chosen and developed based on ideas of romanticism.[8] Among the language about family, we can see the emergence of terms like "intimacy," "care," "love," "trust," and so on to describe both expectations about family and some experiences of it.

The idea of family as a unit oriented toward love, care, choice, and emotional happiness has opened possibilities of diverse unions and even changed the portrait of family makeup in our society. Increasingly, we are witnessing familial units that are both socially responsive to the growing possibilities for human relationships and also socially suggestive of what ought to be validated and sanctioned socially and legally in our society. Certainly, the cases of interracial and same-sex marriages have come as a product of creating families based on choice.

Expanding Our Limits

We black queers have validated normative ways of knowing and being in relationship through our social scripts, protection, and even through religious blessings and rituals. Even more, we have sought methods of explanation and language about relationships to ground diverse ways of being more soundly *within* the accepted categories of economy, law, and sex/gender relations. In a basic sense, we have tried the assimilation route. Unfortunately, it has also been difficult for the rest of the American public to expand ways of thinking about human relationality.

In this book, I seek an ethic that may be exampled in any relationship—*even* those that exist outside normally sanctioned ones. My method for seeking this ethic includes looking to a community engaged in relationships that are not usually valued, certainly not legally sanctioned, and often not even biologically connected. By looking at black queer people to determine the ways that we formulate norms of being together—through the lens of our familial connections—I am searching for an ethic of relationships that draws on concepts of love, justice, mutuality, embodiment, and interconnectedness. Conversely, my methods try to move away from affirming an ethics of relationships solely based on the inhibiting and proscriptive norms of gender, race, and sexuality derived from processes of hierarchical categorization. My work in this book shows that an ethics of being in righteous, fulfilling, peaceful, and generative relationships emerges from justice, love, liberty, and growth.

Notes

1. The history of discourse on family is quite broad, as many disciplines have attended to the subject over time. The texts that most influence this project emerge from a combination of feminists, black feminists, African American Studies scholars, philosophers, sociologists, queer theorists, and ethicists. I have found that many of these thinkers, while emphasizing different aspects of the subject of family, trace the history of the term much in the way that I do in the coming pages. Most influential to this discussion (and the discussion that follows in Chap. 3) are Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978); Ellen K. Feder, *Family Bonds : Genealogies of Race and Gender*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007); Janet Jakobsen, "Queer Relations: A Reading of Martha Nussbaum on Same-Sex Marriage" *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 19.1 (2010); K. Sue Jewell, *Survival of the Black Family: The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy* (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1988); Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999); Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999); Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009); Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989); Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar" in Joy James and T. Denean Sharpley, eds., *The Black Feminist Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 2000); Carol Stack, *All our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community* (New York: Basic Books, 1974); and Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, The Family, and Personal Life* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986).
2. Eli Zaretsky traces this history by focusing on the simultaneous development of a capitalist economic system and the diverse subjectivities that stabilize the system. His history begins with the early bourgeois family in England and continues through modern (1970s) American families. See Zaretsky 9–59.
3. Ibid., 19–22. See also Kathleen Sands, "Families and Family Values: Historical, Ideological, and Religious Analyses" in Kathleen Sands, *God Forbid: Religion and Sex in American Public Life* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) 91–93.
4. Sands, 104–106. See also Lehr, 106–108.
5. Sands, 104; Lehr, 106. See also Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) 111–112.

6. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991) 117–128.
7. Catherine MacKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 61.
8. Weston, 137–138.

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Contents

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

We were in a sunlit room. Soft music was playing on the iPod dock, and incense burned in the windowsill when Indigo, one of my research participants, shared her ideas and experiences of family with me.[1] Indigo is a black lesbian in her early 30s. Because of instability in her biological family, she was mostly raised by a foster family. This long-term foster family was a model family, according to Indigo. The beautiful black couple had been married for more than 15 years; they were comfortably middle class and were pillars in their predominantly African American Pentecostal Christian community. They provided Indigo a home, opportunities for her future, and a strong sense of self that was grounded in Christian moral teachings. She described her foster parents as her "God parents," as in parents sent by God. When she came out as a lesbian to her foster mother, their relationship changed. Indigo was ridiculed, kicked out of their home, and denied further financial support for college. In the following excerpt of our conversation, Indigo describes a significant turning point in her relationship with her foster parents. It took place a few months after she disclosed her sexuality to them:

> I returned to Madison that summer to do my internship. It was really hard. I barely had enough gas to get there. I had no money, nothing. I lived in a hotel. I didn't have food. And so, I decided that I would call my parents. I called, and they were like, "We ain't gon' send you no money, but we'll come up there and take you grocery shopping." They was only 4 hours away. So when they get there, she refused to come in my room. Then she

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> said, "Before we leave, let's sit and talk." So we sat down in the lobby and then she goes on with her rant, saying, "You owe God. You owe God." She brought up scriptures about hell and abomination. I'm sitting there in tears. My "father" is there, sitting, looking sorry for me, but obviously caught in between. And then something [happened] in me. I said, "You know what? If I haven't learned nothing else about my life, I know what it's like to not eat. I know what it's like to eat. I know what it's like to not have. I can survive all of that. I said, you know what? I am NOT that hungry. If Christianity has taught me anything, I know how to fast. So I will be ok. I said, I will not do this. I'm not going to pimp myself out to your verbal abuse for a meal. Thank you, but no thank you. Thank you for driving up here, but I'm not gonna do this anymore." So that really changed my perception of family. Like, dang, I thought this normal shit was like the best stuff. This stuff was supposed last. You know, mom and dad …

I remember that her facial expressions during the story were dramatic, and I could see that the drama was in the *denouement* of the story: she survived—and would survive again, if ever in a similar situation—without pimping herself out. Later in the interview, she described this point in her life as a time when her own values of unconditional care and mutually beneficial relationships, overrode the dynamic of economic dominance and conditional care that was trying to play out between her and her foster parents. She draws on a resource provided through the practice of her Christian faith—fasting—in order to resist that dynamic. And when she realized that she would be "okay," she drew on another sacred resource: a vision for new possibilities.

* * *

Black queer experiences and articulations serve as the foundation for *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination*. This book offers an ethical perspective and method that challenges the static, removed-from-experience approach normative in theological and philosophical ethical discourse. Throughout the book, I locate and explore black queer moral agency in my research participants' experiences and stories, highlighting the values and practices that they shared through interview excerpts like the one above. I use these stories, along with critical textual analysis, to illustrate black queer moral practices of confronting and destabilizing norms, creatively resisting the disciplinary technologies of race, gender, and sexuality in families, and subverting normative ideas of family through the imagination of new relational possibilities.

The American Context and Christian Ethics

In 1996, Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed into law the Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA). This law essentially has two effects. First, no State is legally obligated to treat a relationship between persons of the same sex as a marriage, even if the marriage is legal in another State. Second, the federal government defines marriage as a union between one man and one woman.[2] For Christian ethicists concerned with "gay marriage," the discourse surrounding the issue has evoked new academic inquiries and summoned a more attentive and hands-on approach to Christian social ethics. Christian ethicists simply cannot deny the consistent presence of (Western) Christian influences in the conversation about sexualities and marriage since it has provided modes of discourse, sources for moral discernment, solicited and unsolicited social accountability, and common language for understanding social agreements, secular ritual, and even public and private sphere regulation.[3] Such Christian ethical discourse (and the hegemonic power of Christianity) ought to be of great interest to any scholar of politics, religion, sociology, and social and critical theory in American society, especially those who are concerned with "family" as a subject.[4] The federal legalization of same-sex marriage in 2015 does not eliminate the need for such investigation. Instead, it calls for our attention to the institutions, social mores, and religious discourses that contribute to the normalization of American society. Moreover, as Christian ethicists and Americans invested in sound ethical dialogue, we must all concern ourselves with how universal notions of social justice and democracy collude with relative norms of fairness, difference, and equality—especially as they are mediated through a Christian ethical lens.

Our concern for social justice and democratic living requires from Christian ethics a plurality of approaches to moral reasoning. It is time for normative Christian ethical discourse to more purposefully contend with persons and ethical perspectives that have traditionally been marginalized, including but not limited to womanist and feminist theological perspectives, queer theories, and black queer people. Contemporary progressive Christian ethics has matriculated through a liberation theology stream, spanning latino/a, black, white, feminist, Asian, and womanist theo-ethical perspectives. The liberation theology tradition makes the experiences and social realities as well as the theoretical traditions of those who are marginalized a starting point for reflection and inquiry. New and emerging discourse on social realities and human experience must take

into account the discourses that are being used to explain and interrogate those realities that exist in the subaltern. Since American society will continue to be informed by Christian ethical discourse, we must vigorously challenge norms within Christian ethics by providing even more experiential sources for ethical reflection and diligently deepening the relationships among conversing communities. Christian ethics must not only acknowledge the reality of diversity and pluralism, but it must also envisage and consistently work to create a just and loving community *because of* that reality. I suggest that some of this work may be accomplished by disrupting the power dynamics that perpetuate hierarchies within a diverse and plural environment; resisting those powers in macro and micro ways; and imagining new relationships that subvert the very norms that propel them.

Rather than a direct contribution to the conversation on gay marriage, my work in this book interrogates one of the sub-layers of the issue: moral norms of family and kinship that foreground the intersection of race, gender, and sexuality. American social and political discussions about marriage derive from long-standing norms of family and kinship structures that are based on deeply rooted concepts of gender roles and power differentiation. These concepts propagate dominant social narratives that hierarchically arrange categories of identity. Socially constructed categories of race, gender, and sexuality inform teleological notions of goodness, thereby expanding or limiting visions of how we ought to interact. This reflexive relationship among race, gender, and sexuality and moral discourse on family necessitates that we—as ethicists and moral agents in general—look beyond the question of whether all citizens should have the same rights regarding marriage to consider, instead, how socially constructed categories of personhood (as well as the relational qualities that inform them) shape norms of morality, notions of kinship, and hopes for a just society.

Scholars, activists, communities, and individuals have struggled publicly and privately with the concept of family and the moral "stuff" that surrounds it.[5] Underlying these conversations, I see a basic ethical interest: how can we BE together? And, how does being together affect or influence our common context? In this book, I am particularly interested in the ways that womanism, feminism, queer theories, and black queer people have taken on these questions and engaged in public discourse on concepts of family and kinship. Each discourse has something distinctive to say about how diverse family experiences reflect different needs from society and thus contribute critical reflection on moral narratives of family life in our context. I offer a brief survey of the foundational norms of these

perspectives along with what they potentially add to the conversation in the next section.

While I agree that there is brokenness evident in the ways we are thinking and making policy about family, I contend that instead of a *crisis* in the family, we are simply witnessing further development in the landscape of American relationships. The religious and political outcries of discomfort with diverse families' expectations to be recognized and treated fairly are responses to the destabilizing impact of those developments. However, this changing landscape is and always has been important in a society made of people whose relationships and/or family makeups reflect more complicated circumstances and identities than the stereotype of the white heterosexual family with two children and a dog could begin to describe. America comprises households led by same-sex partners, interracial families, interreligious families, immigrant and transnational families, single-parent households, multigenerational households, co-parenting units due to separation or divorce, and more. The American family *is* a queer family. The idea, therefore, of queer family life relative to black queer subjectivity and sexuality/gender is consistent with these social trends.[6]

We may find it fairly easy to trace the dividing lines in the debate about sexual queerness and family between the über-conservative DOMA supporters and the most radical marriage abolitionists. What proves more difficult, I find, is interrogating the queer nature (and subsequent complications) with which "blackness" operates in our common notions of family. In this work, I have found myself asking an ongoing question: what difference has race played in queering our norms of family, and how have black people, in particular, responded to this self- or other-imposed queerness? Throughout this book, I build on the assumption that the family is a key site for individual and community development. In particular, I recognize that the black family has always been a site for moral learning and practical survival for people in the black community.[7] Because I am interested in tracing the development of moral agency and relationality among black queers, I recognize that the black family is a significant departure point for my analysis.

As I mentioned in the Preface, our country's practice of chattel slavery had as much impact on ongoing norms of black and white families as it did on the specific reality of enslaved blacks. Of particular import is the legal sanction of "breeding slaves." That is, once the identities that most often comprised the group from which enslaved persons came transitioned to the *natural* slave, then personhood for black people shifted outside the

realm that ought to govern such civil social organizing as family. In short, chattel slavery made black people into economic objects who, by definition, did not have kinship. Therefore, black families generally could not participate in the developing trends of "normative" US family life.

The difficulties for black people to access normative family status were continued and perpetuated by the second-class citizenship that black people have experienced in this country since emancipation. Specifically, during the 100 years between emancipation and the Civil Rights Movement black people carefully traversed the space between establishing selfhoods/communities that celebrated black life and the self-policing that emerged as a way to assimilate as successfully as possible into American society.[8] Shaped by a Cartesian/Pauline separation of "spirit" and "flesh," Augustinian sexual ethics, Victorian ideals about proper inter-gender behavior, and white American middle-class notions of "nuclear" families, black norms, and practices of kinship established a politics of respectability that would act as the foundation for black moral subjectivity.[9]

The role of black churches in continuing this politics of respectability has been vast, multipurposed, and multifaceted. On one hand, black churches have named the ways in which "the black community" has suffered emotionally, economically, and even physically from existing within kinship structures that are nonnormative. Single-parent households, "dead-beat dads," and HIV/AIDS-spreading sodomites have represented, in many black churches, evidence of a crisis in the black family that contributes to poverty and violence within the community. On the other hand, black churches have noted that even if they were to eliminate the taboos within black family life, the realities of intergenerational households, large progeny, and economic instability still placed black families outside of the norm. The responses of many black churches to this conundrum have been to work within a politics of respectability in order to gain as much social and moral stock as possible.[10]

Through the proliferation of prosperity gospels, "Save the Black Family" campaigns, mandates against homosexuality from the pulpit, bible studies on premarital sex, the development of "singles" and "couples" ministries, and more, black churches have worked diligently to establish and protect the ideal black family. This work, unfortunately, has been an attempt to eliminate all signs of queerness, even if that meant publicly and repeatedly denouncing the moral subjectivity of many within their own community. Black (sexually) queer people are among those who have been rendered morally abject in this enterprise. As heteronormative

black churches gain moral ground by exercising these politics, many black queers find ourselves exhibiting distinctive moral qualities and living in disruptive, creative, resistant relation to the families and family values that our heteronormative relatives employ for religious, social, and political access to normativity.

Purpose of the Book

The development of a black queer ethical perspective as well as my own interest in this project emerges from a general inquiry: How ought human beings relate to themselves and one another? Essentially, I contend that we ought to relate to one another in a way that fosters the simultaneous development of our individual potentialities as well as the orientations, motivations, and actions that ground us to relate in generous, loving, and just ways with our neighbor.

Let me begin with a negative description of this book. It is NOT an apologetics for black queer identity. I am not describing what it means to be a black queer self, nor do I take for granted a place of categorical naming power. Doing so would

- stabilize blackness and queerness in ways that are untrue to the book's assumptions regarding intersectional identity (to be discussed more below);
- require an explanation of "identity" as a moral category (as opposed to selfhood) as a mechanism for enacting morality;
- assume an ontological "virtue" of being black and queer.

Barring these potential theoretical traps, this book IS an illustration of black queer moral subjectivity, agency, and imagination. In it, I claim that ignoring the morality exhibited through black queer lives and experiences leaves our moral discourse within ethics flat, irrelevant, and narrow—especially in relation to the family. Even more, my work in this book points to experiences that enrich a normative lens for black queerness.

We need a radical shift in method and language. This shift must work against racial insensitivity and cultural incompetence, oppressive gender exclusion and normative role reification, and repression of diverse sexualities and colonization of bodies. In an effort to decenter and disempower the normative ideas of gender, race, and sexuality that currently ground moral discourse on family, I engage ethics, philosophy, critical theory, and

narratives from black queers as sources for (a) liberating and nonnormative standards for moral agency as well as (b) practices of creating diverse ways of being in relationship in our society. My work privileges three ethical frameworks for obtaining, maintaining, and evaluating liberative human relationships: *disruption*, *resistance*, and *imagination*. By reframing family through these, this book contributes to Christian ethics a model for considering norms of human relationships that subvert and decenter normative notions of gender, sexuality, and race.

Propelled by these ethical frameworks, one of the initial aims in this project is to begin to delineate and illustrate a black queer ethics. A black queer ethical perspective, by considering norms of human relationships via conversations on family and kinship, adds critical theoretical depth to Christian theological discourses. This ethics is both a *source* for constructing a liberated view of human relationships as well as a *method* for engaging in Christian ethical praxis. In this book, the method consists of textual analysis mixed with ethnographic research. I privilege the voices, experiences, and stories of black queer people that I interviewed in Atlanta, Georgia. Through over forty semi-structured interviews, I learned about the kind of practical, reflective, and morally attuned lives that black queers live in relation to family. I accomplished this by (a) situating narratives as critical texts, (b) employing stories as both illustrations and disruptions of normativity, and (c) utilizing black queer experiences as sources for moral reflection and discourse.

The aim of a black queer ethics is to use black queer experiences to critically engage the norms invoked in conversations on relationality. This ethics performs the complicated task of pointing toward a new perspective and a practical method, thus supplying important correctives to the communities from which it emerges. In short, black queer ethics is praxis-oriented, reality-grounded ethics.

A black queer ethics privileges a harmony of scholar, activist, and lay voices to frame four inquiries that motivate the book. First, what examples of potentiality-supporting, generous, mutuality-fostering relationalities exist in our context? I find that while we are a marginalized community in moral discourse, black queers are an example of a population sitting at various intersections of identities and oppressions who challenge the hegemonic presence of normative (monogamous, heterosexual, capitalist, patriarchal, mono-generational, mono-racial, monocultural) human relationships. We participate in this praxis by re-visioning, narrating, and manifesting units of kinship—*family*—that, in many ways, subvert negative/

oppressive gender, sexuality, and race norms and which also reconstruct basic notions of relational units.

I am interested in the means by which black queer people seek this type of relationality, and thus, my second query: what key values and practices do black queers employ in this praxis-oriented process? Through an analysis of black queer theorizing, I find that there are three strategic moves toward this kind of relationality that black queers make: disruption–irruption, creative resistance, and subversive–generative imagination. *Disruption–irruption* is a tool of collective and individual moral agency that emotionally, rationally, and practically dismantles normative institutions, behaviors, and expectations (along with the discourses that surround them). *Creative resistance* is a mechanism by which marginalized people resist and eschew the internal and external disciplines that make possible their dehumanizing assimilation (which strips them of subjectivity) into those institutions. *Subversive–generative imagination* is a radical praxis (reflective action) of moral imagination in which new actions and possibilities overturn the power of inhibiting and oppressive norms.[11]

Third, I am interested in the *driving force* behind black queer endeavors to achieve these types of relationships. It seems to me that one impetus is the reality that black queer people have not fit into the norms of family that exist in our context and have, subsequently, responded in numerous ways, including living critically in relation to those norms. Additionally, the presence of various *values* compels black queers to envisage an accountable way of being with one another that is not simply defined by, but is certainly built upon, our experiences as raced, gendered, and sexualized people.

Fourth, as I aim to contribute to Christian ethical discourse, I am driven by a final question: why is an example of black queer pursuit of this kind of relationality relevant for Christian ethics? As a source for critically engaging and thereby promoting righteousness (right relations) in its basic theological, theoretical, and practical assertions, Christian ethics ought to do the work of both dismantling oppressive forces that inhibit positive human relations *and* advancing an ethical discourse that orients our moral imagination and agency toward generous, loving, and just human relationships. This particular Christian moral imperative derives from a basic Christological observation. In my interpretation of Christianity's sacred text, Jesus was a radical and revolutionary dismantler of oppressive forces who used various means of reorientation, disambiguation, and institutional subversion to reimagine a "family" through iteration and action.[12]

In my estimation, a Christian ethics ought to call us to the same (at least) and even "greater works than these."

Together, these inquiries and general claims point to my ultimate thesis in this book: *Black queer people are moral agents who enact family in ways that are simultaneously disruptive to current familial norms in our society, creatively resistant to the disciplinary powers at work in those norms, and subversively generative and imaginative in relation to establishing new ways of being in relationship*. I utilize a black queer ethics to critically engage the real experiences and ethical foundations of black queer people through purposeful conversation with the ethical norms invoked by a range of scholars and theorists in order to deepen the discourse and work toward a liberative ethic of human relations. This process of a praxis-oriented ethics illustrates that black queer experiences, understood in conjunction with theological and theoretical discourses, are a necessary lens through which to understand and engage fundamental familial norms and ways relating.

Intersections and Working Assumptions About Identity in *Black Queer Ethics*

In July 2010, I participated in the Human Rights Campaign's (HRC) Summer Institute, a weeklong seminar that joined together a diverse group of graduate students and faculty doing queer religious studies in the USA. During our queer togetherness, we repeatedly confronted "intersectionality" as a pertinent and rigorous feature of queer discourse, scholarship, and activism. In doing so, we troubled the concepts of identity and identity politics. Through my experience at the Institute, I learned that intersectionality points us toward the realities of intersecting/reifying categories of signification/oppression and *also* constitutes our deep desires for interrelational learning and action.

As we worked together, I found myself focusing on another important aspect of intersectionality: the bodily experience of intersecting identities. I came to understand that mutually constitutive social constructions of identity categories mediate the materiality and experience of our selfhoods. One exemplary moment occurred during our media training. As instructed, we each began our major/public claims with an authoritative naming of our "indisputable" identity. Mine started, "As a black queer Christian ethicist, I believe …." I was suddenly aware of the impact of the categories that I had chained together. What *did* I believe as "black,"

as "queer," as "Christian ethicist?" Even more, was it the same as what I believed as a "black queer Christian ethicist?" And, would anyone even notice that there might be a difference? This brief reflective moment allowed me to confront my unstable, yet reinforcing, categories of identity as well as the intersectional and disruptive character of each one. In that moment, I appreciated that my essential queerness—the unstable, indescribable, matrix of selfhood—could not come apart to expose my "other" identities in order to build coalitions. I remembered that each of us is queer because of the mutually constitutive residue of *several* identity markers that shape us. And more importantly, it is our unapologetic "other"-ness, internal and external, that queers us.

People do not represent silos of selfhood that meet at crossroads. We were not a monolith of queers meeting with "others" to build coalitions that move us toward a utopian future of shared acknowledgement and equal distribution of rights (a move that would singularize and stabilize each "identity" and/or merge together aspects of their distribution into and effects on society). Rather, intersectionality allows us to recognize the complex ways that each of our identity categories is itself internally and externally queer, and even more, that the reality of oppressive forces is manifested differently each time these categories meet inside and outside our bodies.

Queer is, among other things, a word that simultaneously designates a noun, adjective, and a verb. Certainly, our common use of "queer" is as a modifier that points to things that are odd/abnormal and even undesirable. A rather important use of the term comes through its active capacities. That is, queer *performs* because it can bring something into being that illustrates the unnaturalness of "the norm."[13] Inasmuch as queer destabilizes and even dismantles dominant structures of meaning making and normativity, it contributes to our ways of being in the world. Michel Foucault introduced us to an epistemic analysis of sexualities that allows us to understand the naming capacities of the term "queer." His explanation of the ways behaviors transition into personages, makes room for a use of "queer" as a *noun*, and even a proper noun at times.[14] In this usage, the term points to a kind of subjectivity that is positioned as "queer" (in its adjectival sense) in relation to normative identities or subjectivities. The discursive presence of intersectionality has destabilized the notion of queer. As queerness comes to mean something more than our relation to sex/gender norms and nothing less than our positionality in relation

to ourselves and to one another, then intersectional analysis is doing the work of illuminating the complex, inter-identity, interrelational selves that we are. Resisting the norms that foster a chasm between and within identities is the work of remaining whole, complicated subjectivities.

Intersecting identity within the family context is often overridden by the disciplinary power of normative categories of gender and sexuality. Moreover, the notion of complicated selfhoods within a family often exists in troublesome relation to the institution of family itself, as the normative family boasts stable, recognizable, and determinant categories of being.[15] One's process of disrupting race, gender, and sexuality within the family not only troubles the dynamics of relating within the unit; but it also shifts the weight of interest from the maintenance of identity norms to the sustenance of collective and individual being.

In this book, I have a basic assumption about my research subject and certainly about my research participants: black queerness is not comprehended as "blackness" meeting "queerness"; rather, it is a particular subjectivity in itself—one that does not establish queerness as white and blackness as heterosexual. The categories of race and sexuality are destabilized in Chap. 3, during which I explain how each of their social constructions is dependent upon the other. I aim to disrupt the stable (and exclusive) ways that we understand what it means to be "black" or "queer" in an effort to shatter notions of what it means to exist within a family.[16] Or, perhaps more realistically, destabilizing our notions of family will, in turn, allow us to confront the unstable categories of race, gender, and sexuality. Even as we live as "whole" beings, often working against the social and political structures that would render us fragmented, the categorical fragments of our selfhood are in negotiation with one another. Our multiplicity becomes a matter of battling the categories of selfhood that separate our being. For this reason, the ways that I engage black queer identities acknowledge the notion that identities and subjectivities are (and should be) disrupt-able things.

My experience at HRC and our theoretical work on intersectionality, selfhood, religion, and politics sparked my interest in bridging the gaps between categories of identity, moral subjectivity, and moral agency. I am specifically interested in black queer moral subjectivity and agency for two reasons. First, I understand that my theoretical perspective and set of assumptions are not always at work in the ways that we "name" ourselves and one another. It is easy to find people who self-identify as "black queer

___" and who use a variety of markers, categories, descriptions, and experiences to understand their own identity *because* no matter how potentially disruptive and unstable the categories are, our *experiences* as persons bearing those identities are real, stable, and tangible. Clearly, this is the case in my example above. I *do* identify as a black queer Christian ethicist in the world, and that identity is understood because it signals various and overlapping categories of identity.

The fact that identity is based on social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality (and other factors) does not render it make-believe; instead, the social constructions allow us to name our experiences within a very real set of signifiers that others understand. My call for research participants simply required that potential subjects *self*-identify as black queer persons.[17] This minimal requirement was an effort to avoid imputing large, essentialist categories onto potential interviewees. Truthfully, I could make assumptions about the general population that might respond to my call, based on the fact that the terms "black" and "queer" may signal certain identities. Still, opening the call to folks who self-identify within the categories made room for the categories themselves to be troubled, critiqued, dismantled, and even dismissed.

Secondly, I employ a kind of Spivakian–Fussian strategic essentialism[18] in order to put the narratives that my research participants share into a context of raced, gendered, and sexualized language that my readers may understand and critically engage in. The concept of strategic essentialism suggests that while the idea of an "essential" gender or race or self is inaccurate and oppressive, a "strategic" use of essentialism in discourse and action may provide an important base from which we can deconstruct, disrupt, and resist the very circumstances and institutions that reify categories as essences. For Spivak, sometimes it is necessary to actually "situate the subject as subaltern" in an effort to "undo a massive historiographic metalepsis."[19] As such, the type of strategic essentialism that I employ in this project requires us to simultaneously recognize and critique the structures, norms, and normalizing processes that establish social constructions of identity within families as essential—"natural"—things.

When I engage certain "parts" of otherwise intersecting and destabilized identities (i.e., "black" or "queer" or even "women" or "men"), I am doing so with an understanding that both the category and the underlying social construction are working to homogenize that identity and de-particularize the subjectivity altogether. While I do not support this homogenization in general, I am clear that in order to dismantle the

structures of hierarchy and oppression at play *between* social constructions, it is sometimes necessary to engage them as stable categories. Engaging them this way forces us to acknowledge the tangible and material realities of injustice that people experience through stabilized categories of identity. Oppression is *real*, and we ought to recognize its institutional, social, political, and individual expressions of inequality and human limitation. My moral work in this book assumes the reality of oppressions based on socially constructed categories of identity. Thus, *Black Queer Ethics* stands firmly behind the paradoxical notion and use of "black queer" as a *particular*, yet nonessential, subjectivity through which we might come to understand another subaltern expression of moral agency.

"Family" and "Norms": Defining Two Key Terms

To bridge and be in critical conversation with the frameworks listed above, I critically engage the terms family and norms. Because the terms are amorphous, let me treat them briefly in turn.

Family

Part of the purpose of this book is to present information about the ways that black queer people conceive of family, its values, and norms. This purpose assumes that many and varied definitions of family are present in black queer delineations of the term, and I value the diversity of language, symbolism, and practices in those explanations. I am clear that with diversity of explanations comes the possibility of confusion, so in this section, I briefly describe the organizing rubric for my discussion of family.

The concept of family is a useful starting point for engaging moral ideas of relationships because it is widely considered to be and often acts as a site of moral formation, self-identity negotiation, and social education. According to Ellen K. Feder, the family is a critical site wherein difference, and even the understanding of difference, is produced, exchanged, and reified.[20] The particular (and peculiar) context of the family provides an important site in which the production of race, gender, and sexuality norms mutually constitute one another and also work to solidify various norms of relation within the family context. Feder suggests that we ought to attend to the family as an important element that contributes to formation and reification of social constructions of identity.

There are two "types" of families that emerge in this book: families of origin and chosen families. In families of origin, black queer discussions of family attend to the "roots" of familial relationships and engage values, norms, and memorable experiences from the units of relationship into which people were born or primarily introduced. Usually, these relationships are encased in biological and legal boundaries, with fairly clear lines of inclusion and exclusion. In most cases, the line between family member and relative is nonexistent. For many individuals, families of origin ground ideas and norms of identity, relationship, love, and justice.

Chosen families usually denote a set of relationships that are purposefully, thoughtfully, and carefully selected. These families sometimes include but are not limited to biological relatives and friends. Representing connections based on like-mindedness, affinity, similarity of experience, complementary goals, and shared values, these families critically engage the values and norms learned in the families of origin and often exhibit a range of responses to those norms. These responses can simultaneously include perpetuation, denial and reorientation, resistance, and re-visioning. Chosen families are often sites that allow for individuals to exercise freedom in developing behaviors, practices, and expectations that represent the dynamic nature of family that they experience.

Norms

Inasmuch as any definition of "norms" is debatable, I recognize that the term takes on a similar contestable value in this book. In a broad social sense, norms represent sets of expectations and cues of behavior among individuals within a group. Even more, they are an implicit or explicit representation of acceptable and unacceptable behaviors and illuminate values and beliefs. The relationship between individuals and social norms is fairly punitive, as inability or unwillingness to comply with acceptable behaviors results in some form of punishment, including but not limited to expulsion from the group. More interesting than the punitive aspect of a norm is its governing power. Norms do not just represent expectations and behaviors; rather, they evoke and proscribe behaviors. As such, they indicate what actions are proper, which self-representations are recognized, and what beliefs are intelligible.[21]

There are ethical implications for the presence of social norms in our society, especially ones that we determine are inhibiting, dehumanizing, and generally uninformed. Because individuals and groups of individuals

often conform to norms and ensure their acceptance, popularity, potential, and even power or survival within the group, the existence of certain norms determines the ways that we find safe, stable, enriching, and sustaining position within our communities. Indeed, norms create an economy of relationships and relationship potentials, and as such ought to be carefully considered, continuously interrogated, and consistently re-evaluated.

Still, norms persist. Humans are norm-making creatures who make meaning through processes of categorization and stabilization. As these categories for meaning making impute values upon and embed moral claims within themselves, the norms take on a regulatory role. I am interested in that transition as well as the processes of normalization that are at work during that shift.

In *Between Facts and Norms*, Jürgen Habermas articulates the relationship of norms to one's teleological standpoint. He argues that "in moral questions, the teleological point of view from which we handle problems through goal-oriented cooperation gives way entirely to the normative point of view from which we examine how we can regulate our common life in the equal interest of all."[22] According to his view, norms are acceptable and viable within a group as long as they equally and fairly represent and advocate for all of the individuals in the group. For him, norms need to be open to the perspective and critique of all who are affected by them.

My treatment of norms in this book, as it deals with black queer perspectives and experiences, draws from both social and moral discourses, but takes a turn at the point of norm stability and critical engagement. Rather than look for articulations of behavior and belief that have punitive and possibly exclusive potentials, I investigate the ways in which black queers negotiate the practice of disrupting, resisting, and imagining behaviors and expectations in their own families based on the values in their own teleological viewpoints.

Telling the difference between norms that have been disrupted or resisted and ones that have been reimagined is a matter of context/circumstance, articulated values, and nature. By nature, I mean to suggest that *compulsory* norms—ones which are a direct, seemingly uncritical result of normalizing technologies—are distinct from non-compulsory ones in which conscious critical choice makes a difference. Non-compulsory norms emerge from articulated or otherwise understood values and are in constant negotiation. In short, this project treats norms as responsive, evolving sets of human behavior possibilities that are contestable from the moment of their conception.

Ethics and Praxis: Research Methods

Like Traci West claims in *Disruptive Ethics*, I assert that Christian ethicists and anyone interested in thinking through, advocating, and practicing a liberative Christian ethics begin with a liberative method. Our capacity for dialogue "is precisely the core element of a socially liberated method for Christian ethics."[23] Instead of beginning with a delineation of crises and descriptions of contested "problems," Christian ethical inquiry and discourse ought to reflect explorations of the real lives, practices, and perspectives of people whose realities are often left out of theoretical and theological dialogues. By doing so, ethicists accomplish several things. First, we add a necessary validity to a range of personhoods and perspectives about diverse, "righteous" ways of being by acknowledging different ways of being a self. This also includes ways of being a self in relation to *other* selves. Second, we participate in decentering normative ideas of relating that are based on contestable and contest*ed* notions of gender, race, and sexuality norms. Third, we give ourselves opportunities to expand the possibilities for and examples of how we can live peacefully, with new and liberating normative grounding forces. Thus, the liberative ethical method employed in this book is accomplished by engagement with subjects *and* textual research.

Praxis Method

Black Queer Ethics employs three general approaches to gathering and sharing ethical scholarship: semi-structured interviews, textual research and analysis, and narrative. My interviews with black queer individuals sought narrative descriptions of their families, articulated understanding of the concept of family, specific values that they learned and ones that they nurture in their families, and critical explanation of their black queer identity in relation to these descriptions, understandings, and values. As a black queer woman researcher, I am aware that my own positionality influences the project's interest in the subjects as well as the project's research method. Using a black feminist anthropological framework, I employ native anthropology and autoethnography.[24] Native anthropology attempts to study "the folk" and/or one's home, while autoethnography, in order to challenge the notion of objectivity as the best pursued position of the researcher, allows one to study environments whose analysis can be carried out through the lens of the researcher.

Autoethnography, as the cultural study of one's own people is a dialogical enterprise that includes the introspective quality of autobiography as well as the ability to speak simultaneously to the academy and one's own community. In this book, I situate myself as a person who identifies with many of the same demographic categorical markers as my interviewees, and I employ this shared identity to both deepen my understanding of the language and experiences within their stories and critically engage the moral discourse therein. In many ways, my position as a black queer researcher who is committed to maintaining my interviewees' subjectivities means that my method must include an ongoing process of negotiating identities. That is, I recognize that my exchanges with the interviewees simultaneously establish our connectivity as black queers and troubles the notion that black queerness is a stable monolith.

The textual analysis in this project treats a variety of concepts, including but not limited to "norms," "economies of relation," moral agency, and moral imagination. I use interviews to illustrate in narrative form the ways that research participants reflect critically on their own stories, circumstances surrounding those stories, and moral agency within the story. My use of narrative is an attempt to make space for social context to invigorate the stories rather than swallow them.

Narrative is a tool for moral imagination and moral agency that builds on a shared commitment from the listener and the teller in multiple ways. As teller and listener share the story, each engages in processes of recognition, creativity, reflection, and redaction. This is key for moral discourse, and it builds a conscientizing exchange that begets moral action. The black queer stories privileged in this project give us insight into the creative, sometimes tense, and often productive efforts to have and maintain family relationships.

As a black queer person, I acknowledge and take on the important responsibility of doing ethics with black queer people. Taking on research and reflective responsibility requires engagement in at least three significant processes: recognizing, listening and telling, and doing. Recognition is, at its foundation, the first and necessary acknowledgment that we exist simultaneously as individuals as and members of families, communities, and societies. The process of seeing one another—granting subjectivity—marks our ability to know and be known to one another. Listening to one another, truly hearing and ingesting the sounds and silences of one another's realities, is an additional step in the process of knowing. This, for me, leads to telling. The silences of our stories—imposed and assumed—create

a chasm in ethical discourse, especially when marginalized communities are most often voiceless. As this is the case, listening to and telling the stories of black queers is the beginning of the ethical task of doing work in the community. As elements of a narrative methodology, each one of these processes is essential to the full form of subjectivity that sits at the normative core of this project.

Because of the diverse uses of narratives in this project, the forms in which they appear throughout the text vary. While a systematic use of interview material might contribute to aesthetic symmetry within the book, I find that attending to the organic ways in which they are communicated by the interviewees best captures the narrative elements within the interviews. This means that some quotes are lengthy and display robust descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the main storyline being shared while others are brief, offering specific points and/or anecdotal examples of critical thinking and action. In addition to quoting stories from the interview material, I occasionally put interviewees' comments in conversation with one another or display the actual interview dialogue as a way to illustrate the kinds of critically reflexive exchanges that contribute to this work. By engaging the material in these ways, I allow narrative and ethnographic methods to read the complex intersubjectivity within the research.

Ethical Framework

Feminist, womanist, and normative ethical discourses represent a critical synthesis of diverse ethics that have influenced this book. Before I point to the particular aspects of their language and method from which I draw, let me articulate my own understanding of the term. Ethics is a systematic *and* organic process of assessing, critiquing, and orienting our most sacred motivations, inclinations, beliefs, and behaviors in such a way that benefits us individually and relationally. It is the means by which we organize our most fundamental and most exotic dreams and the aims of our intended and expressed teleological aspirations. Our ethics represents both our ends *and* our means of achieving it. As such, it is the theoretical substance as well as the continued practical demonstration of our desire for healthy, liberated, fully relational, and accountable lives. Black queer ethics forwards this definition by existing as both a method and tool for engaging black queer lives and highlights the moral imagination and agency in black queer experiences.

James Gustafson similarly emphasizes a bifocal character of ethics. He asserts that ethics is both a theoretical and a practical endeavor.[25] As a theoretical task, Christian ethics calls one to reflect on the *way moral action occurs*. It looks at the assumptions and presuppositions of people's moral lives, and it also examines the convictions and faith claims present in an individual or community. In a practical manner, ethics examines the *morals* of an individual or community. Morals, according to Gustafson, are the display of human behavior that is an effect of their convictions.[26] The difference between principle and conduct incite Gustafson to pose two questions in doing Christian ethics: "What are the *principles* involved in determining the moral life?"[27] and "What *ought* I to do?"[28]

Gustafson's questions invite us to consider the relationship between theory/theology and praxis in ethics. His initial inquiry about "principles" implies that there may be a theory/theology at work in the way ethics that systematizes an understanding of the "moral life." Conversely, his interest in what we ought to do suggests a practical element to Christian ethics. Taken together, however, these inquiries reflect an inherent praxis-orientation in ethics: principles inform the actions of a moral life, and the moral life itself informs the principles by which we understand it.

Here, let me offer a review of some tenets of classic, womanist, and feminist Christian ethics. For the purpose of this discussion, I have grouped these tenets into three categories to encapsulate some significant patterns in their appropriations and enhancements of the discipline. First, Christian ethics urges a deep engagement in analysis of morality, behavior, and sources. We approach ethical discourse in a posture of analysis, hoping to extract from our reflections a relatively applicable set of knowledge that informs our own moralities, behaviors, and sources. Marcia Riggs describes the process thusly,

> Generally, Christian ethical reflection is analysis of the morality (virtues, values, ideals, duties, and responsibilities) practices by persons and communities of faith who profess belief in Jesus Christ. Such analysis means that we examine the sources of our morality—the Bible, doctrine, theology, and experience of the faithful throughout the ages. We examine these sources both with appreciation and criticism as the sources also critique us.[29]

Riggs' definition of Christian ethics demonstrates the multiplicity of orientations involved in doing ethical reflection. In it, we see the multifocal project of engaging in analysis that is situated within a particular

religious framework and that calls for diligent attention to the governing sources that inform that framework.

Riggs nuances this definition of ethics in her discussion of womanist ethics, which brings me to the second tenet. Ethics, in addition to being theologically grounded and informed, is contextually and experientially located. Riggs explains, "Doing Womanist Christian ethical reflection means that authentic ethical reflection begins with the particular experiences of African-American women in the various dimensions of their lived experiences—historical, religious/spiritual, political, familial, woman-centered, woman-identified—in specific contexts of their lives."[30] More than a reflection on the diverse contexts in which we live, ethics brings us into deep and intimate relation with our experiences in those contexts. As Riggs asserts, this means that ethics engages multiple and intersecting aspects of our lives. Cheryl Kirk-Duggan adds to Riggs' delineation the idea that womanist ethics has a responsive and evaluative orientation because it "demystifies, unmasks, and untangles the ideologies, theologies, and systems of value operative in a particular society to evaluate the myths that sanction oppression."[31] For Kirk-Duggan, womanist ethics does not merely engage experience; rather, it employs the experiences of black women as a moral barometer of the social, political, religious, and interpersonal climate in which we live. That is, experience is not merely an illustration of our context, but it is also a means of morally evaluating it.

The third tenet of ethics that I wish to illuminate is that it is understood and developed as a bodily enterprise. Indeed, we feel the implications of our moral inclinations and decisions in material ways. This process does not simply discount rational approaches; rather, it emphasizes the material groundedness of our moral knowledge. Traci West offers a good discussion in *Disruptive Christian Ethics*. She asserts,

> A feminist approach to liberative Christian social ethics … eschews the false dichotomies that are presumed when they represent the universal as pitted against the particular. Feminist ethics rejects a rationalistic approach that attempts to impartially sort out moral problems into rigidly divided either/or categories of norms. Finally, a feminist method is dismissive of an ethical inquiry that would, in any way, be focused upon making additions to a moral lexicon of principles abstracted from their pragmatic implications for the everyday realities of life …. A feminist approach compels us to resist the temptation to use the pursuit of rational categories to avoid the sensual implications that are present in the material relations we seek

> to understand and alter …. Knowledge that we acquire through our bodily perceptions must not be discounted in ethics, for it is a crucial source of moral knowledge.[32]

Ethical inquiry and discourse are motivated by the knowledge that we obtain in our bodies, and a denial of that knowledge rejects both the possibility for real ethical deliberation and substance.

Theoretical perspectives, taken together with theological convictions, provide ethical discourse with sets of systematically presented focal points of ideas, motivations, and criteria from which we may understand, critique, and establish values and norms. Not solely rational, these perspectives and convictions extract knowledge from our experiences, and in this way, theory and theology are always united with the tangible and often inexplicable humanity that informs the very theories and theologies with which we gaze. Praxis, as the means for reflecting and acting upon our theories/theologies, keeps us in close relationships with those things that we come to understand and perpetuate through our language and behavior. It grounds our theoretical and theological discourses in reality by existing as the process and product of reflective-action. Taken with theory and theology, praxis in ethics governs our moral agency and incites moral imagination. Even more, uniting theory/theology with praxis in ethics results in consciousness-raising transformation and responsive liberatory ethics.

Theory/Theology and Praxis as Consciousness-Raising Transformative Ethics

I participated as a staff member in the Summer Academy at Candler School of Theology's Youth Theological Initiative for several years as a graduate student, and in my last two years on staff, I taught an ethics course called *Living the Conscious Life: Christian Ethics in Practice*. My main claim, which became a class mantra of sorts, served as the basis for this class: "Because ethics is hugely based on being conscientized to one another's realities and personhoods, we are called to LIVE THE CONSCIOUS LIFE!" For weeks, we learned through narrative sharing, improvisational exercises, readings, pilgrimages to sites of worship, and contextual education opportunities. As we reflected together as a class, we engaged, critiqued, shared hopes for, and made commitments about our own ethical contexts in relation to the society and faith communities of which we

dreamed. For all of us, the process of raising our consciousness about race, gender, and sexuality (the course's main foci) was transformative. One student, "Carol," remarked in a closing note to the whole class, "We've all changed a lot. Don't leave here and forget. Don't go back to complacency. We should all carry what we learned and the people we met. Don't fit back into the old positions, the old places. Change and ACT. You can bring justice." In this book, I build on that experience of transformation by bridging theory/theology with praxis in order to participate in *consciousness-raising, transformative* ethics.

One way that we can seek this ethics is through a Freireian "practical consciousness" that is based on critical engagement with our own experiences in order to develop "a form of reasoning that [makes use of and then] supercedes the immediacy of 'personal experience' to approach a critical awareness of the specificity of domination and oppression."[33] This practical consciousness necessitates a type of feminist praxis that "calls for a radical transformation of the self, a transcendence of the oppressed/oppressor relation that lies in the hierarchical strata of human consciousness."[34] It allows us to vision new social possibilities and transform our experiences and stories into new social realities.

Theory/Theology and Praxis as Responsive and Liberatory Ethics

Ethics need not be so hegemonic and discursive that it is unresponsive, stationary, and irrelevant to situated human experiences and personhoods. At the very center of praxis is the notion that practice learns from thinking/feeling, and thinking/feeling subsequently learns from practice. Ethics is clearly concerned with locating discourse in bodily and contextually relevant reflection. The addition of praxis to the process ensures that the experiences, stories, and moral imaginaries of ethical agents affirm that those lived realities require responses that emerge from our most diligent efforts to exist in healthy right relationship with one another. As ethics grows in responsiveness to various manifestations of lifestyles, habits, inclinations, and perspectives, it also bolsters its capacity for empathetic prescriptions and creativity that benefits our relationality.

As a society composed of a variety of personhoods, we need an empathetic ethical perspective in order to create and maintain liberatory accounts and critiques of our lives. The process of thinking ethically and doing ethical work must include a deep desire to allow that process to unfold, reshape, and reimagine itself. Uncomfortable as change might

be, the lack of possibility for change opens us to true discomfort: inhibited and repressed experiences, reflections, and potentialities. An ethics that builds on reflective action as well as theoretical/theological foundations establishes the important pattern of growth and regeneration that is responsive to the diverse array of personhoods and experiences that exist in our context. If ethics is able to take into account all of these differences, without polarizing their particularities in opposition to commonality, it can provide a mode for liberatory moral imagination and agency. Indeed, praxis-oriented ethics garners our ability to transform our morality through the consciousness-raising activity of sharing in one another's humanity. At the same time, it propels us toward a regenerating system of moral thinking and action that is always turned toward the possibility of our liberation. Thus, we must remember that the process of ethics involves responsibilities for diligent and focused engagement with ourselves and our neighbors.

