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Rejection, Creation, and Abolitionist Futures: Sustaining Ecosystems of Care Under Neoliberal Violence 1980-present

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Rejection, Creation, and Abolitionist Futures: Sustaining Ecosystems of Care Under Neoliberal

Violence

1980-present

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Abstract

The enforcement of the child welfare system through policies, funding practices, and ideologies is a national investment in the nuclear family as a critical social institution to the United States (US); this investment communicates to the broader population that conforming to this heteropatriarchal, white supremacist conception of family provides protection from state intervention to those who conform. My project interrogates child welfare's enforcement of normative families, and the resistance from Black family formations and kinship based on their social position and its relation to power. Focusing on the period between 1980 and the present, I examine the ways Black family formations articulate different forms of resistance. Using interdisciplinary methods of digital analysis, archival research, film analysis, and abolitionist dreamwork, I outline abolitionist orientations to family through a term I call, "Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care," which asserts that care for Black/Latinx queer people rejects singularity or an isolated family through communal care.

Acknowledgements

In many ways, I cannot believe I'm writing the acknowledgements to this thesis. It has been quite the process to get to this point! What I know to be true more than anything is this thesis came together as beautifully as it did because of those who support me. I write about Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care, and I would be deeply remiss not to name mine. Behind every title, citation, and word in this thesis is the support from my community.

Thank you to my parents and my nana. While I critique foster care and adoption on systemic levels, I am deeply appreciative for their love, care, support, dedication, sacrifice, and overall investment in me as a scholar, person, and their child. From late night phone calls to texts of encouragement, they have supported me through every step of the way.

Thank you to my **chosen extended family** (you know who you are!) for being an ecosystem of care for me for years. Especially my Auntie Kesho, Uncle Tesfay, Aunt Laura, Ruta, and Etenesh. I love you all SO much!

Thank you to Dr. Kenly Brown. Dr. Brown spoke to my Foundations of African and African American Studies class the fall of my first year. As a Postdoctoral Fellow, she explained to my class what Black Studies research in a PhD program can look like. I took her course that next semester, and she accepted me into her Black Girlhood Studies Lab. After many office hours, she became my first research advisor and taught me how to approach my interests with compassion, love, and dedication to the humanity of my participants. She consistently validated me, and modeled a practice of love in research that continues to inspire me to this day.

Thank you to Dr. Michelle Purdy. I met Dr. Purdy my sophomore year in Education of Black Children and Youth and she completely changed my orientation to Black studies, educational studies, and my critical analysis of the world. Her feedback in class developed my analytical and technical writing in ways I didn't realize I was capable. More importantly, she modeled a legacy of educators informed by holistic care. She gave me scholarly opportunities, nominating me for awards and publishing my first co-first authored piece. She unwaveringly supported me through every stage of this project, provided grace, advice, and support with attention and care for my passion. Even on sabbatical, she chose to embark on this thesis journey with me, and I am profoundly grateful. Her texts with Lauryn Hill song recommendations and consistent reminders of my capabilities encouraged me to "keep pushing." Thank you for believing in me, Dr. Purdy.

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"Her Future Didn't Look so Bright:" Media's Perpetuation of Deficit Narratives on Black

Family Formations

On July 31, 2003, the Jasper County Tribune released an article by Dawn Schroder entitled, "Adoption Saves Infant from Uncertain Future."[1] This rural, central Iowan newspaper highlighted a recent adoption of a Tigrayan child from Adwa, Ethiopia. The eight month year old baby girl's birth mother was a young, single mother. She gave birth to the child alone in the local clinic under a general name, and left immediately after.[2] The clinic brought the baby to the local orphanage, Missionaries for Charity, which gets its lineage from Mother Teresa. She lived in the infant room of the orphanage, and the nuns cared for her. A woman from Adwa contacted her soon to be adoptive parents who adopted her in May of 2003.

Schroder's article emphasizes the role of two new parents who took it upon themselves to adopt a child that the author understood to be impacted by poverty, resource scarcity, and overall, "arduous" circumstances. Schroder opens by introducing the two parent household the child now lives in and the role of her parents in securing a "safe" future for their new child, stating, "She has a promising life full of love, support and all of life's comforts, yet when Maya was born almost a year ago, her future did not look so bright." My critique of Schroder's framing is not rooted in the adoption itself, although recent discussions of the colonial implications of international adoptions are pertinent, but rather my critique is in the choice of a white, American woman reporter's construction of a specific narrative about the adoption that privileges one family formation at the cost of an entire community and culture. Little to nothing is said about Ethiopian people and the values that they hold; instead she deems an entire country, its various regions, people, and traditions, as unstable, unsafe, and doomed to crisis and failure.

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[1] Schroder, Dawn. "Adoption Saves Infant from Uncertain Future." *Jasper County Tribune*. July 31, 2003, 108 volume.

[2] Phelps, Sheri, and Maya Phelps. Adoption Oral History. Personal, February 5, 2024.

Jasper County Tribune, *Adoption Saves Infant from Uncertain Future,* 2003

This article details my adoption, published by my county's local newspaper. I challenge the ways Schroder's article asserts that my futurity was contingent on a white, two parent household saving me from perceived uncertainty. The *Jasper County Tribune* article points to a larger framing of Black children and their communities as helpless and in need of fixing. While informed by different institutions, policies, and historical contexts, the same racist ideologies around Black family formations and communities prevail. Positioning Black communities as lacking security or safety is embedded in a neoliberal orientation to family, which emphasizes that not only do Black communities and families lack the ability to care for their children but also asserts that the solution is state-sanctioned, physical child removal through adoption and foster care systems. The underlying ideology in this approach is that Black children require saving from their communities and families of origin.

My own grappling with my adoption story through written and retold narratives, and my own experiences in an adoptive home, bring me to this project. This piece of media flattened a deeply nuanced story to construct an all too familiar white savior narrative that marginalizes Black communities by emphasizing poverty and limited resources without recognition of the

care and love across different stages of my adoption story. The author's privileging of a white two parent household over Black communities reflects an American reliance on a white, nuclear family structure. Families who choose not, or cannot, conform to normative familial structures experience an ideological inferiorization across time and geography.[3] By recentering Black care networks in retelling these stories, this project is, in part, a reclamation of stories written without the autonomy of the people in them.

My project interrogates the resistance from Black family formations and kinship based on their social position and its relation to power. I am interested in how one's orientation to the state impacts their relationship to family and kinship. I assert that the child welfare system demonizes Black non-normative families, and as a result, it elicits various responses from Black communities confronting state subordination. These responses range from resistance and creation of new families to replication of white supremacist ideologies about the potential of Black family formations. The enforcement of the child welfare system is a national investment in the nuclear family as a critical social institution to the United States (US); this investment communicates to the broader population that conforming to this heteropatriarchal, white supremacist conception of family provides protection from state intervention to those who conform to it. In reality, the state maintains itself as neglectful, abusive, and violent, but Black and Latinx queer care networks provide frameworks to create kinship and family outside of the state.

Theoretical Frameworks and Methodology

Although much of my analysis is rooted in gender expressions and embodiments of sexuality, I also engage "queer" from a queer of color critique perspective that asserts queer as an

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[3] Manalansan, Martin F. "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City." *Social Text* 23, no. 3–4 (2005): 141–55. https://doi.org/10.1215/01642472-23-3-4_84-85-141; Kandaswamy, Priya. "Gendering Racial Formation." Essay. In *Racial Formation in the Twenty-First Century*, 23–43. Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2012.

analytical framework rooted in materiality.[4] In this project "queer" operates as a way to understand resistance to normativity as well as a space of self/communal understanding for those who cannot, or choose not to, fit into the barriers of hegemonic society. In this way, queer has the potential to be in opposition to neoliberalism, which emphasizes individualism and competition in ways that positions human beings' worth as their ability to contribute to a free-market economy.[5] Developing out of discursive knowledge production and LGBTQ organizing positions, "queer" is both a term of resistance to systemic barriers rooted in neoliberalism, and a term of humanization and care for communities targeted by said barriers. I do not argue that queer identity is inherently liberatory, as there are queer people who embrace neoliberal, assimilative, white supremacist ideologies, rather I assert that queer as a framework provides a critique to normativity embedded in both state institutions and in familial formations that consolidate around normativity.

My project also builds on the work of sociologist and legal scholar Dorothy Roberts. In her most recent book, *Torn Apart: How the Child Welfare System Destroys Black Families – and How Abolition Can Build a Safer World,* she coins the term "racial geography of child welfare," which she defines as a concentration of family-policing surveillance in Black, low-income, urban communities intentionally and, in turn, family policing becomes entrenched in neighborhood culture.[6] The entrenchment of the child welfare system into neighborhood culture translates into community reliance on child welfare for social services as the only way to receive social services after the state intervenes in the family. Roberts finds, "If community disruption is the price

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[4] Ferguson, Roderick. "Queer of Color Critique, Historical Materialism, and Canonical Sociology." Essay. In *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, 18–141. Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press , 2004. 22.

[5] Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism – the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems." The Guardian, April 15, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/books/2016/apr/15/neoliberalism-ideology-problem-george-monbiot.