A Road Map for the Journey: Chapter Outline

As a participant in Christian ethical discourse through the writing of a black queer ethics, I advocate for and employ an ethics that builds on the symbiotic relationship between theory/theology and praxis, noting that their necessary union suggests certain ethical responsibilities to be engaged in both scholarly discourse and general moral behavior. Therefore, this book is an exercise in doing the work of ethics and *being ethical* as a way to emulate the reflective work surrounding families that are my sources within the project model. Working in a praxis mode of ethics, I use narrative and critical analysis to further my normative claim that family ought to (a) recognize, attend to, and show care for the diverse subjectivities within familial relationships; (b) acknowledge and deconstruct the institutional, structural, social, and interpersonal disciplines that inhibit *a* from happening; (c) deconstruct and creatively resist the institutions, structures, and relational behaviors that establish inequality and oppression as normative; (d) imagine new possibilities for relationality based on a commitment to preserving potentialities and relational interdependence.

I trace this general claim through argumentation in seven chapters. I argue in the second chapter, "Practicing Black Queer Ethics Through Stories and Narrative," that ethicists and moral agents alike have an ethical imperative when it comes to engaging family and individual/communal experiences. In order to do the work of justice-seeking and dismantling

structures of power at work in our relationships, we must privilege and illustrate as accurately as possible marginalized voices. Doing so requires engaging in ethically responsible tasks like recognizing diverse selfhoods, listening to and telling stories, and being active in response to those stories. By explaining the kind of ethical processes needed to attend to black queer moral subjectivities in relation to family, this chapter provides a methodological framework through which we can understand the processes of moral agency exercised by research participants.

In the third chapter, "The Disciplinary Power of Norms," I argue that, in relation to norms, disciplinary power operates by generating and nurturing technologies that constrict black queer subjectivity and family relations. I also suggest that as we articulate and critically engage marginalized experiences, especially in relation to the social constructions that inform familial relationships, black queer people actually disrupt and dismantle oppressive norms and processes of normalization. Of particular interest are the economies of relationships that become stabilized through the norms of capitalism and heteropatriarchy that undergird normative family construction in our context.

I continue the argument about norms in the fourth chapter, "The Moral Practice of Disrupting Norms," by explaining that the process of disrupting norms requires focused attention and the ongoing commitment to recognize the technologies of normalization that are at work in the creation of norms. Conversely, this attention and deconstructive relation to norms make room for people to express new visions of norm creation. That is, the act of disrupting norms includes a step of deconstructing the normalizing process and destabilizing the concept of a norm itself. By destabilizing norms conceptually, we make room for the possibilities of (a) creating new irruptive norms and (b) understanding those norms through a lens of unstable potentialities rather than static limitations. The creation of new irruptive norms is a key step in the moral practice of confronting norms. As the subsequent step to disruption, irruption allows for norms to be reappropriated and even rewritten after they are disrupted. In this way, disruption–irruption, as a complex two-step norm confrontation tool, does not surrender "family" to a set of norms beyond interrogation; rather, it establishes the authority to reclaim the term as one that has been reframed through a destabilized lens.

My claim in the fifth chapter, "From Norms to Values: Moral Agency and Creative Resistance," is that many black queer people incorporate values and exhibit virtues that resist the disciplinary power of those capitalist

norms that become evident through disruption. In a basic sense, the process of resisting includes participating in the creation of our own teleological "good" as a way to turn our survival energy toward ends that we create. I suggest that what allows black queers to engage in this kind of morally agential action is moral imagination. In the sixth chapter, "Subversive-Generative Moral Imagination," I show that as an equally creative and subversive force, imagination makes it possible for us to vision new, queer possibilities for human relationality.

Each of these chapters illustrates my effort to deepen and broaden ethical norms of family that emerge from black queerness. The book ends with "Reflections on Black Queer Morality and Family," in which I advocate for an ethics of human relationships guided by interdependent subjectivity and argue that such relations exemplify the fundamental (and complicated) values that the research participants in this project seem to articulate.

Notes

1. Indigo [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, 6 May 2010.
2. Pub. L. 104–199, 100 Stat. 2419 (Sept. 21, 1996).
3. Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996) 246–248.
4. Ibid., 247.
5. Having particular popularity in the discussion are the works of Robert N. Bellah et al., *The Good Society* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); Diana T. Meyers et al., *Kindred Matters: Rethinking the Philosophy of the Family* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993); Don S. Browning, M. Christian Green, and John Witte, *Sex, Marriage, and Family in World Religions* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006); Lisa Sowle Cahill and Dietmar Mieth, *The Family*, Concilium (London, Eng. Maryknoll, NY: SCM Press Orbis Books, 1995); Carol B. Stack, *All Our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, [1st ed. (New York: Harper & Row, 1974).
6. Valerie Lehr makes this argument quite astutely in her groundbreaking study, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999).
7. bell hooks, *Bone Black: Memories of Girlhood* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996) xi, 37.

8. Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *Righteous Discontent: The Women's Movement in the Black Baptist Church, 1880–1920* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).
9. Ibid., 14–15.
10. Kelly Brown Douglas, "Homophobia and Heterosexism in the Black Church and Community" in Cornel West and Eddie S. Glaude, Jr., *African American Religious Thought: An Anthology* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2003) 1006–1008.
11. Each of the terms—disruption, creative resistance, and subversive-generative imagination—are the focus of Chaps. 3, 4, and 5, respectively. To explain them, I draw on work by Cynthia Willett and Ellen Armour; Traci West; and John Paul Lederach, and others. See especially Cynthia Willett, Irony *in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Ellen T. Armour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999); Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006); John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005).
12. Jesus' radical nature is exampled many times in the New Testament, including his use of the parable of the sewer (reorientation) Matt 13:3–23; performing through utterance in the Beatitudes (disambiguation) 5:3–12; and cleansing of the Temple (institutional subversion) Mark 11:15–19. For a discussion of Jesus' relation to the politics of his context, see Marcus J. Borg, *Conflict, Holiness and Politics in the Teachings of Jesus* (New York: Continuum, 1998).
13. Elizabeth Wee and Naomi Schor, eds., *Feminism Meets Queer Theory* (Bloomington, IN: Brown University Press, 1997) 228.
14. Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978) 65–68.
15. For example, in a study about gay fathers' choices to disclose their sexuality to their children, researchers found that one of the main concerns that parents held was how children would interpret the "father identity" in relation to the "gay identity." For some families, these two kinds of selves were difficult to explain, especially as a way of teaching children about the link between parenthood and gender. What did it mean to be a "man," a "father," *and* a "homosexual?" See Frederick W. Bozett, "Gay Fathers: How and Why They Disclose Their Sexuality to Their Children" *Family Relations* 29.2 (1980).
16. Here, I am essentially drawing on Hegel's notion of sublation, in which a concept can be both stable/real (preserved) and transformed through a

dialectical interplay with another concept. Undoubtedly black queer subjectivity is an example of how race and sexuality, as identities, can be both stabilized and altered by the presence of the other. See M. J. Inwood, *A Hegel Dictionary* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1992) 283.

17. I did not want to establish a norm of black queer identity as a way to garner research participants. My "call" noted that self-identifying was key to one's participation (in addition to the age criterion). For my explanation and the language of the advertisement, see Appendices A and B.
18. Both Gayatri Spivak and Dianna Fuss are theorists who take seriously the critical and theoretical problems of essentialism. In short, they argue that the assignment of essential qualities to subject (which is also a troublesome term) removes particularity from humanity and allows us to hierarchically categorize human existence and experience in increasingly unhealthy and oppressive ways. However, strategic essentialism, they suggest, is sometimes useful because it forces us to take seriously the experiences of struggle and/or oppression named by the categories. For further discussion, see Gayatri Spivak "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" in Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Spivak, *Selected Subaltern Studies* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1988) 13–20. See also Dianna Fuss, *Essentially Speaking: Feminism, Nature, & Difference* (London: Routledge, 1989).
19. Guha and Spivak, 13.
20. Ellen K. Feder, *Family Bonds : Genealogies of Race and Gender*, Studies in Feminist Philosophy (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 2007), 4.
21. My idea of norms can be traced to essays in Michael Hechter and Karl-Dieter Opp, eds., *Social Norms* (U.S.: Russell Sage Foundation, 2001). See especially Christine Horne, "Sociological Perspectives on the Emergence of Norms" and "Sex and Sanctioning: Evaluating Two Theories on Norm Emergence."
22. Jürgen Habermas, Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1998) 161.
23. West, *Disruptive Ethics*, 34.
24. Irma McClaurin, *Black Feminist Anthropology* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001) 15–16.
25. James M. Gustafson, *Christ and the Moral Life* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1968) iv.
26. Ibid., 256–257.
27. Ibid., 212.
28. Ibid., 3.
29. Marcia Riggs, Plenty Good Room: Woman Versus Male Power in the Black Church (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003) 11–12.

30. Ibid.
31. Cheryl A. Kirk-Duggan, "Quilting Relations with Creation: Overcoming, Going Through, and Not Being Stuck" in Stacey M. Floyd-Thomas, ed., *Deeper Shades of Purple: Womanism in Religion and Society* (New York: New York University Press, 2006) 187. Here, Duggan is drawing on Katie Cannon's discussion of the work and purpose of Christian ethics. See Katie Cannon, *Katie's Canon: Womanism and the Soul of the Black Community* (New York: Continuum, 1996) 138.
32. Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 42. In this discussion, West draws on the work of Beverly Harrison, who explains that our connection to and knowledge of the world becomes real in our experiences of feeling. See especially Beverly W. Harrison, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," in Carol S. Robb, ed., *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 13.
33. Nathalia E. Jaramillo and Peter McLaren, "Borderlines: bell hooks and the Pedagogy of Revolutionary Change" in Maria del Guadalupe Davidson and George Yancy (eds.), *Critical Perspectives on bell hooks* (New York: Routledge, 2009) 23.
34. Ibid., 22.

CHAPTER 2

Practicing Black Queer Ethics Through Stories and Narrative

When I asked one of my research participants, Tyler, about the particularity of being black and queer and living in family relationships, she described it as an experience of existing in a consistent "outsider status." For her, the process of naming and valuing family members was outside of the normal boundaries of society, and as such was a task of negotiation, creativity, and self-explanation. This process of negotiating a queer family in relation to other families began early for Tyler, who was raised as an only child by her single mother.

> The thing that's different [about black queer families] is that there are so few black queer norms that are conventional. It was already wrong to be in a situation like this, so there are few norms to live into. It's always something new to live into. It's always a new negotiation. [The idea of family] is being created by the people who are living it now. For black queer families, there is an implicit outsider status that we always experience, unlike white hetero families. For us, it's automatically opposite. You've made yourself an outsider and chosen to be othered …. My definition of family has to be a little more fluid, abstract, arbitrary. There are people who I would like to include [in the definition] but who wouldn't qualify. For example, my lesbian lover. Also, there is a way that as a black woman, the lived reality of the notion of family—as the domain of religion and children—had been significant in the way that I thought of family. I was being taught that being family looked like something specific and as a black woman, what I was living was falling short

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> of that anyway. But it made me value and appreciate different ways of being family. I had to, from an early age, figure out what that would mean for me.[1]

Sage offered a similar, yet nuanced, perspective on the specificity of black queer families. As I engaged Sage in the interview, I learned that the very act of doing and being family, in Sage's mind, is a bridge between theory and practice. By building on the creative talents of people who are excluded from normally recognized and validated systems of appropriate relationships, black queer families are brilliantly poetic and actively survivalist.

> [Black queer families] are poetic in that there is a light, a spirit, a feeling that is normative beyond ideas, theory, thoughts. It's normative for Black queer families to operate in a jazz mode of creativity. And resilience—figuring out ways of meeting the basic needs of life, even the emotional/spiritual ones when the rest of the world is operating in opposition to the black family, and the black queer family. Just that we exist and are thriving is an extraordinary example of the brilliance that it takes to survive and the brilliance that is generated from our insistence at survival … From jump, there is no model or norm because the very fabric that life is woven with is flawed and found to not be true. You start from scratch so you can be as free and creative as you have access to being. You start out with a critical lens b/c what you know in your soul, mind and body to be true is not what your people always show you to be true. Being black and queer is a gift—a gift of vision. You have access to possibilities, choices, and the knowledge of choices. You can search the depths of consciousness and the expansiveness of all creation to make some really good [stuff].[2]

* * *

There is no better way to guide ethical discourse than to consciously and purposefully ask whose lives are at stake and what kinds of lives they are trying to live.[3] At the base of these questions stands a deep commitment to keep people's real lives and practices at the center of ethical discourse. Below that assumption sits the idea that true ethical considerations only exist attached to people, places, circumstances, beliefs, and stories. Indeed, ethics is grounded in the "stuff" of human life, and diligent ethical engagement calls for attention to that stuff. Deeper still, at the foundation of my work sits another belief: each one of our lives tells an ethical story that, when critically reflected upon, can enliven and enrich our own and our neighbors' lives.

Black queer voices, experiences, and moral agencies are some of many that have been marginalized—ignored, silenced, invalidated—in Christian ethical discourse. Therefore, as I engage and privilege these voices in my

scholarship, I am guided by an ethical imperative: the inclusion and privileging of black queers in ethical discourse must begin with and maintain attention to both the material reality of black queer experiences as well as the perspective that these experiences grant. Granting this subjectivity, then, is a matter of challenging the notion that black queers are merely passive participants in—or worse, objects of—the institutional, social, and interpersonal circumstances that affect black queer lives. My attempt to maintain this full subjectivity draws on a critical encounter with black queer narratives and other theories/theologies to engage the moral imagination and agency that can be gleaned from them. This method requires a cyclical ethical process that merges theory/theology and praxis (by fusing practical insights with critical evaluations) and is manifested through three key steps of ethical responsibility: recognizing, listening and telling, and doing.

In this book, I suggest that black queer people live unique lives that matter, and that one way to make those lives relevant in moral conversations about family is to engage in ethical discourse that privileges their voices, experiences, and stories. In this chapter, I explore recognizing, listening and telling, and doing as three steps that might be useful in attempts to maintain black queer subjectivity. In addition, I suggest that stories and narrative are important tools to employ as a way to authentically engage this subjectivity. My work in this chapter is shaped by the assumption that we can all learn and grow from the lives and stories of those distinct experiences that exist among people in marginalized communities, whose lives have often been erased or ignored in general moral conversations. Part of the importance of this growth stems from the challenge to normative elite experiences and narratives that mask marginalized voices. By valuing diverse subjectivities, we can ground ethical discourse in critical and reflective analysis. Once we are open to the real lives of our fellow human beings, our ethical lens can include creative responses to injustice through moral imagination and agency.

Ethical Responsibilities: Recognizing, Listening, and Telling

Ethical Process and the Goal of Recognition

Our efforts to live in a social world are at least partially founded upon a need and desire to be recognized. This recognition gives us access to economic, material, and emotional goods as well as experiences of human

flourishing like social affirmation, loving relationships, identity validation, and more. Sometimes, however, when we acknowledge our distinctiveness, by claiming subjective distinction and even ownership of our own identities and experiences, we find ourselves outside of the realm of recognition. At times, the very acts of self-naming and locating our life stories in contexts or boxes that lack the ability to be translated are antithetical to the purpose of the *name* and the *story*. This is definitely a key issue within family, as recognition or particular subjectivity is a major part of establishing positive identities. When our subjectivities are obviated, our lives and selfhoods get "re-told." Our stories have been *translated*.

When we choose to tell our stories, we are standing in the sacred and nebulous space of storytelling to and from ourselves and storytelling to and from our communities. The sacredness of the space rests in its capacity to provide room for listener and teller to attend to one another and to one another's stories. Like Simone Weil's concept of attention, this process of making room is dialogical—relational—and it entails moving to a place where an "other's" vulnerability and effort to *see* themselves is recognized as holy. If the process of naming our identities and illustrating our circumstances fails to communicate our realities and existences to something/someone other than ourselves, we must purposefully consider ways of making ourselves recognizable to one another, remembering that we are standing on holy ground where communicability is precarious at best. This effort is an ethical task. And for black queer people, indeed for any member of a marginalized community, recognition—among ourselves and with our neighbors—is key to survival and a sure step toward thriving.

Black queer experiences and delineations of family norms and practices are an example of the constant negotiation between self and other. This negotiation reaffirms the relational nature of human lives and similarly acknowledges the opacity of self that human beings experience.[4] According to Judith Butler, "[t]his postulation of a primary opacity to the self that follows from formative relations has specific implications for an ethical bearing toward the other …. it is precisely by virtue of the subject's opacity to itself that it incurs and sustains some of its most important ethical bonds."[5] For Butler, the ethical implications of opacity are simple: Efforts to know ourselves, as well as the constant negotiations that are a part of that process, provide practice for the work of knowing others. In this way, our opacity is both a consequence of our existence as relational beings and a circumstance that forces us to be *purposeful* relational beings. It calls us to constantly put effort into knowing ourselves and knowing

our neighbors—in non-juridical terms. Our relationality brings us into a natural ethical bond that requires negotiation of types of knowing as well as consistent efforts to answer the questions, "who are you?/who am I?/who are we together?"

Because we are always relating and negotiating what it means to be a self that is recognizable by other selves, we live into the ethical task of simultaneously knowing *individuals* as selves and, subsequently, knowing selves as a part of pre-existing *community stories*. There is no need for us to try to legitimize our experiences outside of a social construction or a relational view since the very idea of doing so is impossible. Instead, we have to remember that every attempt to know ourselves and reflect on our stories happens synchronously with an effort to become intelligible to others.

Butler's ethics in relation to the self concern the importance of acknowledging the limits of the self.[6] As a way to become more intelligible and recognizable to one another, she wants us to move from juridical models of storytelling, in which the primary emphasis of the encounter is an apology-judgment framework, to relational models of storytelling, where the emphasis is on the ways that the subjectivities of the listener and teller interrelate. For her, this ethical move is predicated upon the virtues of justice and mercy (or mercy and forgiveness, really).[7] Butler finds subjectivity or "consciousness" to be opaque—not fully accessible to the self and definitely not to the other. This unknowability, according to her, calls for forgiveness and reconciliation because we cannot fully know each other, and thus, the virtues of forgiveness/mercy and reconciliation emerge for Butler as ethical agential action for individuals and communities. Indeed, it is Butler's hope that the irreducibility of difference can be translated by a relational approach to communication—narrative and performance—and she calls for us to lessen the gaps between ourselves and others by recognizing the gaps in intelligibility.[8] This way, a juridical approach to knowing and being with the other is no longer needed. All that is needed is relation. When, however, we are faced with an inability to relate due, in part, to nonrecognition and unintelligibility, Butler again forces us to ask ourselves, *can we recognize others and be recognized, respect others and be respected, understand others and be understood, etc., with the very language constructs that renders us all invisible?*

Butler complicates this notion of intelligibility with her paradox of subjection: before one can become a subject (who can offer and receive recognition), one must be subjected to objectified criteria of social constructions.[9] More clearly, she informs us that we do not make up the rules

of our existence and that we are objects for others before we are ever subjects for ourselves. Butler's arguments lead us to consider the possibility of not being able to speak of our existences and ourselves. Indeed, the question of signification and recognition is a question of real livability—not only livability as it relates to viability or human flourishing, but also as it relates to *becoming* a self that we determine. If we cannot know our own "I" which, as a result of discourses and constituting regimes is indeed a signification, then we must admit to the letting go of much more than personal pronouns designated through words. Undoubtedly, as this signifier is relinquished, we lose the ability to speak of ourselves, and if we cannot speak for ourselves—and do not know how to allow others to speak for us and about us—then we move past nonrecognition and invisibility into nonexistence.

Fortunately, Butler does support the notion of our fundamental sociality, which depends on the bonds of dependence and interdependence. Yet, she is suspicious of any desire to highlight narrative coherence as a complete possibility. She does not want to foreclose the ethical resource of accepting our limits of knowing ourselves and one another. Even with her concerns, Butler charges us with the agential responsibility of trying to "tell" ourselves in order to induce change and accountability from ourselves and others while diligently reminding us about the impossibility of relating our entire selves to our listeners. According to Butler, the account that we give of ourselves in narrative discourse never fully captures our entire self.[10] The structures of the accounts that we give dispossess us and interrupt the sense that our account is our own.[11] For Butler, any account that we give of ourselves is partial, but she does not fear this partiality. For her, it is the place in which we develop resources for ethics. Our opacity lends itself to the development of virtues that make us better. Our ability to recognize our opacity to ourselves and to others allows us to live lives that are humble and that appreciate our vulnerability. The ability to affirm what is contingent and incoherent allows us to affirm others who are different from ourselves. By suspending the demands for (coherent) self-identity, we can recognize our epistemic limits and actually allow the other to live. That is why, for Butler, recognition is an ethical project—an impossible one to fully attain—but a project nonetheless. Because this recognition requires us to suspend judgment, Butler gives us the opportunity to give and have accounts of the other and ourselves that are not based on judgment-driven recognitions. In essence, Butler wants us to practice self-reflection and offer social recognition—two practices that allow us to

know ourselves and others while also calling us to the consistent reminder of our own and our neighbor's unknowability and dependency.

Throughout *Black Queer Ethics*, I straddle the line between self-naming and representing in order to make black queer experiences more visible and recognizable and eventually, understood and valued in diverse spaces and conversations. Black queer voices self-name through narrative in this book, but as the initial interpreter and redactor of those voices, I offer a representative analysis of black queer realities. The first instance of this representation is illustrated in the way that I create the "recognizable" category of black queers. For the purpose of this work, I designate black queer identities as black people in the American context (mainly, but not limited to, African Americans) who identify and express selfhoods that are nonnormative in terms of gender, sexuality, and relationship construction/status.[12] By nonnormative, I mean, in negative terms, noncompulsorily hetero-monogamous, dualist, patriarchal-sexist. Through a more positive lens, I offer as a constantly vacillating and perhaps porous definition of black queers: Those who are aware of and participate in the sometimes political, personal, even religious endeavor to claim a reality of self-existence that is bound (in terms of gender, sexuality, relationship construction, and race) only by those standards which they have created or found useful and life-giving. Moreover, black queers are people who live in intersecting identities and thus experience an intersection of oppressions which formulate—more than the sum of its parts—an entirely new and constantly divergent set of oppressive realities that contribute to their particular positionality in the world. This positionality allows black queers to interrogate concepts of morality and construct ways of being in the world in relation to their subjectivity.

Our conversations in interviews are the loci for negotiations of identity, interpretations of stories, and development of moral agency. They are the sites in which black queer personhoods become recognizable and intelligible through the exchange of language, and those sites bear witness to the particularity of being black and queer and unknown. Thus, the practice of interviewing—engaging in informative conversation and mutual language creativity—is among one of the first steps of knowledge-sharing praxis. More clearly, by simply engaging in the dialogue, we have affirmed that our identities are knowable to ourselves and to one another, and we are willing to do the work to become increasingly intelligible. To be clear, as the interviewer who is interested in perspectives on and practices of family, I am not the only one involved in the task of recognizing. In fact, each

interviewee participated in series of moral decision-making that included the commitment to recognize me as simultaneously a member of the community and an academic other whose critical interpretation of their stories gives them voice in another sphere. Thus, Butler's notion of ethics, which calls for a non-juridical approach to knowing, sits at the very center of our encounters.

Moreover, *Black Queer Ethics* affirms the need for black queer people to be in conversation with one another as a way to enhance the stories that we are simultaneously creating. Inasmuch as my definition of black queers is negotiable in a larger social context, so too are the meanings that can be made from our shared language and experiences. This process of critical exchange as well as our ability to recognize and interpret one another's identities and stories builds on our capacity to listen and to tell. Indeed, one praxis-oriented result of this book is the infusion and reification of listener–teller roles for a community that is often relegated to a reality of silenced or ignored lives. As we share our stories with one another, we practice the sacred task of listening—being silent in a receptive way—and responding with care. In the next section, I delineate some of the ethical responsibility in listening and telling stories, noting the ways that sharing parts of ourselves is an act of sacred and holy exchange.

Listening and Telling

The responsibility of listening and telling is a direct ethical consequence of our acts of silencing, ignoring, and violently opposing realities and experiences. As a moral response, listening acts as a tool of resistance and moral redirection by building on three important ethical tasks: paying attention, sharing sacred space, and affirming other histories. The very act of listening calls for engagement with the shared language, ideologies, cosmologies, and contexts of the teller and listener. This process simultaneously affirms and disputes, understands and critiques the pre-existing "theory" of one another that exists, and in turn, the act of listening invites new investigation into each individual's interpretation of that theory through hearing, being receptively present, and willing to accept a nuanced or even entirely different history.

According to Simone Weil, the circumstance and practice of paying attention are acts of holy listening and sacred self-emptying.[13] Not only does the attention-giver open herself to the possibility of being overtaken (or penetrated) by the object of her attention, she is prepared to

ask: "what are you going through?"[14] Weil points to the ways in which purposeful attention is concerned with understanding—without cloudiness or self-blocking mediation—what the other is experiencing. For her, this process helps one to acquire the virtue of humility and reminds the attentive listener that she is bearing witness to the fact that the storyteller and her reality exist.[15] I value the way that this type of attentiveness points toward a desire for a significant and real relationship. This examination most surely is cultivation of humility, and humility is, in part, the ability to recognize ourselves fully in relation to another self.

With Weil's discussion of attention, I am also aware of the listener's ability to gain a heightened consciousness through the exchange. To be sure, the attentive person wants to validate the experiences of the other within their own framework and worldview. This process is particularly relational. Similarly, the attentive person is concerned with how the neighbor's experiences exist in her own world. This second step of attention, in my view, is primarily a consciousness-raising movement. The raised consciousness, however, is actually a part of a transformed subjectivity. As the neighbor becomes intelligible in the listener's receptive presence, the listener's subjectivity is changed. The possibility for and openness to this change, it seems, also lead right back to the cultivation of humility.

In an exposition about the responsibilities of a pastoral counseling listener, Emmanuel Lartey continues Weil's claim that listening is a process of self-emptying that allows the self to fully attune to our neighbor. He makes in an important addition, however, noting that listening gives our teller permission to be and feel liberated in the telling process. He says that listening allows "the person to be what they are, freely, without controlling, coercing, or censoring what they say."[16] Lartey's addition enables a consistent negotiation between the teller's ability to be accountable to the listener and the listener's ability to live into the freedom of expression present in the exchange. This exchange makes room for an empathetic response.

In some ways, the extent to which "bearing witness reestablishes [one's] identity, the empathetic [listener] is essential to the continuation of a self," and therefore listening enhances the relational nature of becoming a subject.[17] The space created by self-emptying truly allows for the teller to *become* in those interactions, and the listener takes on the sacred position of being a vessel of her neighbor's flourishing. Lartey names the space of listening "holy" because it is the locus in which attention meets intimacy. He says, "listeners enter into a holy space where personal, intimate mate-

rial is brought into play."[18] This space, for tellers and listeners, is the site where reflection on life experience allows authentic selves to emerge.[19]

The emergence of authentic selves in the listening act may also be credited to the exposure and affirmation of a counter-history or counter-narrative that is made possible through the teller's account of her experiences. One example of this kind of counter-history is present in slave narratives, wherein the circumstances of plantation and/or antebellum life are revisited through the lens, perspective, and memories of black stories. Traci West notes that male dominance and white supremacy strongly affected the history and description of violence that exists about slavery.[20] These dominating factors reify the intimate violence that the slave women experience so that a deafening silence exists around their experiences. However, the slave women's own words—through interviews, oral histories, and even autobiographies—offered "concrete insights … showing how the emotional and spiritual consequences of intimate and systemic violence" merge with a woman's self-perception and reflection on the memorable experiences.[21] By cultivating the lost testimony of the teller, listening makes room for these insights to grow more nuanced and even transform the dominant narrative that insists on ignoring the untold perspective. Indeed, the act of listening allows both the listener and the teller to imagine, believe, and bear witness to another history.

In addition to making space for new histories, the act of *telling* is a way of facing the undesirable, dehumanizing, and socially debilitating history of institutional, social, and individual oppression, with all its implications, and consequences. In her book, *Between Vengeance and Forgiveness*, Martha Minow offers ways to think about collective responses to unnamable violence. She calls for "facing history" through a healthy balance between remembering and forgetting.[22] Recognizing the danger in privileging either remembrance or suppression of the facts of history, Minow suggests that we ought to pay attention to the effects of limiting the victims and/or perpetrators to those identities and stabilizing positions beyond which reconciliatory efforts are trying to move.[23]

Minow's suggestion applies easily to the issue of subjectivity in this book, as I am concerned with the limiting and stabilizing effects that certain norms and normalizing technologies have on identities and familial relationships. If the only stories/examples of family from which we draw ethical discourse emerge from normative descriptions and instantiations, then moving toward a more liberative relationality is an extremely difficult endeavor. As a community of black queers, and also as a commu-

nity of human beings seeking healthy, accountable relationships with one another, we need to acknowledge the truth of black queer experiences *as* black and queerly located *as well as* offer a new narrative that depends on our own agency to re-tell the story. This, indeed, is one of those transformative God-processes of living and loving as we hold in tandem truth *and* hope.

Hope also comes from the knowledge that our narrations are not essential, not stagnant, and not teleological. Rather, our stories are contextually located, and the process of telling, narrating even, situates experiences in historical and tangible contexts. Because nothing is fixed or final or essential about narratives, they can be told in such a way as to pull out and reflect upon implications, possibilities, and location-specific instantiations of various experiences and personhoods. Telling stories, with detail, grit, and a strong focus on depth rather than breadth is one way that black queer lives emerge onto the discourse scene as close to fully intact as is possible. In this way, telling acts as self-proclamation, wherein black queers have more power over the naming and revealing of their lives. Black queer realities move from theoretical space to social and historical one. Simultaneously, discourse is pulled out of nebulous space into the real lives and contexts of black queer people.

Telling our stories creates new avenues for theory, praxis, and further inquiry, as well as possible discourses of resistance. According to theologian Kelly Brown Douglas, discourses of resistance have two fundamental values: deconstruction and construction.[24] As a deconstructive force, discourses of resistance take from the telling of narrative the nuanced, suspicious hermeneutical stances of moral imagination that get left out of the meta-narrative of social realities. The deconstructive quality of discourses of resistance allows tellers (and listeners) to exercise creative and imaginative moral agency through the process of reflecting, redacting, critiquing, and even re-spinning community narratives. Moreover, resistance discourse helps resisters to take back or regain power lost in discourses of domination and oppression.[25] When the picture of oppression, silencing, and violence is so pervasive as to seem like the only reality, oppressed people can become jaded and unresponsive to resistance efforts. Discourses of resistance, initiated through the telling of personal realities and untold personhoods, combat those possibilities.

As black queers engage in the deconstructive process of telling our stories, we are calling on listeners to bear witness to the analytical possibilities for re-visioning justice. In short, telling is a way of establishing our moral

agency as a response to the conscientized perspectives of ourselves and our neighbors. When we tell, or re-tell, histories, we deconstruct the hegemonic forces that bound us to positions of oppression in the first place, and we also forge a new way of thinking about ourselves, our circumstances, and our abilities to express our moral agential power. We open ourselves to possibilities beyond recognizing, listening, and telling. We open ourselves to *doing*.

Narrative: A Tool for Moral Reflection and Agency

Doing ethics from a black queer perspective means recognizing black queer people not only as participants in a larger context of social justice and injustices, but also recognizing the life stories that are incorporated in the fabric of black queer experiences. Narrative—manifested as oral histories, written texts, visual art, music, film, and so on—is a tool for getting to the substance of black queer lives, allowing people to speak for themselves from lives that they have not only written and directed, but also ones in which they have acted and evaluated.

Ethicists and Moral Agency

Twentieth-century social ethics marked a clear move in academic and ecclesial morality from individual, pietistic foci to larger, socially relevant, and interpersonal moral concerns. Ethicists such as Reinhold Niebuhr, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Beverly Harrison situate ethical discourse around our capacity and methods of living into our own moral agency—as individuals and in community with one another. For these ethicists, moral agency is as much attached to what we do—together and apart—as it is to who we are. And, there *is* room to consider moral agency from the perspective of virtue ethicists, who establish our selfhood as the locus and originator of our moral action. Alasdair MacIntyre offers a compelling argument in relation to moral agency and the tool of narrative as a resource for garnering our ethical sensibilities as individual members of our communities. Narrative is always a moral exercise since the exchange between teller and listener, individual and community, simultaneously builds upon and makes room for moral responses to the subjectivities and realities of those within the exchange. These responses are acts of moral agency.

According to MacIntyre, we are all (or at least we ought to strive to be) narrator-agents who are action-oriented and narrative-guided.[26] For him, narrator-agents bear both the accountability and intelligibility of their own and their community's stories.[27] This agency emerges both from within oneself and also from tradition (the place out of which the *moral* self is constructed). The very notion of our lives being a web of situations—stories—that link together thought, actions, motivations, outcomes, and responses, is his articulation of the idea that narrative is the mechanism by which we understand and explain our realities to ourselves and our community.[28] Since we participate in lives that are narrative and understand our lives within that rubric, MacIntyre argues, "The form of narrative is appropriate for understanding the actions of others."[29] In my estimation, the form of narrative is appropriate in helping us evaluate our actions and others' actions within frameworks of understanding that may, at times, compete. Narratives (particular and community) sometimes stand in consistent, congruent, competing, or conflicting relation with one another. In a context of oppression and injustice, where the particular narratives told by black queer lives seem to belie meta-narratives of justice and freedom for all, the use of evolving and intersecting narratives is helpful for making sure that real lives and complex life circumstances are considered.

For MacIntyre, the narrated life is teleological *and* unpredictable. It is not lived or told in the form of sequiturs or told in a way that is allegiant to a particular set of rules. In fact, MacIntyre states, "at any given point in an enacted dramatic narrative we do not know what will happen next."[30] However, he is clear that the life that one lives is in constant and perpetual relationship with other lives, ever moving toward a unified end as well as "conceptions of a possible shared future in which certain possibilities beckon [individuals] forward and others repel."[31] He goes on to claim that the present is definitely informed by an image of the future, and as such, the *telos* toward which narrative points is the process itself.[32] MacIntyre notes that some members of the community will have different visions of where and how the narrative ought to proceed and what the process will look like, to be clear. It follows then that a necessary element of any community's tradition is a continuing discussion or argument about the meaning of that tradition in the past and the direction of the tradition in the future.

It is this meaning of tradition that makes room for one to become a moral agent and to exercise moral agency. This process entails recognition and development of the virtues. For MacIntyre, the virtues are not simply

qualities that enable us to realize the internal goods present in our moral agency.[33] They are also those qualities that enable us to pursue our quest for the good.[34] To participate in the quest, we need justice, honesty, and courage.[35] Without these virtues, we are susceptible to life's corruptions—things that deviate one from the course of the good life. The narrative unity of a life makes up for the problem of how we are to decide between competing values and colliding demands of behavior. In a unified life, the good is the progressive movement *for* the good life.

Certainly, there is a possibility that competing and conflicting narratives will arise. MacIntyre points to this possibility when he says, "We enter upon a stage which we did not design and we find ourselves part of an action that was not of our making."[36] Individual agents participate in narratives separate (or seemingly separate) from their own. For MacIntyre, it is important that we are able to read a meta-narrative in which we have moral agency rather than experience limitations based on our own perspective of how and if our individual story coincides with tradition. By meta-narrative, here, I do not merely mean the larger story of our lives and/or the life of the community; rather, I suggest that the sum of stories plus the moral vision (or perhaps, the desired narrative) *are* the meta-narrative. More clearly, the meta-narrative has a large element of moral imagination and agency, which contributes to the vision of the unified life.

Narrative and Moral Agency in Womanism, Feminist Virtue Ethics, and Queer Theory

Since womanists began publishing theological and ethical work, they have employed storytelling and narrative in distinctive and important ways. Many of their tasks included the expansion of the cache from which we might consider theological discourse, analysis of social circumstances that black women experience over time, and the critical analytic posture of suspicious hermeneutics. Among these and other tasks, womanist writers turned to the stories of black women to forward their claims, grounding their theological, theoretical, and practical discussions in the lived experiences of their sisters. I find that three of the ways they use narrative and storytelling garner my attention most: positionality statements and self-disclosures, literary fiction, and slave narratives.

Because part of the womanist task includes locating work deeply within contexts and bodies, womanist writers have done well to situate themselves within their texts as writers/scholars with specifically located per-

spectives. As an effort to remove the myth of objectivity from their work, womanist writers have shared various accounts of their lives in order to "set the stage" for the conversation as well as mark the special locality that propels their claims. This autoethnographic strategy has allowed them to deepen their own lenses of analysis by privileging introspection, experiential epistemologies, and multiple audiences for their work. For example, in a generous prologue about her journey through the research and scholarship of her text *Under the Canopy*, Linda Thomas provides a detailed exposition of her relationship to her work. She writes,

> When I was eight years old, a new highway was constructed not far from my house. The people in Turner Station were happy that a capital improvement was being made close to our community. While there were benefits in having the highway, the main drawback was that it created a physical barrier that further enforced racial segregation. I remember the sadness in my mother's voice when she said, "Black folks and white folks will be further apart now." I realized very early that black and white folks were not to live together …. This book brings me back home to the church that was across from the railroad tracks …. The church that is the focus of this book, St. John's Apostolic Church, has given me a new sense of meaning as it relates to healing the wounds caused by the stress of apartheid.[37]

Here, we see that Thomas is concerned with reminding us that she is a part of the scholarship she creates. The ideas, critiques, and examples forwarded in her work are present *because* she is a black woman who had specific experiences in relation to her church, not in spite of that fact.

In addition to having work that emerges from particular experiences of black womanhood, womanists have illustrated ways that we can learn from black women. Katie Cannon's introductory text, *Black Womanist Ethics*, is a primary example of the ways that womanists employ literary criticism and engagement in their discussions. To portray portions of black women's moral situation from the mid-seventeenth century through the late twentieth century, Cannon utilizes the literary tradition, including black literature writer, Zora Neale Hurston, as sources for ethics. For Cannon, Hurston's life and work both depicted the moralities that she asserts in her text, and therefore act as the ethical text themselves. To explain her "less conventional sources," Cannon says,

> The Black woman's literary tradition has not previously been used to interpret and explain the community's socio-cultural patters from which ethical

> values can be gleaned. In doing so, I have found that this literary tradition is the nexus between the real-lived texture of Black life and the oral-aural cultural values implicitly passed on and received from one generation to the next.[38]

In Cannon's view, the black lives expressed through literary means serve as sites of moral thinking and agency that might prove useful for ethical discourse. Throughout her text, she explores both the context and situations of black life as well as the ethical responses that emerge from black lived experiences.

Slave narratives are another way that womanists have employed storytelling in their work. In her text about the violence that black women experience, West begins with slave narratives and the oral histories of former slaves to forward her claims. For her, the stories "help us to identify some of the ways that social and intimate violence overlap in black women's lives," and as such prove to be theoretical devices as well as accounts.[39] Noting the ways that slave narratives depict lives that were not only undervalued but severely silenced, West points out the importance of giving voice in scholarship to the lived experiences of people who suffered under the institution of slavery. Moreover, the examples of women's lives, as seen in women deeply entrenched in bondage, allow us to critically reflect on the moral inclinations, decisions, and behaviors that we experience in our contemporary contexts. We can surely note the progression (or lack thereof), similarities, and instances of resistance, all of which are important features of praxis-oriented ethics that has an eye toward history.

Feminist virtue ethics provides another view of the ways narrative is employed in research and scholarship. Susan J. Brison explains and illustrates the ways that narrative can be used to piece together a shattered self after the experience of trauma.[40] Performative speech, in her estimation, can not only bear witness to the instances of traumatic events but also create for the subject a story that possibly leads to reintegration into community.[41] Brison's use of narrative comes from her attempt to provide help for anyone who has experienced trauma and also to provide a tool for the moral community to employ in the face of dealing with the reality of trauma in our lives. For her, performative speech actually has the capacity to alter (or simply affect) our view of the trauma/circumstances of our lives. Saying it, in her view, can do something to it.

According to Brison, when we bear witness to our traumatic experiences, we can transform the memories of the trauma into narratives that

make room for us to be reintegrated into ourselves and also into society.[42] The process of communicating the narrative builds both on our ability to tell and rethink the trauma and also on our ability to re-enter trusting and faithful relationships with people.[43] Indeed, we can theorize in first person.[44] Because trauma shatters the ways that we are oriented to and think about the world as a whole, Brison suggests that narrating that trauma is a key way to repair the shattered worldview and reorient ourselves toward healing and trusting communication. For black queers who have experienced Christian-based homophobia, or who have internalized messages about the inadequacy of their moral subjectivity, such a use of narrative is a means of resistance and survival.

In *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair*, Hilde Lindemann Nelson also looks to narrative as a way to establish—or re-establish—personal identity for a subject and her neighbors, and this establishment of personal identity creates space for the subject to become a moral agent.[45] For her, our ability to self-identify is an exercise of our ability to *act* in moral ways. Others' estimations of us along with our free or limited self-imaginary hinder or make room for our moral agency and moral actions. This connection between identity and agency could pose a problem of coherence, according to Nelson, and she claims that damaged identities are a perfect example of this problematic setup.[46] Damaged identities are those which are found to be morally unworthy of respect, thereby denied various social roles and/or participation in life-giving and powerful relationships that foster good personal identity.[47] Nelson abhors this deprivation of various opportunities and is wary of the subsequent infiltrated consciousness that develops with damaged identities and disallows us from developing a real and robust and respectable sense of moral worth.[48] As a way to fix the problems of damaged identities, deprived opportunities, and infiltrated consciousness, Nelson offers a type of narrative, which she calls the counterstory.[49] She claims that counterstory has the ability to re-tell our lives and identities and restore moral agency and moral self-worth since it was through a type of narrative in the first place that these things were lost to us. Essentially, she feels that lives that are lost through the narrative can be restored through a counter narrative.

As I transition to a brief discussion of narrative in queer theory, I must pause to point out a pertinent shift in the language surrounding narrative and narrative theory as it exists in this area. One of queer theories' distinguishing features is their keen attention to and rejection of stabilizing categories. Inasmuch as narrative often involves key ideas, teleological pur-

poses, and distinctive subjects that forward and make intelligible various sets of situations and selves, narrative also contributes to the stabilization of some subjects. Queer theory has taken important steps to disassociate from these features that exist—even within its liberative cousin, feminist narrative ethics—to create subjects who exist primarily as external to themselves. Many queer theorists have turned from the "feminist" traditional narrative to the performance.[50] Indeed, *performativity* marks queer theory's shift from narrative's neat dénouements and context-situated subjects to the self-producing, self-reflective performance.[51]

While the critical encounter between feminist narrative theories/methods and queer theoretical reorientation to performance garners my interest in general, the value of that tenuous relationship exists in its effects on each theory's ethics. In general, this "split" represents an important distinction in each theory's ethical task. In feminist narratives, wherein liberative subjectivities display the means by which they exemplify coherent narrative selves along with varying postures to moral norms, we find a systematic ethical gaze that does not visit too much harm on intelligible categories of subjectivity. In contrast, queer theories trouble categories of subjectivity by noting that part of our ethical task involves allowing subjects to exist as performative, unscripted selves. Lynne Huffer forwards this claim in her discussion of narrative in feminist and queer theory:

> Thus, while both narratives and performatives produce subjects, narrative depends on a retroactive legitimation of the subject position through the temporality of narrative grammar, while performativity admits that the subject it speaks in the present moment of the utterance is the only subject there is. The performative subject, therefore, is always under erasure; correspondingly, queer performativity occupies the privileged site of postmodern disruption, moving beyond the categories of gender altogether to subvert subjectivity itself. In that subversion, the norms that ground the ethical subject are also destabilized, thereby throwing into confusion the question of the inscriptional relation between a subject and an other that is ethics.[52]

I find it important to note that a great value in queer theory's performativity is its implicit insistence on ongoing praxis. More clearly, if we are subjects that make and re-make performance based on the sheer notion of our own self-reflection, there is room for us to transform our performances into ones that render our critical gaze as the most important ethical one that we know. If we do this, if our own critical gaze (turned

inward) takes priority when we relate to and are accountable to others, then we can use the self-reflection on our own performance as the lens through which we read others' performances of themselves. This is not to say that we only understand others through our experiences; rather, I suggest that we can empathize with others' attempts to know themselves through self-reflection. In this way, we do not lose the necessary accountability of being in positive relation to other human beings. Instead, we gain a posture of responsibility to others that is founded upon our own liberative inward gaze.

Conclusion

Ethics is a praxis-oriented endeavor that requires living into various ethical responsibilities, including recognizing, listening and telling, and doing moral work. As we engage in practices of moral imagination and agency, we simultaneously work on skills that enhance our relationships with one another. Recognition is a necessary first step in that process, and supports our larger ethical purpose of seeing each one of ourselves as full subjectivities with value and agency. Our efforts to listen to one another and share our lives and life stories furthers this attempt toward maintaining our full subjectivity, and in the process, we can find that the practice is just as important as the products of stories. Importantly, stories are not the end of our task in ethical endeavors; our tales have practical implications and thus, another responsibility we have as moral agents is action. Doing, undoubtedly, is a necessary response to recognizing, listening, and telling ourselves.

These ethical responsibilities are often illustrated in narratives and stories. As our stories are impacted by the theoretical and theological perspectives that we put forth as a society, so too, are those perspectives and claims affected by our stories. While the relationship between the two yields various practical hopes, including justice and liberation for each of us as narrator-agents, they also make room for us to recognize patterns that emerge within the stories. These patterns may simply represent elements of our daily lives and social contexts. They may also signal stronger patterns—norms, even—that derive from a combination of interpersonal, social, and institutional ways of relating. Engaging our stories, then, creates the occasion for a more acute and critical examination of the norms that inform our lived experience. Through this engagement, we are invited

to perform a subsequent moral task: confronting those norms that inhibit our potentiality and positive relationality.