[6] Roberts, Dorothy E. *Torn apart: How the child welfare system destroys black families--and how abolition can build a safer world*. New York: Basic Books, 2022. 59

residents must pay for desperately needed financial assistance, then most residents I spoke with were reluctantly willing to pay it."[7] My project expands her understanding of the racial geography of child welfare to understand how the state confined Black, low-income queer people to areas of the city through zoning policies and threats against their safety for expressing their sexuality and gender. My project seeks to understand the specific ways that Black queer families experienced this state intervention as the racial projects of surveillance and policing Roberts outlines manifest differently when queer people are centered.

My project is also rooted in an abolitionist tradition that is fundamentally critical of carceral institutions and centers the lived experiences and impact of people systematically embedded in violent institutions. In his introduction to *Freedom Dream,* Robin D.G.Kelley outlines the importance of Black imaginative work to radical change through dreams of new worlds that center liberation, autonomy, freedom, and self determination.[8] He uses poetry and poetics as a metric to understand how Black social movements and their members conceptualized free worlds; he also centers how social movements created spatial domains of safety to articulate and realize these worlds. As a framework, abolition recognizes the imagination as a site for the possible; abolitionist dreams are still rooted and informed by the contemporary realities of people, but abolition offers a space to refuse imposed harms such as deficit and inferiority narratives, various forms of violence, and ideological and lived confinement to rigid and limiting lives. My analysis is informed by the potential and capabilities of Black kinship formations in a world where their needs are met and white supremacist conceptions of their inability to love and care are destroyed.

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[7] Roberts, *Torn Apart.* 61
[8] Kelley, Robin D.G, and Aja Monet. *Freedom dreams the Black radical imagination.* Boston, Mass: Beacon Press, 2022.

Methodologically, I combine archival research and policy analysis with the close reading of a television show to blend lived experiences with creative expressions. As a critical abolitionist tactic, creative expression offers a space to imagine new futures for those marginalized by race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, class, and/or ability. While centering Black butch-femme socialites, Kara Keeling outlines cinematic possibilities and the role of cinema in Black liberation movements in her book, *The Witch's Flight: The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense.* She recognizes cinema as both a space of violence for multiply-marginalized Black people, but also a space to cultivate and excavate futures for individuals who "were never meant to survive."[9] I engage these scholars' orientations to dreams as a radical knowledge formation and cinematic potentialities to represent Black queer realities and futurities. Dreamwork provides a framework for critique of current institutions and embraces a future without the current, carceral child welfare system.

Thesis Overview:

Chapter One of my thesis reviews scholarship under two different themes: the political history of child welfare and a queer of color critique approach to understanding family formations and child welfare. I examine how the state developed and maintained inferiority ideologies about Black family structures from enslavement to the 1990s through policy implementation. I use legal scholars Dorothy Roberts and Michelle Alexander, historians Heather Andrea Williams and David Adams, and Black feminist scholars Patricia Hill Collins and Angela Davis, among others to construct a historical understanding of how the child welfare system developed as an enforcer of family disruption and separation. I then critique dominant narratives about child welfare that construct Black families and the state as a binary by grappling

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[9] Keeling, Kara. *The witch's flight: The cinematic, the Black femme, and the image of common sense.* Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007.

with the ways some Black families also uphold harmful ideologies from the state in their family formations. I put Queer of Color Critiques scholars Priya Kandaswamy, Katie Acosta, Marlon Bailey, Roderick Ferguson, Martin Manalansan, Renè Esparza, and Ernesto Javier Martinez in conversation with Queer theorists like Judith Butler to understand how Black queer youth who leave their families of origin experience rejection from both the state and their original families.

Chapter Two layers a collection of media sources that tell the story of Ma'Khia Bryant, a Black girl who experienced familial separation at the hands of the child welfare state, with the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). I tell her pieces of her life, analyzing each section with the regulations, standards, and expectations ASFA establishes including permanency plans, adoption incentive programs for states that exceed their standard adoption rates, and explicit expedited adoption process stipulations. I assert that Ma'Khia's story is a case study for a larger failure of reform policies to protect, care for, or support Black children. I also center her life story, family practices, and other forms of care to illustrate how people in her life, including herself, subverted the child welfare system through actualizing love. My final assertion is for the abolition of the child welfare system to conceptualize more generative family formations for Black youth than state-sanctioned families, which I take up at length in the subsequent chapter.

Chapter 3 outlines ways Black and Latinx queer youth and communities created generative family networks outside of the state to cultivate safe spaces, maintain and develop culture, protect and advocate for one another, and make meaning of their intersecting racial, gender, and sexual identities. I begin with the story of Luscious Forney, a genderqueer youth who interacted with both foster/group homes and a trans/homophobic home of origin. I examine how their interactions with geography and subversion of institutions represent forms of actualized abolition as well as community care for other queer youth in New York City. I then analyze a

historically-based, yet creative depiction of the Ballroom Scene through the FX series *Pose.* I
analyze its representation of Ballroom families as care networks, as well as conduct a case study
on a character who left foster care and chose the Ballroom Scene. Lastly, I use archival materials
from a series of sex parties that demonstrate a form of care cultivation and communal support
outside of the family network for Black and Latinx gay men. I use Martinez's framework of
"queer exodus," to understand the ways Black and Latinx queer people experience sociocultural
separation from their families of origin because their ethnic and racial identity expression is not
aligned with heteronormativity.[10] I position the various forms of care as Black/Latinx queer
ecosystems of care, which represent the interacting networks Black/Latinx queer people
cultivated for more holistic approaches to receiving care.

  In my conclusion, I use frameworks from child welfare abolitionists to emphasize the
necessity of embracing more expansive and generative forms of family formations. I engage in
imaginative work from abolitionist practices to begin to conceptualize worlds that center
ecosystems of care for Black communities broadly without the carceral, punitive, criminalizing
child welfare system. I center futurities free from systemic harms and violences as a practice of
conceptualizing and realizing marginalized racial, ethnic, gender, and sexual identities as existing
without constraints and limitations from state-prescribed inferiority narratives and executions of
control. I use Black Feminist Epistemological and Ethnographic frameworks to think through
future research that bridges archival narrative reconstruction with Black Feminist and Girlhood
Scholars, Jennifer Nash and Kenly Brown's conceptions of "felt life" and "affective
life/knowledge."[11]

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[10] Martinez, Ernesto Javier. "Queer Latina/o Migrant Labor." Essay. In *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility*, 76–111. Stanford , California: Stanford University Press , 2013.
[11] Brown, Kenly. "Love, Loss and Loyalty A Black Feminist Reading of Black Girlhood." Essay. In *Black Feminist Sociological Methodologies and What They Teach Us*, 1st ed., 197–206. New York, NY: Routledge, 2021; Nash,

Chapter One: A Political History of Heternormative, Anti-Black Child Welfare and a

Queer of Color Reconceptualization

Systemic Nightmares: Political Histories and Legacies of Child Welfare

Child welfare is an institution that often escapes public criticism due to its label as a social service. However, scholars such as Dorothy Roberts and Angela Burton et al. resist this conception through their analysis of the child welfare system as an extension of the carceral web of policing and prisons. Historicizing and contextualizing the child welfare system reveals the ideologies and values that undergird its development as an institutional power in America. I delve into a political history from enslavement to the 1990s of child welfare to reveal how policy developed to sustain white power through legally upholding narratives that assert the inferiority of Black family structures through layered approaches and across time. I argue the disruption of Black families is foundational to the child welfare system's development, which informs the pathologization of Black families as inherently inferior. My thesis labels reform policy as intentionally contributing to and justifying the demonization of Black families by sustaining the originating ideologies of the child welfare system.

Roberts examines a history of the child welfare system that challenges historical narratives that begin with white children in the 1800s through religious and charitable organizations. Through layering scholarship, literature, archival material, and film, her historicization of the child welfare system establishes its origins during enslavement through Black family separation as foundational to economic interests and investment.[12] She outlines how enslavers leveraged familial bonds to "maximize production," by threatening to sell Black women's children as a punishment for rebellion. Additionally, slavery laws established the white,

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Jennifer C. *Black Feminism Reimagined: After intersectionality*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2019.

[12] Roberts, *Torn Apart.* 90

male plantation owner as the patriarchal authority over the entire "extended plantation family" which included the "property," meaning people, he owned.[13] The control over Black families from their ability to stay together to how they functioned on the plantation remained solely in the authority of the white enslavers, and resistance to this resulted in physical violence and complete family disruption. Simultaneously, Black enslaved people established family reconstruction as foundational to liberation efforts.