Notes

1. Tyler [pseudo.], interview by the author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 16 February 2010. Pseudonyms in the project were chosen by each participant. Be on the lookout for innovative fearless queer nomenclature (IFQN) as examples of the creative resistance and moral agency required in self-signification/identification.
2. Sage [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 18 February 2010.
3. My question echoes Socrates' question that sits at the heart of Greek ethics: "How should one live?" Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle all answer this question, "virtuously." Of particular interest to this project is Aristotle's focus on a teleological reflection on human nature as a way to understand what one "ought" to do and which virtues one ought to cultivate to make these behaviors possible. See Aristotle 1998, 1–2, 4–15. See also Crisp and Slote 1997, 1–3.
4. Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2005) 20.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid., 41–42.
7. Ibid., 42, 79.
8. Ibid., 42–45.
9. Sara Salih with Judith Butler, eds., *The Judith Butler Reader* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004) 332.
10. Butler, 46.
11. Salih and Butler, 333.
12. One of my concerns with naming a black queer identity is establishing an "essential" quality to "blackness," "queerness," and "black queerness." Even as this book investigates the norms, behaviors, values, and virtues present within black queer lives and experiences, I am interested in maintaining an understanding of black queer identity as polymorphous and shaped by multiple and intersecting notions of identity. E. Patrick Johnson and Roderick A. Ferguson each warn against the pitfalls of subjecting black queer identity to a monolithic representation of subjectivity. In short, they argue that doing so reifies the racist and homophobic thrust of ethnic and sexual genealogies. In spite of their concern, I offer this brief explanation of what/who I mean by "black queer" as a way to fully disclose my own perspective about the identities present within the project. For their discussions on black queer identities, see E. Patrick Johnson,

"Queering Black Studies/ 'Quaring' Queer Studies," and Roderick A. Ferguson, "Race-ing Homonormativity: Citizenship, Sociology, and Gay Identity," both in E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, eds., *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

13. While my model is not necessarily predicated upon self-emptying, I do appreciate Weil's description of an attentive inquiry as a way to attune conversation partners to the relational quality of their exchange. Simone Weil, *Waiting for God* (New York: Perennial Classics, 2001) 59.
14. Ibid., 64.
15. Ibid., 60–64.
16. Emmanuel Y. Lartey, In Living Color: An Intercultural Approach to Pastoral Care and Counseling (New York: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 2003) 90.
17. Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002) 59.
18. Lartey, 91.
19. Dori Baker and Joyce Mercer, *Lives to Offer: Accompanying Youth on Their Vocational Quests* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2007) 11.
20. Traci West, Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence and Resistance Ethics (New York: New York University Press, 1999) 13.
21. Ibid.
22. Martha Minow, Between Vengeance and Forgiveness: Facing History after Genocide and Mass Violence (Boston: Beacon Press, 1998) 118–119.
23. Ibid., 143–144.
24. Kelly Brown Douglas, *Sexuality and the Black Church: A Womanist Perspective* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1999) 72.
25. In her discussion on "The Concept of Resistance," Traci West forwards this point. She claims, "Overgeneralization about how societal oppression functions can sometimes create formidable barriers to recognizing and understanding resistance. Too unrelenting a focus on the destructive impact of race and gender subjugation upon black women victim-survivors helps build such a barrier." See West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 152–153.
26. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: Notre Dame Press, 1981) 204–206, 216.
27. Ibid., 205.
28. Ibid., 208–210.
29. Ibid., 212.
30. Ibid., 215.
31. Ibid.
32. Ibid.

33. Ibid., 219.
34. Ibid.
35. Ibid., 223.
36. Ibid., 213.
37. Linda Thomas, *Under the Canopy: Ritual Process and Spiritual Resilience in South Africa* (Columbia, S.C.: University of South Carolina Press, 1999) xix–xxiv.
38. Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988) 5.
39. West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 28.
40. Susan J. Brison, *Aftermath: Violence and the Remaking of the Self* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2002) x–xi.
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid., 27–29.
44. Ibid., 29.
45. Hilde Lindemann Nelson, *Damaged Identities, Narrative Repair* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) xi.
46. Ibid., 4–5.
47. Ibid., 7.
48. Ibid., 28.
49. Ibid., 6.
50. Lynne Huffer, "'There is No Gomorrah': Narrative Ethics in Feminist and Queer Theory" *differences* 12.3: 7.
51. Ibid., 8.
52. Ibid., 9.

CHAPTER 3

The Disciplinary Power of Norms

Gays and lesbians have often used the term 'family' to describe others who have claimed a gay or lesbian identity. This use of 'family' indicates that despite whatever differences might separate those who are gay and lesbian, there is a common identity uniting them. (Valerie Lehr, Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family *(Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999) 43.)*

I outline Foucault's account of normalization to show how the very conceptualization of the natural body we have inherited is itself a product of discipline. Thus the wholesale response of refusal with regard to corporeal technologies of the self is impossible, and even selective rejection of particularly oppressive practices is unlikely to be experienced as liberating, as it will only leave unrequited the psychic structures that our history as subjects with 'identities' has created. (Cressida J. Heyes, Self-Transformations: Foucault, Ethics, and Normalized Bodies (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 17.)

Introduction

Madame is a mid-50s African American lesbian who raised three of her eight younger siblings as a "single mother."[1] Theirs was a household that boasted equally shared resources and responsibilities, the disestablishment of normative gender roles, and a witness to the possibilities of liberated family life. The liberation, Madame shared in her interview, came because "there were always life-changing choices about what [their] family would

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be." Because of her mother's death and her family's working-poor economic status, Madame found herself engaging, with her younger siblings, in ongoing critical reflection about the relational and material norms into which they lived. Her life experiences and narrative display her own praxis orientation to family norm creation. For Madame, one of the many benefits of creating family was the possibility of establishing counter-normative newness in gender roles and experience, diet, and even accountability structures. Here is Madame's account of her experience as a "sister-mother" and the ways that she redacted family life:

> I took care of my 3 brothers and sisters for 10 to 12 years. My mother was in the hospital in Oxford, [Mississippi], and I would come from Jackson on the weekend to take care of the kids so my sister could go out. We were 21 and 19. I was the oldest. So, this particular weekend, they said, "You know, your mother's doing really well. You don't need to come." I was just so tired. But my mother died that weekend.
>
> Now, we got these seven [younger brothers and sisters], so we have to take care of them. Our family's not doing anything to help us. The day that my mother died, we decided that I was gonna take the girls, 'cause the girls had been kinda living with me on and off. She was gonna take the boys 'cause she had a boy. And that's what we decided to do.
>
> Well, the day after my mother died, I was talking to Pee-Wee, who was the second oldest boy of the kids. He would be always behind me, like a pied piper. So, this particular day, he said, "I heard that you were gonna take the girls." And I said, "Yeah." He said, "I want to go and live with you." And I said to myself, "Damn, the boy's asking to live with me." So, I reconfigured it and decided to take the four oldest kids, 'cause then he would be included.
>
> Now, I don't have any relatives or anything [in Jackson]. Earl is 14, Rita is 13, Pee-Wee is 11, and Linda is 9. Two girls and two boys. I had a little one-bedroom. I had the living room, and then that room, a little side room, and the kitchen. So, we get to Jackson. Earl decides he don't want to be there 'cause he gotta girlfriend back in Oxford. So, he sulks, and he pouts. Well then, the phone rings, and it's my sister calling, wanting me to send Pee-Wee back, the one that wants to stay with me, to baby-sit for the summer, 'cause he's responsible. So, I said, "No. Let Earl come back. He doesn't want to be here. He's not doing anything." So, I give Earl the money, and we put him on the bus. And then I had the three kids—the one boy and the two girls.
>
> They were with me, and that's when we had the whole group of activists who really took us in as their family. That was a different lens for me—for family I mean. The family started to look like a different kind of family. I

had never experienced a family like this family of activists, and how they were with each other and their children, for example. Like if one of the kids would have a birthday party, everybody would be at the party. We'd never had that before. We were really separate and segregated in terms of age. If John turned 10, the only people that was at John's party were 10-year-olds. I had never been in a situation where the whole family celebrated somebody's birthday regardless of age. Well, now we did. They taught me something, you know?

I was teaching my brother and sisters things too, and they were really trying to embrace difference. For example, small things, like wheat bread. They'd always eaten white bread, you know? And I had only wheat bread. I remember the first time they went shopping. I had some wheat bread [in the cart], and they were like, "Well, we don't like this. We don't want no brown bread." So, I said, "Okay." I was very conscious about trying to raise them in a way unlike the way I had been raised. So, I said, "Okay. We're gonna make the grocery list, and you all go shopping. I'll drop you off, and you can get whatever you want, whatever breads you want, whatever." I pick 'em up, and we back, and unloading the groceries, and they have wheat bread. I'm like, "Oh, wheat bread? I thought y'all …." They said, "We decided we'd try, you know." And they were eating wheat bread ever since. And it was funny because they actually became known in the neighborhood as the kids in the neighborhood who were different, who were not like them, who lived with their sister who ate Thai food and who ate Vietnamese food. I mean, that's how they became to be known. And it was normal for them. And it was really interesting because they were so far from where they started when they first came.

So I pushed some more. My brother was really reared to be a feminist, I mean really. His friends would come to the house, *[knocking]* "Hey, man, let's go to basketball." Pee-Wee would say, "Well, I gotta finish washing dishes." "Man, why you washin' dishes? You live in a house full of women. Why you washin' dishes?" He said, "I eat, don't I, man. Just chill out. You know, I'll be through." So, from what I observed, he didn't appear to have any shame around it, any resistance around it. It was just a way of life for him. And it was also something that I intentionally taught them. They will tell you that today. My whole thing was, "I'm not your mama; I'm your sister. We're in this thing together. We gotta help each other." I think that was born more out of my identification as a feminist. Even though at the time, I was certainly living a life as a lesbian, but I would say that that had more to do with my identity as feminist, 'cause I started identifying as a feminist early on. And in that time, you know, feminism was queer in as sense, sort of. Feminism was like a social anomaly. So my family got to be and look and feel different.

Madame's story is an example of the irruption of queer realities into our social consciousness of family and the norms that shape it as an institution. This narrative depicts Madame and her siblings as both recipients of socioeconomic hardship and active participants in the shaping of those hardships into livable circumstances. Based on the story, Madame and her family respond to their context and circumstances by disrupting those norms—familial responsibilities/expectations gender, economic provision, and gender roles—that contribute to long-term hardship, socioeconomic instability, gender inequality, and limitations on future potentialities. Madame's family gets to "be and look and feel different" because she "intentionally taught" her siblings a "way of life." We can see that Madame is quite aware that family is a space where relational, gender, race, and sexuality norms are constructed and where negative norms are usually created. In fact, our society places much of the burden of perpetuating systems of oppression on the family. Yet, we see through Madame's example that the family can also act as a positively generative space, where queered notions of self and relational practices disrupt the norms and normalizing technologies that foster the continued subjugation of certain stabilized and inhibited bodies and politics in our society.

In this chapter, I argue that black queer people practice disruption as we critically reflect upon, narrate, and subsequently construct our own ideas and implementations of family. I argue further that processes of normalization, through which we have established norms of race, gender, and sexuality to govern ideas of family, ought to be fully engaged, rethought, and re-acted to make space for new, irruptive norms to exist in families. These new norms exist as products of counter-normalization that queer the concept of normality and make space for unknown potentialities. In short, the new norms that are made possible through engaged moral reflection and action—as seen in Madame's story—destabilize the notion of inhibited and normative selves, relationships, and familial practices. My job as an ethicist in this chapter, and the work of the moral agent in general, is to attune our perceptions to those moments when something different (nonnormative, even) is possible.

Madame's story anchors this chapter and illustrates the framework through which it must be read. Her lengthy excerpt contains narrative, descriptive, analytic, and proscriptive elements—all of which relate to the processes through which she confronts familial norms. This chapter contains similar elements, and though it does not precisely mirror Madame's aesthetic pattern, the discussion reflects a variety of moments present

within processes of confronting norms. For this reason, the interview material within the chapter is displayed in numerous forms and reflects the diverse linguistic and rhetorical modes that my research participants exercised in our conversations as they discussed family. Some of the quotes are lengthy and provide anecdotal reflections, while others displayed in a dialogical format to show the reflexive nature of the interviewees' thoughts. At other points, the material is brief and explanatory, providing concise reflections on specific question. Taken together, the material acts as a multi-formatted text of diverse black queer reflections on family, norms, and disruptive–irruptive moral agency.

On Disruption and Irruption

The dually operating strategy of disruption–irruption comprises two dynamically interacting elements. The first element is rational and deconstructive, as it works to destabilize and dismantle norms and the technologies and disciplines that stabilize them. The second element is nonrational and constructive, as it reappropriates components of norms and reconceptualizes norms in general. Together, the elements contribute to an overarching goal of familial transformative praxis and illustrate the ongoing ethical exchange between moral reflection and action. As a two-step process of norm confrontation, disruption–irruption takes on a challenging posture in relation to socially constructed and stabilized bodies and politics in family. In a basic sense, disruption–irruption confronts familial norms by both "breaking down" the technologies and disciplines that shape them and "taking back" the terms, lenses, subjectivities, and relationalities through which they manifest. The bifocal nature of disruption–irruption points to the notion that though destabilized and dismantled norms may persist in our daily lives, they may also be rewritten and reappropriated through a creative and constructive process. As particular norms within family and the general concept of norms become destabilized, we can participate creatively in reclaiming family in a way that can be reformulated to reflect an array of potentialities.

Though the elements of disruption–irruption act in tandem, they each offer distinct and important strategies to confronting norms. Disruption purposefully confronts the cycle of normalization by making two significant moves that I have drawn from my interview data. First, disruptive work involves recognizing and naming technologies of normalization. Structures of normalization come from both the stabilized selves/identi-

ties that are produced as well as the ideologies, theologies, values, and practices that construct them. In this initial step, the moral agent asks: *What sorts of selves are we?* And, as a result, *what sorts of selves and situations do we allow in our contexts?* The process of recognizing and naming builds upon the work of individual and social conscientization. Second, disruption entails noting the implications and impact of those technologies on real lives and potentialities by offering purposeful critical evaluation. Thus, its question is, *what kind of life experiences, circumstances, and realities result from these selves/identities?* and *Are they good, healthy, and valuable for me? For my neighbor?*

Disruptive work makes room for irruption, which exemplifies the active infusion of queer possibilities into the material reality of family life. In a basic sense, irruption involves a reorienting of selves, politics, and discourses *away from* the power of those technologies but *into* the experience of family. This irruptive moment—wherein norms are both dismantled and recreated—marks both a constructive and destabilizing element of moral agency. Therefore, one final query is concerned with the creation of fertile ground for irruptive norm construction. It asks, *how might we make room for new norms, practices, and discourses that ought to replace ones that are disrupted?* In relation to families, it is this series of questions and, particularly, this final second moment of irruption that result in ongoing transformative praxis.

Disruptive and irruptive work, as I consider them in this project, are radical critiques of power.[2] They aim to intensely interrogate and reorient our understanding of and relationship to the regulatory practices and structural systems that enforce relational hegemonies. This includes hegemonies of categorizing the self and others. Disruption seeks to dismantle the normative institutions, behaviors, and discourses that inhibit the development of free-accountable human beings and relationships. Experiences of injustice, marginalization, and oppression in a general sense certainly motivate disruptive work. Likewise, growing awareness of our emotional and rational relationships to oppressive realities prompts our moral action and incites the irruptive counter-normalizing creation of new ideas and practices of selfhood, community, and family.

The theoretical parentage of disruption emerges from Queer and critical theories, poststructuralist philosophy, and feminism as they employ the concept of *deconstruction*. Queer theories note that the technologies of normalization and the created norms themselves are at the center of multiple and varied mechanisms of human limitation and negative personage

formation. These deconstructive aims of queer theories are undoubtedly significant because they focus on the structural systems that reify the social categories in our context. Various philosophers and theorists, including Michel Foucault, Judith Butler, Nancy Fraser, and Cynthia Willett, importantly discuss in this area, especially as they acknowledge the processes by which identities and selves—bodies, no doubt—come under umbrellas of subjugation simply explained by and understood through the lenses of "natural" or "logical" categories. No doubt, what we are looking for, as suggested by Siobhan Somerville and Ladelle McWhorter, are challenges to certain kinds of categorical distinctions that continue to constitute and reinforce one another.

Because the process of deconstruction leaves us with smaller pieces of puzzles that we can evaluate and discard, if necessary, we must also consider whether this process troubles existing "stable" categories. Undoubtedly, the process of creating and stabilizing categories of identity has been reified by the proliferation of theologies, ethics, and economies that have supported the existence of some categorical identities while subjugating others. "Stable" has tremendous power. What we might mean by stable is similar to what we might mean by strong or long-standing or even valid. Either way, when we stabilize identities and politics by sanctioning some and invalidating others, we create a canon of those identities and politics that are viable in our presence and demarcate which ones are unwelcome in our context. But natural questions follow: should there be categories of self and modes of creating and valuing those selves that exist separate from external and internal evaluation, critique, and possible disbanding? Should we be in the practice of defining—morally or otherwise—types of selves that are so stable that their existence cannot be reconsidered or discarded?

I believe that an uncritical "yes" answer to those questions has led us into the darkness of creating some categories of identity and politics that are harmful to the development of other identities and politics. Our modes of discourse around race as an essential part of ourselves, or gender as a provable scientific feature of a self, or sexuality as a way of enacting a self relative to other people are stable categories themselves that have allowed us to value and devalue certain of our existences within these categories. Yet, as I will discuss below, troubling the concept of stable identities is more a matter of troubling the technologies of normalization and processes of categorization than it is a matter of dismantling the identities themselves. The trouble is that a fully non-essentialist understanding of stable categories is theoretically and theologically a usefully endeavor, but

practically, it is unethical and demoralizing. Stable categories exist not simply because of our structured minds, they are stable because they mediate tangible experiences of oppression. Inasmuch as maintaining one another's subjectivity is an ethical task, it reminds us to recognize and attend to the different ways that we experience life based on the social constructions that categorize us. Dismantling the identities formulated by the technologies of normalization only works to render our experiences invisible and erase the need for us to seek justice on our own and one another's behalf. However, the process of dismantling the technologies and disciplines at work in normalization allows us to break apart the norms as a way of caring for one another *through* the experiences of our identities.

My use of irruption as a theoretical framework derives from its use in liberation theologies. Liberation theologians described irruption as the way that marginalized, overlooked, and excluded subjects—poor, nonwhite, women—burst into history from the underside of social, political, and theological domination by the West. The irruption of these marginalized subjects was marked by struggle for liberation, economic sustainability, and social equality. According to the 1981 Conference of Liberation Theologians in New Delhi, "It is an irruption of religious and ethnic groups looking for affirmation of their authentic identity, of women demanding recognition and equality, of youth protesting dominant systems and values. It is an irruption of all those who struggle for full humanity and for their rightful place in history."[3] Just as liberation theologians describe these marginalized subjects and moral agents, I designate black queer people as a new example of identities bursting into discourse. This irruption of black queers as moral agents not only troubles the category of "moral" (since the intersection of racial and sexual subjugation has generally rendered the black queer subject as morally reprobate), but it also provides us a new moral lens through which to critique norms of family in our context. As black queers enter ethical discourse on family and norms, we are all forced to confront the normalizing technologies constructing our notions of race, gender, sexuality, and family.

Because norms consist of both stabilizing structures and identities, our analysis must employ and move beyond some of the tools of disruption toward irruption. That is, we must certainly destabilize the norms and confront the normalizing apparatuses, but we must do so while recognizing the complex constructive presence of counter-normalization strategies and possibilities. That is why my aim in this project is to also query the ways that we construct family through an *irruption* of the concept of

"family" in the first place. Building upon the work of recognizing, listening, and telling, as well as doing that I mentioned in the last chapter, this process of irruption—counter-normalizing norm creation—is a process of moral imagination and agency.

By disrupting categories and technologies, we surely afford ourselves a necessarily deeper investigation into the ways that injustice and oppression are constituted within and among the identities. But we must be aware that this is a step toward considering the types of selves that get produced and then reconstituted in our context. In short, the irruptive process ought to allow us to *queer* both systems and identities. In this way, we keep the identities intact, and the realities that are experienced in relation to those identities, while troubling the systems of power that enforce, form, and normalize the external and internal relationships among them. Our endeavor to foster systems of morality and relationships that may be liberating and accountable requires this process of disrupting systems and queering selves. As we move toward an interrogation of the types of identities that we wish to nurture in our contexts, attention to the context itself requires a radically queer—that is, foundationally disruptive and openly irruptive—critical engagement. This work, pursued through emotional, rational, and practical means is a springboard for disrupting and reframing the cycle of identity-structure reinforcement.

Confronting Norms

Family norms often reflect hierarchical gender roles, unequally shared resources and responsibilities, and a limited notion of what the shape and membership of the family will look like. There are several norms in question and creation in Madame's family circumstance. The long-term illness and subsequent death of her mother certainly forced a negotiation of the kind of family setup and responsibilities that she and her sister would forge. The role of mothering, according to Madame, took on a new meaning in the face of poverty, the lack of aid from older blood relatives, and child-rearing needs. Instead of setting up a hierarchy of power, Madame talked about how she and her sister endeavored to share responsibility and support the vulnerable members of their family. As this new circumstance arose, "family" came to mean *accountability*, *accommodation*, and *innovation* instead of obedience, authority, and tradition. Madame and her sister used the unstable circumstance of their family to consider and subsequently live into new family norms.

In another segment of her interview, Madame described being an inquisitive child and teenager who could not readily accept the unequal treatment of boys and girls in the home. She recalled that the family operated smoothly as long as the girls were responsible for household chores and the boys were accommodated. She asked unanswered questions to her mother and grandmother and aunts about the disparity between boy- and girl-child expectations in the home. Eventually, she recognized that her questions went unanswered because she wouldn't accept their consistent explanations of normalcy, whether divinely ordained or socially enforced.

Raising her younger brothers and sisters offered Madame a chance to experiment with creating new practices and ideologies in her family setting. Using the example of her experiences within her activist community, Madame challenged her siblings to try new experiences within the bounds of everyday life and also in relation to communal responsibility. For her, dishwashing was a chore (family contribution of labor) that ought to be shared irrespective of gender. Thus, for Pee-Wee and his sisters, dishwashing could be understood as a "natural" response to their use of the dishes for mealtime purposes. Pee-Wee's interaction with his friends about the duty of dishwashing is illustrative of the disruption of gender roles, certainly. More important, however, is the irruption of a new way of being within the household. The new story, or example, of shared responsibility does not offer an upside-down version of gender roles and responsibilities. Instead, it reconfigures the notion of family participation to reflect a critical moment: Pee-Wee can reason and act, within the family and in front of his friends, in a way that reflects his family's moral norm of non-gender-based accountability.

Together with the surprise circumstance of a sibling-run household, the practice of care-taking accountability for vulnerable family members, and the community activists' models, Madame's queer feminism allowed her to reflect on the normalizing apparatuses that were established in her family of origin and question those through her own experience. Simultaneously, she and her siblings reflected on their learned practice of sharing responsibility and care-taking and applied that to new nonnormative practices in relation to gender and age. For Madame, inequality among her siblings was an unacceptable outcome of family life, and this desire for newness, as well as her response to necessity, sparked a new orientation to and vision of the ways families could and ought to relate. The politics of family life, for Madame and brood, reflected this new orientation as well as a dismantling

of the disciplinary powers that made gender inequality an unquestioned norm.

According to Judith Butler, identities and selves are not merely socially constructed. They are also products of political construction that become immobilized and stabilized through processes of juridical and power-driven normalization.[4] Most commonly, we speak of the social constructions that develop through our exposure to media, our socioeconomic circumstances and subsequent modalities, and even the "benign" language that we develop in order to differentiate and self-categorize. What we miss, in this association of identity to certain kinds of social construction, are the ways in which those identities are also stabilized and naturalized over time. When we add power and judgment as features of the social construction process, we can then recognize the political constructions of those identities. In her analysis of this process, Butler calls us to note the possibility that we are not simply creating identities, but we are establishing and stabilizing norms through which we read those identities, and by which we measure their conformity and deviance.

Interestingly enough, as a mechanism that mediates and imputes categorical difference, identities become a policing vehicle of social control and regulation that is simultaneously a product and producer of norms.[5] In many cases, norm deviations group with one another, and this grouping allows for a type of reduced categorizing which, in turn, creates a derivative and newly stabilized identity.[6] Certain kinds of norms—like the norms of gender, race, and sexuality that are the concern of this project—require stable identities that offer judicial relativity for all other identities and categories that surround the stabilized ones. In this way, both identities and norms act as disciplinary powers, constantly reifying one another, and perpetually judging one another. In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault describes disciplinary power as "a series of circulating relations."[7] For him, disciplinary power is found in the systematic management of those identities and norms that circumscribe one another, and he points out that it manages both the population from which it is derived and the bodies upon which its regulation settles. In relation to norms, therefore, disciplinary power operates by "fostering techniques of control, intervention, and regulation often presented as working to mutual benefit."[8] Because disciplinary power is internal to the identities—selves—rather than external to them, it can simultaneously create and police types of identities, consequently producing and reproducing norms of subjectivity. As a result, norms relate

to all things surrounding them—identities, populations, language, categories—and all things are policed under their powers.

Some queer theorists trace the development of norms to something more specific than stable categories of identity: Western notions of polarized dualism.[9] Eve Sedgwick and Diana Fuss make the claim that norms come from binaries that compose Western cosmology.[10] Undoubtedly, the binaries are hierarchical: identities, selves, and behaviors fall into discrete, nonoverlapping, and even mutually exclusive oppositions of type, "such as masculine/feminine, hetero/homo, black/white, subject/object, self/other, public/private, and in/out."[11] As the theory goes, these polarized dichotomies result in stabilized categories and psychological debris. This Western cosmological hierarchy generates, for those framed as deviants from the norm, experiences of alienation, identification, and *dis-identification*. Notions like, "I am not straight, but I am queer," for example, do the double duty of defining and categorizing while also otherizing and (de-) valuing. The idea of being an identity, then, is also inevitably linked with *not* being another identity. I will engage the problematic nature of this result more closely in my discussion of intersectionality below, but here, it is important to simply note that, for some theorists, identities become norms (and vice versa, really) through an extreme process of negative stabilization related to the creation of binaries. The juridical work, in this line of thinking, then, is associated with the hierarchical arrangement of poles of identity, while the establishment of norms emerges from the systematic value system that the hierarchies enforce. The Western binary system of norm creation, for Sedgwick and Fuss, establishes the foundation of social oppressions experienced internally and externally, individually, and collectively.

In families, and in other socially constructed groupings, norms of identity are essentially self-preserving. Identities exist both as a product of difference and as a perpetuator of difference. Despite how the differences relate to the identities, they are *essential* to the identities themselves because they offer distinctness and solidity. Norms likewise act similarly in the family context. In order for them to become fixed, they take on an essential character by converging the differences to form a distinctive set of modalities that are then regulated to "otherness." Again, this deviation of norms does not stand outside the realm of the norm; rather, it stands in ongoing relation to it, constantly reifying the homogeneity within the norm and simultaneously spotlighting the deviations.[12] In families, the norms have the capacity to stabilize the structure of the family, thereby

preserving it. At the same time, the norms can arrest, or severely impede, the affirmative development of diverse identities that can intelligibly exist within, relate to, and inform the continuation of the family. Here again, the self-preserving quality of the norms, especially within families, must be seen as directly related to the creation and ongoing occurrence of deviants.

That the very presence of deviant realities substantiates the norms is no surprise. What is interesting, however, is the fact that the process of normalization includes a quality of valuation. Norms are not simply created as an establishment of something that has been regularized or repeated; rather, norms become more valuable, desirable, and "essential" as deviants are established through normalizing technologies as irregular, undesirable, maligned, and "unnatural." The development of norms is the development and affirmation of a hierarchy of values relative to whatever norm is being established. In this way, normalization functions as a way to "sustain insider/outsider dualisms convinced of their own inherent meaning."[13] Foucault warned us of this possibility in the quote at the beginning of this chapter. As we come to identify with one another, eschewing inhibiting labels and disciplines to assert our freedom as unique and distinctive selves, we do so under the identity that was created out of its deviance to another established norm. Evading the normalizing mechanism is virtually impossible, in Foucault's eyes. Later, we will consider what usefulness normalization and normalizing technologies have, if any. For now, let us engage the process(es) of normalization.

Normalization: A Systematic Process

There is an important distinction necessary in the way that I speak of norms and normalizing apparatuses. It is not only the totalizing effect of normalized selves and modalities on our family relationships that concerns me. In addition, I am concerned with normalizing processes that take place and that influence or constitute us as intersubjective selves. There are three salient features of normalization that necessarily distinguish it from what it produces. I borrow the first two features from Cressida Heyes. She points out, first, the notion that each identity, or body in her terms, can be measured in its conformity or deviance.[14] This is a notion to which I pointed in my discussion above. I revisit it here to suggest that the process of normalization is built on this certain outcome for norms: a norm*al*/deviant set of categorizations and modalities. Second, Heyes points us back to the reality that these designations of category and identity are, in

fact, "types" of individuals. For her, normalization and the technologies therein produce both the content of measurement for conformity as well as entire sets of patterns of grouping that become stabilized over time.[15] In addition to Heyes' delineation, I am adding a third feature of normalization. I find that it is necessary to note the potent effect that those produced categories, binaries, and types have on their own contexts and those contexts with which they come into regular contact. In short, because the process is one of reification and even cyclical imputation, I assert that normalization also encompasses an apparatus of self-regeneration. Once norms are created through various technologies, they, in turn, create a set of intelligibilities and juridical standards through which the contexts that house them are understood.

Normalization, then, is a systematic process that results in conformity, modes of individuality, and even more. Heyes warns against too general a use of the term, however. She notes that feminist philosophy often features language about norms and the normalization process that color over the details of the process. She claims that when norms are understood in an active way, as we make the word into the verb *normalize*, theoretical precision is lost. Normalize, she argues, comes to mean "any process through which homogeneity and conformity are enforced or encouraged, or a controversial process is made to seem everyday."[16] But Foucault's account is much more complex because it adds to the systematic process an image of mechanistic management. That is, for Foucault, normalization not only sorts, classifies, and labels, but it also measures and controls. As such, normalization as a process is inherently categorical and evaluative.

While normalization seems to have interconnected purposes that range from sociopolitical and economic aspirations to theological and cosmological ones, I find that its most fundamental purpose is quite simple and can fuel any of those secondary ones. My take on normalization and its ultimate aim comes from Ladelle McWhorter. In *Bodies and Pleasures*, McWhorter asserts,

> Normalization has proven to be a very powerful means of ordering groups of people (and other organisms) for the purpose of acquiring knowledge about processes and for the purpose of intervening in and reshaping those processes and, therefore, the future individuals that those processes construct. Its use is now so widespread that it hardly seems innovative and only occasionally threatening. It just seems … normal.[17]

Implied beneath McWhorter's words is another poignant claim: normalization does not impose. Instead, it augments and channels, and the result of a non-imposed channeling of ideas, language, and value system is really much more powerful than a simple imposition. That is, the purpose of normalization extends beyond a schematic process of categorizing and even hierarchically arranging identities, bodies, and norms; it produces a kind of "real normality" that can seem self-produced. The powerful purpose, therefore, lies in the way the normalization process itself appears nonexistent while ordering, channeling, valuing, and judging all things in relation to the norms that it establishes.

One way that normalization achieves this "behind the veil" status is by appearing to be a benevolent process in which help for a desired identity, body, circumstance, and relationship is available. Normalizing power "aids" us in realizing our own potential by presenting itself as benign. It is able to so through technologies that "penetrate deeper into and range further across the lives it orders than other forms of power might."[18] For this reason, we can see that normalizing technologies and also our concepts of what is natural—our norms—historically develop in tandem. Below, I will discuss the ways that both normalizing technologies around race, gender, and sexuality are historically inseparable from our normative notions of those socially constructed categories. The evidence that Siobhan Somerville, Ladelle McWhorter, and Craig Prentiss outline, for example, shows that processes of normalization and the norms that they produce "arise together because they require one another."[19]

The process of normalization occurs internally as well as externally. In addition to the benign nature that the normalization process can perform, disciplinary power—in Foucaultian terms—is marked by "its deployment by individual subjects who direct this power inward, applying it to their own bodies, their own selves."[20] That is, part of the normalizing process occurs when we internalize the technologies of normalization as normal, central, and self-generating. As this internalization takes place, we provide the normalizing technology with the most powerful means of embedding itself into our psychic structures and social modalities. The more these technologies proliferate and organize and become hierarchically categorical, we see instances of total failure. It turns out that even though there is an internal and external process of normalization taking place, no actual body or identity "passes" the normalizing management scheme. As the developed norms vacillate between internal and external motivations, becoming more persistent and perpetual in their existence, normalizing technologies

themselves move fluidly between macro- and micro-territories.[21] From society, to families, to identities and back through each arena, technologies of normalization link to the normative social constructions that govern the ways that we perceive and relate to one another. More than that, the infringement of these technologies on internal and external spaces makes self-knowledge and even self-management seem like an impossible and unproductive endeavor.[22]

Normalizing Race, Gender, and Sexuality

There is a close relationship between the creation of categories of race and categories of sexuality. Because they reify one another, race and sexuality must be interrogated as oppressive forces simultaneously, forcing us to notice the ways they interact, counterbalance, and reinforce each other as dehumanizing schema. Arguably, the mechanisms that normalize our current notions of race and sexuality are not altogether dissimilar from those that contribute to the construction of gender. An intersectional perspective aids our ability to grasp the interrelated nature of oppressive forces. As we do so, we can become clearer about the development of a homophobic, heteronormative, racist, sexist-patriarchal society, and its relation to categories of identity like "straight," "black," "transgender," and "lesbian," to name a few. Noting these specific relationships helps us understand that categories of race, gender, and sexual identity are made possible through and within an oppressive society characterized by rigid sex roles, dominated by male supremacy, and structured by racial prejudice and oppression. These inhibiting technologies, and the developed discourse that surrounds them, contribute to the creation of categories of abnormality. Our recognition of these relationships forces us to trace the normalizing strategies of and the relationship between certain "deviant" actions, identities, expressions, desires, and the "norms" to which they relate.

Siobhan Somerville, Ladelle McWhorter, Roderick Ferguson, and Ellen Feder each tell a similar story about the genealogy of race, gender, and sexuality. Part of the normalization process has not only been the development of these categories, but also the persistent separation of the categories as exclusive and distinct from one another. Yet, these scholars all claim that the categories are mutually constitutive and mutually informative. Somerville and McWhorter discuss the ways that the historical discourse around race and sexuality, in particular, developed simultaneously and that

separating the two inhibits us from seeing the mechanism of disciplinary power at work. Ferguson makes the strong claim that academic and theoretical discourses have attributed social transformation—especially related to liberalism and historical materialism—to white heteronormativity, thereby establishing and centrally locating deviance in nonheteronormative communities of color. With his "queer of color critique," Ferguson revises the concept of historical materialism and argues that Marx was invested in a liberal notion of the human that "took normative heterosexuality as the emblem of order, nature, and universality, making that which deviated from heteropatriarchal ideals the sign of disorder."[23] Feder employs Foucaultian analysis to reveal the discursive strategies of power that participate in producing each category. She recognizes the possible conflation of categories when doing this type of analysis, but her discussion offers us a way to see that the diverse material production of these categories does not require us to disentangle their processes of production entirely. Indeed, what these scholars suggest is that history—with all its scientific claims of authority—academic discourse, and power exist as normalizing apparatuses by which race, gender, and sexuality come to be in our context.

Foucault is certainly known for assertions about history's role in creating sexuality, but he may be lesser known for his claim that *racism*—used as a term distinctive from our current understanding of ethnic racism—employs internal and external technologies to craft what is abnormal. Speaking about mid-nineteenth-century psychiatric analyses, he says

> The racism that psychiatry gave birth to is racism against the abnormal, against individuals who as carriers of a condition, stigmata, or any defect whatsoever, may more or less randomly transmit to their heirs the unpredictable consequences of the evil, or rather of the non-normal, that they carry within them. It is a racism, therefore, whose function is not so much the prejudice or defense of one group against another as the detection of all those within a group who may be the carriers of a danger to it. It is an internal racism that permits the screening of every individual within a given society.[24]

Neither Somerville, Ferguson, nor McWhorter is trying to claim that our current understanding of race and racism is the same as the way we recognize sex or gender and sexism/transphobia, or sexuality and heterosexism for that matter. Yet, they seem to have some element of this

Foucaultian analysis as the base of their work. The production of abnormality, and the ways that it becomes hierarchically valued, nonarbitrarily distributed, and materially visited on certain populations, bodies, and identities is certainly related to this Foucaultian racist "screening of every individual within a given society."

In *Queering the Color Line*, Somerville claims that there was a "shift in understandings of sexual identity that occurred during the late-nineteenth century."[25] As Foucault (and others) have argued, "although sexual acts between two people of the same sex had been punishable during earlier periods through legal and religious sanctions, these sexual practices did not necessarily define individuals as homosexuals per se. This period brought on the emergence of a new idea of sexuality, in which sexual acts and desires became constitutive of identity."[26] For Somerville, this meant that homosexuality should certainly be read as a "historically specific production."[27] In her estimation, this was a paradigmatic and historical shift from a cultural system that relied solely on physical traits to differentiate people from one another, to a more modern one that focused on desire as the most meaningful axis of difference. Telling the story about how both liberalism and historical materialism posited gender and sexual normativity as crucial to social transformation, Ferguson seconds Somerville's point. He points out that Marx equates capitalism with artificial forms of desire that manifest in social disorder, while sexual transgressions become the sign of capital's disruptive effects. Using Marx's claims about the prostitute as a symbol of the damaging effects of commodification on the family, Ferguson claims, "The universalization of heteropatriarchy produces the prostitute as the other of heteropatriarchal ideals, an other that is simultaneously the effect of racial, gender, sexual, and class discourses."[28]

Ferguson explains that *social sciences* are responsible for relocating the focal point of social inequality analyses from racial difference through biological variation to cultural explanations for the perceived social inferiority of black people. Though Ferguson may oversimplify the relationship between the categorical results and analytical work of social sciences, his argument is clear: nonheteronormativity was central to racial formations in the USA. He relates the "multiplication of racialized discourses of sexuality and gender" to the "multiplication of labor under capital."[29] Though nonwhite immigrant populations in the USA grew in response to demands for low-wage labor, Ferguson uses the Foucaultian language of the "implantation of perversions" and "the dispersion of sexualities" to illustrate that their relations to white Americans were managed by a clus-

ter of exclusionary regulations. He goes on to charge American sociology with imagining "African American culture as the site of polymorphous gender and sexual perversions and associat[ing] those perversions with moral failings."[30]

Somerville points back to Ferguson's claims through her definitions of sexuality and race. Sexuality, she claims, is "a complex ideological position, into which one is interpellated based partly on the *culture's* mapping of bodies and desires and partly on one's response to that interpellation [emphasis mine]."[31] By race, she means "a historical, ideological process rather than … fixed transhistorical or biological characteristics."[32] According to Somerville, an increase in the policing of racialized social boundaries occurred as the mapping of bodies did. For her, the ideological process is a key factor, since the historical interdependence of both scientific and popular theories of race and sexuality are so distinctively intertwined. She, too, finds that "it was not merely an historical coincidence that the classification of bodies as either homosexual or heterosexual emerged at the same time that the United States was aggressively constructing and policing the boundary between 'black' and 'white' bodies."[33] These purposeful efforts to shore up and bifurcate categories of race and sexuality, according to Somerville, were not only intertwined, they were indicative of macro-level normalization.

McWhorter's claim about the racialization of abnormality follows both Foucault and Somerville and certainly draws on Ferguson. She asserts that mapping of bodies and imposition of ideologies was undoubtedly a huge part of the ways that we produced categories of races and racism, sexualities, and sexual oppression. While Somerville and Ferguson trace the historical link between the production of race and that of sexuality, McWhorter exposes the production of race and sexuality as processes affected by production of abnormality.[34] In her estimation, the means of production of race and sexuality are not simply analogous; they are the *same* because they emerge from technologies of normalization that create categories of abnormality. What differs, however, are the very important and distinct ways that racism and oppressive (sometimes violent) heteronormativity are exacted in our contexts. McWhorter does recognize the problematic nature of conflating all oppressive regimes under the guise of racism. Still, "exclusion, oppression, hatred, and fear of abnormality as practiced and perpetuated in our society have everything to do with race, no matter which group of 'abnormals' are the targets."[35] The issue, according to McWhorter, is the problem of "racial purification" foun-

dational to modern racism. By defining and policing abnormalities and impurities, racism, whether modern or historical, employs a sound categorical, hierarchical, normalization technique. And again, no one exists outside the norm, and no one escapes being "racially" normalized.

While Somerville highlights the nineteenth-century shift in understandings of sexuality, McWhorter makes a correlating claim about race. She argues that the nineteenth century brought a view of race that moved away from the structure and physics of bodies to more rigorous normalizing strata. Indeed, this period brought on a notion of race as *function*, in which people of different races behaved differently and thus experienced different material realities.[36] Ferguson, too, marks the move from natural science, which argued that blacks were biological disadvantaged relative to whites, to social science, which asserted that black society was a hotbed of gender and sexual perversity that inhibited moral development and, in turn, called for social and legal intervention and regulation. Ferguson asserts that social theory positioned the white bourgeois family as the model of heteronormative life, while black families and black sexual practices were consistently associated with aberrations, or nonheteronormative behaviors.[37]

For both McWhorter and Ferguson, the shift from natural history, to biology, to ideology in race formation ends with the production of the homosexual, the disease-ridden whore, and the black male rapist (which is not dissimilar from Ferguson's story about the categorization of the prostitute). McWhorter claims that the very notion of race as function, in which behaviors are the distinguishing features of the category of race, painted the backdrop for discourses of *sexually* abject threats to white male supremacy. This framework of panic, according to McWhorter, not only begot the caricatures of identities listed above, but it also made room for the concept of the Normal Family.[38]

McWhorter cites Paul Popenoe, the early twentieth-century leader of the eugenics movement, as the progenitor of the "normal" family that needed as much, if not more, protection as the white (read Nordic) race.[39] As the site responsible for schooling the right type of moral citizens, the normal family bore the responsibility of educating members through proper gender formation, economic empowerment, and racial/ethnic identification. According to McWhorter, Popenoe's model of the "normal" family was "nuclear (with a male head), reasonably successful in a capitalist labor market (and thus not poor), fecund (but producing no offspring with mental or physical disabilities or antisocial attitudes), and of

course, all of its members were heterosexual."[40] Families not meeting this description, therefore, were pedagogically inadequate and not worthy of state or private rights and privileges.

Based on this description, the "normal" family could not be black.[41] For Popenoe, who McWhorter describes as a eugenically minded Nordic supremacist, the purpose of the family was not to preserve rights of individuals and stabilize concepts of order for society. Instead, it was to protect the race, which required regulation of both racial and sexual behaviors. The family became a vehicle in which one learned to become a generative member of the race, through regulations of proper sexual behaviors like marriage, normative gender role education, and pro-life legislation and rhetoric. As long as pure Nordic reproduction and its surrounding circumstances (proper gender role activity and development of sustainable economics) were salvaged and protected through enforced racial segregation and antimiscegenation, the family would be heralded as the most sacred institution of society.

Feder shifts our attention to a different mode of normalization. While she does affirm that technologies of normalization work in symbiotic and reifying patterns, she attributes the development of the categories and norms themselves to the exclusionary discursive representation of race and gender difference. For her, power is the foundational normalizing element at play.

Feder appreciates the "analytic separability of gender and race," but sees these categories as "thoroughly and simultaneously at work in each other's production."[42] Despite discourses that highlight the production of difference as a mutually exclusive process wherein categories of difference like race and gender are parallel and never intersecting paths, Feder emphasizes that race and gender's separability is not a matter of distinctive categories. The possibility of conflation is strengthened by the fact that comparative stories of discursive formation and normalization often feature one element over the other. Using the example of the founding of Levittown,[43] however, she argues that what actually makes race and gender separate in normalization discourse is the type of power related to each. Race and racism are deployed by power that originates and manifests in the state, according to Feder, while the disciplinary power effecting gender difference is located within the family.[44]

In her description of Levittown, Feder illustrates this distinction. Suburbs manifested policies of racialization by determining the "types" of whiteness that could purchase and inhabit housing within the neighbor-

hood. First, the state contributed to a specific type of suburbanization of this community by federally regulating and financing mortgages. In keeping with the rules of racial segregation in housing, the federal mortgage lenders implemented a gradation schema to determine the "desirability" of neighborhoods that, in turn, denoted the value of the home.[45] As it turned out, America's "business and professional" men and the housing blocks they desired were given the highest grade of desirability while working class and "mixed ethnic" or black people were oriented toward housing that was determined the least desirable. Concurrent with these developments was the racialization that was taking place as ethnic groups moved from urban to suburban contexts. Diverse ethnicities that had been determined "other," "mixed," and sometimes even "colored," came to represent a middle grade of whiteness in the development of areas like Levittown.[46] Receiving the designation of moderate desirability, these groups—as long as they did not include relative blackness—were positioned as white. Thus, what we see is a development of a certain whiteness that is attributed to class *and* the development of an acceptable whiteness that is white *enough* not to be black. Moreover, these designations were reified by state-sanctioned housing regulations of segregation, property value, and federal loan distribution.

In addition to the historical, academic, and power-related technologies responsible for race, gender, and sexuality normalization, religion is also present. There are several scholars who discuss the ways that religion, especially Western religious ideology and doctrine, has been a regulatory force for modes of behavior. Here, I would like to mention briefly the claims of Craig Prentiss, Paul Harvey, and Kelly Brown-Douglas. Each makes the assertion that influential religious theologies and racist ideologies are not only related, but also intersect. Their claims require us to consider religion (Western Christian perspectives) as participatory in the development of race, racism, and sexuality in our society.

Interestingly, the type of normalizing technology that Prentiss highlights is myth. In Western religious contexts that are primarily Christian (Protestant), the creation of race and ethnicity has come through the use and explanation of stories that emerge from the biblical text and the subsequent interpretations and retelling of those stories. Prentiss and other authors in his edited volume show that the ambiguous nature of myth makes ample room for the social constructions of race to become more and more substantiated as new stories develop, old stories are retold, and

communities participate in constant interpretation. Whether a set of readings (Scripture, perhaps) could be used to assert one message and alternatively substantiate another makes no difference to the foundational claim: myth is another means of social construction that establishes and normalizes categories of difference.