During the Civil War and just after emancipation, through methods like flyering for missing family members and physical travel across different plantations, Black family members, which included four million formerly enslaved people, sought out missing members of their families and negotiated with plantation owners for their return.[14] While making efforts to reconnect with their families, enslaved people also created new, non-biological family networks. When formerly enslaved people reconnected with families of origin, they often blended their found families with their biological families; this represents a cultural formation of chosen families cultivated out of survival, but maintained through support, care, and love.[15] Even amidst these extensive efforts to connect and recreate family, the Freedmen's Bureau had jurisdiction to establish freed Black children as "orphaned" or "abandoned," which resulted in the child's indentured servitude instead of family reconnection.[16] This solidifies the need for "orphaned" children physically, but also the categorical construction of orphaned/abandoned similarly to "abused/neglected," to generate revenue on a federal level, dating back to enslavement and Reconstruction. Understanding the origins of the child welfare system as rooted in enslavement reveals that the foundational ideologies behind child welfare are the restriction of Black

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[13] Roberts, *Torn Apart.* 93

[14] Williams, Heather Andrea. *Help me to find my people: The African American search for family lost in slavery.* Chapel Hill, North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press, 2016. 12

[15] Williams, *Help Me to Find My People.* 11*;* Roberts, *Torn Apart.* 93

[16] Roberts, *Torn Apart.* 98

communities to develop kinship and family formations and the delegitimization of Black families and their efforts to connect.

Family disruption operates as a tactic for physical and emotional separation, but it is also used as a tactic in cultural removal and sanitization. The origins of white supremacist cultural displacement by the state in favor of a child welfare system began with Indigenous communities as the primary target. At the onset of the Civil War, when Southern white people feared losing enslaved people as workers, the Bureau for Indian Affairs established boarding schools on reservations "to sever the child's cultural and psychological connection to his native heritage."[17] On-reservation schools still offered connections to family and tribal culture so Richard Pratt, a Colonel in the Civil War, created the first off-reservation boarding school named the Carlisle School in 1879, meant to "kill the Indian, save the man;" off-reservation schools translated into the implementation strategies for rapid assimilation.[18] The American government's reliance on physical child removal as a tool in familial separation is clear through the movement towards off-reservation boarding schools for Indigenous children. Through the 1880s and early 1900s, off-reservation schools forced Native children to learn English and industrial work, while removing tribal identifiers–including clothes and hair–from their appearance as strategies for cultural "sanitization."[19] Native families and children resisted forced education through physical resistance, such as self-educating, burning down schools, and running away, and mental resistance through selective incorporation.[20] Students used selective incorporation to recognize the role of education in their survival but intentionally rejected the deficit narratives about their culture. The creation of Native American boarding schools is tied to how the United States

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[17] Adams, David Wallace. *Education for extinction: American Indians and the boarding school experience, 1875-1928.* Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 2020. x
[18] Adams, *Education for Extinction.* 52
[19] Adams, *Education for Extinction.* 103-11
[20] Adams, *Education for Extinction.* 223

legalized family separation, justified through deficit narratives about Black and Indigenous cultural practices of family.

The Progressive Era prompted maternalist welfare legislation, but excluded Black and other non-white mothers from funding by perpetuating deficit narratives about Black and brown motherhood as a justification for social welfare divestment. New Deal legislation named, "Aid to Families with Dependent Children" (AFDC) explicitly excluded Black women under the terms that "blacks need less to live on than whites."[21] Black people's resistance led to the expansion of welfare to include Black communities, but the state retaliated by creating exclusionary welfare laws that punished them for desegregation activism.[22] In 1965, Daniel Moynihan released "The Moynihan Report: The Negro Family, The Case for National Action" pathologizing Black families and asserting their deviance from the nuclear family as the cause for widening economic and achievement gaps between Black and white families. The Report specifically demonized the Black mother as the sole parental figure, which contributed to the state's weaponization of stereotypes like the welfare queen to target Black mothers.[23] The Report reduces families to a heteropatriarchal nuclear family model, which resembles the same ideologies of the child welfare system today. Angela Davis, in her article, "The Black Family and the Crisis of Capitalism," argues that Black families exist as more expansive than simply the biological family, which David Moynihan failed to recognize because he lacked a sociocultural and historical understanding of Black families. However, this report became an ideological and scholarly justification for State divestment from the same social services Black communities had fought

[21] Gordon, Linda. *Pitied not Entitled: Single Mothers and the History of Welfare, 1890-1935*. New York City, New York: The Free Press, 1994; Roberts, *Torn Apart. 115*

[22] Briggs, Laura. *Taking children: A history of american terror*. Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2021. 33-34*; Roberts, *Torn Apart.* 115.

[23] Cohen, Cathy. "Punks, Bulldaggers, and Welfare Queens." GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies. 1997.

for and only recently won.[24] The state orientation to child welfare transitioned from a false

promise of social inclusion to complete divestment. Child welfare policy developed a strategic,

investigative, carceral, criminal-legal system named Child Protective Services (CPS) while

demolishing the remnants of a social welfare program.

    Narratives like the Moynihan report established the conditions for child welfare to

enforce systemized social control over Black communities. In 1974, the federal government

established the Child Abuse and Prevention Act (CAPTA) which marked the first federal

legislation to develop criteria and procedures for an official child welfare system. This policy

established child abuse and neglect as the primary metrics to gauge child removal. CAPTA

legally enabled the termination of parental rights, but also legally defined child abuse and neglect

on the federal level.[25] Angela Burton et al. argue that the federal legislature intentionally created

vague terms for child abuse and neglect so state legislatures could decide how and to what

degree to implement the legislation as well as create umbrella terminology to embed as many

families in the system as possible. CAPTA also formalized and expanded mandated reporting

systems into nationwide "reporting, investigation, and prosecution," which created a

universalized, systemic structure to the child welfare system rooted in criminalization as a

functionary of the state. The institutionalization of the child welfare system post-Jim Crow

represents how policy implementation works to codify deficit and inferiority ideologies about

Black families. Meanwhile, robust policing systems like CPS enforce these ideologies in practice

on state and community levels through executing home searches, charging parents with crimes,

and creating barriers to family reunification.

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[24] Davis, Angela, and Fania Davis. "The Black Family and the Crisis of Capitalism." *The Black Scholar* 17, no. 5 (September 1986): 33–40. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.1986.11414431.
[25] Burton, Angela Olivia, and Angeline Montauban. "Toward Community Control of Child Welfare Funding: Repeal the Child Abuse Prevention and Treatment Act and Delink Child Protection from Family Well Being.." *Columbia Journal of Race and Law* 11, no. 3 (July 1, 2021): 1–43. https://doi.org/10.52214/cjrl.v11i3.8747.

The 1980 election of Ronald Reagan marked a pivotal moment not only in child welfare policy and its impact but also in the federal government's political agenda with the rise in neoliberalism. When Reagan took office, an onslaught of federal divestment from social programs and federal welfare followed, marking a period of severe state neglect of the most marginalized communities in the United States. Davis recounts, "Since 1980, the military budget has literally doubled while non-military budgets have been slashed by almost $100 billion."[26] The federal government made efforts to shrink government and divest from social services, while, contradictorily, investing in certain areas such as policing, prisons, military, and child welfare. Despite this movement for divestment from social services, the government invested in policing, military, and child welfare under the guise of citizen protection; the state identified its enemy and those in need of protection. The federal government enforced a national identity that reflected the dominance of a white, middle class, nuclear family, and the war on (Black and brown, low-income, urban) families began.

The inclusion of child welfare as a system that warranted federal investment shows that the state saw it as a means to generate profit. Child welfare was an institution that maintained racial and economic control over the Black, low-income communities. Hyper-policing and criminalization became fuel for the prison industrial complex, and the government trapped this money in the child welfare system through locations like salaries and foster family funding. Child welfare is a neoliberal project developed to enforce robust state surveillance under the guise of child protection. These state-constructed narratives of the dire need for child protection hinged on the establishment of childhood as a stage of innocence and deserving to be protected. For Black children, this is paradoxical; while child innocence and protection became the federal government's justification for investing in the child welfare system and child removal, the state

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[26] Davis, "The Black Family and Crisis of Capitalism"

failed, and still fails, to protect and care for Black children in the child welfare system. The state

is responsible, but rarely suffers any consequences, for the frequent abuse of children in foster

care placements and group homes. Extreme cases of neglect and abuse are often used as state

justification for more fiscal investment in the child welfare system through methods like

accreditations and training.[27]

     Alongside expansive federal investment in child welfare, policy implementation

dedicated to the child welfare system grew exponentially. President Jimmy Carter's Adoption

Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (CWA) established "reasonable efforts" as a

requirement for family preservation, resulting in a doubling of federal funding for family

preservation and support services.[28] Legal scholar, Libby Alder, positions this legislation in the

historical period which represents an era of neoliberal reform riddled with social, moral, and

political contradictions. Alder emphasizes that the use of permanency as a legal term manifests

out of a lineage of reform policy, beginning with CWA in the 1980s, to address "foster care

drift." Foster care drift is a term to characterize a child in the system for long periods with no

reunification plan or identified adoptive placement. She further situates this policy with Reagan

era propaganda about Black families, specifically single Black women, as the state and its actors

were "decrying 'the breakdown of the American family' and popularizing the image of the

'welfare queen.'"[29] Alder highlights a lineage of caricaturing that Patricia Hill Collins calls,

"controlling images" which are weaponized against Black women to justify narratives of

inferiority about their ability to care for their children.[30] This is another mechanism to

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[27] Cambria, Nancy. "Toddler's Death Spurs Overhaul of State Agency the Changes: Missouri's Children's Division Is Poised to Become One of a Few to Be Accredited." STLtoday.com, June 24, 2009. https://www.stltoday.com/news/toddlers-death-spurs-overhaul-of-state-agency-the-changes-missouris-childrens-division-is-poised-to/article_a40560fe-68a7-52cc-826e-4b4aa38d0c8c.html.