Paul Harvey's essay, which grapples with the process by which "Christianity in America has mythically grounded (and frequently regrounded and revised) modern notions of race," is particularly illustrative.[47] Combined with historical factors such as the trans-Atlantic slave trade, stories from the Old Testament about God's providence, God's "chosen" people, and the distinctive character of a Christian society permeate social and religious discourse about race. The creation and ongoing sustenance of the categories "White" and "Black" are based, according to Harvey, on frequent appeals to a divinely ordered hierarchy of difference. Questions regarding the very humanity of enslaved people, the possibility of reconciling freedom with "blackness," the protection of social stability and religious sanctity, and the more important protection of racial purity for whites carved deep and abiding lines between black and white identities. Harvey argues that these notions of race outlasted the religious discourse and historical circumstances within which they were most stringently formed, yet he finds it important to point to some of the more substantial and mythic, "mythoscientific" examples that persisted.[48]

Harvey points to the Hamitic myth[49] in relation to the circa-bellum pro/antislavery arguments as strong and long-lasting race rhetoric. Using this commonly rehearsed story, Harvey traces its employment through several streams of race normalization in the USA during that time. Many turned to the story of Noah and his sons to point to a divinely ordained social-natural position for blacks. One key issue was to determine whether enslaved blacks were human or nonhuman. Although status as a human being did not grant or guarantee freedom, knowing that they were not human indeed made their enslavement easier to justify. Whether human or not, these "people" were to be "servants of servants."[50]

The appeal to the myth was also used to answer the question of whether or not slaves could be "Christianized." Theorists and theologians of the day agreed that whiteness certainly denoted a "natural" state of freedom. Contrarily, blackness signified a "natural" state of bondage. Since white people, certainly in American civil and religious society, should always be free, it was necessary to point out that the very state of being Christian

was that of freedom as well. When the subject of Christianizing slaves arose, so too did the questions of inherent freedom versus attained freedom, eternal freedom versus civil liberty. In short, if freedom equaled Christianity plus whiteness, then what was the sum of Christianity and blackness? Moreover, was it even possible to reconcile the notion of holy freedom with Christians enslaving other Christians?

Attempts to answer these questions ranged in absurdity, but they were always treated by establishing and continually rehearsing productive ideas about the distinctive nature of "Black" and "White" peoples. Arguments ranging from fear of the proliferation of evil to the pseudo-scientific worries about mongrel offspring of mixed races worked to reify the distance between the races and also drew on Biblical divisions (and hierarchical arrangements) to affirm that racial categories were more than socially and scientifically sound. They were divinely ordained. Interestingly enough, this division resulted in the production of the same protection against the tainting of white purity through social and sexual encounter to which McWhorter and Ferguson point above. Indeed, one of the ultimate aims of the raced hierarchical divisions was to establish blackness as an aberration of nature, deserving perpetual servitude, which must be civically harnessed and reproductively monitored. Once again, we see a normalization of race as function being substantiated, only this time, the grounding argument is Biblically sanctioned. What we witness over time is a purposeful use of religion as a tool for creating and normalizing white Christian civic identity while simultaneously normalizing the "natural" repudiation of blacks.[51]

Brown-Douglas' claims about the normalizing relationship between Christianity and categories of race are more specifically oriented to the ways that "Platonized Christianity" and white cultural assumptions constrain black sexuality within walls of physical, spiritual, emotional, and psychological imprisonment.[52] The normalizing apparatuses at work in Brown-Douglas' argument result not only in a creation of race, but more importantly undeniably *un*-free black bodies and sexualities. In her estimation, Platonized Christianity provides a sound basis upon which white cultural assumptions about black people and black bodies can be created, mystified, and cultivated. Brown-Douglas argues that for white culture, blackness is equal to "unrestrained sexuality" and that Platonized Christianity equates sexuality with "a cauldron of evil" that opposes God–human connectivity.[53] Douglas claims,

> By arguing the "evilness" of sexuality, Christianity implicitly provides a theological justification for any claims that a people governed by sexual desires are innately evil. Christianity, especially when it does not challenge the sexualized depictions, in effect vindicates white culture's vilification of black people. Platonized Christianity and white culture thus become de facto allies in demonizing an entire race of people.[54]

This heritage has shaped black church responses to black queer identities and conversations on sexuality. What becomes normalized, according to Brown-Douglas, is not merely a sexualized race, but an undesirable, morally reprobate categorization of that race, which becomes more stable as whiteness is increasingly understood as morally upright and socially acceptable. Moreover, the normalization process works to stabilize a notion of blackness and whiteness as completely antithetical categories of identity that are not only socially incompatible but morally antithetical.

Brown-Douglas' work, along with that of the other thinkers above, shows that black identity, bodies, and experiences are positioned in a nebulous space between holy acceptability and whole liberation.[55] Inasmuch as this close look at processes of normalization has illuminated the multiplicity of strategies and aims of hierarchical categorization, we must also wonder what benefits of these constructions emerge from within the communities that are themselves reaping oppressive results. Indeed, is the white cultural assault, together with Christianized systems of morality and long-standing social–historical constructions, a normalizing technology that cannot be resisted? Or, do the steps toward the freedom and wholeness for which Brown-Douglas yearns become easier to make as the people engage in innovative strategies of moral agency? My supposition is that the process of disrupting these norms, though an arduous and undoubtedly confusing endeavor, is a worthwhile one that sometimes requires theoretical concession and always requires practical courage. Recognizing black queer people as moral agents is a pointed disruption of several intersecting processes of normalization that together imply an irrefutable hierarchy of categorized identities. Engaging in disruptive processes calls for a type of praxis-oriented morality that bravely confronts and even utilizes the essential identities that are formed through normalization simply because doing so challenges the assumptions beneath their formations. Perhaps, this process is the only way to make room for constructing new, irruptive, and possibly liberating norms.

The Importance of Deconstructive Elements in Disruption

One of the most important reasons that I employ disruption as a tool of moral agency in this project is that by dismantling certain norms, rhetoric, and technologies of normalization, is required for confrontations of the powerful dominance of Western ways of knowing as well as white heteropatriarchal ways of being in our context. Other forms of knowing and creating norms are often marginalized in academic, activist, and religious spaces, and I am compelled to consider a process wherein the normalized approaches to knowing and being come into question.

By troubling the concept of "other," deconstruction works toward transgressive, rather than simply affirmative, ideas and enactments of justice and politics. Nancy Fraser notes that the deconstructive task of destabilizing group identities makes room for new senses of self whose existence is independent from an otherizing process. She says, "By destabilizing existing group identities …, [transformative remedies] … not only raise the self-esteem of members of currently disrespected groups; they … change everyone's sense of self."[56] Feminist theologian Ellen T. Armour echoes Fraser, as she claims that a major thrust of deconstruction is its insistence on interrogation and disruption for both systems and created selves. Armour describes it as a set of non-neutral strategies for intervening in particular contexts "in order to disrupt strategies of mastery [and elicit] a play of differences that is already 'there.'"[57] In Armour's estimation, the disruptive interventions sever the enclosure of the contexts and open them up for those who are defined as "others." The process calls into question each disciplinary power and identity's relation to the norm while making space for more than simple affirmation of the existence of difference. In this way, deconstruction *transforms* language, space, and norms.

Armour's work in *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference* involves interrogating the ways in which the project of feminism reinforces a polarized theoretical relationship between race and gender. Her effort to "subvert the divide" draws primarily on work from Jacques Derrida and Luce Irigaray in conversation with black feminist theories and womanist theologies. One element of her work I find pertinent to my project is her claim that the process of deconstruction requires focus on both macro- and micro-level social realities. One way to focus on these realities can be found in Cynthia Willett's claim that humor and camp provide a space wherein systemic and interpersonal expressions of unjust

norms can be questioned, rattled, and even overturned. Willett's work in Irony *in the Age of Empire* suggests that while tragic narratives of social realities can be informative, comedic parody has the ability to work in transgressive and transformative ways, allowing for concentration on normalizing technologies as well as the norms they engender.[58]

Certainly, our ability—as activists, scholars, family members—to feel and recognize humor through deconstructive and disruptive satire and symbolic humorous rhetoric and illustration requires a perception among ourselves of a shared commonality, or common identity.[59] "Interrupting the normal [through] parody" brings to the surface hidden alternative values, allows us to create new spaces for understanding ourselves and one another.[60] According to Willett, social norms can often be "all-consuming of our identities and preempt any normal attempt at dissent or resistance," and for this reason, comic forms of disruptive subversion can have the effect of disorienting coercive disciplinary powers as well as sociopsychological norms.[61] She claims, "Parodies of gender and sexual identities go beyond the politics of dissent …. and mock the prevailing aesthetics of pleasure and pain as well as the boundaries of social emotions like shame and personal feelings like disgust."[62] By twisting things around through a shared understanding of ambiguously normative disciplines, parodies actually have the ability to disrupt our visceral reactions to the ideas, images, sounds, and actions of our discursive identity.[63]

For Willett, the deconstructive process can also be a step toward creativity and freedom. The creativity of possibilities, identities, and responses to social circumstances that seem outside the realm of our power/responsibility is challenged. We are invited to ask questions of ourselves as well as our theoretical and material surroundings. This creativity, in my estimation, fits nicely with Willett's understanding of freedom, particularly negative freedom, which grounds our theoretical and material sense of self in a space beyond "free choice" and, instead, in a place of choice-limit destabilization. That is, the creativity and freedom granted in the process of deconstruction redirect liberalism's negative freedom away from the valorization of individual choice and toward the destabilization of norms and disciplinary practices that block choice.[64] A queer theory spin on liberal theory's negative freedom (which encompasses a sense of owning one's body) reorients freedom through deconstruction toward "realistic" pleasure-seeking that does not discount, but rather celebrates the "impulses, involuntary reactions, noises, fluids, and irregularities" of "diverse human experience" that could be squelched in normalization.[65]

Of course, when the deconstruction process focuses on identities, it is engaged in risky business. In a social climate of hierarchical social categorization, deconstructing identities could lead to deconstructed oppressed identities and whole, unchallenged normative ones. Because one aim of deconstruction is to unravel the messiness of oppressive narratives of race, gender, sexuality, and class for all people, we can miss its destructive power when that aim is only limited to the most visible members of our society. Willett argues, "Deconstructive policies would erase core domains of our divisive social identities, and allow for the proliferation of multiple new identities …. The deconstruction of social identities risks reinforcing existing distributions of race-, sex-, and gender-based power rather than restraining them."[66] Because social inequality is a deep and "ineradicable reality of social power," the rate and process of deconstruction could lead to the primary deconstruction of marginalized identities. "The total deconstruction of identity is likely to have more effect on those groups that have less power than on those that have more power. Blackness is a more easily deconstructed in a white hegemonic system than is whiteness."[67] Black queer people are in a precarious enough situation—as morally abject and racially inadequate—that breaking down our identities is more likely to render us more invisible in terms of moral discourse.

Willett's concern is one reason that I am interested in the ways we deconstruct family and the social normalization that contributes to family norms. While I am concerned with what it means for us to be certain kinds of socially located selves, the emphasis of the deconstructive task in this project rests with the ways that deconstructing the norms of gender or sexuality or race—rather than specific genders, sexualities, or races—contribute to and/or emerge from the process of deconstructing family. Taking on the family as a contestable space—though it is certainly a foundational and important pedagogical one—moves it into a category of institution that is transformable. And certainly, transforming relations within family is a step toward a general transformation of human relatedness.

Notes

1. Madame [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 18 April 2010.
2. My concept of disruption as a radical critique of power is drawn from philosopher Cynthia Willett who, in her writing, starts with a foundation of Derridean deconstruction as a critical means of destabilizing rhetoric

and using irony to expose self-deception. For a discussion of irony's role in ethics and moral notions of freedom, See Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008). I also draw on Penelope Deutscher, *Yielding Gender: Feminism, Deconstruction and the History of Philosophy* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2001); and Ellen T. Armour, *Deconstruction, Feminist Theology and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

3. Phillip Berryman, Liberation Theology: Essential Facts About the Revolutionary Movement in Latin America—And Beyond, Volume 1987, Part 2 (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1987) 163.
4. Layli Phillips and Marla R. Stewart. "'I Am Just So Glad You Are Alive': New Perspectives on Non-traditional, Non-conforming, and Transgressive Expressions of Gender, Sexuality, and Race among African Americans." *Journal of African American Studies* 12 (2008): 382.
5. Judith Butler, Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity (New York: Routledge, 1990) 2, 5.
6. Heyes, 6.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. Phillips and Stewart, 382.
10. For more discussion on Western cosmology as a foundation for the notions of "queer," "other," and "normal," see Eve Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990). See also Diana Fuss, "Inside/Out" in Diana Fuss, ed., *Inside/Out: Lesbian Theories, Gay Theories* (New York: Routledge, 1991).
11. Phillips and Stewart, 382.
12. Heyes, 7.
13. Ibid.
14. Ibid., 16.
15. Ibid., 17.
16. Ibid., 17.
17. Ladelle McWhorter, *Bodies and Pleasures: Foucault and the Politics of Sexual Normalization* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1999) 156.
18. Ibid.
19. Ibid.
20. Ellen K. Feder, *Family Bonds: Genealogies of Race and Gender* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007) 4.
21. Heyes, 17.

22. Ibid.
23. Roderick A. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique* (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 2004) 6.
24. Michel Foucault, *Abnormal: Lectures at the College de France 1974–1975*, trans. David Macey (New York: Picador, 2003) 316–317.
25. Siobhan B. Somerville, *Queering the Color Line: Race and the Invention of Homosexuality in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000) 2.
26. Ibid.
27. Ibid., 3.
28. Ferguson, 9.
29. Ibid., 12.
30. Ibid., 20.
31. Somerville, 5.
32. Ibid., 7.
33. Ladelle McWhorter, *Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America: A Genealogy* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2009) 4.
34. Ibid., 33.
35. Ibid., 35.
36. Ibid., 98.
37. Ferguson, 18–20.
38. Ibid., 250.
39. McWhorter, Racism and Sexual Oppression, 251.
40. Ibid., 252.
41. Ibid., 253.
42. Feder, 86.
43. Feder explains that the stories of the 1959 founding of Levittown are told in a way that disallows a critical analysis of the intersecting forces of race and gender. She claims, "One story relates the state-sponsored racial exclusion that made possible the establishment of a homogenous community of 'whites,' many of whom had suffered discrimination as ethnic minorities. The other tells the tale of the disciplinary restoration of women to their place in the home, which also shaped the prescribed roles for husbands and children." She goes on to argue that the stories definitely implicated one another but they strongly resist a type of narrative union that would come of race and gender analysis were complimentary in the storytelling. Feder uses the story of Levittown to illustrate the privileged position of the family in relation to the production of gender and racial difference. See Feder's discussion on pp. 21–22, 31–41, 86–87.
44. Ibid., 87.
45. Ibid., 30–31.
46. Ibid., 31–32.

47. Paul Harvey, "A Servant of Servants Shall He Be: The Construction of Race in American Religious Mythologies" in Craig R. Prentiss, ed., *Religion and the Creation of Race and Ethnicity: An Introduction* (New York: New York University Press, 2003) 14.
48. Ibid., 15.
49. The Hamitic myth comes from the Genesis 9:18–27 story about Noah's drunkenness that is revealed by his son Ham. As punishment for exposing his father's nakedness, Ham's son Canaan is banished to enduring servitude for his father's brothers, Shem and Japheth. In the mythic residue, Ham comes to represent Black people; Shem, people of Indo-Asian ancestry; and Japheth, Whites. For a more complete discussion of this story and its racial derivatives, see Harvey, 18–19. See also Sylvester Johnson, *The Myth of Ham in Nineteenth-Century American Christianity: Race, Heathens, and the People of God* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004).
50. As an example, Harvey points to the diligence of pro-Slavery theologians during the early and mid-1800s. He notes that they worked feverishly "to enunciate a Christian pro-Slavery apologetic, one that would preserve boundaries of whiteness/blackness while also supporting their efforts to Christianize the slaves." According to Harvey's account, white Southern Methodists wanted to "make black more secure in their blackness—their enslavedness—because it would make them obedient and content in that obedience." See Harvey's full discussion on pp. 20–22.
51. Johnson, vii.
52. Kelly Brown Douglas, "Black Body/White Soul: The Unsettling Intersection of Race, Sexuality, and Christianity" in Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith, eds., *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2008) 101.
53. Ibid., 105.
54. Ibid.
55. Ibid.
56. Nancy Fraser, Justice Interruptus: Critical Reflections on the "Postsocialist" Condition (New York: Routledge, 1997) 24.
57. Ellen T. Armour, Deconstruction, Feminist Theology, and the Problem of Difference: Subverting the Race/Gender Divide (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999) 3.
58. Cynthia Willett, *Irony in the Age of Empire: Comic Perspectives on Democracy and Freedom* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008) 2–4.
59. Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1999) 88.
60. Ibid., 86.
61. Willett, 133.

62. Ibid.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 129.
65. Ibid., 134–135.
66. Cynthia Willett, *The Soul of Justice: Social Bonds and Racial Hubris* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2001) 86.
67. Ibid., 87.

CHAPTER 4

The Moral Practice of Disrupting Norms

Disruption and Irruption as Moral Discourse in Practice

As I mentioned in the previous chapter, disruption–irruption is both critical and practical. It can alter the postures from which we engage normativity and normalizing technologies, thereby offering critical engagement with those ideas and practices that inform our values and behaviors. In *Disruptive Christian Ethics*, Traci West invites religious leaders, lay leaders, and activists who do theologically disruptive work around issues of sexuality, gender, race, and violence into conversation in order to witness the practical aims that guide the theological work within their communities. By doing this, she says, "Theoretical and practical knowledge merge together in the living texts that these ministers and activists create."[1] In my research interviews, I found that black queer people are doing this practical disruptive and irruptive work within their family lives all the time. As I mentioned in the beginning of the chapter, this work is situated in two key moral moments and manifests in rational, disruptive steps as well as irruptive, reorienting moves.

As a reminder of the disruption–irruption process, let me briefly recount the steps. First, there is *recognizing and naming technologies of normalization*. To become conscientized, people reflect critically (in solitude and/or in community) about their own experiences and the way those experiences relate to their actual values. It is an ongoing process that also makes room for people to explore the macro- and micro-level norms shaping their life

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circumstances and familial contexts. The second step is *providing critical evaluation relative to the experience of normalizing technologies,* which often occurs in tandem with the initial phase of recognition and naming. Sometimes, however, critical evaluation is a consequence of one's reflection on the social and psychological implications of the technologies and circumstances that ground their experience within and thoughts about family. The final, irruptive step is *re-orienting selves, politics, and discourses away from the power of those technologies.* Notice, here, that the reorientation is not simply a turning away from the norm, though that is certainly a part of the process. There is also a move to re-situate one's self in new and different surroundings, learning new language to describe experiences, and/or finding and creating new ways to value the experiences that contributed to notions and implementation of family life.

To illustrate some of the thoughts from the interview data that contribute to my system of describing the disruption–irruption process, I excerpt representative reflections from a few of my research participants. The conversations below are divided into a sequence that reflects the process named above: "A family was what I saw on TV," "Who's asking the questions about our 'family values'?" and "My identity doesn't need my family's approval." In the first section, I place two interviews together (that were conducted separately) and arrange them in an alternating pattern to elucidate the complex ways that their experiences contrast with and complement one another. In the second and third, I feature the comments of individual interviewees who speak directly about critical reflections on their family experience and their process of reorientation.

Recognizing and Naming: "A Family Was What I Saw on TV"

Benito is a late-20s Black gay man who has grown up in Atlanta's foster care system since his parents passed away when he was eight years old. He has recently become more comfortable being "out" in the community and has situated himself in a community of friends that he describes as family.

> Well when I was younger I always thought, and I still do, that a family was what I saw on TV. Like I thought the white people had what they called a family and then the blacks just had whatever they could put together. So my idea of a family was of course a mom and a dad, probably brothers and sisters. They all communicated and the parents they did for [the kids] and supported, you know? That is what I have seen in TV and movies.[2]

Denise is a late-20s Black lesbian who has resided in Atlanta for nearly ten years. She holds a Ph.D. and does scholar activism around issues of queerness and family.

So my dad was middle class and my mom's family was working-class poor, and so my dad's sister used to tell me all kind of shit, like, "Go to college. You're pretty enough to join a sorority. Join a sorority. Whatever you do, don't get down there and cut your hair off." I had no idea what that meant. Like, I had no concept of what it meant to be a black woman who goes to college and cut her hair. Later, I realized she meant, "Don't get progressive and enlightened and challenge hetero patriarchy, and be a good girl and stay in the Christian norms and get married, and don't own yourself, acknowledge yourself, [or] find your own power. Ugh."[3]

Benito: Well … my mother and father passed when I was eight but my family, when they saw that me and my sister were just like all over the place in foster homes and whatnot, they didn't care to come and get us or call to check up on us or see how we were doing, or even, you know, anything. So that to me felt like, okay, this is my family but this is not what I want. So when I see other kids—because I lived in a middle class neighborhood in one foster home—and when you get to those areas, you know, family was more of what I envisioned it to be. You know, you had a mom and dad and they were married. And I wanted that. But I knew … with a foster family it really wasn't mine.

Denise: Obligation. Like I was taught obligation. I have all of this guilt. I have internalized so much guilt. So my mom, as soon as I got out of college, was saying how she bought her mom a dining room suite when she was my age, and all this stuff that she did for her mom that I'm not doing for her. Like an obligation. But I don't have any of that money. I don't. I don't. So I have so, so, so, so much guilt. I'm not ballin' right now, but if I was, I would need to remodel my mom's bathroom. So like this guilt that you just hear is obligated. If you make a penny, you're supposed to make sure that penny go home. Like I feel like we cannot go on vacation until some money is sent back [home].

Benito: So, it wasn't until I met a lot of my gay friends, and particularly the older ones, who really showed me what a family was. If they haven't heard from me in two days they are calling or coming by, but my own family, my personal family, they don't even know where I live, you know. So I would say my new friends are my family because they actually have shown that they care in many more ways than just saying it. A lot of people say, "Well I care about you" or whatever, but then they do another thing, but they, my new family, actually show me what a family is like;

> that same image that I had growing up. My new family will actually do it and do for me. Blood don't mean family, I guess. But I guess my idea from TV is only half wrong then, right?
>
> *Denise:* I mean, I feel guilty and I often feel bad that I'm not able to help [back home] more, even though not in a financial standing or like some real standing to even be able to. So I have a lot of guilt for not being able to meet family obligations. But here in my created family I feel like I don't owe nobody shit. But I wonder if that's just the freedom that is created because I don't owe them anything, or well, it's given me space not to owe, but just to come and share it when I want to. Like, I'm very accountable, but I don't feel like I owe. It's just what I do. It doesn't make me feel guilty.

Denise and Benito's excerpts illustrate two moments of recognizing and naming several norms, including norms of gender performance, family expectations, and general belonging. More interesting than the norms themselves are the moral standards that Denise and Benito each use to reflect on their experiences. For Benito, the notion that family accountability is good and possible transitioned from a fictional depiction on television to a reality in his context when he found his current family. After experiencing consistent presence from his new family members, he could see how the possibilities of family accountability that he desired were actually available to him. He learned, however, that what made them available was the disruption of norm of blood-ties and the assumption of responsibility that we associate with blood relatives. For Benito, enacting the family norm of care and responsibility was possible after the initial step of recognizing family as something that existed even beyond the limits of what he saw on TV.

In Denise's example, we see her discovery of multiple layers of undesired norms. Her desire to eschew the constraints of gender performance, she recalled in another portion of the interview, was a direct attempt to rupture the progress of the college–job–marriage–baby train on which her aunt had booked her a first class ticket. Denise named the normative life pattern and family prospects that her own family desired for her but that she wanted to destabilize by simply "seeing what would come." Her choice to pursue graduate studies, however, was met with mixed reviews. She was both a member of the family about whom people could be proud and also a member who should be gainfully employed, and financially accountable to her household of origin. As she reflected in her interview, Denise noted that it was easy to recognize the gender and sexual constraints that emerged from

within her family context, but it was more difficult to sit with the realization of her feelings of obligation. As she compared those feelings with her experiences in her created family context, Denise breathed a sigh of relief and claimed, "I'm just glad to be free to give out of love."

Critically Evaluating: "Who's Asking the Questions About Our 'Family Values'?"

Bayard is mid-20s black gay man who studies religion. He currently resides in Atlanta, but the majority of his family is spread across the nation. His is a multi-racial family.

I ended up rejecting the need to distance myself from my family, but first I was able to go through some critical evaluations. If I had to choose between survival and these biological relationships, I would choose survival, right? I hope. And so what [that decision] did is it helped me kind of start to question. Okay, so two things, one, is I have a predisposition towards questioning. Because I've experienced the world to be other than the dominant narrative about the way the world is, it gives me an opportunity to ask questions about who else might be experiencing things this way and not just people that share being Black and gay or Black and queer but other people that have experienced sort of struggle and oppression for whatever different ways. And so it connects me to people. It opens a space up in me that allows me to see that space in other people, and so that is one thing. I think the other thing about it is, I mean, well "queer" to me in itself embraces a radical politics.

Even playing with language like the way the community has taught me that's my "big sister." There's no biological relationship but "so and so" is my big sister, right? And you better not mess with her. Ah, language is liberating.

See, because I'm specifically sort of linked to the Christian tradition, to me I feel like I've been given a tremendous gift. *My* canon says Jesus wasn't necessarily really all that into biological relationships. In fact, I would argue that Jesus was very clear about wanting to kind of escape a biological determinism when it came to ethics and how we should treat each other. Like "behold your mother" or "who are my brothers?" Where, again, does it say "*Greater love has no man than this that he lays down his life for his friends*?" Is that Galatians, Colossians? Wait, a better example, this marriage thing. Sort of interesting, right? What are the implications of this marriage conversation? What do they have to do with family for me? One of the reasons why I'm not really that interested in marriage as a political goal is because I

> think it kind of privatizes relationships in a way. It's sort of saying this is an exclusive relationship that's honored by the state in a way that might end up being destructive to the broader networks of communities. But who's asking these questions about our "family values?"[4]

Bayard is a wonderful example of a person using theological formulations to offer a critical analysis of his ideas of identity in relation to his family. His moral standards emerge from a Christological framing of family that disrupts our context's notion of biological familial bonds. At another point in his interview, Bayard heartily celebrates the connections that he has with his family, but he is still clear: his family is a place of love and refuge *because* it affirms diverse identities and realities and supports unknown relationship possibilities. For him, the notion of family as an unstable social construct makes room for it to exist as a disruptive space wherein norms of gender, race, and sexuality can come into deep question and be subject to pointed critical analysis. Together with a theological emphasis on radical notions of family, Bayard's family norms suggest that destabilized selves, practices, and relationships are the moral norms that make the family a liberating place to be. When we begin to constrict those, according to Bayard's account, we confine human possibility to the realm of social management, thereby limiting our family values to reflect realities and desires that are not even our own.

Reorienting: "My Identity Doesn't Need My Family's Approval."

Brother M. is an Atlanta community activist and scholar in his early 50s. He has lived in Atlanta for about 25 years.

> So we're all at Aunt Dee Dee's house and my cousins are there with their back-to-school clothes. I say in front of everybody, but no one in particular, "it must be great being a girl" and "gee I wish I could be a girl because girls get to wear great clothes." Now I don't remember ever wanting to not be a boy. But not knowing better, I thought girls had more freedom. I didn't know what constraints girls had to deal with. I knew from my vantage point that boys have always been taught what not to do, so I was like, "wow you get to wear these colors and purple and whatever." The next thing I know, [my cousin] comes back into the bedroom and says, "Uncle Wash wants you." So I walked down the hall. I get there and my father says, "Did you say that you wanted to be a girl?" That's all he heard. Meanwhile, I pieced

it together that [my cousin] must've run and told. So I'm terrified. I try to explain what I meant by that and so I say, "Yeah…."

Well, before I can get the next word out, he smacks me and I see stars. He says, "Get out of my sight." And so I turn to walk back down the hallway. I remember what that hallway looked like and the feeling that hallway represented, like, my isolation, my embarrassment. It felt like [it was] a death row walk because I'm 11 and I'm walking away from that moment with my father, but then I've got to deal with whatever the kids are going to do. They didn't do much. My mother came later on to ask if I was all right, and I don't recall even responding. She said, "You can't just say anything. You have to watch what you say. You can't go around saying stupid stuff like that." What she said seemed very different from my father's response. My father was very flat, basically like "That's not acceptable, I'm not having it. And I'm going to punish you for it." My mother's [response] I took as not so much as scolding but like a warning. Either way, both were a confirmation for me of what I suspected, which was that I am not safe, and in order to survive – because I really did think on some visceral level that I didn't know if my father would kill me – I had to remember that it was not safe to be who I was.

Well, years later as an adult, I thought about the struggle of discovering my full identity and my full self and the threat of that somehow separating me from my family. I realized that my identity doesn't need my family's approval. The first time I challenged my father was about coming out. And I completely challenged him, completely defied his authority. It was the most liberating and terrifying act up to that point in my life. And part of that was because I rewrote and kind of reshaped our relationship. In my family now – including my parents who eventually came FULL circle – there's a different level of safety than I had. I'm not dealing with messages about being something I'm not because I am intentional about placing myself in a setting that reaffirms and supports my values.[5]

By choosing to come out to his father in defiance of a don't-ask-don't-tell policy around queer sexuality within the family, Brother M. created a new possibility for relating. The irruption of his reality, experiences, and continued gay presence within the life of the family was a series of morally agential moments that not only reorient him to a more liberating posture toward himself, but it also invited into the family space a reorientation of identities and politics. For Brother M. and his father, the disruption of normative sexualities also fostered a new trajectory for the ways that they could relate to one another. Brother M. mentioned that after years of sharing unabridged experiences from his life (since he eventually lived

in a different state from his parents), his family adjusted to the norm of acceptance. This acceptance, he informed me, was not merely about his sexuality and sexual practices; rather, the acceptance was about the distinct personhoods present within the family. Brother M. boasts that his courage to come out and continue to engage his family in critical conversation changed the landscape of what their family could be. His mother could be a different mother; his father, a different father; and his brother, a different brother. Each of them was safe—in whatever manifestation of identity and relationship that presented itself honestly within the family.

Deconstructing "Family" and Race Politics

As the previous section shows, the "family" is a setting that produces, exchanges, and reifies difference.[6] Even more, the context of the family produces mutually constituted race, gender, and sexuality norms. For Feder, speaking of family requires that we consider it as "both the social formation and the normative idea that shapes our understanding of what the family is or is supposed to be."[7] Indeed, the family is the place where we become and also where we resist the structures of becoming.

In her work on family and development, April Few contends, "the family, as a social institution, and even as an ideology, is central in shaping racialized, gendered, and sexual meanings and practices. The family is where we learn how to think of ourselves and others, form expectations of privilege or oppression, and behave in specific contexts."[8] As Few reads it, the family is as much a norm-producing space as it is a site of moral formation. These qualities of the family context certainly call us to engage it as something that is both a recipient and perpetuator of various technologies of normalization. Adding to the thoughts offered by Feder and Few, I assert that since the family offers itself as a "safe space" in which dispensation and internalization of social norms can occur, it can be viewed not only as a site of formation, but also one of *trans*formation. This is possible because the disciplinary power and technologies of normalization around sex, and race and gender, which stabilize the family simultaneously are being formed *within* the family. Thus, as the family becomes a site of pedagogy, it also has the capacity to become one of disruption.

Learning how to reorient one's relation to the norms within family is an important product of deconstructive work, and it requires us to name and *break* the technologies at work. McWhorter suggests that a break in the regime of normalization calls for a break between "increased capacity

(progression along a developmental scale) and increased docility (the narrowing of behavioral possibility)."[9] Here, she is pointing to the ways that technologies of normalization orient our progress and capacity for being a certain kind of self (or body, for her) and also diminish our ideas of what we can become. This limit in behavioral possibilities, which McWhorter names as docility, circumvents our freedom of imagination—moral imagination, even—and regulates our notions of acceptable and worthwhile human practices. Yet ironically, McWhorter's claim leaves room for the possibility that we can increase our capacity for development, if we can evade (or at least counterbalance) the docility promoted by the normalizing regime.

According to McWhorter, counterbalance, "depends upon affirming the free, open playfulness of human possibility even within regimes of [normalization] without getting stuck in or succumbing to any one … discourse or formation."[10] We need continued growth in capability. Moreover, McWhorter's claims helps reminds us that this growth in capability is a tenuous thing, as we must be careful not to also grow in docility. We need to find ways to continue to grow in capability, ways to be strengthened and enabled, that don't make us more docile, more disabled at the same time. For Foucault, the question is quite pressing, "How can the growth of capabilities (*capacités*) be disconnected from the intensification of power relations?"[11] McWhorter's version of the question is "How can I affirm the 'truth' of my normalized (homo)sexual 'identity' while at the same time I refuse the cancellation of freedom and the foreclosure of becoming that sexual identities have produced?"[12] In the same light, I ask and answer simultaneously, how can our process of affirming truth and growth in capability develop while we stay grounded in the materiality of our experiences within our families? And more than that, how can our family experiences help us to deconstruct the technologies and categories that shape how we think of those experiences in the first place?

I find that a purposeful engagement with the technologies that my respondents name is a worthwhile step in this process. In fact, my own research shows that a deeper look into the ways that individuals traverse the ambiguous space between growing their own capacities and eschewing mechanisms of docility unmasks several disciplinary categories. Interestingly enough, social constructions of identity allow them to maintain an understanding of self while troubling the normalizing structures that make those selves interrelate in certain ways within the family.

Three key structures and categories have emerged in my interviews as vehicles for normalizing technologies in my participants' experiences and views of family. In the excerpts above, we see these technologies contribute to the language, assumptions, and relationships between family members. One structure to which their narratives point is religious (particularly, Christian) ideological and behavioral mandates. For example, both Denise and Bayard refer to Christianity as an informing framework for how they understand norms. Denise interprets her aunt's suggestion to "join a sorority" and warning about cutting her hair as mandates to "stay in the Christian norm." Conversely, Bayard uses his understanding of Christianity, Jesus particularly, as a way to frame a nonnormative vision of family. In both cases, a religious framework situates norms.

A second category to which their excerpts point is racialized politics of respectability and acceptability. Brother M. read his parents' responses to his admission of wanting to be able to wear lots of colors like girls do as a "warning." In the interaction, he learned that as a young black boy, he was not at liberty to "go around saying stupid stuff like that." "Watch[ing] what you say," he learned, was a way to maintain safe acceptance within the family.

A third normalizing structure to which the excerpts point is economic disciplinary powers. Here again, Denise's experience is useful. She suggests that economic and material provisions are normal in her family and that those norms produce expectations among family members. For Denise, her mother's expectation that she could provide financially feels like an obligation embedded in her mother's idea of her as a good daughter. Meeting her mother's economic/materials needs, regardless of her own financial abilities, becomes the standard for acceptable behavior.

While the norms that developed within my interviewees' particular families of origin and/or their eventual families of creation may vary, they negotiate one or all of these technologies. In the coming pages, I illustrate ways that a few people in my project deconstruct family through a critical engagement with race. In subsequent chapters, I will treat the other technologies in the contexts of resistance and moral imagination.

Deconstructing Race Politics

The essentializing power of the social category of race is one of the normalizing structures that impacts our experiences of family. The meaning of *black*ness is certainly produced and reproduced within familial space.

What is curious, however, is the way that the totalization of black identity for many black people has been shaped by politics of acceptability and respectability, which act to govern the behaviors, expectations, and ideological postures. This suggests that the experience of racism in our context is not merely due to an external force that acts to subjugate groups of people due to their race; rather, it is a complete system of technologies that, in addition to fostering contexts of subjugation, reify and essentialize human experience based on the social construction of race. We need to ask whether race as a category of self-description creates negative norms or non-essentializing, counter-normalizing relations, regardless of our own intentions. If the social category of race was created by and still operates within a hierarchical structure of races, then the effect of identifying by and with those categories is inherently oppressive.

Some of the participants in my study point especially to two features of race as a social category. First, race as a measurement of appearance—with particular focus on hair texture, skin tone, facial features, and body structure—is named as a significant tool of family relation designation. In fact, phenotypic calculations serve dual roles as measurements of family inclusion and inclusion within/exclusion from the race.

Peaches, a mid-30s black queer woman from Alabama, points to race as a particularly strong normalizing feature of family. When I asked her about norms that shape her idea and experience, she initially responded saying, "There aren't any." But after a moment of reflection, and a sip of her wine, she sat back in her seat and said, "You know, maybe race is a norm. Maybe it's what this whole thing is about." Interestingly, Peaches' experience of race as a normalizing technology contains a subversive element:

> I think that's one of the reasons why I told that first story about my mom and aunt and my uncle. They are very fair-skinned people, and I was very, very black. It was kind of like 'we are family; this is what we look like. It's okay that you're dark and we're very light. Your aunt has blonde hair, and your uncle has red hair, and your mom has kind of blondish hair. You're super, super, super black and your grandmother looks like a white lady; all those things can happen in one family. It's okay.' I think that they did prepare me for what other people were going to say to me, but in my own home, it was just completely normal for anything to exist.[13]

The second feature of race as a category is found in its ability to set cultural, social, and even familial boundaries of behavior for those who identify within the raced category. That is, measurements regarding one's

status as black enough emerge as another categorizing element. The policing of behaviors, moods, motivations, language, choice of appearance (distinct from natural appearance), activities, and general performance stems from a notion of what it is to exist within the race and as a part of the family. Recognizing that this type of policing is a common feature, Bayard, speaks to the ways his family acted in opposition to this norm.

> One thing that I appreciate about my family is that they didn't do a lot around like what it means to be Black. In other words I think that there's a lot of families it sounds like they do a lot of *Black people do this and Black people do that, and you're not gonna do this and that 'cause you're Black*. So within the family, there was a broader range of acceptable Black identities. And that often left me very alienated when here, outside the world, right, because I got picked on by other Black kids for not being Black enough. And so that created some tension so I guess what I appreciated is I'm not setting a norm in terms of Black identity because family is also very diverse. And I never thought that I had to listen to X kind of music or whatever.

So then, does race operate arbitrarily as a normalizing technology arbitrary? No. Both descriptions of race point to it as a feature of categorization. For Peaches, even though the statements from her family were positive, she learned that family could be understood based on a racialized understanding of "what we look like." Likewise, Bayard's lessons about race within his family were liberating, but he understands that family is a space in which certain kinds of blackness can be solidified. Each story alerts us to the specific presence of an inclusion/exclusion motif that permeates discussion around family and race. It is important to note that whether race as a categorizing norm—through racism—suggests that there ought to be divisions based on phenotype, or whether it suggests that those differences ought to be transcended, the point remains: race is a tool of categorization that impacts—positively and negatively—the experience and discourse of family, especially for black people.

Re-thinking and Re-acting Norms: A Constructive Process

As I mentioned above, norms and technologies of normalization are products/producers of certain processes that affects subjects both internally and externally. While this reality might be disheartening since none of

us would like to be reproducing the norms that subjugate our existence in our diverse contexts, the fact that we participate in norm creation and reification can also be good news. This news actually makes it possible for us to consider ways that we might construct positive, irruptive norms for ourselves while paying attention to the means by which we generate and disseminate them. In a nuanced version of this point, Heyes claims that norms are not actually derived from a "transcendental standard," but instead, they derive and operate internally to a group or population.[14] For her, even though there are often transcendental justifications for the norms, the actual management of those norms and identities relating to them come through an internal process. Because of this internally oriented process and operation of normalization, norms have the capacity for change and evolution. As technologies of normalization transform, that is, space opens up for the creation and dissemination of new counter-normalizing norms. And since at least some of the work of normalization is occurring internally, we have the potential to participate in the types of norms that are produced on our own bodies, in our own identities, and within our populations—small or large.

Employing the methods of normalizing technologies, while being aware and purposeful about the norms that we wish to impart can be a revolutionary act. McWhorter suggests that we back away from the notion of refusing normalization *in toto* and consider the possibility of learning how to harness the energy of disciplinary power in a way that reorients us.[15] Admittedly, this method has the potential to bring us right back toward oppressive schema of identity and category, but she wants us to consider the possible positive outcomes. It is clear that disciplinary power and the technologies of normalization at work in our social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality within the family are powerfully effective, so engaging their positive usefulness might be one way to generate and establish new destabilizing norms. After all, black queer people have survived and even thrived as individuals who may have been supported within a black family. The complex space of the black family may have possibilities of resistance, perhaps even transformation, for black identities, as Bayard suggests above.

Returning to McWhorter's theory of capacity and docility, I find it pertinent to note that using *new* technologies of normalization *might* be possible, *if* we can increase capacity while decreasing docility. In this way, we would "seek out, create, and cultivate disciplinary practices that produce an expansion of behavioral repertoires, practices that increase the range

within which we exercise our freedom and with which freedom plays itself out beyond who we currently are."[16] Knowing the difference between old and new would be a matter of recognizing those technologies that lead to static, compulsory ways of being and those which foster potentialities.

While canvassing these possibilities for using positively technologies of normalization, I hear the voice of Audre Lorde reminding me that the master's tools will never dismantle the master's house. Thus, while using the master's tools, we must at least recognize that employing technologies of normalization might reproduce the socialization and systematic valuation that leads to oppression and marginalization, no matter the immediate outcome. Perhaps, as I have argued earlier, the process and technologies of normalization are themselves the "enemy" of any possibility of becoming fully free and purposefully non-compulsory human beings that have the capacity to relate to one another based on values that have not been benignly imposed. If this is the case, perhaps we need to consider a *queer* notion of normalization that would allow us to make use of the power, while troubling the aims.

In a discussion about using pleasure to replace pain as a disciplinary tool, McWhorter offers a way for us to queer the concept of normalization. For her, it can exist as an alternative to docility and disability. It can evoke the development of capacities and capabilities that point to "positively" normalized selves. She recognizes that what she offers is an uncomfortable paradox in which "we set as a goal the disruption of normalization, and then we engage in disciplinary practices without a goal in order to effect that disruption," which means that we actually *do* have a goal.[17] But she claims that if we consider it more closely, the paradox dismantles. If we have as our goal the development and expansion of behavioral options, then we are aiming toward ongoing change and trust in new behaviors. This goal can take us toward new freedoms, both within ourselves and also among our neighbors. Learning to grow and change and become the context of different forms of family relationships is certainly a queering of normalization that can benefit us all. This queering, no doubt, includes the work of rewriting and reappropriating norms and destabilizing normalization altogether.

Queer theory/queerness offer tools for disrupting normalization and making room for new norms to take shape. I discussed earlier that some queer theorists believe norms to be the result of Western binaries. One of queer theory's goals is to collapse those binaries, thereby breaking down the foundations of dominant normalization. Presumably, this is achieved

by "troubling, interrogating, and destabilizing the binaries and their attendant [norms], and by embracing indeterminacy, provisionality, and disenchantment to prevent their reinstatement."[18] As the fundamental representatives of these binaries, the norms and processes of normalization are also targets of destabilization. I assert that this whole process of destabilization makes room for disrupting negative and oppressive technologies of normalization and subsequently readying the soil for the implantation of new, destabilizing norms. Likewise, queerness, taken theoretically or practically, can be a means of social transformation in two ways. First, in the ways that queer bodies, language, and orientation "shake up" normative notions of race, gender, sexuality—and the development of each of these constructs—queerness acts influentially on the temporal and spatial realities constructing the norms. Second, and perhaps more importantly, queerness also affects the materiality of normalization by troubling the tangible ways that inhibiting categories of identity imprint themselves on human bodies. In this instance, troubled—or queer—materiality in the normalization process makes physical room for new needs and manifestations of familial norms. New bodies, new relational constructions, and even new economies are possible.

Generating New Norm Possibilities

Here I want to share some of the insights from a few of my research participants who speak about the types of norms they wish to establish in their own family contexts and the means by which those norms are made possible, or sometimes impossible. This section illustrates a basic practice that might be employed as we rethink norms in the family context. It builds on the notion that "there is no plan," and briefly engages the idea of generating norms from a position that is "outside" the norm. It also recognizes the informative history of queer elders as a source for norms of resilience and creativity that allows people to vision and enact family in safe and life-giving ways within contexts that render black queer folks invisible, at best, and morally deviant, at worst.

In the beginning of Chap. 2, Tyler noted that one of the results of her identities (Black, queer, Jamaican, woman) was that a notion of the "normal" family existed only in concept. Her reality afforded, instead, a picture of nonnormativity that began with her situatedness "outside" the norm. At this point, we have certainly learned that no one is actually outside of the norm because there is no "outside." What we have instead are

constantly moving relations to the center—the norm—that pulls everyone into some kind of relationship to the norm. In Tyler's case, the only relationship she had to the norm of heteronormative family life was a marginal one. Marginality, in turn, gave her a perspective on the norm of family that she (and others in the study) found liberating. Because there was no way that she could meet the proposed standard of family set before her, she began with a blank slate, and for her there was no plan.

The reality of having "no plan" emerged among a few of my participants as a great relief amid the stress of not meeting normative familial standards. A few participants made the point that there is a fine line between having no plan and "anything goes." Below, Ashley comments on the freedom of the blank slate:

> Yeah. Family is something that you can create. It can look all kinds of crazy ways. I love that it can change, that you can generate things differently than you ever thought of before, that anything is possible. There is something about my queer identity that governs this anything is possible sort of idea, and that I come from queer ancestors or whatever, sexually queer I'm talking about here. People who have done great work to make this anything-is-possible idea really stick. There have been folks who have tried different ways of being and living just because…. They were already different and so thinking of different things as a creative, generative process was great and good and a part of what it meant for their queer identity I think. I'm just glad that now I get to participate in that kind of life. Like, who knew that I would be able to stand up and say (and live into) what I think family is?[19]

For Ashley, the constructive line between no plan and "anything goes" is an understanding that "anything is *possible*." We might ask whether anyone is actually without a plan or privy to a blank slate of family creation, given each of our proximity to the norms that shape family ideology and practice. Yet, we must be compelled by Ashley's appreciation of her "queer ancestors" who participated in processes of family creation because it was a possible endeavor in the first place. For her, the relationship between possibility and identity is symbiotic, and it speaks to the type of openness to the process of life that having a queer identity makes possible.

Another participant, Harriett T., a legally blind Black lesbian minister, is clear that she is trying to establish a family norm of communicative openness and safety. She spoke about the ways that her family of origin lived into a "don't ask don't tell" policy around difficult subjects, and she claimed that this silencing set up a pattern—norm—within the family that

each family members' experiences were extraneous. Her own blindness, femaleness, and eventual lesbian identity were buried beneath her own and her family's dreams of her becoming a minister. In light of her experiences, Harriett suggested that a norm of family ought to include acute attention to the particularity of family members' identities, experiences, and deep desires to share those with one another. The absence of this example in her family of origin meant, for Harriett, that the creation of norms within her own family would hinge on learning the set of skills and creating the type of environment to make communicative openness and safety possible. She says,

> I think probably maybe one of the biggest norms that I would like to establish, and I think that we are working on doing that, and we have grounds for it, is the idea that no subject is too heavy for the weight, for that which bears up the relationship. I think sometimes people don't talk about things because they think that [their] partner can't appreciate it, or understand it, or respect it, or it's gonna run them away. I think that my yearning for that norm has also developed out of the fact that I'm with someone who's older than me, and so she has a lot of different ideas about being in the world, because she's been in the world longer than I have, so she should have all that stuff. I think that the idea about being free enough to discuss anything with your partner, anything with your family member is, well ought to be, a norm, and the idea that to not do that is destructive.[20]

In Harriett T.'s estimation, "bearing up" the weight of individual and collective experiences, insights, and longings ought to be a norm within family. For her, this communicative honesty is something that can both attend to particularities within the family and also call the family to reflect constructively with one another. With this suggestion, Harriett T. wants to establish a norm of moral reflection and action within family.

Harriett's lesbian identity and same-gender partnership is a huge contributing factor to her ability to think through new norm possibilities and the ways that she would like to establish them. She continues,

> I think the whole lesbian thing speaks to my belief in the ability to create these very interesting paradigm shifts where we talk about where we can mother this way, we can parent this way, we can love this way, we can partner this way. And it's like with my partner, people have said – well, people have asked me, "Is she your wife?" And, well, that's a term that we don't use for ourselves, because for us, there's just so many possibilities as lesbians to talk

> about what it means to be partnered in this world. So I think that the whole lesbian thing is a very creative expression of existence and the loving each other, and I think it also speaks to a level of what I believe to be the infinite quality of love because you can never – I do believe this, that you can love someone all your life and never reach the boundaries of who they are as a person.[21]

Loving one another is an open process in which we recognize the limits in our ability to know and categorize one another.

Later in her interview, Harriett T. suggested that this limit—which undoubtedly feels restrictive—actually grants us true freedom to engage in loving relationship with other human beings. Being set free from the limits of category, behavioral and structural norms, and hierarchical identity constructions is a gift that comes from having the courage to innovate standards of relationship that focus on unknown potentialities rather than strictly stable identities and politics. The morally disruptive standard of norms, according to Harriett, lies in unreachable boundaries of selfhood and their irruption into the realm of family.

Conclusion

Family relationships need to and ought to undergo disruption. The dynamics within families are products of various technologies of normalization, and too often, these technologies lead to inequality, subjugation, and marginalization of certain identities. Left unattended, these technologies create and reify stable identities that inhibit individual freedom and circumscribe possibilities for healthy, life-giving relationships. We organize ourselves around identities, and because they are embodied, we experience them in irrefutable, tangible ways. These socially constructed, but undeniably real, identities relate to one another in ways structured both by the categories of identities themselves and also by the normalizing technologies of relationship formation. In short, that the identities exist is a product of the type of relationships for which we make consistent room in our contexts. As we try to dismantle the structures and normalizing processes that foster negative identities, the process of disruption is an important moral step in confronting norms.

The dismantling of power in the disruptive–irruptive process is a practice of moral agency. As such, it works both to destabilize structures and to recognize the materiality of the identities that are a product of those

structures. Disruptive and irruptive work, in this way, are quite queer. Simultaneously recognizing that selves are real and that differences of experienced selves are real, disruption uses deconstructive elements to confront the strictures and structures that exist between those selves. What is morally agential about this process, then, is the repudiation of the systems that perpetuate oppression. While caring for actual human lives and experiences, black queer people are doing the work of disrupting models of family and relationships. In this chapter, I pointed to ways my research participants expressed theoretical and practical perspectives on "family." The moral agency that these folks employ begins with naming the types of selves and identities, as well as categories, that they see present in family contexts. By critically reflecting on the implications of those types of selves and their relationships, a few of my participants also evaluate the religious hegemony, race politics, and inhibiting economic frameworks that inform and reinforce many norms within their families. Again, in naming and interrogating these structures, black queer people participate in a kind of moral agency that makes room for them to reorient themselves in relation to the categories of identity and technologies of normalization that they experience. By dismantling the structures that hold together certain identities and unequal power dynamics between those identities, these participants engage in an ethical practice of moral imagination and formation in general, making room for new, irruptive norm creation.

Norms exist. Identities are normalized, and more than this, categories of identity are normalized. The purpose of disruption is not to erase norms, though decentering norms is certainly a worthwhile endeavor and an implicit aim of this project's work. Instead, disruption makes room for the irruption of new counter-normalizing norms that are themselves examples of new possibilities. In my estimation, this rupture in normalization allows us to recognize the ways that certain relationships and relationship expectations become normal, regardless of the ways that people experience them. The moral task that we *all* face, and which black queer people in this project have illustrated, is maintaining a critical and generative posture in relation to norms that exist in our context. I will discuss the role of subversive–generative moral imagination in Chap. 5, but in relation to disruption, I find it pertinent to mention that the dismantling process aims, fundamentally, toward creation of new space. In this space, where pieces of dismantled structures and technologies remain, there is room for people who are marginalized, silenced, and disempowered to create and reflect on new, queerly disruptive norms. Whether these new

norms are good, just, life-giving or healthy becomes, as a consequence to the disruptive process, a subject for new evaluation. In short, the production of and engagement with familial norms, for some black queer people in this project is a work that is able to rest on something alternative to ongoing limits of race, gender, and sexuality. Our families are reflective of something distinctive, and our ideas of forming and inhabiting relationships are part of moral processes of visioning that begin with the courage to shatter foundations.

This necessary courage calls me to reflect on Valerie Lehr's words that begin this chapter, "Gays and lesbians have often used the term 'family' to describe others who have claimed a gay or lesbian identity." Family has been deconstructed by a few black queer folk speaking in this project; this disruptive moral moment has left some notion of a queer family intact. Why is that the case? What significance is there in finding family among "strangers"? I suggest that when queer people refer to themselves and one another as family, they are not framing relations of ownership, regulation, or commoditization. Implicit in the warm reference is not an undertone of "natural" gender norms or assumed performance of race, nor is there an underlying assumption of independence—economic or otherwise—that would shape the interaction between individuals. Instead, what replaces these possibly normative structures of relation is a different kind of assumption—a queered set of categorical distinctions that evoke a sense of connection. Ownership is often replaced with a desire for belonging; regulation, with appreciation of limitlessness; and commoditization, with nonexploitative showcasing. Instead of gender norms, race politics, and forced economic individuation, people look for irregularity and collective work and responsibility. Thus, in the queerness of disruptive action, which is followed by the irruption of queer norm construction, we have evidence of moral agency that ought not be rendered obscure, as it finds itself at the center of our truest efforts to be our best selves—together.

Notes

1. Traci West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 144.
2. Benito [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, 29 April 2010.
3. Denise [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, 6 April 2010.

4. Bayard Rustin [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, 20 April 2010.
5. Brother M. [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, 27 April 2010.
6. Feder, 4.
7. Ibid., 5.
8. April L. Few, "Theorizing with Racial-Ethnic Feminisms in Family Studies," in Sally A. Lloyd, April L. Few, and Catherine R. Allen, eds., *Handbook of Feminist Family Studies* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2009) 37.
9. McWhorter, 180.
10. Ibid.
11. Michel Foucault, "What is Enlightenment?" in Paul Rabinow, ed., *Ethics: Subjectivity and Truth*, Vol. 1 of *The Essential Works of Foucault, 1954–1984* (New York: New Press, 1997) 317.
12. Ibid., 181.
13. Peaches [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Decatur, GA 15 April 2010.
14. Heyes, 6.
15. McWhorter, 180.
16. Ibid., 182.
17. Ibid.
18. Phillips and Stewart, 382.
19. Ashley [pseudo.], interview by the research assistant (Sara J. Toering), field notes, Atlanta, GA, 13 April 2010.
20. Harriett Tubman [pseudo.], interview by the author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 3 May 2010. She chose this pseudonym to represent the way that living into her identity as a legally blind, black lesbian is like traversing the underground of our society and leading people through darkness to places of freedom, renewal, and safety.
21. Ibid.

CHAPTER 5

From Norms to Values: Moral Agency and Creative Resistance

Introduction

Black queer people loving ourselves and loving one another is a radical, revolutionary, creative, and resistant act. In so doing, we resist three things: first, that black lives are unlivable and unworthy of protection, care, justice, and love; second, that material realities of oppression are inevitable outcomes of black subjectivity. And third, that black *queer* subjectivity is devoid of moral and ethical reasoning and practice. By living into a claim that black queer subjectivity is as morally comprised as any other subjectivity, black queers resist both internal and external disciplines that place moral subjectivity solely in the realm of white, heteronormative, middle-class experiences. Even more, as black queers exercise this resistance in relation to capitalist norms within the family, we challenge the family's colonizing power. In short, when we acknowledge black queer moral subjectivity, we push back against capitalist economies of relation.

In the initial pages of this work, I mentioned that the story of family in our context could easily be told through a narrative of economics and capitalism. American economic motivation reverberates loudly in the rhetoric of our "American Dream" and the discourse surrounding our belief that each one of us can be (and *have*) anything that we desire. Unfortunately, that is a falsehood exampled by the diverse array of economic classes present in our society as well as the *variety* of means by which people coalesce in order to survive the destructive disciplinary powers of capital-driven notions of family.

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Capitalism has colonized the family. According to Valerie Lehr, author of *Queer Family Values*, fears about the breakdown of family, which present themselves most often in discussions about same-sex marriage, "are materially based, since family connections continue to be a primary means of assuring that care is provided for children, the incapacitated, and the elderly."[1] People are fighting to maintain the particular institution of family "because they feel that their individual survival depends upon [it]."[2] Thus, the heteronormative nuclear family model is a norm/aspiration for everyone because of economic benefits.[3]

The social institution of family has maintained a central role "in defining status for and maintaining inequalities among people."[4] The centrality of the family's role is based on the notion that family and capitalism operate through a mutually beneficial and reinforcing relationship: capitalism needs nuclear families, and some families structure themselves on a capitalist model. There are a plethora of theories as to why these environments operate in such a symbiotic way. Reasons range from the maintenance of patriarchy to the need for the family to be a formative space for future laborers (or capitalists). Lehr's list, while not exhaustive, is an impressive illustration of the intricate relationship between the market system and family.

> Other explanations for this particular form of family include the need to ensure paternity (at least for property owners) so that inheritance follows paternal lines; the capitalist need for consumer units, units that are important for capitalism because they create markets for the goods produced (Barrett 1980); the importance of dependent wives and children on male workers for minimizing the resistance of labor; the importance of nuclear family dynamics for creating the psychological predispositions necessary for capitalism and liberalism; the support that the family-household ideology provides for an understanding of masculinity that is critical for producing male laborers and male citizens; and the creation of a reserve labor pool of women workers through the formation of a dual labor market.[5]

The economic system establishes and reinforces sex/gender relations that become embedded in both the family context and the market. What strengthens their ability to do so is an ideological assertion that these ways of being and categorizing (capitalist managing laborer; husbands managing wives; wives producing "free labor") are natural and desirable.

Certainly the legacy of chattel slavery along with the residue of the US expansionism and economic system created and continues to foster large-

scale barriers to economic sustainability and individual and social freedoms based on this model. Situated outside the norms and benefits of whiteness and, until recently, middle-class status, black people and black families in the American context have experienced the relationship between the market system and the family in a slightly different way. As I will explain more below, black Americans' subjectivity within this system was shaped by a complex economy of relations based on the intersection of race, gender, class, and sexuality dynamics. Through the experience of black Americans, we can see the disciplinary power of the family and economic system used in a way to reinforce racial, gender, and sexual divisions.

Black people have had to be creatively responsive to the unjust and oppressive social and economic circumstances that sustain American life. And, in response to social and religious sanctions on heteronormativity as the moral standard for family life, many black queers have expanded these efforts of decolonization to include nonnormative ways of enacting family. According to my research, some black queers are acting and thinking differently about the interpersonal dynamics within families, the role of the family context in shaping identities and selves, and the moral products of a limited and normativized concept of family. In fact, many of my research participants' claims were consistent with Lehr's as they pointed to the capitalistic mechanisms that structure our economy of relationships. According to one interviewee, Ashley, capitalist normalization in families creates "self-interested divisiveness" that is masked as freedom of choice, financially responsible self-sufficiency, and sexual fidelity.[6] For her, family as a site of capitalist ideology production is certainly effective for people who value resource-hoarding and colonization of bodies. It is also effective, she claimed, if we want to create subjects who control one another.

One of my research participants, Timothy, a graduate student studying English and Black religion, calls for a closer examination of our values and resistance to the rhetoric that we use around "the black family."[7] He says,

> The conversation right now (in the hetero black community) is about how to "save" the family, which is generally about how to save black men and their money. So these conversations support the perpetuation of a patriarchal, capital-driven model of family. My definition tries to speak against that understanding of family. We need to think about family outside a patriarchal or economic model that's mainly about inheritance or future economics, it's about a different way of creating network and thinking about love, relationships.

My research also suggests that some black queer people are creatively resisting dominant familial formation and norms by pushing back against (a) norms that subjugate diverse expressions of identities and selves, and (b) structures that foster unequal and oppressive relationship dynamics. In this chapter, I focus on the disciplinary powers of capitalism (and the fear of material lack) and gender normalization that form the basis for normative family dynamics. Building on values like interdependence, loyalty and presence, unconditional relationships, shared history, whole health, love, poetic creativity, and freedom for diverse subjectivity and human potentiality, some of my participants described their own efforts to resist a biologically determined, economically independent, "resource-hoarding," nuclear, heteropatriarchal family construct. Timothy articulates this idea well:

> My idea of family and the ways I practice it] are acts of resistance because they are intentionally against the biologically determined and socially constructed narrative that we inhabit. It is a form of resistance because it doesn't adhere to the normalizing structure of and narrative about the ways family is supposed to look. It is resistant by the very fact that I *call* it a family. That I can and do call it family resists what family is supposed to be. If family (normatively) is supposed to biologically reproduce itself, my form of family is about the multiplication of love, justice, and truth. But it doesn't occur on the level of biology. It occurs on the level of one's intention for it occur.

Timothy names several features of resistance that I expound in this chapter. First, his intentional approach to family is counter-normative, in that resists the compulsory way that people understand, enact, and perpetuate it. Second, Timothy recognizes that there is a resist-able quality about family and its makeup. For him, family does not have to be limited by images of what it is "supposed to look" like. Even more, calling something family that does not look like family is, for Timothy, an important act of resistance. Timothy's intention, recognition, and reappropriation of the term family entail a movement through resistance, reconstruction, and eventually creation.

Several of my interviewees shared with me some of the values that inform their notions of family and help them shape their relationships into ones that reflect those family values. At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to share stories that would illustrate their idea of family. I asked for these stories in order to hear how each person would narrate

the "definition" or "description" of family that they would be invoking throughout our conversation. Soon after the stories were told, I asked a different kind of question to get them to begin thinking more deliberately about the values that influence their ideas and practices of family. I asked them to name five terms that they associate with family and allowed them to choose one term on which to expound. Through my analysis of these sections of the interviews, I have grouped their distinctly articulated values into four themes: *interdependence*; *loyalty and presence*; *unconditional (but non-compulsory) relationships*; and *shared history and belonging*.

I engage these and other values that motivate black queers to disrupt normative ideas of family and also resist the constraints of familial norms that limit their individual and collective moral agency as black queer people. I argue that as moral agents, black queers participate in something that I call *creative resistance*. Creative resistance is a mechanism by which marginalized people resist and eschew the internal and external disciplines and disciplinary powers that support and foster institutional assimilation. By assessing and implementing their own values and creating new discourses and norms, creative resisters redact, improvise, and initiate community narratives as well as new practices of kinship and family, thereby transforming social realities.

Capitalism and the Family: Propagating an Economy of Values

The development of a market economy produced a family system that appeared to stand in direct opposition to the market.[8] As such, this opposition might suggest that the family is an anticapitalist space. The family and the capitalist society appear to be pulling in "separate directions," making family a "sphere of privacy, warmth, and individuated human relations" and the market, a place of cold human relations based mostly on exchange.[9] In reality, the family and market are mutually interactive spheres that manifest in a public/private distinction, and the family context supports capitalism by appearing to be a refuge.[10]

Feminist, queer, and critical race theorists illuminate a different kind of relationship between the family and the market system. They suggest that the family and the market system constitute an interrelated economic system that, in turn, regulates the economy of relationships in each environment. The relationship between capitalism and the family is mutually

beneficial—especially for those who participate mostly in the market economy. In relation to gender, the family, and the market, Angela P. Harris argues that both the capitalists and laborers benefit from the unpaid labor in the family sphere. She says,

> Capitalists benefit indirectly through access to a pool of "ideal workers" available full-time for their entire careers, undistracted by the demands of family life; workers benefit directly from their ability to outsource care work to women. In this way, "productive" labor is supported by "reproductive" labor—the labor involved in keeping workers fed, clothed, and otherwise cared-for; the labor of socializing and caring for children who are too young to work; and the labor of caring for the elderly who are too old to work.[11]

For Harris, exploitation travels down the proverbial economic and social (and racial) ladder to ultimately exploit those engaged in unpaid (read: devalued) work within the system. This hierarchical arrangement of values relates both to actions (agency) and persons (subjectivity) and constitutes the economy of relationships that are exacted in the market and the family.

Similarly, Catherine McKinnon claims that as a "unit of male dominance, a locale of male violence and reproductive exploitation," the family is the primary locus of dominant forces.[12] Rather than contradicting each other, then, capitalism and family complement one another and share the same authority structure evident in similar patterns of "organization, distribution of wealth, and resource control."[13] Thus, analyses of class, race, gender, and sexuality from a structural perspective, must understand the market in conjunction with the family, rather than in opposition to it.[14]

Structures of relationship within families, I have argued, are derived from notions of race, gender, and sexuality normalization that occur both within and outside of the family structure. The distinction between "inside" and "outside" familial normalizing technologies is virtually unnecessary, as economies of relationship are governed specifically by disciplinary powers that are mutually reinforced through a heteropatriarchal capitalist family system. In the remainder of this section, I explore the ways that capitalism and family constitute a symbiotic relationship in three ways. First, I expose the racial implications of creating a "border" between family and capitalism, public and private. Second, I turn to Ellen K. Feder to illuminate the disciplinary power in the family system. Lastly, I elucidate the "family values" that manifest—explicitly and implicitly—as a result of the capitalist family system that shapes our society.

The Exclusionary Boundary of "Family"

Nancy Chodorow suggests that the development of capitalism marked borderlines between "home" and "workplace" in such a way that the former became the locus of behavior and value education for the latter.[15] Women in the roles of wife and mother became moral educators whose responsibility it was to shape the types of selves that could successfully participate in each sphere.[16] The pedagogical role of the mother was aimed toward a kind of personality creation in which "the desire for and obligation to independence" were qualities cultivated in the home environment.[17] Women's work in the family, then, makes a very direct contribution to the social reproduction of capitalist ideology and behavior.[18] Even more, this work illustrates one way that the market economy and family work together to inform and mutually enhance one another. And, while they enhance one another, they reinforce the boundaries that exist between them.

But Chodorow's analysis depends on a racially homogenized starting point, and we need a more nuanced picture of the boundary between the capitalist system and the family. I am of the Ellen K. Feder and Hortense Spillers camp, since they engage racial history in the development of gender in the American family. Drawing on Hortense Spiller's 1987 essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Feder argues that Chodorow's claim about gender being formed in the realm of domesticity needs to engage the racial history within the development of gender in our context."[19] Feder and Spillers note that Chodorow's and other feminists' arguments about the co-constitutive "spheres" of capitalism and the family miss the ways that nonwhite (particularly, black) bodies and selves are specifically located outside the boundaries of the family.[20] Spillers notes how for Chodorow (and other feminists), "woman" actually means "white woman."

The notion of gender that shapes feminists' arguments on the framing of "public" and "private" spheres is based upon a racialized economy of relationships. The history of chattel slavery housed a set of languages that determined what bodies and selves were designated by common social signifiers, and for Spillers, the fact that "woman" denoted white womanhood in particular, the realm in which family created/reified gender was not a realm of which black bodies and selves were a part. Even more, if gender was understood in terms of whiteness, so too was the notion and realm of family in which that gender operated. Thus, the realm/sphere

in which black bodies were ascribed was the economic sphere.[21] Existing outside of the proper arena of gender formation and formal family in our context, black bodies and selves inhabited and even formed the basis of the mechanism of the market economy. While whiteness became gendered through a privatized family, black people's bodies and selves were given meaning beyond the dominant family system—in the economic system of property.[22] In short, the boundaries of domesticity about which Chodorow and others speak are marked by slave economies that are beyond it.

This demarcation between the family system and slave economy shaped a legacy of legal and social sanctions that characterize notions of the family in general and the black family in particular.[23] "Family," now modified by the "grammars" producing race and gender, denotes units of relationality that are (a) distinctive from the slave/economy realm and (b) comprised of genders and gender economies based on "master" or "dominant owner" rubrics. As evidence of Spillers' claim, history shows that the same set of laws that designated black children as born slaves (thereby outside of a legally recognized and supported unit of kinship) also "guaranteed paternal authority in white families."[24] The simultaneous designation of maternal lineage as the determining factor for slave status and paternal lineage as that which legally designates parentage and inheritance lines delegitimized the children of black mothers and gave white fathers legal and economic authority within the family. Thus, an attempt to separate the slave/economy from notions of the family dismisses their historical relationship.

The legacy of this "grammar" reaches far beyond slavery to contemporary social and legal characterizations of family. For example, Patrick Moynihan's 1965 report, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, uses the dominant understanding of white, male-led family to ultimately stabilize the delegitimization of children of black women and simultaneously draw a boundary around what can and cannot be classified as a family.[25] As a widely read and publicly debated work, Moynihan's report had the power to situate black family relations as inferior to white ones.[26]

Panoptic Mechanics: The Family's Disciplinary Power

While the market and the family wield extreme power in normalizing class, sexuality, gender, and race, the home (including the neighborhood and household) also has a particularly important and privileged position in sustaining disciplinary power.[27] Feder extends the force of disciplinary

power beyond the hierarchical institutions that Michel Foucault analyzes in *Discipline and Punish* and applies the concept to the context of the family in her analysis of Levittown and the formation of race and gender. She uses the story of the 1950s founding of Levittown, which was a post–World War II suburban development, to illustrate the family's relation to the production of gender and racial difference. The suburban household setting enforced racialization initially through the allotment of neighborhood space based on race, with whites getting the best. Whites were the economically, socially, and politically "valuable" families, and any group's placement on the hierarchy of normal/valuable residents depended upon their approximation of or access to whiteness. But designating which types of families represented the desirable whiteness within the neighborhood was only one type of normalization. The interior plans of the homes also designated the types of spaces and activities (and perhaps subjectivities) that best supported this desirable family.

The suburban household enforced racialization as well as categories and physical spaces that determined, regulated, and reified gender and gender role divisions. The designation of public and private spaces within the home, made possible the continued observation of behaviors designated for certain spaces. In the same way that Levittown worked to designate which types of family represented desirable whiteness within the neighborhood, the interior plans of the homes designated the types of spaces and activities that best supported this desirable family.

The creation of freestanding "single family units" that could boast privacy and economic stability did not evade the mutually enforced regulation that could take place within *and* among households of families who understood what regulations should happen in *every* family within the neighborhood. Feder writes,

> The question "What will the neighbors think?" marks the extension of the panoptic operation into the space beyond the bounds of the private sphere, into the neighborhood occupied by other families. The surveillance characterizing private familial space and that characterizing the public space of the neighborhood are analogues: The "neighborhood," whether taken to be the families occupying nearby houses or more loosely as a community comprising extended family, or those who share a common religious affiliation or are members of the PTA, enjoins individual families to incorporate the community's expectations, just as a family compels individual members to adopt its values.[28]

The family's disciplinary power is simultaneously internal and external, mutually enforcing and divisive, and it makes room for the normalization of various categories within the family, including gender. The privacy of the white middle class single-family unit—with its spatial designations, technical home mastery machinery, regulatory janitorial and child-rearing functions—was undoubtedly a Panoptic prison that highlighted both the gender disparities exacted in a public–private power system and a manifestation of racialized familial abnormality. As it was exampled through Levittown's divisions between its most and least desirable residents, single-family units marked a space where whiteness normalized the middle-class family.

"Borderlands" Morality: Capitalist Family Values

Neighborhood and household technologies of normalization coupled with family values contribute(d) to the creation and structuring the capitalist family system. Values in the market and family contexts produced and were produced by an economy of relationships that black queer virtues and values ultimately resist. While many values emerge and overlap to inform a capitalist family system, I highlight four that seem to be pervasive and particularly effective in regulating relationship dynamics: individualism and independence; private/nuclear ownership and dominion; the importance of (singular) male leadership (which seems to be a foundational value for the other themes, really); and inherent inequality, which is based on the continued division between the public and private spheres.

Individualism and Independence

One of the most prominent values that shapes the family–market system is an appreciation for individualism and independence. One can trace the development of these values in the family–market system most easily by employing Spillers' analysis of the grammar that emerges from historical terms. Our current understanding of the definition and connotation of independence and the individual (as a subjectivity) are derived from their direct relationship to industrialization, property ownership, and propensity for competitive economic sustainability.

The development of the bourgeoisie family, along with the increased distinction between capitalists and workers in the market system, encouraged individualism.[29] The concept of the individual was directly linked to privacy (privatization), productive property, and economic competi-

tion.[30] "Individual" designated a male who has his basic needs met and who operates as the leader within a male-dominated family.[31] In the eighteenth century, John Locke described the individual as "one who owns property," and who is also "rational and industrious."[32] This person's purpose is to increase *his* wealth through labor efforts, while maintaining a marriage and running a household through his *wife's* management.[33] This individual was understood as a "proper" citizen whose rationality (through property ownership) could be recognized and supported by the government and system of economy, entities which also upheld the "rights of the rational over the irrational."[34]

The notion of independence supports the formation of the individual. Property ownership, and the ability to exchange goods and freely move about in the marketplace, for example, are privileges that not only speak to one as an individual but also as an autonomous being. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon claim that the term independence, in its early English usage, denoted a relationship of subordination.[35] A dependent person was one who relied on someone for support, but a dependent was also described as "a retainer, attendant, subordinate, servant."[36] The terminology surrounding independence reflected a social context that was built on a subordination framework, which was not attached to one's subjective value.

Contemporary welfare regulations are products and producers of these notions of individualism and independence, though the subjective value of differently raced and gendered bodies marks differences within the welfare system. Those notions generate ideas of fitness for autonomous citizenship in our society.[37]

> When the federal programs we call "welfare" were instituted, payments were granted so that mothers without husbands could stay at home and care for their children. Today, mothers receiving TANF (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families) are expected to engage in wage work in order to be considered deserving of state economic support. Wage work is the opposite of dependency in contemporary life, and to be considered dependent (as are children and people whose disabilities prevent full participation in the workforce) is to be unfit for full citizenship.[38]

In the New Deal legislation, the dependence of welfare is set in opposition to the independence of social security. Even more, within the welfare system, money is supposed to go to "good" or deserving dependents—

not black women. The concern of welfare grew in the 1960s when civil right legislation ensured that black women could be a part of the welfare system.

To be clear, the value of individual independence, wherein wages are provided to single persons present in the market, sets up inequality.[39] When we pay single individuals for work "in the system," we devalue, by not directly compensating or even recognizing, the "economy of dependability that takes place in order for that individual to even participate in the wage earning system."[40] In this way, that wage-earning person is economically valued within the system as an "autonomous individual … provider," while the dependency worker, who acts as "a custodian of the autonomous individual's wellbeing" is a secondary recipient of the market system's regulations.[41] In fact, there really is no such thing as independence, as the actual mechanisms of the capitalist system and the family both rely on an economy of relationships in which some are subordinate, economically unproductive, and socially unrecognized.[42] What *is* real, however, is the inequality that our culture's value of independence and individualism reinforces with the welfare system. In short, the values of individualism and independence bring about "family values" of inequality and subordination.

Private and "Nuclear" Ownership

Another family value that emerges, which is also directly related to individualism and independence, is private ownership and dominion (or control). The existence and continued operation of a market–family system makes room for family to be understood as a privatized unit of economic production and benefit. The structure of the family, however, with only a head of household understood as a wage earning individual, suggests that those families who can own the labor in the household and exist in an autonomous posture in the market are families deserving of the most social, legal, and economic benefit. The development and maintenance of male supremacy in the space of the family as well as in the space of the market, which corresponds with the development of concepts of private property ensures the economical and social downfall of women.[43] Even more, unquestioned male supremacy in the family threatens the economic, political, and social well-being of any person who participates in a family that is neither (a) economically independent nor (b) run by someone who is not an "individual" in the market. Part of the benefit and

privilege (in addition to independence and autonomy) of privatized ownership and male dominion, is the continuation of patriarchy after the end of a *formally* male-led society.[44] As the values of independence, individualism, and private ownership continue to be prevalent in our notions of family, we perpetuate the very coldness and inequality of the market place, from which we claim to distinguish the safe haven of the family.[45] The family's symbolic opposition to the realm of work and business becomes the "smoke and mirrors" that hides the power of the bourgeoisie's hegemonic depiction of family.[46] The capitalist marketplace, along with the bourgeoisie family value of male-led households, determines the economy of relationships that locates ownership, autonomy, and sustainability in the singular possession of a male leader.

Importance of Singular (Male) Leadership and Dominion

The privileging of male leadership points to several sub-values that shape the household and that also stabilize the social structure of the marketplace. The gendering of the "head of household" role in the family makes dominion possible. Wage-earning power that is primarily located in male leadership, having already created unequal dependency through its linkage to economic provision, makes conflict "more tolerable" by the less economically privileged parties within the household.[47] This dominion is similar to that which is exhibited in the marketplace, especially in relation to laborers who find themselves in an obliged relationship with capitalists. Capitalism's refusal to pay for labor within the realm of domesticity results in wage earners' (typically, men's) obligatory relationship to capital.[48] Capitalism, then, is only accountable to some positions in the society, while it reaps of benefits of all members of society.[49]

By creating a system in which only one role within a normative family unit is able to earn wages, then capitalism ensures *every* role's dependence upon it. This dependence, I suggest, allows for families to look past the inherent inequalities, and diminished quality of life (due to time away from loved ones) that any sole wage earner may experience as a result of the system. What is more, these relationships within the home become systematized, maintaining an economy that deals only with social beings (genders, age groups, skill bearers, "the vulnerable," etc.) rather than with particular roles, or even specific persons.[50] Each group's individual and collective relation to capital governs the economy of relations within the household.[51]

Inherent Inequality: "Public" Versus "Private" Spheres

One of the most substantial values that results from a capitalist family system is inherent rationalized inequality. Undoubtedly, the ways in which working poor persons experience inequalities in the home as well as the marketplace are distinct from the ways that white, middle class, heteronormative families do. The basic story of the unequal division of labor, however, is usually told from this normative bourgeoisie perspective and illustrates the way that even among those whom the system is set to benefit the most, inequality abounds.

The family is the place where we freely perpetuate inequality through gendered marriage.[52] What could be a contract that supports equality and makes each party safe is fundamentally unfair because the people who would enter into the contract are not equal in social and economic terms in the first place.[53] Our sex as well as our interpretation of our gendered roles according to that sex pre-establish the terms of marriage. This predetermined economy of sexes means that patriarchy, sexism, and ultimate public powerlessness persist because the "fairness" of marriage is flawed from the start. Moreover, with children added to the mix, the family image looks quite hierarchical: men as heads of household, women as labors, and children as economic and social burdens/liabilities that reap the rewards of the public and private labor of the parents. This image, I believe, moves us away from the good life, in which equality, protection and care for the vulnerable, and freedom are resources to which all members of society have access.[54]

Black Queers as Moral Subject and Agents: Virtues and Values that Resist

In the third movement of this chapter, I discuss the concept of creative resistance and how it motivates black queers to push back against constraints of the capitalist mechanisms that discipline family relationships and orient us toward possibilities for the good life. In this movement, however, my focus rests on black queer lives as a moral space in which virtues and values make creative resistance possible. Our ability to resist (and even exist in spite of) disciplinary powers comes when we exercise our moral subjectivity through our values. These values allow us to draw on the moral resources within ourselves and from our own experiences. In "Re-building Sodom & Gomorrah: The Monstrosity of Queer Desire in

the Horror Film," Kent Brintnall suggests that there is power in revolutionary existences. He asks:

> If it is true that our queer desires are powerful enough to bring floods, garner the attention of God, and cause the downfall of civilizations, then might our desires also be powerful enough to generate communities of care and concern, motivate political resistance, and establish institutions to defend our interests? In sum … can we revel in our marginality as a psychic fund for resistance, instead of internalizing it as a badge of shame?[55]

I say that we certainly can and *must* do so by drawing on the resources and the values within black queer lives to strengthen our resistance efforts for our own and others' sake.

Black queer moral subjectivity and agency are both products and producers of key virtues and values. An exploration of these elements of black queer morality shows how black queer selves are also moral selves. This section argues that black queer subjects are also ethical subjects who enact moral agency by reflecting and acting on their own experiences and values. As a way to explore this moral agency, this section begins by engaging two virtues in black queer subjectivity that became evident in the research: survival/resilience and reflective creativity. I claim that virtues act as a lens through which the possibility of "the good life" (that is, new ethical standards for relationships) is refracted into something real by *virtue* of our subjectivity. Finally, this section ends with an exploration of the values that emerged from the interviewees' stories. For some of my research participants, these values work to combat the constraints of "family values" that derive from capitalistic foundations, and they also make room for black queer creative agency.

Two Virtues of Black Queer Subjectivity: Survival/Resilience and Reflective Creativity

Indigo's story, which I shared in the Introduction of the book, illustrates defiant fortitude and responsive flourishing wrapped in a deeply affirming self-care that is reminiscent of Delores Williams' "way making."[56] Indigo experienced a Hagar-esque wilderness moment when she found herself in Madison with no food, no community, and no immediate means of acquiring either. When she shared her story, I could hear in her tone the defeat and despair as she recalled her decision to call the only family that

she knew could help her in her situation. In what transpires between them, however, Indigo is thrust deeper into the throes of the "wilderness" forces working to satiate her immediate hunger while starving her long-term whole health. She draws on a resource provided through the practice of her Christian faith—fasting—and also a different kind of sacred resource: a vision for new possibilities.

I perceive Indigo's moment when "something happened in [her]" as a pivotal and internally (perhaps, divinely) inspired moment of clear vision. Williams describes a similar experience in Hagar's story: "When Hagar and her child were finally cast out of the home of their oppressors and were not given proper resources for survival, God provided Hagar with a resource. God gave her a new vision to see survival resources where she had seen none before."[57] While Indigo may not have known exactly how or when material support would become available, her declaration, "I'm not going to do this anymore," implies that new attempts at survival—ones that did not including "pimping" herself—were certainly possible and would be the next viable course of action.

Emilie Townes' admonition for wholeness, through a close reading of Baby Sugg's sermon in the clearing, also relates to Indigo's short narrative.[58] Indigo's refusal to continue sacrificing one part of herself to satisfy another is a way of resisting the bodily divisive constraints of familial economic control. This suffocating control works most stealthily in Indigo's case as a disguise of concern and also an acute reminder about the obligatory foundation in her relationship with God. Indigo can recognize the way that this moment represents a lose–lose barter system. Either she will go without food or she will go without self-love. Both are directly related to her body and simultaneously to the survival of her spirit.

Our choice to love our body is a "radical spirituality within structured domination and control" that shows concern for "concrete material well-being and spiritual wholeness."[59] For Baby Suggs, this self-love is a matter of survival:

> And no, they ain't in love with your mouth. Yonder out there, they will see it broken and break it again. What you say out of it they will not heed. What you scream from it they do not hear. What you put into it to nourish your body they will snatch away and give you leavins instead. No, they don't love your mouth. You got to love it.[60]

For Baby Suggs, these black people—enslaved people—must engage in the God-processes of living and loving themselves and others *as* embodied

persons. Baby Suggs' exaltation of the embodied self, as commanded to the slave community and experienced through physical ritual activities in the clearing—dancing, singing, crying—recognizes how the body experiences the affliction visited by the violence of racism and slavery. This moment of defiant fortitude is precisely the exercise in which Indigo engages in order to salvage her own wholeness and work toward a synthetic, complete, and healthy protection/care of herself.

One of my participants, Sage, and I are members of a grassroots queer progressive study group that thinks in community about ways that organizers and activists can be supported and sustained in their work. In our group, we defined survival/resilience as "creative healing" and "openness to possibilities and the continued recognition of creative responses." When I interviewed Sage and asked her about what special qualities black queer people and/or black queer families have, she explained that we are brilliantly survivalist. Our insistence at survival, she claimed, is itself a product of the brilliance that comes from a "gift of vision" that sees not only the reality of ideologies, structures, and institutions that persistently seek (or merely allow) our demise, but also the possibilities for our own flourishing. She shared:

> From jump, there is no model or norm because the very fabric that life is woven with is flawed and found to not be true. You start from scratch so you can be as free and creative as you have access to being. You start out with a critical lens b/c what you know in your soul, mind and body to be true is not what your people always show you to be true. Being black and queer is a gift—a gift of vision. You have access to possibilities, choices, and the knowledge of choices. You can search the depths of consciousness and the expansiveness of all creation to make some really good shit.[61]

For Sage, our survival is directly linked to our "critical lens," embodied knowledge, willingness to "start from scratch" in order to access possibilities for human flourishing.

In response to Sage's reflection, I found myself thinking specifically of resilience as a positive and creative ability to adapt to and live beyond the consequences of singular or structural attempts to extinguish our lives. I quoted her words in Chap. 2 in order to explain the ways that many black queers start from a posture of possibility in creating families. I also wanted to point to the ways that narrating life stories and circumstances was a way to gather from these stories some of the tangible, virtuous resources that black queers reflect on, enact, redact, and reflect again. This "jazz mode"

of creativity, as Sage calls it, is a way of responding to the circumstances that envelop our lives. According to her, poetic creativity helps us iterate and practice values like whole health, time, passion, laughter, intimacy, peace, and hope.

The Importance of Virtues in Queer Subjectivity

Black queer subjectivity is undoubtedly creative, generative, and queerly spontaneous in its own right. Our visions of new family possibilities point to a constructive element of black queer moral agency that is attuned to familial ideals and aspirations distinctive from the normative ones in our context. In my estimation, these visions build on both family values and key virtues that I found present in black queer lives, as they were shared through stories.

Because they seem to be stable and essential qualities and point to a static eudemonistic future, queer theorists have not necessarily been fans of "the virtues," as espoused by Iris Murdoch, Alasdair MacIntyre, and Martha Nussbaum. The very alterity and diverse subjectivity from which queerness emerges and to which queerness points shuns notions of selfhood that essentialize and orient our character to an externally determined *telos*. Yet, I suggest that acknowledging virtues within marginalized existences is not only an ethical task, but it is also one that debunks the myth that only certain subjectivities have a repository—or exemplify—features of "goodness" toward which we might direct ethical action. I will return to this point in the third movement of this chapter, but here, I simply assert that the presence of virtues contributes significantly to three moments in black queer subjectivity. First, they *illuminate* what is "the good" for us and contribute to our ability to distinguish between what realities are present in our context and what we actually find valuable in our existence. Second, virtues aid us in *seeking* what is good for our lives and *practicing* those things in relationship with others. Third, they allow us to *recognize* and *work toward* possibilities of human flourishing.

Iris Murdoch's orientation to humility, realism, and freedom are certainly beneficial to any self—even selves that reject a stabilizing notion of selfhood. Murdoch wants us to have a concept of the Good, understood through virtues, as a way to orient our right actions.[62] For her, right action and freedom are the "natural products" and positive consequences of attention to the Good.[63] She claims that the virtuous person is able to experience this proper orientation and have the ability to know what is

real and what is not.[64] Moreover, it allows us to consider, for ourselves, the difference between what is real and sheds light on what is real and what is really valuable. The takeaway for Murdoch is that *true vision* makes space for right conduct.[65] In fact, she finds that our ability to act rightly and to properly direct our attention is actually a work in love-seeing. The virtue of love allows us to have attention to reality and orientation toward freedom. As black queers reflect on and live into the realities of capitalist constraints and notions of family, the presence of virtues, in my estimation, contribute to their vision of a different economy of relationships and certainly a liberating set of organizing mechanisms.

Another important feature of the virtues that contributes to black moral subjectivity is their ability to foster individual and collective *efforts* toward those realities and possibilities that we seek. Alasdair MacIntyre lifts up the ability of virtues to provide a singleness of purpose and an awareness of embeddedness in tradition.[66] For MacIntyre, this developed coherent and embedded narrative concept of a life allows the self to become an agential self.[67] It is within the tradition that one is able to consider moral issues and think through competing desires, goods, and even narratives within the tradition. I find that MacIntyre's virtues make it possible for us to not only seek the good for ourselves but they become more developed as we practice them with others in the tradition.[68] To be clear, I do not share MacIntyre's belief in the narrative unity of a life—especially as I have witnessed, through the interviews, several lives that conflict with the ongoing normative narrative of persons and families in our context. Still, MacIntyre's emphasis on virtues as a way to develop interdependence—technically, independent rationality as well as vulnerability and dependence—is a refreshing way to invoke and practice moral agency as individuals and as members of moral traditions.[69]

One final positive feature of the virtues that I wish to mention is their propensity to orient moral subjects toward a life of human flourishing. According to Martha Nussbaum, the virtues are good for the sake of helping us practice the actions and massage the emotions/motivations needed for achieving a life that has unlimited growth potential and helping others have that same opportunity.[70] For her, the good life is marked by persistent pursuit of the virtues.[71] As I will mention in the third movement of this chapter, the virtues that I name in black queer subjectivity are not merely means to or elements of a particular *telos*; rather, they are created, improvised, and redacted over time and through experiences and point toward diverse moral imaginaries.

Christian ethical discourse, even in the realm of Christian social ethics, is not void of discussions about virtues and the types of characters that normative ethics ought to cultivate as we work toward beloved community. However, because of the unfortunate presence of heteropatriarchal capitalist leanings in many Christian ethics works and also in the implications of well-meaning liberation ethics, the virtues discussed often mask oppressive economies of relationships. For example, fidelity manifests in heteropatriarchal–monogamous coupling; respect and humility, in male-led private and public spheres; and liberty and flourishing, in notions of individuated independence. In the face of these virtues and in order to reflect critically about the very particular identities, circumstances, and realities that contribute to how black queers relate to varying concepts of morality, I value the virtues of black queer subjectivity.

I highlighted two virtues that seem to be present in my participants' reflections on their experiences and ideas of family. To be clear, these virtues do not speak to the fullness of their subjectivity; nor do I claim that these virtues are present in each of their lives. But as I consider some of the qualities within the subjectivities that I experienced through stories and explanations of family, I recognize collective and individual character attributes that seem to orient ethical thinking and action in a way that resists oppressive, capitalistic elements of family.

Black Queers as Moral Agents: Exploring Our Family Values

My interviewees come from diverse economic backgrounds, have had different levels of access to education, and reflect quite differently about what family can and ought to be/do in our lives. While each person does not speak specifically to the concept and oppressive force of capitalism (though some do), my analysis draws highlights the impact of black queer lives as resistant forces by drawing out a tone of anti-heteropatriarchal capitalism that undergirds their named values.

To illustrate my claim that black queer moral agency in general as well as black queer moral agencies resisting capitalism and family norms emerge from individual and collective values, I will provide some exemplary excerpts of the value themes that surfaced in the interviews. In some instances, the values are evidenced in stories, while in other moments the values come forth as an explanation. The varied formats reflect the diverse ways my participants articulated their values. In this section of the chapter, I simply offer our conversations, with a brief summary, as a window into

their delineations of the values. In the third movement of the chapter, I will return to a couple of these themes and place them in conversation with other black/queer discussions of resistance.

A "Radically Different Formation of Family": Learning Interdependence *from Sage and Madame*

Sage is a 30-something black lesbian who was raised in a family of Baptist ministers. Her own religious/spiritual journey has moved her toward New Age Metaphysical Thought. Her ongoing personal and community work deals with learning from and building intergenerational communities of black queer people. In this portion of our conversation, Sage is explaining the difference she makes between family and other kinds of relationships.

Nikki: Do you enact those relationships [family and friendship] differently? Like your relationship with your friends, does it look specifically different than the relationship with your family?

Sage: I think so. I think with friends, maybe I give a little less so that I can reserve that for myself and for my family. Like if a—I guess if a family member makes a request that's totally too much—and this doesn't necessarily mean that it's good that I do this—but if a family member makes a request that's too much—not too much by just the sheer nature of their request but maybe about what I'm able to do. Like if somebody asked me to take them somewhere or to give them some money or something like that, then I would go to the limit—

Nikki: Of what you can do?

Sage: Right, or there wouldn't be any limit. If it was at all in my power to do it, even if it impacted me negatively, I would do it; whereas with a friend, I think I would be more likely—a whole lot more likely—to have really conservative—to me, what I would think of as really conservative boundaries around that. I want to create for myself a radically different way of relating to people because I think if you were really to strip it all bare, it's capitalism's role in our lives, in the tiniest ways and the hugest ways, that make relationships *not* be family. So I think where I see that happening, whether it's because of gender proscriptions or class or race, wherever I see that happen, I think I have to reassess that situation and move it somewhere different.

Nikki: In your description of your family, you said, "radically different." Can I just get you to clarify radically different from—?

Sage: What did I say was radically different?

Nikki: You said you were trying to create radically different relationships. So I just wanted to know, what's the thing from which you want it to be radically different?

Sage: I guess if the norm is individualism, then you partner with some other person and create a nuclear family with or without children wherein your property is yours, your time if yours, and all your resources are yours, basically. I think I want to—okay, so then let's say we move from that something that is like a remix of that where you have more people that participate in your unit or whatever, I think I want to move even from that to a place where we operate outside of capitalism, outside of a nuclear family system such that you're creating family all over the place and not necessarily because you're partnering romantically with somebody, or not because you share blood with somebody, but because you're making a choice to have that collaborative work and responsibility, that cooperative economics and then that constant I guess growing and accountability to one another.

Madame, whose story we heard in Chap. 3, is in her early 50s. Having already discussed her struggles and joys of being thrust into a parenting role (of her younger siblings) when her mother passed away, Madame offered these two examples of how she was continuously learning from others how to engage in family relationships and family support.

There was a guy, whose name was G.A., who was from Nigeria, who was going to Ole Miss. Well, I had no car to drive back and forth to see my mother in the hospital. My brother has two cars, but essentially, I have no car. So, G.A. says to me, "Madame, take my car. You know, I walk to class. You take the car, you use the car for as long as you need to use the car. It's your car." And G.A. would come home with me sometimes and help out with my brothers and sisters. I mean, he was like their uncle, really. And then, there was another woman Melba who I worked for. I kept missing work to travel to the hospital and also to get my siblings. I just got to the point where I called her one day, and said, "You know what, Melba? I'm gonna have to resign because I'm really not working." And she said to me, "As long as I have a job, you have a job." I mean, those acts really touched me in a way that has an affect on my life, a huge impact, and so, when I think about family, I don't just think about my blood relatives. I also think about, you know, a G.A. and a Melba, who I consider adoptive kin.