[28] Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. Pub. L. No. 96-272. 94 Stat. 500; Roberts, *Torn Apart.* 120

[29] Alder, Libby S. " The Meanings of Permanence: A Critical Analysis of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997." *Harvard Journal on Legislation* 38, no. 1 (2001).

[30] Hill Collins, Patricia. *Black Feminist thought*. 2nd ed. New York City, New York: Routledge, 2000.

pathologize state failures as essential qualities of Black motherhood. The pathologization of

Black parents, specifically mothers, came from layered approaches from the federal government.

While CWA is a seemingly progressive policy because it emphasized permanence for foster care

children, the state excluded Black communities from this family preservation effort; even

without explicit racialized language like the Moynihan Report, the ability to still target Black

communities through vague, discretionary language represents a fundamental component of

neoliberal policy. Scholars refer to this legislative manifestation as "colorblind policy."[31]

Extreme drug policies enforcing criminalization created an avenue for race neutral

language that targeted Black, low-income communities by forcibly embedding people in carceral

systems of surveillance and control. In 1988, Ronald Reagan signed the "Anti-Drug Abuse Act"

into law as a part of his national "War on Drugs" campaign, which implemented extreme

criminal punishments for drug crimes, even with no criminal record. The lived impacts included

evictions, high minimum sentencing for drug crimes including a five-year minimum for

possession of cocaine-based drugs, barring from student loan access, and even the death penalty

for serious drug crimes.[32] The War on Drugs, like the War on Families through child welfare

reform policy, created an avenue for white people, and State actors across the board, to

implement racist policies that targeted low-income, urban neighborhoods without using race

specific language.

The federal government matched codified child welfare terminology with monetary value

to incentivize state actors, such as social and caseworkers, to devalue reunification to further

justify family disruption and, in turn, criminalize Black parents. By 1996, the budget for prisons

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[31] Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness* . New York City, New York: The New Press, 2012. 68.
[32] Alexander, *The New Jim Crow;* Bonilla-Silva, Eduardo. *Racism without racists: Color-blind racism and the persistence of racial inequality in America*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, an imprint of The Rowman & Littlefield Publishing Group, Inc., 2022.

and policing doubled the money allocated to AFDC and food stamps.[33] Similarly to figures about prison numbers, foster care caseloads doubled from 1985 at 276,000 to 568,000 in 1999.[34] These number changes are largely due to national policy shifts from parent-child reunification to fiscal investment in adoption. The Adoption and Safe Families Act, which I explore in detail in Chapter Two, establishes permanency through adoption as the solution to high numbers of children embedded in the system. Similarly to how the Freedman Bureau labeled children as "abandoned" and "orphaned" in 1865, the federal government enforced labels of "abuse" and "neglect" to place children into the child welfare system. States, and in turn caseworkers and social workers, received financial incentives to remove children from their families. It was no longer financially beneficial for caseworkers and social workers to support reunification, and more children entered the system while more parents experienced criminal charges of abuse and neglect.

The War on Drugs and War on Family layered with federal investment in prisons created a robust system to trap Black families, through various avenues, in networks of violence; these policies gave the state complete discretion over how to practice these policies on the state and local levels, while federally upholding lifetime punishments for any perceived legal violation. To this day, child welfare operates as a functionary of the criminal legal system. Both child neglect and abuse result in criminal charges that require investigation. Law enforcement enter into private contracts with CPS and social workers to share information, engage in collaborative training, expedite investigations, and respond jointly to cases under the guise of child protection.[35] As a result, Black and brown low-income people have increased points of contact

[33] Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow.* 72

[34] Swann, Christopher A., and Michelle Sheran Sylvester. "The Foster Care Crisis: What Caused Caseloads to Grow?" *Demography* 43, no. 2 (May 1, 2006): 309–35. https://doi.org/10.1353/dem.2006.0019. 309.