In Sage's explanation of what would be radically different about her family, we can see that there is a clear desire for sharing economic responsibility and resources. This, for Sage, is a different kind of practice that we find in our discourse about family and its goals for sustaining individuals and members. In Sage's mind, her vision for family is something that is

not only radical, but it is resistant and active: it pushes against norms of ownership, individualism, and independence that she believes governs the current normative family system. Madame's actual experience seems to exemplify Sage's radical vision of family. For Madame, G.A. and Melba's generosity, limitless sharing, and lack of reservation in commitment indicate a level of relationship that naturally moves beyond friendship toward family relationship. This is what family is supposed to be, according to Madam, who experienced much more economic conservatism from her biological relatives.

…

"Staying Down": Learning Loyalty and Presence *from L. Alice and Gabrielle*

L. Alice is hospital chaplain who co-parents a son with her former partner and her former partner's current partner. In many of L. Alice's stories, I heard about ways that the terms and practices and values of family are learned and relearned on an ongoing basis.[72]

Nikki: Are there other criteria for how you designate family members? If so, can you name them?

L. Alice: Number one, real quick, that they stay down.

Nikki: And can you further describe this "staying down?"

L. Alice: Yes I will. It's kind of like presence. Hmm … Ok, so by stay down I mean that they are willing to journey with you through some troubling periods, through some dark periods, through some stupid choices and the consequences, and I mean there might have to be some shifts and ebbs and flows about boundaries and nature of relationship just so that they can stay healthy if you're doing something real crazy, but that they stay present with you and stay believing in the possibility of you and the hope of who you're going to be even if you can't. So I take that very seriously.

Nikki: Wow! I think that staying down should be in an urban dictionary with that definition. There's something really sort of robust about what you mean behind that phrase that we use all the time, and I appreciate you explaining here.

Gabrielle is a researcher who has recently moved back to the South from California. An activist and scholar in her late 20s, Gabrielle shared many stories about how she is open to exploring lots of relationship styles in order to find the type of family with which she feels most fulfilled.[73]

Nikki: So before I ask you any specific questions, I just want you to take a deep breath and tell me a story that describes your idea of family. Tell me about one of the situations. Tell me any story, any experience you want that would give me a little bit of insight into your idea of the family.

Gabrielle: Huh. I was watching this special, and I can't even remember what it was on. It was like MTV or something. But it was like about these polygamist families or these open relationships that, you know, and I use both of them separate because one was describing themselves as an open relationship and the other one described themselves as kind of a polygamist family. But what I thought about it was, why is this illegal?

Because one of the things that I like about both of them is that they were so in synergy. And I think, you know, like in one, the open relationship, it was actually two couples and they were actually two heterosexual couples, that had come together and they were living together. And I can't remember what brought them together but they were raising the children together and it was like beautiful because the kids had two moms, they had two dads—well, and importantly, they had four parents and I can just remember my own upbringing where I had two parents and I remember I probably did not spend time with my parents until probably in my 20s because they didn't have time for me because, you know, there was just so many other kids in the house and I just could not imagine how they spent time being a parent to all their kids. So it ended up being my brothers and sisters who more of a parent to me. But I remember looking at this family like, wouldn't it be great to come home and have, you know, these people that are in your life you can trust to be, you know, like parents.

And I was thinking the same thing about the polygamist family because they seemed really functional. But it was this idea of having so many people that you could trust and come home to and to be honest. We—me and [my partner] tried to adopt that a little bit ourselves because when we lived in Monterrey the last three years, one of the best things for us is that were actually, you know, with another couple who had come together—which I thought was so crazy—because they were a couple but Val had actually adopted her nephew from her brother and sister and Alicia actually has three kids that she had from a previous marriage, but also from a previous divorce not even her own biological but her husband's child from a previous marriage preferred living with her. And so, she had all four of her kids. Val had her kids and then me and Candy and one of the things we did is that every Sunday we all went out, we all had dinner, we all, you know, whatever. When they had their back to school nights we all were there. When, you know, somebody needed to get picked up one of us was off to go pick them up, you know? And it was just so beautiful.

They all called us mommy or auntie. We were always there. And these were grown children. These are not like little kids who were confused about who we were. You know, they were grown children but they even say now that that was like the best two years of their life is having us all in the family. So when I think of family, I mean it has nothing to do with, you know, who created who, but just really like this big happy, you know, all of us at the table Sunday dinner, even though they were getting older and we would force them to put their cells phones away and stuff like—you know, like we would literally play Twister with like teenage boys at night.

And at first they, you know, would bitch and moan about it but then they were—they knew they had fun, I mean, 'cause they would come every Thursday to play again but it was probably, you know, not by definition of what we considered a family but probably the most functional family environment that we all were in because it was healthy for me, too, because they kept me grounded and actually all of us grounded because there was a lot of grocery shopping and [Laughter] other things but it was just—it was just, you know, that idea of all of us together and I loved it. I loved it.

Nikki: Was that something that you all naturally fell into when you were there or is it something that you like had to think about in a more sort of conscious way?

Gabrielle: It definitely was something we fell into. And it—seriously, it was not anything that we planned or anything. It just happened. And I think what it more had to do with is we were all in a place in our life where we needed support and some kind of way from each other and I don't even mean in any way financial because, you know, all of them were financially fine. It was just more of a thing that coming from so many different forms of family. Val and her nephew, you know, were at a point that he was in an environment that was bad for him so he came out to live there and just—it was really like okay, here we are, four women, you know, with literally four teenage boys, you know, and it's just—it's a task. And it was one of those things where, you know, Alicia would call us and be like I need some help. One of these kids is getting on my nerves. And so we would come over literally to give her some breathing room. And it just happened to be over the period of time that just one of those things that kind of came together organically where they became dependent on us to be there when one of their moms blacked out and you know we would take them out or we would, you know, be like well, look, yeah, she's mad at you but this is what you need to do. And next thing you know it became a group effort. It became really a group effort.

Nikki: Group effort. I hear that.

Gabrielle: So it was great. And it's crazy because even though we're physically apart now, they consistently email me—well, text me. They don't email, they text. But they text and they're just like how are you doing? You know, we miss you, can't wait to come down. They're all coming down next week. 'Cause we're taking them for Spring Break so their other mom can have a break. But they're really looking forward to it. And it's just one of those things that is just like—it's just nice. It's just really nice to have them. But yeah, it definitely happened organically.

Both L. Alice and Gabrielle's excerpts illustrate the ways that presence and loyalty are essential in families. L. Alice uses the phrases "staying down" to describe ways that family members are not only present to one another in terms of physical being, but her description also seems to point to a kind of generative witnessing that comes about as folks exist together in spaces that imagine one another's possibilities. Gabrielle's stories about the open-relationship, polygamists, and her family in California display a more practical side of the qualities of presence and loyalty. While there are certainly other emotional benefits, Gabrielle is clear that support and care and togetherness are desirable results that may emerge when we practice family styles and exist in constructions that are distinct from normative two-parent households. For her, this is even true in two-parent same-sex households. And queerness brings about the possibility for anyone to pursue ways to stay down, perhaps, for as many family members as they see fit.

…

"It's All Love": Learning Unconditional, Pedagogical but Non-compulsory Relationships *from KD, Denise, and Xavier*

KD is a in her later 20s and works as a hospital chaplain. She has a strong relationship with her family of origin and claims that the strength in those relationships helps her to shape her romantic partnerships.[74]

Nikki: Tell me a story or a couple stories that describes your idea of family. And, if your idea of family is too complicated for one story, tell me a couple.

KD: Okay. A narrative that goes around my idea of family? [I'm going to] talk about my mother, well, me and my mother's relationship. She is my best friend, and we have been intentional prayer partners and spirituality is really central in my familial context, through the blood family. And so we've been intentional prayer partners since I was 18, and she's known about the struggle I had with sexuality since I was 12.

When I decided to come out at 23, she and the rest of my family members had a really challenging time 'cause they couldn't believe that I said that I was gay and most of all, that I said God was okay with it. And so my mom and I had definitely had a communication breakdown the first year and a half to two years that I was out. And she has really transformed through this journey for me, so that narrative just centers around what it means to be unconditional. Because although we have decided to agree to disagree, she continues to love me in spite of the way she feels, and she—the last thing she said when we really talked about it was as long as I'm happy, that's what really matters.

And we move on to talk about how my sexuality informs my spirituality and how I feel the Creator has called me to do certain things that I feel will go against some of her ideology and theology. And her response was, well, if God has told you to do it, you do it, regardless of what I have to say about it. So I mean that is really what unconditional love is all about.

…

Denise is a Tennessee native who has lived in Atlanta for several years. She is a scholar of psychology and a local activist. For the most part, Denise considers many people in the Atlanta black queer community to be family.[75]

Nikki: So if you can, name five terms that you would use to associate with family.

Denise: Okay. Unconditional. Maybe this will help me if I just say this. I feel that one thing about being queer is that you can do whatever the hell you wanna do and everybody just gon' accept you. I feel like if I wanna try some shit, like if I wanna wear some crazy shit, I can and it's just all love. If I wanna do my hair a particular way, if I wanna just fall out on the floor and start twitching my leg, it's all love, and that we're just saying, "babe, you just do what you need to do." It is a level of freedom that I feel like most straight people do not get the experience, just doing whatever the hell you wanna do, and there's still a place for you.

And I love, love that so I guess that would be freedom of expression to be, to live, and still be loved.

…

Xavier is an Atlanta lesbian who was initially raised by her parents in Philadelphia and then by extended family in Alabama. She is currently in her late 20s and organizes monthly gatherings at her home for Atlanta "family."[76]

Nikki: Ok, well the next question is what is that criteria? What criteria do you use for calling somebody family?

Xavier: Definitely loyalty. I really enjoy unconditional … hmm. Unconditional.

Nikki: Say some more about that. Like, what do you mean by unconditional?

Xavier: Well growing up, I was kind of socially popular, you know, and at that time in my life, that was, you know, enough. You know, okay, I got friends, you know, I'm going out, I got people calling me wanting to do stuff, and it was all good. And for me, that was wealth at the time, you know. I got all this going on.

But what I realized later is that those people were not necessarily my friends or family because they wouldn't hold me accountable, you know what I mean? As much as I was the person to hold someone else accountable—and that came from upbringing, you know. Even if we didn't communicate, we held each other accountable. Well not even my mother. She would hold me accountable, she'd hold my brother accountable, but she wouldn't hold my father accountable.

Nikki: And would you hold her accountable?

Xavier: I would hold her accountable, I would hold my father accountable, which is what caused a lot of the estrangement between my father and I, because I felt like I was saying all the things my mom should have said, you know. And he came from a family where the women, you know—you don't talk back, you don't express how you feel. And because of my masculinity, um, I never really fell into line with that role.

So yeah, so that's what I mean by unconditional communication. Like, you're gonna tell me how you feel and I know that I can trust that it's a true critique or compliment, you know, whatever it is. You know, whatever it is, is coming from a place of enrichment where you want me to be a better person, you know. You're not just telling me what I wanna hear which is kind of what happened in my youth, you know. People just kind of all stars, you know. It was all about stars and I didn't experience even real friendship until I came to college where I had people say, "Well that what you just said is not okay to say to me." Well you can say how you feel, but you need to think more about your delivery, you know, and just how you're gonna communicate as opposed to just, you know, tact basically. And that being something that came out without strain. And even if I was defensive or if I shut down in response, we were still friends the next day, you know what I mean? But then they understood that because I wasn't used to hearing critiques or hearing constructive criticism or just being held accountable, that is was a jagged pill to swallow sometimes.

Nikki: And it was a learning curve.

Xavier: Yeah, absolutely.

Nikki: So there had to be some grace in that?

Xavier: Absolutely, absolutely. But in that, there was also reciprocity because I felt like I was able to also do the same for them, and it taught me how to be a better friend because, as opposed to communicating the way I used to, I would communicate taking on the learning that I had gathered from my different friends and family, and felt like I could be just as helpful, you know, in the exchange and provide unconditional communication.

KD, Denise, and Xavier each point to ways that relationships are valuable when they exhibit a kind of unquestionable acceptance. This acceptance is marked by willingness to participate in one's growth as well as willingness to hold one accountable to a sense of self that simultaneously shows integrity to the individual and to the relationship. The relationship between unconditional acceptance and accountability, then, seems to rest on the relationship's capacity to support the potentialities of the subjectivities within the relationship. The unconditional nature of the relationship, according to both KD's and Denise's excerpts, allows for a certain kind of freedom and even safety for one to simply be. It also seems to accept the instability that is inherent in being. For Xavier, the measure of accountability that is present in unconditional communication makes room for people to love one another while trusting in the other's ability to lovingly shape our actions.

…

"So that They Don't Forget": Learning Shared History and Belonging *from Candy and Kori*

Candy is a mid-30s military officer who is currently "suffering under Don't Ask Don't Tell." Partnered with Gabrielle, who is a very "out" activist in the Atlanta community, Candy shared that she struggles with finding safe space and trusting that her full presence is welcome in any space.[77]

Candy: I'm going between the belonging and the love. I think there are times you love people and then times you can't stand them, but you know you still belong to that shared thing that you have. So let's go with belonging.

Nikki: So what does belonging to you mean or look like?

Candy: It's like I belong here. I have a place, you know. It's like I'm not just floating out into space. This is my family, I belong here. And the

belonging leads to, you know, what I said about that last one, was, you know, they're there for you. So if I belong, I know that they're going to be there for me no matter what.

Kori is a biracial Charlotte, NC native who moved to Atlanta for graduate school. Much of her interview included stories about how she came to know herself through the stories of her family. Kori's father passed away just before she was born, and while she never knew him, she learned a great deal about his race and identity from his family and her maternal family's consistent efforts to keep them in contact.[78]

Nikki: So let's just start off. Can you name five terms that you associate with family?

Kori: Love, responsibility, hmm … dialogue, shared vision kind of, of like … history. I kind of want—now I want history separate from that. How many is that?

Nikki: Five. You can take one and expound on it if you want.

Kori: Okay. I'll take the history piece because most of my family still lives in the same area where they were raised … and one of them lives in the same town where they were raised and lives in the same house. And we just know great-great-aunts and the school where they went, the black school that's torn down. These are the kinds of things that when I would ride around in town with my mom, she was like, oh, so-and-so used to live there. You know, that kind of thing. Like it's all just so connected. And my mom's middle name … my mom and her twin brother, their middle name is Springs because John Springs was a plantation owner, and he—it's a mill town and—he basically brought the mill to the town. But he fathered a lot of children with his slaves, one being my great-grandmother. So my mother and her brother had the middle name so that they don't forget that this is what's happened in that town.

Nikki: Wow.

Kori: So it's that kind of stuff. It's important history to us. Even as I'm working on my own research, I'm looking at the school there. When I can just call my aunt and ask her a random question about how the city got its name and she knows … and even … and not that she knows in a way that I could like throw into the study and that be the end of it, I mean, of course I have to triangulate it, but …

Nikki: She knows the story.

Kori: … but she knows the story. The point is that there's a story and that there's a different story that white people had in that town than the one that black people had in that town. And so there's just that much to tap

into that is still available, especially in a town where if there is a predominantly black area of town, the history is so hard to get a hold to.

Nikki: Yeah.

Kori: So that's something that my family values and that I value as I build family.

Both Candy and Kori's excerpts seem to value the community-oriented and culturally sustained elements of family relationships. They also point to ways that sharing space or knowledge provides a network of belonging that renders their reality and presence within the community quite necessary. Candy's emphasis on belonging is certainly about how she can assume that her presence is welcome and even sought after. Kori's story shows that part of what make her presence and her family's presence in the community and with one another is the shared knowledge of the "real" story about how they came to be.

The list of values that my interviewees offered is quite long, and this grouping only represents a broad stroke of the general picture that their terms presented. Words like "love" and "trust" appeared quite frequently, while words like "belonging" and "sacrificial" only appeared once. Interestingly, most of the lists, even if they did not originally use the term love, were amended at some point to either include it. In this way, some of the participants claimed that each of the terms established what love was supposed to look like. It was also interesting to note that many explanations or stories about certain terms used other terms. For example, Candy's discussion of belonging was simultaneously about presence; Gabrielle's stories about presence were also about interdependence; and L. Alice's discussion about staying down is simultaneously about unconditional relationships.

I surmise that the gestalt of the groupings, for most of the participants, relates in some way to the multiplication of love and possibility. Timothy mentioned this value in his interview, and seemed to suggest that the very notion of multiplying love was itself a resistant act against the divisive ways that we organize our familial relationships and expectations through measures of capitalism. The possibilities of creative resistance, understood through Timothy's vision, both draw on value resources that emerge from our responses to those ways of being that we find undesirable and also make room for us to generate values and economies of relationships that reflect love and possibility.

Black Queer Family Values that Resist, Reconstruct, and Create

The practice of resistance, especially within the context of family life, has both been a consequence of "abnormality" for black and queer people as well as a purposeful effort to survive within the normative construction of family in the American context. On one hand, the sheer "difference" in our subjectivity has given blacks and queers a *forced* opportunity to think creatively about how to exist and thrive economically, emotionally, and physically within the middle class, white, heteropatriarchal system that governs religious, economic, political, social, and even legal sanctions of family. On the other hand, both populations have had visions of family life, based on their own needs and desires that sometimes complimented, but often countered those within the normative system. Creating and maintaining families in both groups, then, is as much a matter of response to real circumstances as it is pursuit of imagined possibilities.

Black queer people live at the intersection of these identities, which means that there is both an additive and unique quality to black queer moral subjectivities and agencies. Inasmuch as black queerness is its own bevy of subjectivities, it is also comprised of qualities and circumstantial experiences familiar to black and queer contexts separately. While none of these categories is essential, and none offers a script of experiences or ways of life, it is important to note that in our context blackness and queerness represent certain kinds of bodies, habituations, experiences, and oppressions that often stand in negative relation to the capitalist market-family system. In this final movement of the chapter, I attend to ways that black queer resistance participates in ongoing and longstanding resistance efforts. Finally, I return to a discussion of virtues, values, and creative resistance as components of black queer morality. I argue that as black queers practice creative resistance, we not only pursue a concept of and *a priori* "good life"; instead, we participate in reflecting on and even creating (through practices) what the good life can be. I claim further, that this process of participating in the creation of the good life makes space for all people to resist, transform, and vision anew the kind of social relationships and families that are situated beyond the limits of capitalist-driven, market–family structure.

Resisting the Heteropatriarchal Capitalist Family Construct

We have heard some black queers' behaviors and visions of family life that implicitly and explicitly operate as creative forms of resistance to oppressive, capitalist-driven mechanisms that shape and legitimize normative family relationship economies. Inasmuch as the black queer values expressed in that movement speak to innovative ways that we have chosen to survive, they also call our attention to the legacy of resistant survival in which blacks and queers have participated over time. It seems that the constructs of family that govern our relationships both inside and outside our particular units of kinship are working against our survival. In short, we (as black queer selves, and as black queer families) are simply not meant to survive. Our survival, and continued pursuit of survival strategies, resists the potential dehumanizing death that the normative schema serves to our bodies and selves. To explain the importance of our survival, especially in relation to violence, Traci West claims that resistance (at least) requires four things: consciousness and complex perception, recognition of a different moral center, ongoing practice, and a sustained ethic.[79] I find that black queer moral agency engages each of these requirements.

Janet Jakobsen warns us of some "crucial issues" that arise within the conceptualization of resistance.[80] She is worried that, in the process of resisting, we might stabilize and entangle the quite complicated concepts of "norm," which is a product; "normalization," a process; and "normativity," a standard. When we uncritically resist processes of normalization, we may leave certain norms intact. Likewise, when we sweepingly resist norms, we might stabilize them as "standard" and also leave oppressive normalizing processes intact. Creative resistance avoids the pitfalls about which Jakobsen warns because it is more focused on the normalization of relational hierarchies within families than, say, a normative family itself.

Two of my family members—my former partner and her new partner—are engaging in a project that aims to capture the stories, strategies, and lessons of survival and resilience from black queer elders who have navigated the terrain of normativity in our context for decades. Their project, the MobileHomeComing, sends them (in an RV—"revolutionary vehicle"—named Harriett Tubman) all over the country to interview, put on workshops, and fellowship with intergenerational communities of black queer people. At the foundation of their work is one assumption: black queer survival is brilliantly resistant and creatively resilient, and it comes

from a legacy of survival practices from our ancestors. In a blog post about safety and travel, they articulate it thusly:

> We are black and queer, so our histories of travel are not only voluntary, they are compelled and circumscribed by violence, hate and inequality …. What then does it mean for us to be safe on the road? Security, means having the upper hand in an unsafe situation. Security, means having access to the violent means that the state uses to defend itself, the police, the national guard, the private security forces that companies use to protect their wealth. We acknowledge that, in a world where violence against queer and gender queer young people of color is common, security is not … enough. Our intention is for our journey to be SAFE. Safety, means being able to be comfortable in our skin, having the freedom to move, being able to sleep restfully and wake renewed and excited about the journey. Our safety plan will involve a network of comrades and kindred who are aligned with the vision of the project and who are affirm our queerness, our genderqueerness, our proud blackness, our youth …. Our hope is that this network of kindred will draw on and contribute to an ongoing process through which progressive kindred can connect to each other ….[81]

This post illustrates ways that black queers draw on the legacy of responsive experience to create new ways of living through a critical consciousness. The values that they lift up actually serve as a nuance of the values at work in the system, and by expressing different values, they capture the essence of the good life toward which they aim and in which they participate in creating. The post itself provides an apt delineation of the differences between safety and security, in which they explain an "oppositional" tradition as a way to frame their understanding of the approach to living that they value. The post also appeals to their current experiences and the measures taken to put those in place, which illustrates their use of the legacy of resilience upon which they draw. Finally, they appeal to the shared values within themselves and the communities of which they are a part, in order to establish a notion of connectivity, support, and safety that is itself built on relationships. This post is a wonderful example of the virtue of black queerness, as it illustrates two black queers drawing on particular experiences and responses to those experiences to formulate a way living and relating that they find healthy. The exchange between experience and response—praxis—highlights the moral orientation of black queers as something both internal (though not stabilized by a limited subjectivity)

and external (complicated and revisited by the assumption of stabilized objectivity).

The example illustrates what black queers do this in the context of the family as well. For instance, as shown in the interview excerpts above, black queers shift away from independence to interdependence. Rather than solely valuing independence (which is determined by an economically driven understanding of the "individual" in a Lockean sense), black queers in my interviews have privileged (implicitly and explicitly) interdependence (which is marked by a clear understanding of one's self as simultaneously a member of community and also a subjective/agential self). Rather than place the value on the self-determining qualities of individualism, they seem to be valuing the relational interchange that contributes to both the development and sustenance of their subjectivities and the maintenance of a quality of relationships that is driven by intersubjectivity. Though this nuanced practice can be difficult to exercise in such a hegemonic context of family sanctions, black queers have done this work in order to survive. Our survival has meant that examples of moral imagination can be understood as testimony rather than speculation.

Another example of resistance that I find particularly helpful is Gabrielle's description of the type of informal coparenting in which she and her kinship unit engage in order to support one another in the process of raising teenage boys. Her story illustrates multiple forms of resistance at once: dependence as a value of relationship sustainability; kinship as formed by choice, rather than a notion of law or biology; shared responsibility and accountability to multiple people who attend to one another. These acts resist various parts of a capital-driven family system, including most particularly, the concept of a male-run household as the most efficient way to sustain economic, social, and authoritative power. Gabrielle's story illustrates the power of shared responsibility in not only creating a dynamic of relationships built on the gifts, time, and talents of those involved but also in fostering a pedagogy of respect for community, women-love, and dependability.

Gabrielle's example of family reflects Patricia Hill Collins' claim about the multiplicity of roles that black women currently play and have historically played in kinships over time. According to her, black women exist in multiple familial roles—"bloodmothers" and "othermothers," for example—and these diverse roles challenge the norm of a heterosexual, married couple, nuclear family with a nonworking spouse and a husband earning the family's income as natural, universal, and preferred.[82] She sug-

gests that this image of family is deeply embedded in specific race and class formations, and without a clear and robust consideration of the intersecting identities and social situations which make that type of family even *possible*, our work in social transformation is remiss.[83] Collins suggests that by placing black women at the center of family and social analysis we both learn from the strategies of survival employed by black people over generations and also raise our consciousness about the need to question white, middle-class, heteronormative male perspectives on family.[84] One of the most important tools for resistance, for Collins, is certainly the realization that engaging parental roles in black families is quite different from mothering in white families. Black networks of fictive kin, along with examples of queer kinship, augment Collins' claim and provide examples for black queers to employ.

In *Survival of the Black Family*, K. Sue Jewell explains the importance of extended family and kinship networks that contribute to black survival. She notes that the larger society has viewed extended families and kinship networks as impediments to "upward mobility for black families," in a capitalist sense, but she is clear that these networks make intergenerational sustainability and even progress possible.[85] These structures, claims Jewell, enable a necessary intra-familial sharing and foster mutual co-operation that both support the development of black families and exhibit the virtues of family life from which black people benefit.[86] Similar to Jewell, Jakobsen justifies the importance of queer kinship as a way to resist normative structures of family that obviate any constructions beyond heteronormative ones. She says that families and relationships ought to draw on a queer fund of nonnormativity to offer "possibilities for producing lives and social relations of value."[87] Jakobsen introduces the concept of queer relationality in her essay, "Queer Relations: A Reading of Martha Nussbaum on Same-Sex Marriage." According to her, "queer relationality explores the non-normative or alogical forms of affiliation on which social relations depend but are rarely socially recognized …."[88] This queer relationality critiques the practical sustainability of "nuclear families." In *All our Kin: Strategies for Survival in a Black Community*, Carol Stack talks about the *network* of relationships that come together to offer support and sustainability for one another. These relationships are not always, and arguably not usually blood kin, but rather people who come together to support one another economically, socially, and even in daily life, and in so doing *become* family.[89] This network of queer fictive kinship and support does not depend on controlling or inhibiting the development of diverse

subjectivities. Instead, it seems to affirm values of interdependence, collective work, and responsibility and care that undoubtedly shape subjectivity.

There are, indeed, multiple strategies that *interdependence, loyalty and presence*, *unconditional (but non-compulsory) relationships*, and *shared history and belonging* invoke as black queers continue to creatively resist capitalist constructs of family. Harris puts together a concise list of strategies that feminists employ (or suggest) as ways to reorient our notions and sanctions of family away from the inhibiting constructs of capital-driven family. Those strategies include: eliminating the "ideal worker" norm in the workplace, injecting an awareness of human vulnerability into state policy, and challenging the use of marriage as a channel for economic support for families.[90] By becoming conscientized about fallacies such as the public–private dichotomy, and the virtue of autonomous individuals, or the efficiencies of a gendered division of labor, black queers engage in a structural analysis of gender, race, class, and sexuality that combats oppressive economies of relationships while also working toward survival.

Conclusion: Creative Resistance, Black Queerness, and the Good Life

The centrality of this chapter lies with one simple question that I derive from Rev. Nancy L. Wilson's work: What would it mean for those who are considered by many to be *a priori* beyond moral redemption, those labeled "black" and "queer," if we understand instead that they posses a particular moral excellence?[91] Queer people, and black queers in particular, "manage profound moral survival" by refuting negative notions of our identities and by creating a positive vision of good lives, lives where queers can flourish.[92] Creative resistance, as a mechanism that pushes against disciplinary powers that propel people toward unconscious institutional assimilation, allows black queers to open up what the good life is and can be. In fact, creative resistance is a way that black queers move beyond a vision toward the actual creation of the good life—the ways of being, the practices of getting there; and the cognitive and reflective moves required in the process.

Iris Murdoch writes that human lives exist in a context wherein there are transcendent values and a concept of the Good that is the condition of our humanity and that can unify our experiences.[93] She makes imaginative appeals to this experience so that we can narrate moral evaluations. For Murdoch, the Good is actually the direction toward which our developed virtues point, and they aid us in the process toward the good life.[94] Black

queer efforts of creative resistance employ both the work of practice as well as visioning, thereby maintaining participation in the creation of the good life and imagination of the Good. A utopian vision as motivation for developing and maintaining a moral community is both helpful and sustaining because the teleological goal—the process of seeing "the good"—emerges from an important place: a belief that the good is, in fact, possible. This hope, in my estimation, makes it possible for us to engage in "good" acts, and simultaneously, it gives us motivation for seeing that "the good" is manifested in our life's works.

With attention to both the dynamics within interpersonal relationships as well as possibilities for larger social transformations, black queer moral agency calls us to also resist four disciplinary powers within family. First, we resist a framework of normativity suggesting that black queer people, and certainly black queer families, are situated between the poles of racial inferiority and moral depravity. Second, we resist norms of relation influenced by race, gender, or sexuality and that lead to hierarchical relationality. Third, we push back against normalization processes that seek to create stable, controlled identities. And fourth, we resist social and material ideologies that privilege heteronormative family structures over every other possibility for human relationality.

The creative resistance that black queer people employ is both interpersonal and community-oriented. This employment of resistance is certainly not new to black queer people, queer theory, or feminist and womanist ethics. Womanist ethicist Marcia Riggs claims that black women's resistance and moral agency "establishes the interrelationship between moral issues pertinent to a particular community and the goal of attaining universal justice across communities."[95] According to fellow womanist ethicist Traci West, resistance "bears the potential for igniting a broad-based transformation of cultural values and practices."[96]

Even as we consider black queer moral agency within creative resistance, we must also notice that many people, regardless of identity or social location, struggle with disciplinary powers in family normalization. Our resistance of capitalist disciplinary powers offers freedom and possibility for all people to do so—and to think creatively together in that process. This expansion of black queer moral agency is powerful in its ability to resist norms, practices, and sanctions of family life that lead to hierarchical divisions, inequality in all spheres of life, and a limitation on human potential and relationships.

Notes

1. Valerie Lehr, Queer Family Values: Debunking the Myth of the Nuclear Family (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1999) 93.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 2.
4. Ibid., 12.
5. Ibid., 21.
6. Ashley [pseudo.], interview by the research assistant (Sara J. Toering), field notes, Atlanta, GA, 13 April 2010.
7. Timothy [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, 5 February 2010.
8. Catherine McKinnon, *Toward a Feminist Theory of the State* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003) 61.
9. Ibid.
10. Angela P. Harris, "Theorizing Class, Gender, and the Law: Three Approaches" *Law and Contemporary Problems* 72.4 (2009): 45.
11. Harris, 45.
12. McKinnon, 61.
13. Ibid.
14. Harris, 45.
15. Nancy Chodorow, *The Reproduction of Mothering: Psychoanalysis and the Sociology of Gender* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1978) 4.
16. Ibid., 4–5.
17. Nancy Chodorow, "Mothering, Male Dominance, and Capitalism" in Zillah Eisenstein, ed., *Capitalist Patriarchy and the Case for Socialist Feminism* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1979) 98.
18. Ibid., 95.
19. Ellen Feder, 10.
20. Ibid., 10.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
23. Ibid., 9.
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid.
26. Moynihan's report received sharp attack from African American scholars, religious leaders, and Civil Rights activists. Most prominent among them were the N.A.A.C.P., Rev. Jesse Jackson, and Rev. Al Sharpton. Their comments and the ongoing debate are discussed most recently in historian James Patterson's book about African American family life. See James Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle Over Black Family Life From LBJ to Obama* (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

27. Michel Foucault's analysis of philosopher and social theorist Jeremy Bentham's Panopticon in *Discipline and Punish* yielded the metaphoric phrase "disciplinary power." Jeremy Bentham is an English philosopher and social theorist who, in 1875, designed a type of prison called the Panopticon, which Foucault describes as a mechanism for pervasive observation and normalization. In Bentham's design, the warden (or manager) of inmates had total visual authority (power). Because the inmates could not tell if they were being watched in this design, Bentham claimed that the Panopticon was an innovative means of obtaining power over the mind. Foucault expanded the effective range of this "disciplinary power" to include most hierarchical institutions including the military, schools, hospitals, and industrial workplaces.
28. Ibid., 43.
29. Eli Zaretsky, *Capitalism, The Family, and Personal Life* (New York, NY: Harper & Row Publishers, 1986) 18.
30. Ibid.
31. Valerie Lehr, *Queer Family Values: Rethinking the Myth of the Nuclear Family* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University, 1999) 19.
32. Ibid., 18.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 18.
35. Nancy Fraser and Linda Gordon, "A Genealogy of Dependency: Tracing a Keyword of the U.S. Welfare State" *Signs* 19.2 (1994): 312.
36. Ibid.
37. Harris, 46.
38. Ibid.
39. Eva Feder Kittay, *Love's Labor: Essays on Women, Equality, and Dependency* (New York, NY: Routledge, 1999) 4.
40. Ibid., 47.
41. Ibid., 48.
42. Ibid., 180.
43. Zaretsky, 19, 70–71.
44. Lehr, 20.
45. Ibid., 19.
46. Ibid.
47. Feder Kittay, 43.
48. McKinnon, 66–67.
49. Ibid., 66.
50. Ibid., 68.
51. Ibid.
52. Susan Moller Okin, *Justice, Gender, and the Family* (New York: Basic Books, 1989) 122.

53. Ibid., 123.
54. Ibid., 170–171.
55. Kent L. Brintnall, "Re-building Sodom & Gomorrah: The Monstrocity of Queer Desire in the Horror Film," *Culture and Religions* 5.2 (2004): 156.
56. Deloris Williams theologizes about the Hebrew Bible story of Hagar, a slave woman in Abraham's house who was forced into exile by Abraham and his first wife Sarah. Hagar and her son Ishmael wander alone in the wilderness "without resources for survival." Through this story, Williams explains how God "made a way out of no way" for Hagar and continues to aid the survival of African American women facing poverty, violence, sexual exploitation, and other physically and spiritually marginalizing social ills. For further discussion, see Deloris Williams, *Sisters in the Wilderness: The Challenge of Womanist God-talk* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1993) 3–6.
57. Ibid., 5.
58. Emilie Townes uses Toni Morrison's Beloved to articulate the ways that Womanist spirituality "rejects dualism and argues for wholeness." Hers is an ethical review of how African Americans can love our selves through an unapologetically coherent and cohesive "relationship between body, soul, and creation." For further discussion, see Emilie M. Townes, *In a Blaze of Glory: Womanist Spirituality as Social Witness* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) 47–67. See also Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Plume, 1987) 88–89.
59. Townes, 55.
60. Morrison, 88.
61. Sage [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 18 February 2010.
62. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York, NY: Routledge Classics, 2001) 64 and 69.
63. Ibid., 69.
64. Ibid., 57 and 67.
65. Ibid., 64.
66. Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: A Study in Moral Theory* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2007) 205.
67. Ibid., 208–210.
68. Ibid., 186.
69. Alasdair MacIntyre, Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2006) 8.
70. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990) 82–83).
71. I recognize that, for Nussbaum, the virtues are more static, and even more, the virtuous life is about reconciling all the tragedies that we

experience based on conflicting goods, conflicting obligations, and unharmonious rules and duties. In opposition to MacIntyre's perspective, Nussbaum definitely advocates universalism in the benefit of the virtues, though she is clear that "practical wisdom" exemplifies the virtuous person's ability to attune herself to the complexities and unavoidable particularity of life. See Martha Nussbaum, *The Fragility of Goodness: Luck and Tragedy in Greek Tragedy and Philosophy* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986) 67; and Martha Nussbaum, "Virtue Ethics: A Misleading Category?" *The Journal of Ethics* 3.3 (1999): 176.

72. L. Alice [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 27 April 2010.
73. Gabrielle [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 6 April 2010.
74. KD [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 13 May 2010.
75. Denise [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 6 April 2010.
76. Xavier [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 14 April 2010. In her interview, Xavier talked about the common colloquial use of "family" to describe the network of people in one's context who identify as queer (or gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender).
77. Candy [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 6 April 2010.
78. Kori [pseudo.], interview by author, field notes, Atlanta, GA, 12 April 2010.
79. Traci C. West, *Wounds of the Spirit: Black Women, Violence, and Resistance Ethics* (New York, NY: New York University Press, 1999) 151–181.
80. Janet Jakobsen, "Queer Is? Queer Does?: Normativity and Resistance," *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 4.4 (1998): 520.
81. Julia R. Wallace and Alexis P. Gumbs, "Safety: An Abolitionist Vision," Mobile HomeComing, entry posted April 14, 2009, http://mobile-homecoming.wordpress.com [accessed November 23, 2010].
82. Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment (New York, NY: Routledge, 2000) 178.
83. Ibid., 179–180.
84. Ibid., 178–183.
85. K. Sue Jewell, Survival of the Black Family: The Institutional Impact of U.S. Social Policy (New York: Praeger Publishers, 1988) 131.
86. Ibid.
87. Janet Jakobsen, "Queer Relations: A Reading of Martha Nussbaum on Same-Sex Marriage," *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 19.1 (2010): 139.

88. Ibid., 138.
89. Ibid.,167–70.
90. Harris, 49–50.
91. Nancy L. Wilson, "Queer Culture and Sexuality as a Virtue of Hospitality" in Robert E. Goss and Amy Adams Squire Strongheart, eds., *Our Families, Our Values: Snapshots of Queer Kinship* (New York: The Hawthorn Press, 1997) 23.
92. Ibid.
93. Murdoch, 54.
94. Ibid., 56.
95. Traci C. West, *Disruptive Christian Ethics: When Racism and Women's Lives Matter* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2006) 55.
96. West, Wounds of the Spirit, 152.

CHAPTER 6

Subversive–Generative Moral Imagination

Introduction

As I began the ethnography for this work, I understood that my ability to consider the outcome of the work would rest with the ways that my interview participants shaped my ideas about morality and family and their ability to create a foundation for the ethics that I would put forth. I did not anticipate, however, the significance of visioning, daydreaming, and imagining that would emerge as another central feature among black queer morality. In fact, I was pleasantly surprised when, unsolicited, one of my first interviewees introduced imagination as an important element of his moral capacity to enact the type of black queer family that he wanted.

As the interview closed, I asked, "Is there anything that you would like to say or talk about that I have not asked?" Timothy, who grew up in a fairly conservative Pentecostal environment, responded thusly:

> Well, yeah, actually, there is one more thing. I guess I just want to say this: my spirituality is one in which I learn the notion of conversion—that people can change their mental/emotional/spiritual outlook on the way the world is. They can imagine a different world. My values are linked to this notion of conversion, which I think is linked to imagination. There are ways that we can inhabit the world differently. Our conversion, you know, the way it comes out of our openness to imagination, functions by how we relate to other people, the way we create relationships and family, the way we love that which is supposed to be unlovable—hell, even the way we value that

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> which we say is *un*valuable. We black queer people are often people who exist on society's margins, you know that. So there are ways that this position of marginality calls for being valued despite the fact that we are on the margins because there is love on the margins as well. I guess I just want to leave saying that I am impressed with queer people's ability to try to have conversations on how they can deal with being in queer relationship, since the very idea of doing so is based on the way they imagine how life could be. Child, imagine if we all could convert to being this queer![1]

As our conversation ended, Timothy and I laughed about the seeming impossibility of a mass queer conversion. We giggled about how "fabulous" our world could be, if only queerness—and the notion of living into new, never before seen possibilities—could lead us into the fierceness of our potential as human beings. We joked about all of the styles, language, activities, and even systems of morality that would develop in all this queerness.

Weeks later, when I received the transcript of our conversation, I realized that Timothy and I were engaged in the type of imagining that is, in fact, a significant part of the moral subjectivity and moral agency that contributes to social transformation. That is, our "make believe" conversation about a queer future invoked the very alteration of perception and suspension of reality that makes room for innovative possibilities of human flourishing. In *Dependent Rational Animals*, MacIntyre points to this feature of imagination, claiming that its role is to enhance and foster our ability to see alternative futures that, having derived from one starting point, lead to different directions.[2] These alternative futures, in turn, provide us with an array of "goods to be achieved, with different possible modes of flourishing."[3] For MacIntyre, our imagination, coupled with knowledge about the future possibilities, is crucial to our ability to overcome.[4] In this way, and in relation to families, the process of imagining might be understood as simultaneously *survivalist*, in that it allows an individual or community to hold a consciousness about ideological and material circumstances that may be distinct from the reality in which we find ourselves; and *prophetic*, by making room for a vision that not only replaces the experience of current realities but also evokes action that makes new possibilities real.

Despite MacIntyre's description of what imagination does for our potential to expand the possibilities for human flourishing, it is quite difficult to develop an actual definition of imagination. Philosophical ethicist Nathan Tierney explores this issue in *Imagination and Ethical*

Ideals, resigning to an apophatic approach. For him, imagination is *not*: "perception … memory … belief … [nor] inference."[5] Because imagination is an internally produced thing, it surpasses perception, which for the most part, is generated by some stimulus external to ourselves. This reasoning also applies to memory, which is produced by our cognition of some state that we no longer occupy. Likewise, imagination extends beyond belief because of its ability to suspend judgment about the veracity (not the *real*ness) of a situation. Finally, since imagination can transcend rules of logic and modes of reasoning, it is not something that we infer.

Tierney's definition of imagination in negative terms calls our attention from what imagination *is* to what it *does*. He turns to Wittgenstein's notion of "seeing-as" to construct a discourse about how imagination functions. Tierney notes that for Wittgenstein, "seeing-as" is "a process, momentary or sustained, and to a greater or lesser degree within one's conscious control, of altering one's perceptions and perspectives so as to have varying experiences of a single object."[6] Our ability to affect our experiences by altering, and even focusing, our perceptions is a key element of imagination through seeing-as. In this way, black queer efforts to disrupt and resist norms of family that we find oppressive might be understood as steps along the path toward imagining the type of familial future that gives us possibilities to flourish as individuals and as family members.

John Paul Lederach, whose work in *The Moral Imagination* focuses on peace-building and ethical dynamics that contribute to its success, adds a moral element to human imaginaries. He introduces "moral imagination" as a transformative component of moral agency that brings about social change. Unlike Tierney, Lederach moves away from a functional understanding of imagination to a substantive one. According to Lederach, moral imagination comprises four key disciplines:

> the capacity to imagine ourselves in a web of relationships that includes our enemies; the ability to sustain a paradoxical curiosity that embraces complexity without reliance on dualistic polarity; the fundamental belief in and pursuit of the creative act; and the acceptance of the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown that lies beyond the far too familiar landscape of violence.[7]

What is key in Lederach's definition of imagination is that it always operates in dialogue with reality, but it opens up new dimensions and possibilities of that reality. Along with its survivalist and prophetic elements

that I named above, Lederach's definition is constituted by imagination's ability to *subvert* realities or norms that exist within a certain context as well as *generate* new ones. This subversive–generative quality comes from the ways that moral imagination both "embraces complexity" and faces "the inherent risk of stepping into the mystery of the unknown." In other words, subversive–generative imagination allows the moral agent to acknowledge and participate in the risky business of creating a future, imaginatively and tangibly.

Black queer creative resistance, which I covered in the previous chapter, is a way for moral agents to participate in the cultivation of the good life, and it requires imagination. An ability to both create and work toward the good life calls for the cognitive, emotional, and tangible pursuit of a vision that destabilizes a rational notion of progressive norms and, instead, invites critical and creative projections of new life possibilities. I call this work imagination, and in this chapter, I argue that moral imagination is simultaneously a process of emotional, rational and active conscientizing. I further argue that subversive–generative imagination, which involves radical transformative praxis, requires thinking and acting *beyond* identity politics and *toward* ethical frameworks like embodiment, mutuality, generosity, queer futurity, and justice–love.

To expound upon these claims, I explore the concept of imagination, focusing on its relation to morality. I also consider Jose Muñoz's notion of queerness as an ideality, which in relation to family, allows us to embrace ways that imagining new relationships has the potential to simultaneously affect, or generate, present and future family norms. Muñoz's discussion of queer possibilities calls into question the nature of queer futures. Do they hinge upon a kind of "gay pragmatism," in which the possibility of "rights for all" is the future that needs to be imagined? Or, does a radical queer future call us away from that kind of identity-based visioning, thereby motivating a more radical version of human flourishing?

I also suggest in this chapter that one of the means by which the potential for human flourishing is generated is through subversion. Thus, I engage Janet Jakobsen's queer relationality as both a *mechanism* for subverting the capitalist economies of relationship that we can identify in normative family relationship and a *practice* of instituting new behavioral patterns that foster individual and collective flourishing. I also share an example of black queer moral imagination through a depiction of queer family within my own kinship network. Finally, I offer a brief exposition of two ethical frameworks that may contribute to the development and ongoing guide for moral imagination and agency.

Imagination as a Moral Capacity

After considering some of the virtues present in my participants' moral subjectivity, I want to turn to another tool, imagination, that has proven useful in black queer efforts to disrupt, resist, and create new possibilities of human relationship norms. I find that imagination is not quite a skill, gift, or orientation. Instead, it seems to be some combination of each of those. When coupled with an emphasis on social and even personal transformation, imagination is inextricably linked to morality and the ways that human relationships benefit from our ability to alter our perceptions in order to be in life-giving relationship with one another. Thus, imagination as a moral capacity moves beyond some feature of human activity that is merely developed, imputed, or to which we are adjusted. Instead, moral imagination is part of human *capacity*. That is, moral imagination is a feature of human capabilities that manifests by the cooperation of certain skills, gifts, and orientation in order to perceive what is real and what is really possible.

The presence of imagination in efforts toward individual, micro-community, and larger social change is significant because of its relational, reflective, and pragmatic qualities. Lederach finds these qualities, coupled with moral reasoning, to be important in peace-building endeavors. For him, building peace and fostering transformation in relationships require processes wherein we attend to the web of relationships, creative possibilities, and risks that embrace, rather than avoid, complexity. Lederach's discussion of moral imagination in some ways mirrors the tasks of ethical responsibility that I named in Chap. 2.[8] Recognizing, listening and telling, and doing are ways that moral agents enact relationships that reflect attention to creative and complex exchange, and praxis.

Ethicist Amy Levad, whose work in restorative justice and imagination is partially derived from Lederach's discussions, defines moral imagination as "the cognitive faculty that empowers human beings to create images of our world and its possibilities."[9] For Levad, the images maintain a moral element because of the way they impact ethical discernment by affecting our knowledge, reason, and interpretation of human relationships.[10]

> Our images of the world and its possibilities help us to organize and give meaning to our experience; they are a primary component of our knowledge of the world. Moral imagination is schematic in that it helps us to map our world and its possibilities, drawing connections between various experiences. As individuals are formed and sustained through engaging in

> practices within certain cultural, social, and institutional locations, they use the narratives, metaphors, and symbols around them to create images of their world and what it could become.[11]

From Levad's description of moral imagination, I extract the praxis orientation embedded within moral imagination. Our practices of imagining possibilities for human relationships are predicated upon our practice of those relationships both prior to and as a consequence of the cognitive act of imagining. In this way, I see the reflective element in Levad's definition as the hinge point for turning moral imagination into moral agency.

The activity of moral imagination, according to Levad, consists of "entering others' stories and appreciating their perspectives, making connections across a variety of experiences, and considering myriad possibilities for what the world could become."[12] To Levad's list, I add two other activities of moral imagination: subverting norms and world-making. In previous chapters, I have discussed ways that black queer moral agency has done subversive work through disrupting and resisting norms. Later in this chapter, I will return to subversion as a tactic for implementing the types of family relationships that black queers envision. Likewise, I will discuss world-making as a practice of imagination that build toward a queer familial future.

Inasmuch as black queers participate in creating and pursuing the good life for themselves and inspiring the same in others, we employ moral imagination as an aspect of our creative action. In a basic sense, imagination is an important component of moral wisdom, and an exercise of moral wisdom facilitates black queers' ability to engage in improvisation in family life. Virtue ethicists Martha Nussbaum and Iris Murdoch offer a robust depiction of the ways that I believe moral wisdom makes use of imagination.

For Nussbaum, "practical wisdom" incorporates the virtues of cultivated perception and appropriate responsiveness.[13] More importantly, practical wisdom aids us in planning and conducting the good life. For her, the mark of practical wisdom is being able to attune ourselves to complex situations. Our improvisational abilities and skills of adaptation derive from and, in turn, contributed to our cultivated perception and responsiveness. Imagination is an important aspect of cultivated perception, according to Nussbaum.[14] In her estimation, when we participate in activities of imagination, we also attune ourselves to others' situations, perspectives, and experience. This process, then, is a moral behavior in which our attempts

to better perceive our neighbor's reality foster our ability to envision different futures for ourselves, our neighbors, and our relationships. When we move from a simple "intellectual grasp of particular facts" to a genuine concern for the substance and implications of human experiences and exchanges, our imagination propels us toward the good life through the wisdom of practical care, knowledge, and perception.[15]

In Murdoch's view, wisdom is attached to our ability to perceive reality.[16] This perception of the real, for her, is marked by the virtue of humility, and similar to Nussbaum, this virtue also comprised an element of imagination.[17] When we are able to understand ourselves in relation to others and also contemplate their experiences in conjunction with our own, we open our own capacity for and practice of attention. Murdoch also describes imagination as a pertinent element of our ability to perceive reality, whether it is our own or our neighbor's. For her, imagination is a component of attention that allows us to lovingly attend to the reality of the other. Combined with a perception of the real in our own lives, this moral practice, according to Murdoch manifests in the virtue of humility and propels us toward the good.

To be clear, Murdoch is most appreciative of imagination at its highest level: *dianoia*. *Dianoia* is "discursive understanding as selfless wisdom," and she asserts that it is this type of imagination that actually motivates us toward the good. Murdoch distinguishes *dianoia* from *phantasia*, or fantasy, which is an imaginative capacity that is more oriented to one's self. *Dianoia*, alternatively, mitigates the egotistic illusory work of *phantasia* by orienting us toward reality of others.[18] In this way, this high form of imagination aids us in ordering the world, understanding ourselves, and attending to others.[19] While the moral takeaway for imagination is the way it enables us to make real to ourselves the existence and experiences of other people, the social and political takeway is equally as important.[20] In society and politics, imagination helps us to see and classify the consequences of policies, to see what it is like for people to be in certain situations, and to relate moral ideas to pragmatic considerations.[21]

For both Nussbaum and Murdoch, our ability to perceive and attune ourselves to our reality is a prerequisite for creating the kind of world that we wish to inhabit. Even Lederach affirms this notion when he describes "moral imagination" as "the capacity to imagine something rooted in the challenges of the real world yet capable of giving birth to that which does not yet exist."[22] As we attune ourselves to the realities in our surrounding, we make it easier for ourselves to subvert those realities by constructing

new ones. That is, we have to perceive what is real before we can turn it into what is *possible*. As black queers become more conscientized about the dynamics within and economies that constitute our family relationships, we give ourselves a chance to imagine a different future for those very relationships. The term "different" there speaks both to the intimacy with which our imagination relates to what is current in families as well as the path for creative and transformative action that alters possibilities for human relationships. Instead of remaining situated within a compulsory set of family economies based on norms of gender, sexuality, race, class, and ability, we can draw on our imaginative capacities to initiate and cultivate "that which does not yet exist." In doing so, I believe we challenge the very notion of what exists and what is real: through *possibility*, we blend a normative present with a queer future.

Generating New Worlds: Imagining a Queer Future

Imagination as Queer World-Making

In order to explore the relationship between imagination and new worlds, I borrow from José Muñoz's delineation of "the worldmaking power of disidentificatory performance."[23] For him, queer performances are not simply practices of theater, nor are they merely politically driven displays of critique. Rather, queer performativity harnesses the nuance of politicized, disruptive theatrical behaviors that enact counter-hegemonic discourse and action. In short, disidentification in performance, for Muñoz, brings about queer transformative agency and draws on the dismantled pieces of normative life in order to do so.

I also employ Muñoz's work because his assessment of the relationship between disidentification, performance, and world-making complements my assertion that imagination is a work in transformative, radical world-making. Imagination, in relation to queer possibilities, fosters a set of worlds that transform individuals and society; generates alterity and opposition to stagnant economies of human relation; dismantles and then utilizes what is tangible and present to formulate what is not-yet; and point to the institutional and state function in cultural hegemony. As black queers engage in imagination, then, we perhaps "perform" a type of world viewing that is essentially and discursively radical, critical, and transformational.

As our imaginative capacities translate to world-making, we not only create the worlds we wish to inhabit but also transform the one in which our subjectivity and experiences exist. The practicing of imagining, like performance, "engenders worlds of ideological potentiality that alter the present and map out the future."[24] Again, moral imagination draws on the nuanced difference between creativity and transformation by recognizing that our own experiences contribute to the type of worlds that we envision while also providing a strategic plan for some aspects of our world that we may want to alter. Thus, the alterity is not only in the future of our imagination but also in our ability to reshape the possibilities for right now. Black queer survival in our arguably hostile normative context, for example, is evidence of how imagining and enacting possibilities make moral agents inhabit a space of social and subjective reality that is being both altered and created, since our survival challenges the ideologies of normative subjectivities. Whereas Muñoz's concept of performance allows us to see how that activity transports audience and performer to a different time and space, moral imagination's work illustrates what it is to transform and create the time and space that we inhabit.[25]

In addition to transformation and creativity, imaginative world-making can establish alterity and opposition while providing a critical analysis and a stand against oppression. For the most part, alternative views of the world are not merely different; they are also oppositional. In fact, the change in perception that moral imagination allows is more than a different viewpoint. Instead, it functions as an oppositional ideological perspective that critiques regimes of oppression and challenges the notions of "truth" that pervade hegemonic discourse about the subjectivity, experiences, and even needs of our society's marginalized people.[26] This oppositional gaze, to be clear, disruptions the notion of absolutes and, in its stead, privileges ambiguity.

One way in which absolutes become destabilized is through imagination's use of the disassembled "parts" of what is real to construct an ideal future of what is really possible. Muñoz argues that when queer performativity engages in disruptive disassembling, its effort is not to totally and simply "tear down the majoritarian public sphere."[27] Instead, he claims, performance uses *parts* of the hegemonic worldview and circumstance to build images of alternative realities. Like Muñoz, I find that imagination's building capacity is as much about an interpretative employment of reality's circumstances as it is about fashioning an alternative circumstance by using "raw materials" of our culture's normative discourses. Later, I will

speak more to the possible assimilationism that might result from using these "parts" of normative society to build something new, but for now, let me simply affirm that there is extreme transformative and critical power in using the disassembled components of our social norms to create an image of alternative world possibilities.

Another way that absolutes become destabilized is through a critical focus on institutions and/or the state. This critical focus is similar to the step of recognition that processes of disruption employ. In addition to the critique of essentialized subjectivity and identity politics, imagination has the power to implicate the role of institutions and social ideologies in hegemonic normativity. In fact, Muñoz calls this implication "a ground-level assault on a hegemonic world vision that substantiates the dominant public sphere."[28] In short, both performance and imagination disavow what the dominant, normative, hegemonic culture deems real and values as absolute.[29] Indeed, for Muñoz, social space that is manifested in institutional or state formality "is both a stage and a battlefield."[30] Like certain aspects of performance, imagination allows us to consider the ways that both counterpublics and marginalized individuals experience our culture as well as "the ideological state apparatus and other aspects of the hegemonic order."[31] By imagining new worlds and cultivating those worlds through performance and everyday practice, we also participate in discerning the role that institutions and state bureaucracies play in shaping the world that we inhabit. This process of seeing-as, in relation to structural apparatuses, is another way of seeing, through a critical lens, what is real. In this way, becoming conscientized about our own surroundings and all of the complicated intersections of performance at play facilitates praxis—where seeing a three-dimensional view of our world allows us, in turn, to participate in three-dimensional world-making.

Towards a "Queer Utopia"

"Queerness is an ideality," according to Muñoz.[32] It is a future that we have not reached, yet it holds the representation of the potentialities that we seek for ourselves as individuals, as humans in relationship, and as social beings endeavoring to formulate boundless relations. The space of queerness—which we have never quite inhabited, according to Muñoz—is a utopia wherein a move beyond the present is something more than a progression of time. It is, rather, a transposition of what is real and what our desires propel us to create. Moral imagination also features this element of

now and not-yet and allows moral agents to occupy spaces that are projections future possibilities.

Working toward and imagining a future of possibility is a moral practice of hope-work, wherein queer possibilities—those that alter the structures and strictures of the future—face destabilization. In some ways, hope-work rejects what is "real" and "here and now." For Muñoz, this rejection is ultimately queer and displays "an insistence on potentiality or concrete possibility for another world."[33] As our imaginations illuminate and also anticipate queer possibilities, while also invoking active responses, they represent the "affective contours of hope itself."[34] Ideality—whether social or political—is not usually an acceptable horizon toward which liberal or queer efforts aim. Moral imagination reformulates and sustains a place for social and political idealism, when almost everyone—from radical leftists to über-conservatives—insists on its dismissal. While "shouting down utopia is an easy move," perhaps a more productive and hopeful endeavor is to intervene in the dominant dismissal of social and political idealism, offering ways of seeing and inhabiting the world that might lead to our individual and collective happiness.[35]

Queerness and the utopic future that it suggests are based on some basic idea about the necessity and inescapability of human relationality. Muñoz claims that we need "an understanding of queerness as collectivity" because this notion of human relationality reifies the idea that "queerness is primarily about futurity and hope" that depends on our true expressions of selfhood and the relations between those selves.[36] When we envision ourselves in irreducible relationality, we also vision new kinds of selves, unlock new possibilities, and enact new lives. To be clear, working towards a queer utopic vision requires intent, and vision is manifested through practices—seeing and doing-as in order to move toward being. One way this occurs is through the creation of micro-communities in which people exist in fully intentional relationality and where human potentiality is not based on individualism, but rather on our relationships with one another.

Subversion Tactics: Implementing Queer Relationality

In this chapter, I gesture toward Janet Jakobsen's concept of queer relationality. According to Jakobsen, many queers inhabit spaces and enact modes of behavior that we might understand as "queer" because of the

ways those spaces and behaviors reflect a difference from, challenge to, and subversion and reformulating of normative human relationships. I will discuss Jakobsen's notion of queer relationality in more detail below, but here I want to mention that one part of what is interesting about the notion of queer relationality is not simply the ways that people of different genders might take on and transform certain family roles. Instead, what seems to mark the *queerness* in relationality for Jakobsen and others is the way that the relationships themselves (along with the expectations and subsequent behaviors they inspire) take on new meaning, thereby allowing selves/subjects/identities to be constituted by something in addition to—or even completely separate from—the structure of the family. In short, I gather that queer relationality allows for two significant things pertinent to morality and human relations. First, it makes space for the manifestation of newly imagined, yet circumstantially responsive, economies of relationship within families and/or kinship networks. Second, because our identities are often so closely tied to the roles, experiences, behaviors, and values from our family life, queer relationality opens the door for us all to imagine and even experience new ways to constitute ourselves and to think about our constitution in relation to others.

The aesthetics and general exercise of queer relationality circulate throughout all spheres of social production. For the purposes of *Black Queer Ethics*, I am interested in ideas and practices that draw upon this pervasiveness and that enact the operation of queer relationality, as part of a world-making, morally imaginative project. Since I will discuss the concept below, let me momentarily consider the terms separately. I mentioned in the Introduction of this book that queer is a term that acts as a noun, adjective, and verb. As an adjective, it describes things/people/circumstances that are abnormal and perhaps even undesirable. As a verb, it "performs," by illustrating ways the "norm" is itself unnatural. In this way, it dismantles structures of meaning and challenges the concept of norms altogether. As a noun, it designates subjectivities that are positioned as abnormal through action or description. Its noun form always positions "queer" in dynamic relation—though not always opposition—to normativity.

Second, relationality is a term that carries the inheritance of the story that I told in Chap. 5 about the development and proliferation of the "autonomous individual" ideology while simultaneously pointing to an irreducible *we*-ness in human selfhood. As the story goes, the bourgeois subject is defined precisely by male autonomy, his fixity as a self who is independent

from other selves, and his absolute ability for self-determination. We get this story from several sources, including the Enlightenment, Modernism and, most particularly, through societal discourses around religion, family, and capitalism. In the aftermath of this story, "queer" embodies, operates, and interrogates what is "normal" about this ideology and ultimately insists on the "we" that predicates the "I." Thus, by relationality, I mean that the way we understand our very bodies and experiences is a relational process. Even more, I suggest that relationality points to the ways we exist in fundamentally social bonds with one another as human beings, and I focus on how these bonds develop and transform in family.

In this section, I engage queer relationality as a concept and also consider its relation to moral imagination. My discussion emerges from a general question: *what does the imaginative element of queerness present to relationship economies (practically and otherwise), and how do those relationships manifest in families?* On the one hand, I suggest that queer relations present possibilities for innovation and creative responses to life circumstances, allowing those who participate in the relationships to step outside of the compulsory structures and behaviors of normativity to actually imagine and enact the types of relations and selves that make their lives more livable and enjoyable. On the other hand, I can see ways that queer relationality impacts the ways that people who identify as queer can manifest normative relationships while embodying nonnormative subjectivities. "Homonormativity," as it is jargonly described these days, points to the systematic approach to dominant cultural assimilation employed by people who sexually identify as queer. The question that emerges, when putting these two possibilities together, is: What significance is there in the practical and moral distance between something like "gay pragmatism" and a radical queer agenda? And even more, how do these sociopolitical (and religious) "poles" reflect queer relationality in different ways?

In the coming pages, I discuss Janet Jakobsen's description and general advocacy of queer relationality; Jose Muñoz's interrogation of a queer utopic vision that is in conversation with "gay pragmatism"; and black queer notions and practices of queer and fictive kinship. As she questions the whereabouts of the subjects of sex and sexuality in social and political discourses on freedom and democracy, Jakobsen enters the "debate" around gay marriage by interrogating the kinds of relationships that our political order—and subsequently our social order—supports as normal, viable, and morally preferred. In her estimation, a move beyond the dyads venerated in our couplist society—which are socially, religiously, and

legally sanctioned—requires us to critically engage forms of relationality that are based on something more than an ideology of the autonomous individual. Jose Muñoz also enters this conversation by questioning the social and political thrust of queer relationships that respond to gay rights agendas in relations to family. His inquiry, like Jakobsen's, forces us to think about the relational styles and values that we queers privilege as we imagine ourselves within society. Certainly, practices and norms of kinship within black queer spaces point to a kind of queer relationality that draws on a queered notion of kinship as well as black cultural notions of fictive kin. Thus, I will conclude this section offering a couple of examples/stories that illustrate black queer manifestations of queer relationality.

"The Autonomous Individual" and Queer Relationality

Jakobsen begins her work in "Queer Relations" by posing the question: "what kind of subjects are we?"[37] She argues that contemporary public discourse on marriage and family issues is shaped by a hegemonic Christian secularism and is constituted by references to a kind of religiosity that is consistently denied under the framework of "separation of church and state." In light of these discourses, Jakobsen interrogates the issue of human subjectivity that she believes is at the heart of the issue. At the foundation of her inquiry, then, is a challenge to the norm of liberalism that acts as the basis of public discourse and socioeconomic and political negotiations about the structure, support, and rights versus privilege concerns around family.[38]

One way that queers can answer (and have answered) Jakobsen's question is by affirming and advocating an idea of liberalism through the appeal to rights-based recognitions. When we queers fight for rights as autonomous individuals who deserve the same treatment of citizenship that other autonomous individuals hold, including rights to marriage, adoptions, and military participation, we draw on a notion of subjectivity that sits at the foundation of liberal, capitalist society.[39] As "single subjects" of justice, queers who are fighting for rights on the basis of equality as single rights-bearing individuals reify the kind of assumptions around citizenry, autonomy, and privilege that constitute a liberal–capital view of human subjectivity, according to Jakobsen.[40] For her, productive conversations about family and human relationships—even the debate over marriage—might do well to move beyond a set of discourses that privilege

this orientation to liberalism and, instead, queer the notion of human subjectivity altogether.

Before she turns to a discussion of queered notions of subjectivity and queer relationality, Jakobsen astutely points out that queer people and queer notions of justices and relationships are often situated at the nexus between autonomous individualism and radical approaches to livability. Certainly fighting for rights, sexual and other freedoms, and equality are noteworthy and necessary in rights-based society for many queers. These attempts can even queer the notion of rights and individual subjectivity by advocating the recognition of marginalized individuals while upholding the actual arguments and paradigms at their foundation. Moreover, Jakobsen notes, these attempts at rights can even critique the norms by which boundaries of acceptable community belonging (in both queer and normative spaces) and equal citizenship are established.[41]

Jakobsen explicates her notion of queer relationality through four subtopics that culminate in her ultimate hope "about the possibility of developing a world in which the rich and varied dependencies that make life possible can be recognized."[42] Here, I will treat three of them, since her fourth—interdependence was such an important aspect of my discussion in Chap. 5. First, Jakobsen describes the distinctiveness in queer relations by highlighting their connection to networks of kinship common in African American and other communities of color who may also face difficulties with—or simply live in slight contradiction to—the white, middle-class heteronormative structure of the nuclear family. I discussed these kinship networks briefly in the previous chapter, illustrating that as black queers orient themselves toward an economy of relationships based on the values that we wish to instill in families, we often resist the norms of nuclear family and recognize ways that larger or complicated networks of kin participate in our individual and communal moral development and resilience. Jakobsen suggests that nuclear families as the normative standard reify capitalist norms and threaten the survival of nonnormative kinship units. She points to ways that families have responded to these institutional and social norms in order to survive. Queer kin, she suggests, is often based as heartily on the connections and accountability mechanisms within fictive kinship structures as it is on other "logical" and socially recognized forms of relationality.[43] These kinds of networks result from a range of circumstances, including but not limited to economic sustainability, care and protection of vulnerable members, and the exclusion of queer persons from the nuclear family space after coming out.

To illustrate some means by which social relations work "in the context of networks of relation that do not precisely fit our normal set of categories,"[44] Jakobsen offers a narrative of her own experience with a network of care and sustainability:

> In my own life, my utter dependence on such a narrative became apparent when my lover was injured in a bicycle accident that produced a spinal cord injury and resulted in paralysis …. I was literally fed and, perhaps more importantly, our dog was regularly walked and fed by a network of people …. Many of these people I had never met, and some of them I still have not met …. Some of them might be said to be members of the oft-invoked "gay and lesbian community"—the local lesbian ob-gyn, whom I had once met, and the local crew coach, whom I did not meet until much later—who in the course of lesbian life in a relatively small city heard of our plight and pitched in. Some were members of Christian and Jewish congregations to which Christina's friends and colleagues belonged, but who did not know us personally. Some were simply friends of friends …. In other words, Babe the dog and I were sustained not by a community of people—our religious congregation or community defined by institutions of employment—but a network of people who came to their contributions and connections through various means.[45]

For Jakobsen, this network is certainly exemplary of the kind of kinship relations in which many people find ourselves. Again, they seem to illustrate the kind of necessary, but socially unrecognized, "family" that contributes to individual and collective sustainability. What is more, this network's engagement with Jakobsen, her partner, and their dog appears to hinge on both real and imagined connections. That is, Jakobsen mentions that she only knows some of the people within the network, and even among those with whom she is acquainted, her connections are minimal. Yet, Jakobsen and those within the network shared some vision of a connection that was based, at least in part, on a basic sense of human relatedness and intersubjectivity.

As a second subtopic that contributes to her discussion of queer relationality, Jakobsen turns our attention to policy implications for thinking beyond the concept of marriage. While I do not wish to thoroughly engage her discussion about marriage and Proposition 8 campaigns in California, I am interested in the underlying message in her discussion: When we define families by starting with the concept of marriage, our policies, cultural ascription, religious sanctions, and general social norms succumb to a long

history of heteropatriarchy, gender inequality and binaries, and capitalist economies of relationships. Queer relationality offers us the possibility of imagining a structure of relationships that moves beyond the linear dyads of heterosexual marriage bonds—which socially, religiously, and legally privilege human coupling over every other kind of human relation. With queer relationality, we can move, instead, toward networks of relationship that "provide for something more than basic survival."[46] In fact, according to Jakobsen, queer relationality allows us to access the bevy of relationship possibilities that produce new practical approaches to our collective health and sustainability.

Queer relationality makes room for new approaches to individual and collective sustainability. Jakobsen points to queer relationality's work in focusing our attention on "how life is sustained under non-normative conditions" and the ways that multiple forms of social relation are vibrant in the spectrum of normativity.[47] In a basic sense, queer relationships force us to confront and even think creatively about the kind of nonnormative economies of relation, resources, provisions, and systems of livelihood that contribute to the array of human needs, desires, and behaviors that are a part of our context. Non-normativity, in this way, is extended to multiple subjectivities, communities, and modes of relationality and offers room for practical and moral imaginations to provide creative insight into collective efforts at whole health.

Even more than its extension of the realm of non-normativity, queer relationality universalizes access to alternative possibilities of family life for all people. Jakobsen asserts that this "universal access," taken from the disability rights movements and discourse, reorients our thoughts and policies about family and relationships. Instead of beginning with an initial conception of the normative individual who can then inform us about *every*one's needs, desires, and visions for livability, we can begin with "those who are excluded by this traditional approach."[48] In doing so, we can all access alternative relationship economies, social spaces, and political sanctions (and protection and provision) of family. Universal access, while bearing practical aims of current social movements, is perhaps an important focus of our moral imagination. Certainly, I can recognize the utopian ideal of a kind of relationality that makes noncompulsory relationships, and the ascriptions we assign to them, possible for everyone.

Jakobsen's discussion of queer relationality, especially in response to the pervasive use of liberalism as the standard in contemporary discussions on family and marriage, points to a challenging and pragmatic element

within moral imagination. In relation to family discourse, moral imagination within queer communities (and black queer communities in particular) cannot avoid an encounter with social policies, practical manifestations of care and protection, and pragmatic approaches to world-making. For example, Jakobsen's question centers on human subjectivity and its relation to both the ideological positionality and practical implication of privileging autonomous individualism as the guiding standard for freedom and equality, especially in relation to sexuality and queerness. I read her question as both an inquiry about the kind of subjects that we are, the kind that we privilege in our society, and the kind of relationships that govern those subjectivities. I *also* read her question as an attempt to trouble the static nature of a subjectivity defined by individualism. That is, her work in queer relationality not only invites us to reconsider the ultimate relational quality of our selfhood; it also provides a lens and opportunity for us to consider our subjectivity as something that can be imagined, produced, and recreated in community with other human beings. In a family context, the futurity of our subjectivity, then, is not merely based on a fixed set of relationships that is governed by normativity that marginalizes queer subjectivity. Rather, it can be founded upon, or at least substantiated by, a cadre of possibilities of relations that respond to our desires, needs, circumstances, and hopes.

Queer Relationality Versus "Gay Pragmatism"

While many queer theorists assert that "the gay agenda" is operating within the politics and logical constraints of hetero- and homonormativity of the present, there is certainly a split among them about the connection between queerness and relationality. For the most part, queer theorists have advocated for a kind of subjectivity and freedom that barely moves beyond the normative aspects of subjectivity itself. That is, queer theorists have pushed for a way to queer the concept of a self—moving from a starting point of the heteronormative individual to a destabilized notion of selfhoods—by challenging the "normal" rubrics by which we have evaluated those selves in the first place. Judith Butler added to this queer move by arguing broadly that our selfhoods, constituted as much by our communities as by our own internal drives, could not be separated from some kind of "we" that pre-exists any imagination of our "I." As I mentioned above, this Butlerian argument has been quite productive for queer theorists who advocate a vision of the queer self as an irreducible

part of multiple and ever-multiplying notions of collective and individual subjectivity.

For other queer theorists, however, the normativity of community and family—wherein the boundaries of inclusion, description, and relation are still determined by a rubric of normalcy—still represents the pervasiveness of heteronormative conceptualization. Thus, some have advocated for a move beyond "queerness as a utopic vision of community and inclusivity" model, since the constraints of such a vision reify the very structures against which queer theories push. In a roundtable discussion about queer temporality and the ways that queer theorizing poses a challenge to linear histories of queer theories as well as a linear future, several queer theorists expounded on this notion.[49] Standing out among them is Lee Edelman, who in addition to the discussion about community adds an argument against foreseeing a queer future as a "good":

> If queerness marks the excess of something always unassimilable that troubles the relentlessly totalizing impulse informing normativity, we should expect it to refuse not only the consolations of reproductive futurism but also the purposive, productive uses that would turn it into a "good." … To try to resist the refuge of the "good," to try to move … into the space where "we" are not: that is a project whose time never comes and therefore is always now.[50]

Edelman cautions us against an approach to queer theory that creates a new norm of stabilization and futurity. She and her conversation partners within the article want to question the long-term theoretical consequences of privileging both a normative gay movement and queer discourse that uses the same structures of thought as modern, progressive theory.

Muñoz is equally concerned with society's growing comfort with a "gay agenda" that binds itself to the acceptable structures of heteronormativity. Yet his turn to a different kind of queer futurity moves beyond the predictable agenda of the contemporary gay movement by suggesting a queer future that is based on the inescapable relational quality to which Butler and others point. As I discuss above, Muñoz's aim toward futurity queers the currently operating logic of queer temporality by advocating a discourse of hope through the concept of a queer utopia. His work "highlights a new investment in social theory," which calls on both futurity *and* relationality.[51]

While I have noted that Muñoz's argument about hope and futurity is based on a notion of irreducible we-ness, I would be remiss if I did not

mention that his unapologetic emphasis on relationality is propelled by his close attention to the cultural and racial implications of privileging what he calls an "antirelational thesis."[52] Muñoz recognizes that the antirelational rhetoric and discourse of Edelman and Leo Bersani result from an important argument against the value of sexuality as a relational and contingent category.[53] He contends, however, that another feature of queer discourse propels this thesis: "a distancing of queerness from what some theorists seem to think of as the contamination of race, gender, or other particularities that taint the purity of sexuality as a singular trope of difference." Put another way, Muñoz not only exposes queer theory's emphasis on an antirelational approach as a disassociation from the heteronormativity of the family but also sheds light on queer theory's white-washed, middle-class, male-oriented, HIV/AIDS-safe singularity of categorization.

Muñoz illuminates whiteness embedded in queer theory's insistence on a distance between itself and futurity and relationality. He argues, "Theories of queer temporality that fail to factor in the relational relevance of race and class merely reproduce a crypto-universal white gay subject that is weirdly atemporal."[54] He continues by asserting that queer people of color along with working-class queers provide critical reflection on this issue that is reminiscent of critiques made by women of color who did not conform to the white middle-class expectations that were characteristic of the second wave of feminism. By critically engaging the singular subjects that many feminist arguments in the 1960s and 1970s produced, many women of color provided an alternative view from this simplistic, often racist set of over-generalizations. In the same way that Hortense Spillers' work confronted the assumptions within Nancy Chodorow's feminist critique of the family, Muñoz appreciates the queer of color critique that points to the common tendency in identity politics to draw hard, often competing lines between identities. Again, Patricia Hill Collins' extensive work on intersectionality challenges this approach. The growing discourse within queer theory that embraces interdependency (not only in relation to economic sustainability but also with regard to subjectivity) invites us to revisit—and appreciate—relationality.

Returning to Muñoz's discussions about the myopic approach of gay pragmatism, I find it quite understandable that he is wary of the reifying logics and practices of movements that are based on the singularity and purity of a gay individual. His rejection of homonormativity for queer futurity is rightfully skeptical of the kind of limited goals that emerge from an imagination of "freedom" and "equality" that privileges frameworks

that otherwise diminish social relationships among any persons whose subjectivity or manifestation of livability is beyond a homonormative vision. Like Jakobsen's claims about the dyads celebrated in gay marriage campaigns, Muñoz's advocacy for a utopian queer relationality both opposes the pragmatism of those movements and challenges the temporal limits of imagination in which they are housed. "Gay pragmatic organizing," Muñoz argues, "is in direct opposition to the idealist thought that I associate as endemic to a forward-dawning queerness that calls on a no-longer-conscious in the service of imagining a futurity."[55] Certainly, this not-yet future shapes and expands the possibilities for families and family practices that are based on queered relationships and queer notions of kinship.

Notions and Practices of Fictive Kin and Queer Kinship: Enacting Queer Relationality

Contemporary conversations that engage issues of family and American diversity, no matter how they may try to escape it, are tethered to discourse around marriage. Whether marriage is, indeed, the foundational relationship within a family, or if it is—less extremely—a mere organizing rubric for the economies of relationship within a family, it takes center stage. I find it important to note that no matter how one argues in the large public debate about legalizing gay marriage, the general sentiment that seems to be propelling the arguments on both sides is that human coupling—under the framework of individual privilege or not—is the most "natural" and positive sustaining element of human social relationships. In our country, marriage then becomes a significant distraction for citizens, veiling us all from the very real conflicts and inequality that govern our lives socially, politically, and religiously. In this way, marriage "serves to reinforce the privilege of those who already find it easiest to imagine their lives as private."[56] Even more, marriage exemplifies "a privileged relation to legitimacy" that many people want to access, despite the social and ideological implications of supporting a kind of insider-outsider norm of family legitimizing.[57]

But what if we complicate the images for the network of family that people choose to replicate? For example Kath Weston's work, *Families We Choose*, illustrates a myriad of family "choices" that people exercise, and she explains how these choices are often set within bounds of race, class, gender, and sexuality constraints imposed both by institutions and by small communities of relation.[58] Even the cover illustration of her book, which

displays a photograph of the "Revlon Boys," is a testament to the complex and diverse ideas of family that exist within her text. Three young men from the House of Revlon—a voguing house in New York—represent, for Weston, the complexities of choice, circumstance, identity, and value that contribute to the myriad ways that people construct family. She explains the importance of voguing house images in confronting our assumptions about families in general and queer choices for family specifically. She says,

> Many kinship practices fall within the realm of choice and possibility yet remain conspicuous by their absence …. Members of the House of Revlon created drag performances that pushed onlookers to think twice about what's guile and what's parody, what's staged and what's real, what's free and what's forced, when gender/race/class/sexuality meet. Voguing houses became home when members described themselves bonded by ties of kinship.[59]

Based on Weston's work, we might understand kinship formation as a form of praxis. That is, the elements of choice, reflection, practice and response to circumstance—cultural, economic, and institutional—illustrate and importance cycle that occurs within all kinship practices. When we acknowledge this element within families, moving away from a "natural" or "logical" or "progressive" set of assumptions about family formation, we might see important, formative features in queer kinship ideas and practices.

One family that inspires the work in this book and has challenged my own notions of familial relations for the past ten years actually exists within my own kinship network. They were not a part of my formal research because they are not currently Atlanta residents, but their story and family life propel this research.[60] At a recent dinner party, one of my family members remarked, "my god-son has three moms, and it's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen." She was describing a set of relations between our god-son, Kenyan, and his mothers: Park; Park's former primary partner, Vicci; and Park's wife Jackie. Park, Vicci, and Jackie are all co-parents, whose relationships with one another seem to be as important as their individual relationships with Kenyan.

I recently visited them on a trip with my partner, and after witnessing and hearing stories about their family, we appreciated the queer kinship that they inhabited. We all planned to attend brunch on a Sunday afternoon. First, we met Park and Kenyan at the home that they share with Jackie, and we followed them to the restaurant. Because Vicci is often

late, Park encouraged Jackie to drive over to Vicci's primary residence and help her to move more rapidly. This detour for Jackie was approximately an hour, and we had certainly finished our meal by the time she and Vicci arrived. While we relived the meal again (since Vicci and Jackie were now enjoying food), they shared several stories about raising Kenyan together, vacations that had recently taken and even more that were being planned, experiences with Kenyan's teacher and classmates, logistics nightmares and successes, and the strong bonds they each made with other close friends. My partner and I were amazed to note that Kenyan was not only being raised by this fierce, and quite diverse, set of mothers, but he was also regularly forming relationships and having experiences with family members important to each of the women individually. In fact, he was on his way to a rock-climbing afternoon with an "uncle." Kenyan's family life, we realized, is even more complicated than the trio of career-driven, religious community-committed socialites with whom we were eating. His family consisted of a cadre of people who affirmed the diversity in his parentage while also contributing time, resources, values, and ideas to his childhood.

I find Kenyan and his moms fascinating because they represent a kind of subversive representation of what our imaginations about family can be. Park and Vicci certainly did not anticipate that they would have a third parent with whom they would raise Kenyan, but they did imagine that Kenyan would be surrounded by love and people committed to his well-being. This image, open to queer possibility, is what makes imagination subversive. While imagination certainly points to new, yet-to-be-discovered possibilities, it is also always attached to what we know and have experienced. In this way, our imaginations have the capacity to create alternatives that not only stand in connection to what we know as "real" but can also suggest an alterity that dismantles what we believe is "natural" or "moral." This tactic of subverting norms, practices, and social assumptions about families is an invaluable step toward generating queer utopic potentialities.

Imagining Ethical Frameworks for Queer Relationality

Morally imagined queer potentialities emerge from a combination of the experiences, creative visions, and ethical frameworks that house our values, norms, and social practices. As our imaginary efforts produce the

kind of selves, circumstances, and worlds that we believe are possible, we often draw on ethical features—named or unnamed—that we find helpful in organizing our relationships. In this section, I offer a brief discussion of some ethical frameworks that might be useful as we exercise moral imagination and which might also contribute to positively queer relational experiences within families. The virtues, according to Murdoch, benefit moral subjectivity and foster moral agency by helping us to recognize and seek the good, and we need to employ ethical frameworks that help us to do the same. Feminist discourse on love as mutuality, along with Marvin Ellison's justice–love, both situate our imaginative efforts within notions of morality that aid us in this process. Because it is grounded in bodily experience and ongoing radical interchange between selves, mutuality keeps us attuned to our subjectivity and invites us into ethical relationships with one another. Likewise, justice–love situates our relationships and interactions within a framework of moral agency that makes us consistently recognize our particularities and seek goodness for and with one another. Below, I engage mutuality and justice–love in turn.

Mutuality

Both love and justice, whether merged together or taken separately as important ethical tenets, bring with them complex and long-standing assumptions about how we ought to relate to one another. The general modern narrative about justice has arguably derived from a "justice as fairness" notion, which usually speaks to a distributive/retributive paradigm of right relations. In this way, justice has represented something like "equality of treatment" and "equal regard," boasting an orientation to the singularity of a moral standard based on objectivity.

In contrast, one ongoing assumption about love among and between humans is that it is naturally preferential and subjective. This *erotic* love allows for difference in desire and treatment among those who claim to share it for one another. The moral "love standard" toward which Christian ethics turns, however, is *agape*. Love has only tried to claim objectivity within Christian ethical discourse when considered within the framework of human–divine relations. As Christianity's divine love, *agape* and its surrounding discourse, has been the subject of much debate, is the ultimate and most divine form of love represented through self-sacrifice or radical mutuality? More importantly, what kind of moral agents and sorts of relationships are produced by these representations?

Early twentieth-century public theologian and ethicist Reinhold Niebuhr emphasizes sacrifice as the primary historical manifestation of *agape* and suggests that just relations are most suitable for the public sphere. For him, humanity grounds its sinfulness in self-love and self-centeredness, and thus, sacrificial love opposes that force and models the example of Jesus' selfless act on the cross. As Niebuhr sees it, this act is foundational to Christian morality and is the moral standard by which our love for God and neighbor ought to be measured. As I discussed in Chap. 2, Niebuhr sees the split between public and private spheres as a division between standards of moral behavior. Mutual love, according to Niebuhr, is based on the expectation that one will experience reciprocity—understood, perhaps, as an equal exchange of self-offerings. For Niebuhr, then, mutually loving relationships are only sustainable by *agape* as self-sacrifice. This kind of exchange, for Niebuhr, is perfectly understandable in private. To the extent that the private sphere—where inter-human relationality and human-divine relations are housed—is the locus of an agapic standard, the public sphere is the proper context of a non-religious standard. Because his division between public and private results in different moral spheres, Niebuhr is not reticent to suggest that mutuality and self-sacrificial love are simply impossible in public. For that context, he offers justice. Justice's aim, for him is equality and freedom; its function, to create balance between competing groups; it's achievement marked by rational calculation of interests and rights.

I find that Niebuhr's division of moral standards is based on a kind of moral subjectivity against which *Black Queer Ethics* fundamentally pushes: the hyper-individuated, self-determinant, independent, singularly oriented, and self-interested subject. Both the "spheres" in which he locates systems of morality seem to protect, if not recreate, those kinds of subjects. It would be more useful, I argue, to think about human relations from a position that articulates and/or assumes that we are already relational—irreducibly interdependent, vulnerable, and in constant search for right-related connectivity. By assuming this kind of subjectivity, we might then find ourselves in need of moral standards, or ethical frameworks, that help us to relate to one another through justice and love, individually *and* collectively. When we deny either "sphere" of this kind of purposeful ethical consideration, we certainly open ourselves to ways of relating that are based on ascription (rather than experience), dignity (rather than sanctity), and merit (rather than need). To imagine ourselves in right relations—queered relations, even—we most certainly must move away from

ethical frameworks that value self-sacrifice over mutuality and embrace notions of morality that respect our wonderfully created embodied vulnerability. Likewise, we must seek just relations *within* groups—families, in this case—as well as among them.

Barbara H. Andolsen and Beverly W. Harrison are two of the most prominent feminist ethicists who fervently resist an ethic of love based on self-sacrifice, especially as understood within interpersonal relationships. Each of them, for slightly different reasons, advocates a love-as-mutuality model. Andolsen claims that *agape* is simply more than self-sacrifice and other-regard.[61] This definition, for her, reflects an androcentric experience and names it as morally normative. She notes that the idea of modeling self-sacrifice as the supreme Christian virtue has come from particular Christological claim: Jesus' crucifixion requires of the Christian moral agent a life of complete self-giving.[62] She also notes that feminists often use other or slightly modified theological bases for their claims about *agape*. For example, Harrison asserts that the Atonement can still be used as a point of departure, and the Cross can still be a symbol for the lesson that we all, as moral agents, ought to emulate Jesus' dedication to love that highlights human dignity.[63] For other feminists, including Margaret Farley, the Trinity is an important theological source. Farley suggests that a human mutual love ethic reflects the quality of the Trinitarian relationship, especially as it pertains to infinite and perpetual activity and receptivity within the Trinity.[64]

Andolsen offers a few key reasons for which *agape* solely as self-sacrifice is a problematic ethic for human relations. First, self-sacrifice is too gendered and thus too uncritically normative for women in our society.[65] Second, dogmatic ideas of self-abnegation, self-effacement, and excessive humility manifested in women sacrificing their needs, desires, and development for men in their families. Third, because self-sacrifice is unequally valued as a virtue among men and women, agape's virtuosity can be exploited. That is, women may practice it to their demise, and men may avoid its practice altogether. While she bases this claim on a very strict heteronormative model, the thrust of her claim is important: Love as self-sacrifice creates dynamics of relation and power based on morally substantiated unequal behavior. This is not to say that Andolsen or other feminists believe and/or support *sameness*; rather, the force of Andolsen's point here (with which I strongly agree) is that self-sacrifice as our "highest good" reifies the very relational hierarchies that love ought to dismantle. One of Andolsen's last reasons for turning away from this model is quite pertinent to my work.

She suggests that an overemphasis on self-sacrifice as a Christian virtue reflects acceptance of the public/private dichotomy.[66] Based on the discussion in Chap. 5, I am clear that this model of love has direct implications for domestically oriented members of normative families as well as our notions of family in general. Andolsen puts it simply: the dichotomy created by self-sacrifice affects both women and the public.

Harrison understands mutuality as "the power, simultaneously, to affect and be affected by, another."[67] Harrison recognizes that traditional understanding of mutuality has made it subordinate to definitions of *agape* as "unrequited radical, divine love." Yet, like Andolsen, Harrison is clear that this understanding of love is rooted in a theological image that does not necessarily match with many people's experiences. She says that it represents the image of a transcendent, disinterested God. To the extent that this image functions as an ideal for Christian love between human beings, and it encourages a kind of "Promethean" heroic invulnerability which leads to distorted power relations and patronizing and self-sacrificial forms of love.[68] Harrison challenges this theological perspective and offers an account in which the foundational image is one of "genuine reciprocity." In this way, Harrison sees mutuality, bodily integrity, shared empowerment and common respect all as "love's essence."[69] "Mutual love," Harrison asserts, "is love in its deepest radicality" and *is* justice.[70]

Harrison understands vulnerability, which is at the heart of mutuality, as necessarily balanced by a commitment to "bodily integrity." For her, bodily integrity requires freedom from bodily coercion by another as well as access to the basic concrete conditions of physical well-being like food and shelter. Right relationship, therefore, is characterized by a balance of vulnerability and bodily integrity, respect and self-respect. She claims, "Whenever one party is invulnerable, and therefore unwilling or unable to be affected by another, there can be no love present. And wherever bodily integrity is not respected, genuine other-regardingness is absent."[71] When both of these qualities are present in a relationship, they evoke the "deep intimacy" of community.[72] These "deep, respectful, sensuous," and mutually empowering relationships, Harrison argues, ought to be considered morally normative. In turn, we can come to understand that whatever ruptures, distorts, and inhibits this mutuality is morally abject.[73]

Harrison's attention to the critical "role of the body and passion in forging the connections between love, power and justice" derives from her believe that all of our relationships are mediated by our bodies.[74] She even suggests that our knowledge is radically embodied and that we come to

know the world through our sensory perception of reality, our passionate feeling about the world, and our engagement with the "concrete, creative order of things."[75] Through our senses, we learn about our relation to the world. Through our passion, we experience a longing for a deeper connection to the world. Acting on this longing is the work of love, and this active loving contributes to the development of right relations (26; "The Power of Anger" 12). Informed by the feminist rejection of mind–body dualism, Harrison presses for a "moral rationality" that is at once embodied and passionate. In what is probably her most widely read essay, "The Power of Anger in the Work of Love," Harrison argues for the epistemological and ethical significance of emotion, including and especially anger:

> If feeling is damaged or cut off, our power to image the world and act into it is destroyed and our rationality is impaired. But it is not merely the power to conceive the world that is lost. Our power to value the world gives way as well. If we are not perceptive in discerning our feelings, or if we do not know what we feel, we cannot be effective moral agents …. In the absence of feeling there is no rational ability to evaluate what is happening.[76]

Taking emotions seriously is the important first step in moral reasoning, but it does not lead automatically to "wise or humane action."[77] Rather, it is the responsibility of ethics to draw on the intellectual resources of theological–ethical–social traditions and help an individual or a community to move through emotions to moral action.[78]

Harrison is clear that we cannot avoid the presence of power dynamics within our relationships. In the face of these unavoidable dynamics, we all must work to minimize the power differentials through reciprocity and mutuality. She presents this vision in contrast to dominant views of intimate relationships that involve domination, objectification, and ownership. In her estimation, restoring right relationship by reclaiming our embodiment and sensuous connection to one another and the world will, in fact, enact justice.[79] Jesus' example, for Harrison, is a moral paradigm. Rather than a singular representation of atoning, divine sacrifice, Jesus' lifestyle is one of "questioning, challenging, and correcting moral traditions" that we ought to model by redefining community and relationships of mutuality.[80] She focuses on Jesus' praxis, rather than his sacrifice, as the "irreplaceable" mark of his life:

> We Christians have, I believe, even misunderstood the praxis of him whom we name as "Lord." Jesus' paradigmatic role in the story of our salvation

> rests not in his willingness to sacrifice himself, but in his passionate love of right relations and his refusal to cease to embody the power of relation in the face of that which would thwart it. It was his refusal to desist from radical love, not a preoccupation with sacrifice, which makes his work irreplaceable.[81]

According to Harrison, mutuality is essential for true relationality. She states that, "to experience the power of relationship, there must be reciprocity, shared power, power exhibiting cocreative, mutually enhancing action."[82]

One of the main relational reasons for which Harrison is invested in mutuality rests with the dangerous possibilities in unequal power dynamics. She asserts, "Power that is not reciprocal is always violent power, abusive power. It destroys our capacity for, and cuts us off from embodied, sensuous relationships with one another."[83] Rejecting classical liberal conceptions of the individual, Harrison argues, as I do above, "a sense of the self as genuinely autonomous and independent … is the result of a misunderstanding about who we are as persons."[84] For her, we are all "richly related, centered being, one whose ties are deep and complex."[85] In the same way, power is irreducibly social because it is both generated in and manifested through our relationality. Harrison notes that social power exercised within relationships has a direct impact on larger social relations. She says, "the generation, distribution and direction of social power are shaped by patterns of social relations that characterize any society."[86] Because we must consider our relationality in both contexts, Harrison suggests that the primary social question for moral inquiry around relationality is not "whether" and "under what conditions" we should come into relationship with one another (as in contractual forms of liberalism); instead, we ought to be inquiring about the actual "conditions and patterns" of social relations that distort right relationship.[87]

Justice–Love

An ethic of justice–love, as a governing norm for obtaining, maintaining, and evaluating liberative human relationships, is another important moral framework by which queer relations might be organized. On the outside, this ethic has the capacity to subvert normative notions of gender, sexuality, and race, since it is based on a relational, rather than constructed, understanding of selfhoods and identities. In general, Christian theologi-

cal ethics asserts that love and justice ought to govern personal and familial relationships. Yet, we find that a cadre of logics that promote gender hierarchies and limit diverse sexualities surrounds most conversations that emerge from Christian ethical discourse on family. With these conversations at the helm, we find ourselves in need of new, imaginative ways for thinking about the relationships within families and the kind of ethic that will support them.

A representative discussion of love and justice as ethical guides for relationships is found in the report to the Presbyterian Church—USA in 1991 made by Christian ethicist Marvin Ellison and other scholars and ministers working on the issue of sexual diversity within the Presbyterian Church. In this report, Ellison and his cowriters claim that the necessary ethical ground for human sexuality and relationships is one of justice–love, defined as "loving and compassionate right relatedness."[88] According to Ellison, justice–love is an ethical framework that is grounded in an open-ended commitment to at least six core values. These frameworks are undoubtedly related to Ellison and others' responses to the subject of ordination and religious participation of gays, lesbian, bisexuals, and transgender people within the Christian community of faith and worship *as well as* the gay marriage conversation in Christian ethics and the larger public sphere. The six core values, which culminate in a single ethical standard, are (a) the goodness of bodies and pleasure; (b) body right, or the principle of bodily self-determination; (c) mutual respect and consent; (d) fidelity as a commitment to honesty and fairness and an ongoing willingness to renegotiate the relationship to serve the needs of both parties; (e) taking responsibility to maintain wellness while avoiding disease and unintended pregnancy; and (f) a willingness to explore the justice implications of sexuality for persons and their communities.[89]

According to Ellison, the single ethical standard that justice–love provides fosters both mutual respect and power sharing.[90] I find it important to note that Ellison does not claim to dismiss the power within relationships. Instead, he calls for an equal sharing, acknowledging that power is a part of human relationality. I wonder, though, if we could imagine relationships that do, in fact, dismiss or dismantle the "system of power" within relationships altogether. Evaluating justice–love as a norm, ethicist Daniel T. Spencer claims that it "weave[s] together the best moral insights of the biblical tradition with our contemporary experience of the Spirit's liberating and redemptive movement in our midst. Justice–love integrates two biblical mandates as inseparable dimensions of God's activ-

ity and our calling in the world to ground an ethic of sexuality and right relation 'for the flourishing of all creation.'"[91] Based on Spencer's evaluation, the positive thrust of justice–love is its capacity to create right relations based on a complementary relationship between love and justice. In this way, Spencer also seems to acknowledge the presence of power that might become infused in relationships and wants to temper it with love. This aim is certainly positive on the levels of individual and interpersonal relations within families.

Justice–love is an important ethical norm not only because of its hope for individual and communal potentials but also because of its subversive power. For Ellison,

> All talk of love, whether about partnership, marriage, or family, should also be justice talk …. Self-respecting and erotically empowered people are often willing to take risks for love and to make a difference. They tend to also refuse to settle for less than what they and all other people deserve: a fabulously inclusive world … that welcomes friends, lovers, and strangers and seeks to turn this precious globe into a nurturing home for all. Be forewarned, therefore: when people come to love justice this deeply, this passionately, they become justifiably and dangerously queer, no matter whether they are LGBT or NOT and most definitely, whether they are married or not.[92]

The call to love one another invites us to seek our neighbor's full self-actualization, as well as our own, while being invested enough in one another to pursue relationships that are accountable to one another's experiences. The subversive power of justice–love is that it turns the idea of a liberated, self-actualized agent on its head. It makes us recognize that being fully free selves means that we are able to love and love justly. It means that our liberty necessitates our accountability and becoming free together means being family.

Notes

1. Timothy [pseudo.], interview by the author, transcript, Atlanta, GA, 5 February 2010.
2. Alasdair MacIntyre, *Dependent Rational Animals: Why Human Beings Need the Virtues* (Chicago, IL: Open Court, 2006) 74–75.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., 95.

5. Nathan Tierney, *Imagination and Ethical Ideals: Prospects for a Unified Philosophical and Psychological Understanding* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994) 43.
6. Ibid., 45.
7. John Paul Lederach, *The Moral Imagination: The Art and Soul of Building Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 5.
8. See p. 58 ff.
9. Amy Levad, "The Moral Imagination of Restorative Justice" (PhD diss., Emory University, 2009), 27.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid., 28.
13. Martha Nussbaum, *Love's Knowledge: Essays on Philosophy and Literature* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990).
14. Ibid., especially chapters 2, 5, and 6.
15. Ibid., 152.
16. Iris Murdoch, *The Sovereignty of Good* (New York: Routledge, 2002) 64 and 88.
17. Ibid., 89–91, 93.
18. Iris Murdoch, *Metaphysics as a Guide to Morals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1992), 317.
19. Ibid., 314–315.
20. Elizabeth Burns, "Iris Murdoch and the Nature of Good" *Religious Studies* 33.3 (1997): 305.
21. Ibid.
22. Lederach, ix.
23. Jose Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999) ix.
24. Ibid., 195.
25. Ibid., 198.
26. Ibid., 195–196.
27. Ibid., 196.
28. Ibid., 199.
29. Ibid., 196.
30. Ibid., 199.
31. Ibid., 198.
32. José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (New York: New York University Press, 2009) 1.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 7.
35. Ibid., 10.

36. Ibid., 11.
37. Janet Jakobsen, "Queer Relations: A Reading of Martha Nussbaum on Same-Sex Marriage" *Columbia Journal of Gender and Law* 19.1 (2010): 137.
38. Ibid., 165.
39. Ibid., 137.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 138.
42. Ibid., 177.
43. Ibid., 168–169.
44. Ibid., 169.
45. Ibid., 170–171.
46. Ibid., 173.
47. Ibid., 174.
48. Ibid.,
49. Carolyn Dinshaw, Lee Edelman, Roderick A. Ferguson, Carla Freccero, Elizabeth Freeman, Judith Halberstam, Annamarie Jagose, Christopher Nealon, and Nguyen Tan Hoang each participated in the discussion via e-mail in 2006. Grouped in threes, they wrote to one another about several topics. Queer temporality, history, and relationality emerged as subjects that spanned each set of conversations. See Carolyn Dinshaw and others, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion" GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 13.2–3 (2007): 177–195.
50. Carolyn Dinshaw and others, "Theorizing Queer Temporalities: A Roundtable Discussion" GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies 13.2–3 (2007): 189.
51. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 10.
52. Ibid., 11.
53. Queer theorist Leo Bersani first introduced the thesis of antirelationality in his book *Homos.* In short, he argued against a construction of sexuality and its surrounding discourses that are based on a kind of relationality in which an autonomous subject is "condemned to sociality as the precondition of self-identification. Leo Bersani, *Homos* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995). See especially Chapter 4, "The Gay Outlaw," pp. 113–184.
54. Muñoz, Cruising Utopia, 94.
55. Ibid., 21.
56. Michael Warner, *The Trouble with Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000) 100.
57. Ibid., 96.
58. Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991).

59. Ibid., Preface to the Paperback Edition, xvi–xvii.
60. The names used in this example are ally pseudonyms.
61. Barbara H. Andolsen, "Agape in Feminist Ethics" *The Journal of Religious Studies* 9.1 (1981): 69.
62. Ibid., 78.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., 79.
65. Ibid.
66. Ibid.
67. Beverly W. Harrison, *Justice in the Making: Feminist Social Ethics* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 59.
68. Beverly W. Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 1985) 16–19.
69. Harrison, Justice in the Making, 59.
70. Harrison, Making Connections, 18.
71. Harrison, Justice in the Making, 59.
72. Ibid., 63.
73. Ibid., 151.
74. Ibid., 25.
75. Ibid., 107.
76. Harrison, Making Connections, 13.
77. Ibid., 14.
78. Harrison, Justice in the Making, 189.
79. Ibid., 70.
80. Ibid., 36.
81. Ibid., 64.
82. Ibid., 60.
83. Ibid., 108.
84. Ibid., 58.
85. Ibid.
86. Ibid., 24–25.
87. Ibid., 24.
88. Presbyterian Church—USA, *Report of the Assembly Committee on Human Sexuality to the 203rd General Assembly* (Louisville, KY: Office of the General Assembly Presbyterian Church, 1991) 21.
89. Ellison, Same-Sex Marriage?, 142.
90. Ibid.
91. Daniel T. Spencer, "Keeping Body, Soul, *and* Earth Together: Revisioning Justice-Love as an Ecological Ethic of Right Relation" in Marvin M. Ellison and Sylvia Thorson-Smith, eds., *Body and Soul: Rethinking Sexuality as Justice-Love* (Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock, 2008) 320.
92. Marvin M. Ellison, *Same-Sex Marriage?: A Christian Ethical Analysis* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2004) 167–168.

CHAPTER 7

Conclusion: Reflections on Black Queer Morality and Family

This book makes three concentric claims. First, family and its surrounding norms, is both a microcosm of and pedagogical foundation for human relationality. As such, an ethical investigation into often-marginalized families provides critical insight into ways of relating, recognition of various identities and selves within familial relationships, and examples of relational possibilities within family. Second, black queer people are moral subjects whose ethical reflection, lived experience, and embodied action illustrate valuable moral agency for those of us thinking about liberating and life-giving ways to enact "family." As moral subjects, black queer people enact moral agency in relation to family in ways that ought to be understood qua moral agency. Refusing to acknowledge the examples from this (and any other) community denies us all the learning and moral growth that comes from connecting with diverse human experiences. Third, recognizing and critically engaging the moral agency within marginalized subjectivities allows us to consider and bear true witness to the moral *potential* in all of us, since what we have to say through the particularity of our experiences—and the disruptive, resistant, imaginative responses to them—is full of potentialities.

Each of these claims points to the book's main argument: human relationality exercised in family ought not squash the potentialities present in diverse human experiences in order to normalize economies of relationship that social constructions of race, gender, and sexuality stabilize. Instead, our relationality—in family and in general—ought to be governed

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by attention to an irreducible *interdependence* and *liberating support* of human potentiality. If we situate our relationality on a kind of liberating norm that calls for our supportive attention to one another's potentiality, we will allow ourselves and one another opportunities to bear witness to, provide accountability for, and live in freedom with each of our ongoing processes if becoming. Even more, we will make room for our relationships to reflect the human capacity to participate in divine creativity.

Doing: Ethics as Active Engagement

I employ black queer ethics as a method and perspective throughout the book. Doing ethical work has meant carefully attending to the subjectivities of black queer people. As an ethical task, caring for and critically engaging black queer moral subjectivity involves at least three processes: recognizing, listening and telling, and doing. Recognizing otherwise invisible members of society requires both a change in perception and a willingness to grant value. That is, we grant one another full subjectivity through our willingness to "see" one another in our fullness as embodied, contextually situated, ever-becoming selves. One result of recognizing one another, then, is being able to understand the different ways that we experience the world, and this new understanding opens the way for us to share those experiences with one another.

Sharing experiences and receiving what is shared are the most significant ethical tasks that we can undertake as we carefully attend to one another's subjectivity. It takes an immense amount of work to garner language, establish trust, and find time for sharing our experiences with one another. This effort builds our moral capacity to hold one another and our stories in amorphous space—where the outcomes, motivations, settings, logics, and sequence of events are all up in the air. Stepping into this space with one another is key to granting and caring for subjectivity, as it affirms the unstable nature of being a person. More than that, it reminds us of the promise of instability in our relations with one another. Actively responding to this instability, then, means *doing* different things. It might mean standing in solidarity with one another, assuming responsibility, providing resources, showing up, and so on—things that show that we have both recognized and really participated in the listening and telling of our lives.

In the beginning of the book, I described recognizing, listening, and telling as foundational steps in the process of political, spiritual, and social solidarity. They are really the precursors to *doing* ethics. Ethical practice

is what allows us to understand the reality of interpersonal, institutional, and social oppression.[1] Once we have borne witness to one another's lives and grounded ourselves in a tangible empathy, we are called to one last responsibility: action.

I situate ethical action as last in the list of responsibilities to highlight it, primarily, as a responsive element. Moral engagement with ideas, theories, theologies, and even social norms often proscribe circumstances of which various members in our human community reap the benefit or detriment. These circumstances and situations provide contextual standards by which we make basic judgments regarding our teleological goals, diverse as they may be. More often than not, these standards transcend context and become normative, resulting in an array of hierarchical relationships between our bodies, experiences, and lives and those standards. Inevitably, this hierarchy begets moral inclinations and attitudes, which, in turn, beget moral discourse—for better or worse—and moral discourse begets active responses of moral behavior. Ethical action is born and established as this behavior becomes increasingly systematized over time.

In relation to recognizing, listening, and telling, *doing* is a necessary response that is built on the assumption that real lives, circumstances, stories, and beliefs matter. Ethical action assumes that there are situated outcomes toward which we ought to aim and that there are concrete circumstances that we want to enhance or dismantle. In this way, doing ethics is faithful action, built on the hope for our named and unnamed teleology. Certainly, doing ethics in response to the processes of recognizing, listening, and telling develops our moral agency. It depends on our ability to reflect as individuals and in community with one another on the tangible realities of our neighbors, and incites action that reflects our interdependent and subsequently accountable relationality.

Our relationality suggests the moral standards toward which our ethical actions should aim: justice, love, and humility. Indeed, our ethical action must exhibit the behavior that the prophet Micah urged, "do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with [our] God" (Micah 6:8).[2] As a notion, justice suggests that each person has inherent worth and therefore the right to "have that worth recognized and respected."[3] Justice is what informs us that our relationships with one another oblige us to an exchanged of respect as well as guarantee us dignity.[4] In this way, it has a direct relationship to our experience in the polis. The relational quality of justice, then, along with our natural relational state as human beings calls not only for the empathy that I mentioned above but also for *care* that

becomes actualized through religious, social, and legal policies that reflect our deep desire to be in good, healthy relationship with one another. This actualization is where the action of justice plays a huge part in creating an ethically responsible community (as well as ethically responsible scholarship): actualized justice results in social change. By recognizing the diversity of our living circumstances, bodily experiences of oppression, and spiritual desires for a justice-oriented teleology, justice does the work of revealing, comprehending, and refusing structural evil. And, as Emilie Townes schools us, justice uses "conflict … as a creative force and methodological and strategic tool" for transformation.[5]

In the end of *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*, Towne calls us "to live and be witness to a justice wrapped in love," an appeal that echoes and reveres the long-established relationship between justice and love.[6] For those of us who are truly invested in a justice-oriented and loving community, we might consider embracing a posture of humility.[7] As we learn from virtue ethics, the Good exists beyond our experience. As such, it humbles the ego and exercises authority from a place that has the ability to relate to our contexts but that is not derived straight from our local, skewed vision of what is real. Love and humility have a symbiotic-teaching relationship in which "humility captures in negative terms what love captures positively: a quieting of the self and a connection to the world beyond."[8] What we need is a sense of our own subjectivity that has become reoriented to a place of reality, with the potential freedom of knowing that it is guided by something other than its own desires.[9] While love defines self's reorientation to the world, humility exists as a certain kind of (selfless) respect for what is real.

But walking humbly as an ethical task requires more than reorientation of the self. Indeed, humility requires active postures of deference to our interdependent relationality and willingness to exist in positions of dependability and dependency. When we think of accountability and responsibilities, especially in ethical conversations, we often imagine the ways and actions through which we ought to be accountable and responsible to *others*. I argue, however, that humility allows us to develop expectations and behaviors that reflect our dependence on our neighbors. In fact, persistent humility among relational beings is a conscious and faithful orientation toward an oft forgotten virtue: trust. And while this trust could seem dangerous in a world filled with the interpersonal and structural oppression exampled through many black queer lives, it does not stand independent of justice and love. Certainly, trusting in our ability to

live into our ultimate relationality is built on the reality that justice and love exist, and they exist in our lives right along with injustice, silence, and oppression. Part of our job is to extract from our life stories strategies for tipping the scale toward the moral lives and communities in which we hope to live.

Engaging in these processes with black queers through the research and writing of this book has taught me something very important about subjectivity: subjectivity is, itself, unstable. As black queer people, we are not, in fact, comprised of a single subjectivity or several subjectivities, for that matter; rather, our subjectivities are the foundation of and reason for understanding our selfhoods through the lens of potentialities. Put another way, this book and the methods that I establish in its initial pages suggest a fundamental shift in the concept of moral subjectivity. Instead of recognizing and engaging one another as static persons bearing identities that require liberatory responses to injustice, we must see one another as persons bearing potentialities that call for justice and liberation on the basis of what is *possible*—for who we are and who we are becoming.

The use of narrative and the interaction with interview material in this book is an attempt to respond to the dynamic nature of identities and subjectivities present in familial relationships. By placing the interview material in conversation with ethical theories and theologies, I participate in the ongoing negotiation of ideas, experiences, and subjectivities that inform the moral thrust of the project. Our stories both impact and are impacted by the theoretical and theological perspectives that we put forth as a society. This cycle of ethical praxis is key for moral discourse, and I find that it builds a conscientizing exchange that brings about moral action. *Practicing* ethics by attending to our diverse subjectivities motivates us to confront the institutional, political, social, and interpersonal structures and norms that inhibit the potentiality of our subjectivities.

The Use of Narrative and Stories in This Book

There are four uses of black queer stories in this book. First, I employ them as *lenses and illustrations of moral imagination and agency.*[10] In this way, they act as new perspectives, important social standpoints, and acute examples of the moral inclinations and behavior from which we have not typically drawn constructive ethical conclusions. Our identities certainly shape the ways that we experience the world, and as such, they contribute to our worldview. To be sure, black queer identities are neither monolithic

nor stagnant. We develop new lenses—critical and constructive—that help us to make meaning of the world as rapidly as our experiences come. Our experiences help us to develop moral inclinations that reflect the position of our identity within a context that is both external *and* internal to ourselves. Black queer stories remind us that marginalized people and experiences deepen the lenses our morality.

Second, I use narrative in general and black queer stories as *pedagogical examples*. Here, they are consciousness-raising transformation tools from which we might learn methods, language, and practices of living into and creating new norms of kinship and family. As black queer people who live in an American context, we face consistent reminders that our lives and the ways that we wish to orient ourselves are not congruent with normative society. In response to various challenges to our very being, we dismantle, reshape, and create diverse means of understanding and living in our contexts. These processes are as organic as they are systematic, for some of us, and illustrate a great example of the mis-education, re-education, and self-education that we employ in order to transform our experiences into ones in which we feel safe, nurtured, and loved.

Third, Black queer stories are definitely used in this text as *critical lenses/responses to injustice*.[11] In them, we find analysis, decision-making, and moral agency that reflect purposeful rejection of oppressive and unjust norms of race, gender, and sexuality as well as kinship and family. As such, they serve as important analytical tools. By engaging the stories, we can think through and evaluate ethical norms and ideas about kinship and family that have systematically not recognized Black queer realities. The stories become yardsticks of moral relevance, social consciousness, and human empathy. Additionally, they act as reference points to which we might orient our readings of classic and contemporary, modern, and postmodern notions of human relationship, modes of discourse and justice-oriented scholarship and activism.

Finally, the stories are used as *proponents of new norms of family and kinship*. In this way, they imagine and exhibit, foresee and create new ethical norms and standards by which we ought to consider family and kinship. Taken together, these employments of Black queer stories reflect the illustrative, pedagogical transformative, and generative nature of narrative. Narrative in this book—exhibited through black queer stories in interview and focus group settings—provide ethics steeped in liberating and life-giving understandings about human relationships.

Summary and Implications of *Black Queer Ethics*

The chapters in this book present theoretical frameworks and illustrate the moral agencies that answer the question that I posed at the beginning of this project: *How ought human beings relate to themselves and one another?* By engaging the family as a critical and formative site, I have argued that we should not be guided by socially constructed inhibiting categories as a way to define and determine the ethics of relating. Instead, family ought to foster a mode of human relation that works to simultaneously cultivate the potentialities and actualizations of individual persons while also situating those selves in an indissoluble bond of generosity, mutuality, and justice. I have suggested further that disruption-irruption, creative resistance, and subversive-generative imagination are all steps of moral agency that black queers employ as we work toward this kind of relationality.

Queer theoretical perspectives are grounded by a push toward the disruption and decentering of norms in relation to gender, sexuality, and the regulatory practices that reinforce those.[12] A queer critical stance disrupts the norms of categorization by illuminating the processes by which they are constructed and implications of their presence. If a potentially infinite coalition of sexual identities, practices, discourses, and sites might be identified as queer, it is not a token of liberal pluralism, but rather a negotiation of the concept of identity itself. Queerness shakes up the foundations of identity by destabilizing the organizing rubrics around which those identities (and relevant practices) are understood. As such, the act of affirming queer identities is an appropriate response to the constrictive limits of multiplying discursive categories in society and particularly in the liberationist movements and identity-conscious politics of the racial civil rights, feminist rights, and "gay" rights movements. The rhetoric of these movements has been structured predominantly around self-recognition, community, and shared identity—though inadvertently resulting in some modicum of exclusion, delegitimation, a false sense of universality, or, erasure through assimilation—which has often been shaped by imputed labels of sexual personhood.

The category of *queer* has been enabled by the knowledge that stable identities are fictitious—that is, produced by and productive of material effects that are arbitrary, though ideologically motivated. Thus, the disruptive aims of queer theories and practices are significant because they force us to grapple with the complex structural systems by which sexuality and gender constructions are formed and maintained in our culture.

The deconstructive elements within queer disruption insist that all sexual behaviors, concepts linking sexual behaviors to sexual identities, and categories of normative and deviant sexualities are dismantle-able social constructs that are currently creating certain types of social meanings. This book illustrates the deconstructive and disruptive work that black queers perform in relation to those social constructs. I use this framework to destabilize the notions of selfhood and family that relegate our moral subjectivity to the margins of subalterity.

Such a destabilization, or confrontation, is a practice of moral agency. More specifically, the practice of confronting norms is an important way for us to exercise our capacities as moral agents who are committed to preserving one another's subjectivity in family relationships. When we purposefully interrogate the normalizing schemes and technologies that elicit compulsory behaviors and attitudes about and within family, we weaken the power within those technologies and even sharpen our attention to what they produce.

I learned two significant lessons about norms through the research and writing of this book. The first is that the power of norms is a result of their tautological nature. Normative norms normalize. That is, norms become norms through a process that stabilizes what a norm is *and* what a norm does. Through different technologies of normalization, disciplinary powers, social reinforcement, and internalization, norms regulate the ways that we understand ourselves and the relational economies that contribute to the categorizing of those selves.

As I worked through the racial, economic, and religious technologies of normalization that impact family, I asked several questions of the research: Are all norms bad? Is it possible to have a normalization process that is not normativizing? Are there such things as counter-normative norms? If so, what can they do? As a way to answer these questions and critically engage norms, I introduced the concept of disruption-irruption. I argued that confronting norms requires the dually operating processes of disruption and irruption. Disruption-irruption is a means of confronting norms that both breaks down the technologies and disciplines that render it powerful and pervasive (disruption) and destabilizes the concept of norms by creating new norms that are defined by possibility rather than stability (irruption.) Through disruption-irruption, then, not all norms are bad. Some can be generative and life-giving, if they emerge from processes that purposefully attend to diverse subjectivities rather than compulsively respond to stable identities. Additionally, disruption-irruption makes it

possible to create and exercise counter-norms as tools by which we can evaluate norms in relation to one another.

I used the story of Madame and her brothers and sisters to illustrate the complex ways that norms inform and are informed by family. Madame's narrative depicts some ways that new realities and norms can irrupt into the fabric of family life. Inasmuch as the family is a pedagogical site in which norms of race, gender, and sexuality are constructed, it can also be a generative space in which those norms are re-visioned and re-acted to reflect attention to the particularities of persons in familial relationship. These new ways of being make room for queered notions of selfhood as well as relational behaviors, and by doing so, they continue the process of disrupting behavioral and institutional norms that hinder individual and relational potentialities.

The second lesson I learned about norms is that though there may be good ones—or ones that we can create to be good—norms still have the capacity to obviate the particularities of our subjectivities. Normalization hides the matrix of technologies at work in its process. Therefore, in addition to creating counter-norms that can interrogate the compulsory, limiting norms, we need irruption to do the work of destabilizing what a norm is. When we destabilize the concept of norms, we destabilize the concept of a norm*al* subjectivity. Even more, we open the possibility for subjectivity to bear an inherent meaning of potentiality.

But destabilized subjectivities do not erase the stability of oppression and tangible forces of subjugation that foster inequality and injustice. Therefore, the work of disruption and irruption must also interrogate the ways that normalizing structures reinforce unjust dynamics of power and privilege within relationships. Recognizing these dynamics is key in the counter-normalization process; it allows us to dismantle the forces yet reappropriate some of the elements into new irruptive norms. The moral thrust of the disruption-irruption process, then, is located in its ability to emphasize and care for subjectivities while resisting the systems that reinforce oppression.

People are always points of potentiality and points of resistance that limit that potential. On the one hand, the stability of subjectivities that are intelligible within our communities grants us visibility and (sometimes) ensures our inclusion within the space. In doing so, that stability manifests external disciplinary forces that impact how our subjectivities relate. On the other hand, our internal instability that infuses our potentialities are unavoidable, and they pose a challenge to the external economies that try

to limit potential. In this way, our internal subjectivities are resistant, and by generating reflection and action in relation to external disciplines, they are also creative.

The norms that prescribe behaviors and social expectations in our culture are often ignorant, dismissive, or even hostile to black queer realities, and as such, black queer people often find ourselves in a posture of resistance as we consider ways to live in relation to those scripts. When people resist through action, new beliefs and altered expectations, moral imagination and agency become generative. Faithful theological thinking and action does not require unconscious and unquestioned obedience; rather, it "means candidly and judiciously facing our own community's complicity in those roots and structures of oppression our social analysis lays bare."[13]

Black queer people who attempt to love ourselves and other black queer people are engaging in this type of generative and creative resistance. By living into a claim that black queer subjectivity is as morally comprised as any other subjectivity, we resist both internal and external disciplines that place moral subjectivity solely in the realm of white, heteronormative, middle-class experiences. Even more, as black queers exercise this resistance in relation to capitalist norms within the family, we challenge the family's colonizing power.

One of the most pervasive mechanisms of oppression that this project engages is capitalism. The history of family is also a history of economic organization. Our inheritance of a capitalist economic system—and the rules, practices, and identities of which that system is comprised—manifests in economies of relationship that reify inequality, limitation, and oppression. Capitalism is a reproduction of a set of economies (and relational constraints) that disguise the truly unequal and oppressive nature of those economies and relations. This reproduction and disguise rob us of a future. Human relations are not simply shaped by an inability to imagine a different relational possibility; rather, such an imagined future is obscured by a false perception of the present. When black queers imagine new relational possibilities—through the practice of recognizing and resisting oppressive ones—there is a real confrontation with present reality. The luxury of obfuscation is not an option.

The disguise and distraction of capitalism manifests in the myth that normalization will bring ontological and political freedom—in the form of acknowledged moral subjectivity, but it will not. Neoliberal capitalism, funded by homonormative dyadic relations, drives discourse and law on family

Much of the work of resistance that emerges in this project results from a creative turn away from capitalist forces. Some of my research participants respond to this structure of oppression by first facing and then turning away from (as much as possible) capitalist-driven relational styles. This element of truth-making is both resistant and creative, as it allows individuals to imagine new possibilities for living outside of the structures of oppression with which they are familiar.

That the family has been colonized is no reason for subjectivities within families to remain passive in relation to the normativizing structures that make that colonization possible. Capitalism, though a powerful mechanism of this colonization, can be resisted. Moreover, the effects that capitalism has a regulatory power can be resisted, if they are recognized and dismantled. Because capitalism and family mutually reinforce one another, the processes by which they are resisted must work together. As I argued, some black queers are resisting disciplinary power of the capitalist family by pushing back against (a) norms that limit human possibility and relationships by subjugating diverse expressions of identities and selves; and (b) structures that foster unequal and oppressive relationship dynamics. To do so, we invoke various values, including but not limited to interdependence, loyalty and presence, unconditional relationships, shared history, and freedom. These "family values" give some black queers an ethical framework through which to understand and critique the dynamics of power that inform familial relations.

In addition to exercising actions based on family values, black queers exhibit various virtues that foster the moral agency within creative resistance. As we participate in turning away from the norms and disciplines that subjugate our identities and limit our potentialities, we also participate in creating new notions of what is good. This attention to the possibilities of human flourishing illustrates the constructive element of resistance. That is, black queers' efforts to resist is a critical first step in the longer, creative process of generating a notion of the Good. This second, creative step is what transforms black queer resistance, which is a means of surviving, into resilience, which possesses the potential for thriving.

But, thriving and resilience require something before we are able to participate in creating the Good. We have to be able perceive and do—see-as—in order to generate critical, reflective, and active responses to our lives. Imagination is an important tool that allows us to perceive and act, participate, and generate all at the same time. At the beginning of Chap. 6, I admitted that I had not considered imagination as an important tool

before engaging with one of my interviewees, Timothy. Our offhand conversation at the end of the interview reminded me that in addition to the disruptive and resistant postures that we hold in relation to norms and normalization, we engaging in imaginative work that allows us to see doubly. We see both what *is* and what *can be*. And, we respond to them at the same time. This double-vision/action is what makes *moral* imagination possible.

For Marcia Riggs, this type of reimagining has a socializing effect. She claims that while socialization is a type of moral education, counter-socialization is "one way of practicing the ongoing process of re-socialization…."[14] This socialization process entails a consistent negotiation of practices of resistance and creative acts. I also find this process to be reconstructive. Ghanaian theologian Mercy Oduyoye warns against strict resistance without forward thoughts of community repair and relationship reconstruction. Remarking about possible community repercussions after the exposure of hidden violence, she asserts, "Reconstruction demands a community of women and men making a concerted effort towards building up an empowering society that upholds and promotes the full humanity of every individual."[15] *Black Queer Ethics* affirms the process of creative resistance that works toward good community relationships.

Moral imagination—a process of emotional, rational, and active conscientizing—is also an important product and ongoing feature of the journey toward the cultivation of liberated individuals and accountable relationships. Moreover, *subversive-generative* imagination, which involves radical transformative praxis, builds upon the work of disruption and creative resistance to continue visioning possibilities and potentials for healthy and positive human relationships. Imagination is not merely a process of fantastical visioning; instead, it draws on our moral capacities for transformation and creativity. In short, imagination aids our efforts to generate rational, emotional, and active responses to both realized and not-yet realized possibilities.[16] By subverting inhibiting norms and thereby creating room for visioning new, librating ones, subversive-generative imagination acts as moral practice that requires thinking and acting *beyond* identity politics and *toward* ethical frameworks like justice-love, embodiment, mutuality, and generosity. Even more, by living into something new together, we generate new possibilities for our futures.

But what kind of future is it? It is one filled with queer possibilities. Jose Muñoz's notion of queerness as an ideality helped me to articulate the possibility a queer future. In relation to family, this kind of future helps

us to imagine new relationships and even new subjectivities within those relationships that have not even been considered. This new set of selves and relationalities has its own capacity for subversion and creation and thus will have an impact on family norms.

A Final Word: Our Voices Matter

One of my favorite books is Anita Diamant's *The Red Tent*. This biblical fiction, or better yet, this creative redaction of Dinah's story, is a remarkable illustration of the kinds of lessons that can be gleaned from an entirely new perspective on a set of social realities, kinship ties, cultural affinities, and ways of loving. Dinah is the daughter of Jacob, aka Israel, and his first wife (of four), Leah. As many lay Christians read it in the Hebrew Bible, a Schechemite prince raped Dinah.[17] She and this crime were avenged by her brothers, who slaughtered the men and boys of the town as they recovered from the circumcision that Jacob required from the King, who was trying to make things right. Without being biblical scholars, we might all be able to notice from this version of events, which is told in a few verses between the everlasting Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob saga and the lengthy and dramatic Joseph narrative, that something deep and rich is (dis)missed in our version of the Dinah story. For example, a not-so-close reading shows us how the honor that her brothers avenged was not Dinah's but her father's. She was his property for which a brideprice must be paid. That she would end up with Prince Shalem was no concern. That she would belong to him before the check was cut, well… that's another story.

In Diamant's fictional redaction of these events, Dinah gets the voice denied to her in our sacred text. We learn of her orientations to her parents' religious practices, her complicated relationship with her kinship network, her discovery of gender and sexuality in the context of her mother's tent, and the application of such lessons with her husband, Prince Shalem. We also learn of her struggles with—and eventual resistance of—the system of erasure of her experiences that is required by her culture and religion. And finally, we see her become an agent in her own religious life, reflecting on and making meaning of the world through the lens of her life experiences.

Before Diamant takes us on Dinah's journey, she speaks to the reader through what we are to presume is Dinah's voice. She says these words:

> I carried my mothers' tales into the next generation, but the stories of my life were forbidden to me, and that silence nearly killed the heart in me. I

> did not die but lived long enough for other stories to fill up my days and nights…. I found cause for laughter and gratitude. I was loved. And now you come to me…. You come hungry for the story that was lost. You crave words to fill the great silence that swallowed me, and my mothers, and my grandmothers before them. I wish I had more to tell of my grandmothers. It is terrible how much has been forgotten, which is why, I suppose, remembering seems a holy thing.[18]

When histories are lost to us, when stories are silenced, when complexities are smoothed over… remembering *is* a holy thing. It is an ethical thing. It is a resistant thing. We are called, as ethicists or people concerned with ethical thinking and action, to redact the future as much as the history. That is, we can use ethical frameworks and discourse to interject the kinds of erasures that we can anticipate based on scholarly engagements (or lack thereof) with race, gender, and sexuality through the real lives of minoritized and marginalized people. In so doing, we might also reframe our relationship to ethics by taking ownership of, and thus accountability for, our sacred stories.

This remembering, along with noticing the indecency of black queer moral subjectivity and agency, IS a matter of life and death. That ethics meets with race, gender, and sexuality IS a matter of life and death. For one thing, we know from the Lorde—Audre, that is—that our silence will not protect us. There is, then, no need for it. Therefore, doing the ethical work of excavating stories and privileging diverse subjectivities demonstrates, once and for all, that black lives matter.

Notes

1. Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Justice in the Making: Feminist Social Ethics* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) 9.
2. This and any other biblical references present in this book come from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV).
3. Emilie M. Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 135.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 136.
6. Ibid., 165.
7. bell hooks, *Belonging: A Culture of Place* (New York: Routledge, 2009) 66. hooks quotes from M. Scott Peck's work in *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace* when she asserts that our efforts to become

fully aware of our own humanity and appreciate one another's gifts through love undoubtedly results in appreciation of our own limitations.

8. Pamela M. Hall, "Limits of the Story: Tragedy in Recent Virtue Ethics," *Studies in Christian Ethics* 17 (2004): 8.
9. Iris Murdoch, *Sovereignty of Good* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1985) 95.
10. I draw on Katie Cannon's work as an example of using narrative this way. See Katie G. Cannon, *Black Womanist Ethics* (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1988).
11. Traci West's inclusion of slave narratives in her analysis of black women, racism, and violence informs my use of narrative as a critical lens and response to injustice. See West, *Wounds of the Spirit*, 28.
12. For example, French philosopher Michel Foucault delineates the process of creating categories of subjectivity based on a "science" of sexuality in *The History of Sexuality*; Judith Butler challenges the very foundation of "natural" gender in *Undoing Gender* by suggesting that gender is simultaneously constructed through individual expressions and social proscriptions; and Siobhan Somerville, in *Queering the Color Line*, challenges the categorical distinctions between race and sexuality, asserting that they are created by the same mechanism of hierarchical differentiation.
13. Beverly Wildung Harrison, *Making the Connections: Essays in Feminist Social Ethics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1985) 126.
14. Marcia Y. Riggs, *Plenty Good Room: Women Versus Male Power in the Black Church* (Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 2003) 100.
15. Mercy Amba Oduyoye, "Spirituality of Resistance and Reconstruction" in Mary John Mananzan et al., eds., *Woman Resisting Violence: Spirituality for Life* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1996) 161.
16. I discuss the transformative quality more directly in Chap. 5. My discussion is based on Nathan Tierney's work in *Imagination and Ethical Ideals: Prospects for a Unified Philosophical and Psychological Understanding* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1994).
17. Genesis 34 NRSV
18. Anita Diamant, *The Red Tent* (New York, NY: Picador, 1997) 2–3.

Appendices

Appendix A: Description of Ethnographic Method

I conducted forty-four interviews to investigate and critically analyze the normative insights of black queer Atlanta residents as a way of interrogating the diversity of human attempts to be in positive, productive and creative relationships with one another. I had three fairly simple objectives as a researcher. First, I wanted to document the narratives of black queer experiences of family. Second, I wanted to elicit and record black queer folks' descriptions of their families, family values, and family structures. Third, I wanted my work to capture my interviewees' own descriptions of how their moral inclinations and/or ethical understandings inform and contribute to their understandings and practices of familial relationships. Below, I describe the design and procedures of my research method, the participants who were interviewed, my recruitment methods, and coding strategy.

Design

My study took place in Atlanta, GA. I conducted semi-structured interviews and collected demographic data through "Participant Information" sheets. Though I intended to conduct formal focus groups as a way to supplement the individual interviews and make room for the participants to share ideas with one another, I was not able to find a time that worked with my participants' schedules. However, because some of my participants knew one

T.N. Young, *Black Queer Ethics, Family, and Philosophical Imagination*, DOI 10.1057/978-1-137-58499-1

another and were interested in the project and one another's experiences, impromptu conversations often emerged at social gatherings. Some of the organization and use of interview material in Chap. 3 comes from these informal conversations. For the most part, interviews were conducted like oral histories. In the appended interview schedule (see Appendix D), one can note the story-driven open-ended questions as well as pointed single-answer questions. During the interview, I asked about family make-up, family structure, familial practices, relationship constructions, moral motivations, and ethical standards in relation to familial relationships. At the beginning of each interview, I asked participants to share stories that would illustrate their idea of family. I asked for stories in order to hear how each person would narrate the "definition" or "description" of family that they would be invoking throughout our conversation. To get them to begin thinking about the values that influence their ideas and practices of family, I asked them to name five terms that they associate with family and allowed them to choose one term on which to expound. Through my analysis of these sections of the interviews, I have group their distinctly articulated values into four value themes: *interdependence*; *loyalty and presence*; *unconditional (but non-compulsory) relationships*; and *shared history and belonging*.

I asked permission from each interviewee to audio record the conversation. Everyone allowed the recording. Because I wanted our conversation to feel like an encounter, I did not take notes during the conversation. After most interviews, I recorded field notes on the same digital recorder. An external party transcribed all of the interview material. I loosely transcribed my own voice-notes.

Sample

Forty-four black queer Atlanta residents participated in my study. Each person self-identified with the description "black queer" or some related terms. By "self-identified," I mean that individuals whose sexuality and/or relationship status is commonly known via statement, title, or any official public documentation, and/or through personal disclosure in their homes, communities, workplaces, and social affiliations.

"Queer" is used as an umbrella term that includes individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, gender-queer, polyamorous, and sexually non-identifying. Eleven identified as men; two, as gender-queer; and thirty-one as woman. None of my participants used the term transgender to identify, even if they had transitioned from male to female or female to male via operation or performance (Two people fit into this category).

"Black," refers to anyone who self-identifies as a person of African descent. The participant pool included thirty-eight African-Americans, three Jamaicans, one Dominican, one Barbadian, and one Cameroonian. For a complete table of participants' demographics, see Appendix C below.

Recruitment

I recruited participants for this project by using three general advertising strategies. First, I created and distributed fliers, letters/emails, and web announcements. Second, I made announcements at large social gatherings, including religious services, community meetings, and parties. Third, I recruited participants through recommendations given my persons who had already been interviewed. This snowball sampling was extremely helpful, as it produce 25% of my entire research pool.

Coding

I coded the transcripts of the interviews at three levels: (1) common themes and patterns in stories; (2) ways of explaining ideas—narrative, expository, descriptive, theoretical, hypothetical; (3) recurring words and phrases. I generated lists of terms/phrases at each level to be analyzed in conversation with the literature.

Appendix B: Sample Recruitment Advertisement

(Study Flier)

The Black Queer Family Project: Seeking Research Participants

Thelathia "Nikki" Young, a Black queer doctoral candidate at Emory University, is seeking Black queer adults (18 and over) in the metro-Atlanta area to participate in her book research.

What Is the Research Subject?
The basic purpose of Nikki's study is to investigate the ways in which Atlanta Black queer people understand, value, and construct "family." She invites individuals from the Black queer community to participate in interviews and focus groups wherein they will be invited to share narratives of their own experiences that contribute to their definitions and practices of familial relationships as queer people of color. The research is intended to

contribute data to a larger book project that puts Black queer experiences and narratives in conversation with Womanist and Feminist ethics as well as Queer Theories. This study aims to acknowledge the voices and experiences of Black queer people and make them available in community and academic discussions of family and familial practices.

What Does Participation Involve?
Participants will be interviewed for approximately 1.5 hours, though the interviews may be longer or shorter depending on the preference of each participant. Participants in focus groups will only be asked to attend three sessions that last approximately 1.5 hours each. Total commitment from participants ranges from 1.5 hours to 6 hours.

Participants will be asked to engage subjects that include family make-up, family structure, familial practices, relationship constructions, moral motivations, and ethical standards in relation to familial relationships.

Who Is Eligible for Participation?
This study will only include persons who are at least 18 years of age and who self-identify as Black queer Atlanta residents.

- "Self-identify"—individuals whose sexuality and/or relationship status is commonly known via statement, title, or any official public documentation, and/or through personal disclosure in their homes, communities, workplaces, and social affiliations.
- "Black,"—in this study, refers to anyone who self-identifies as a person of African descent. Subjects are not limited to African-Americans and thus may include Atlanta residents whose nation of origin is outside of the United States.
- "Queer"—in this study, is used as an umbrella term that includes individuals who are lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning, gender-queer, polyamorous, and sexually non-identifying.
- Residency includes partial or full-time status in the metro-Atlanta area.

Who Is Ineligible for Participation?
This study will not include any persons who do not meet the criteria above.

This study also excludes any persons who meet the criteria but who are enrolled in a K-12 institution.

How Can I Get Involved?
Interested persons should contact Thelathia "Nikki" Young at tyoung3@learnlink.emory.edu or 404-643-1339.

Appendix C: Table of Participants' Demographic Data

	Gender identity →	*Woman*	*Man*	*Gender-queer/ non-identifying*
Age	18–29	17	5	
	30–39	10	1	2
	40–49	1	3	
	50–64	2	2	
	65 and older	1		
Nationality	African-American	26	10	2
	Jamaican	2	1	
	Barbadian	1		
	Dominican	1		
	Cameroonian	1		
Relationship status	Single	5	9	1
	Partnered	20	1	1
	Dating	4	1	
	Polyamorous	2		
Children	Yes	6	2	
	No	25	9	2
Highest level of education	Some college		1	1
	Bachelor's degree	9	5	
	Graduate or professional degree	22	5	1
Salary range	Less than $20,000	9	2	1
	$20–29,000	3	1	
	$30–39,000	5	3	1
	$40–49,000	8	2	
	$50–59,000	2	2	
	$60–69,000	1		
	$70–79,000	1		
	$80–89,000	1	1	
	Greater than $90,000	1		

Appendix D: Interview Schedule

Opening Statement

I am very interested in the ways that Black queer people create, have and understand family. I would like to ask questions about your family. Please feel free to take your time in answering the questions. You should also feel

free to refuse to answer any question. I want to learn your story to better understand how Black queer people relate intimately with one another.

Question Guide

Opening Questions

1. What makes you want to participate in this study?
2. Have you ever told a story about your own life? If so, what was that like?

   Grand Tour Question: Tell me a story that describes your idea of family.
   Research Question 1: How do Black queer people define family?

3. How would you describe your current family? Does this include your family of origin? Who is included? Excluded?

   Research Question 2: How do Black queer people understand family relationships (relative to other relationships)?

4. What differences are there between your relationship with your family and your relationship with friends, acquaintances, colleagues, etc?

   If they stall…
   a. How do you distinguish between family and friend? Friend and partner/lover/significant other?
   b. What are your criteria for calling people "family"?
   Research Question 3: How do Black queer people create family?

5. How did you become a member of your family?
6. Tell me about the process of creating these relationships.
7. What drove you to create and maintain your current family?
8. What joys have you experienced in creating family?
9. What difficulties or challenges have you experienced in the process?

   Research Question 4: What do Black queer people believe are the fundamental values and authorizing norms of family?

10. What do you value about family? About your family? What values do you try to instill in your family members?

11. What norms were you taught about family? How do you live/practice family in relation to these norms?
12. What norms do you affirm or try to establish in your family? Where do these come from?
13. What do you believe are the key components of family?
14. How are your family members and family roles, if any, distinguished?
15. What role does religion/spirituality play in your family values?
16. What about being Black governs your idea of family?
17. What about being queer governs your idea of family?
18. What about being Black *and* queer governs your idea of family? Your family practices?
19. Is there anything distinguishable to you about Black queer families? How do they relate to other families?

Research Question 5: What about Black queer relationships/family supports ideas and efforts of love and justice?

20. How are love and justice related to family?

If they stall…

a. How would you define the term "love"? What is the role of love in your family?
b. How would you define the term "justice"? What, if any, is the role of justice in your family?

21. How, if at all, is your family life an act of resistance?

If they stall…

a. How would you describe a "normal" family? How does your family compare to this description? How does it differ?
b. Based on your description of "normal" family, how conscious are you in making choices to be more similar or different to that image?

22. What do you think your idea and/or practice of family has to contribute to moral conversations about family?

Research Question 6: What role does accountability have in Black queer perspectives and practices of family?

23. What expectations do you have from your family members? What can they expect from you?
24. What does a family relationship require of you?
25. What commitments (implicit or implicit) are present in your family?
26. How are you accountable to your family and how are your family member accountable to you? In other words, how are you all held accountable to these expectations/commitments?

Research Question 7: What is the role of liberation/freedom in Black queer ideas and practice of family?

27. What does freedom/liberation mean to you?
28. Is there anything liberating about family? About your family?
29. If so, what?

Closing Questions

30. How did it feel to tell me about your family?
31. Is there anything else that you would like to talk about that I have neglected to ask?

Appendix E: Coding Lists

List 1

Stories from Childhood
Stories about Coming Out
Stories about Creating Family
Explanations of Meaning of Family
Explanations of Family make-up
Descriptions of Family Practices
Suggestions about What Family Should Do/Be

List 2

Values
- Love
- Trust
- Accountability
- Dependability
- Interdependence
- Freedom
- Equality
- Safety
- Loyalty
- Sharing
- Provision
- Joy
- Diversity/Difference

Actions
- Pushing back/resisting
- Claiming
- Creating Family
- Conversations with Family of Origin

Beliefs
- Religious
- Political
- Economic

Hopes
- Freedom
- Economic Sustainability
- Acceptance
- Togetherness
- Safety
- Future Possibilities
- Equality

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Index

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