[35] Roberts, Dorothy E. *Shattered bonds: The Color of Child Welfare*. New York City, New York: Basic Books, 2001. 33

with both police and CPS due to the state subjecting these communities to constant surveillance through CPS, policing, and mandated reporting. The collaboration and symbiotic relationship between these entities leads to the forced removal of Black children from their homes at significantly higher rates than any other racial or ethnic group.[36]

Policing acts as physical surveillance through occupation and invasion of marginalized communities; social workers uphold this violence by creating incredible barriers to child reunification that are regulated and monitored by police and/or CPS in additionally invasive ways. Homes with children deemed in need are subjected to random searches that assess cleanliness, drug use, the amount of food in the kitchen, living space size, and several other criteria for safe homes.[37] Police and CPS surveil Black families with the intention of finding conditions deemed neglectful in those communities. Neglect exists in white middle to upper-class communities, there just isn't the same surveillance infrastructure searching for neglect because child welfare systems target the most vulnerable people to state control; Black, low-income neighborhoods do not have the financial and social resources wealthy communities use to protect themselves from policing. Additionally, the state's inferiority narratives do not target wealthy white communities because the state does not position their occupants, predominantly white cisheterosexual nuclear families, as threats. The way CPS invades homes and takes children into custody of the state mimics policing, as it is reactionary, violent, and disproportionately targets Black communities. The overlaps between these systems manipulate the meaning of welfare by eliminating privacy and establishing strict punishment against Black families and their communities.

[36] Roberts, *Shattered Bonds* 33; Jacobs, Leah A., Mimi E. Kim, Darren L. Whitfield, Rachel E. Gartner, Meg Panichelli, Shanna K. Kattari, Margaret Mary Downey, Shanté Stuart McQueen, and Sarah E. Mountz. "Defund the Police: Moving towards an Anti-Carceral Social Work." *Journal of Progressive Human Services* 32, no. 1 (December 8, 2020): 37–62. https://doi.org/10.1080/10428232.2020.1852865

[37] Burton et al, "Toward Community Control of Child Welfare Funding;"; Roberts, *Shattered Bonds*.

Social workers also exacerbate and uphold social control through their lack of leniency or compassion for families suffering from the effects of poverty, constructed through the aforementioned political history. Social workers often punish parents who do not or cannot follow through with the requirements they demand for reunification including, but not limited to, parenting classes, psychological evaluations, random home visits, regular visitation hours, and drug testing, all while maintaining a full-time job. Sometimes parents cannot follow through with such a high demand of requirements. Other times, the state hires psychiatrists to diagnose Black family members with mental illnesses which bars them from reunification. Regardless, caseworkers and social workers utilize their discretion to decide whether Black mothers and family members proved their capabilities as parents/guardians.[38] In the few instances of reunification, the state forever has jurisdiction to investigate the family.[39] These federal and state-level decisions intentionally construct narratives around failed parenting to villainize Black parents for the governments' choice to systemically divest and devalue housing, child care, and income supplements: "They employ social control strategies that draw children and parents more deeply into a system of surveillance and separation that produces poor outcomes."[40]

Across history, the U.S. child welfare system created an enemy out of parents and weaponized notions of innocence associated with childhood to communicate manipulative and violent messages of protection and child-saving. Removing a child for the state's failure to provide for people is an activation of white supremacy. It is a tactic to transform Black mothers and children from victims of social disparities embedded in the heteropatriarchal, white supremacist, capitalist system to criminals that require policing and surveillance which further

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[38] Roberts, *Shattered Bonds*; Jacobs et al, "Defund the Police."
[39] Roberts, *Torn Apart.*
[40] Jacobs et al, "Defund the Police."

invests in carceral action. My thesis deepens this political history by layering policy with stories of Black youth to illustrate how these ideological developments manifest in state control tactics as well as resistance efforts from Black/Latinx communities.

Complicating the Narrative: Queer of Color Critique

While some segments of Black communities responded with resistance to criminalization, brutalization, and policy implementation that asserted their inferiority, child welfare historians and scholars rarely confront how some Black cisheterosexual families also sought, and still seek, to replicate the same values of nuclear, normative family structures that undergird the white supremacist, heteropatriarchal norms and policy. This section complicates this history by centering the experiences of Black and brown queer family formations and kinship structures as both rooted in generative care and reconciling their gender/sexual identities with their racial/ethnic identities. I complicate conceptions of child care existing as either state-sanctioned foster care and/or adoption or biological families. Queer family formations' relationship to their family of origin represents how this binary does not exist for all youth. I examine how scholars understand the ways that some Black families overcompensate for sociopolitical rejection through consolidation around heteronormativity, often resulting in the rejection of their own queer children. I end with an introduction to how queer youth grapple with this rejection and create space for validation, safety, and care for one another.

Black people with gender and sexualities that deviate from normativity experience a double rejection from homophobic families and from state welfare institutions. The double rejection Black queer people experience creates specific familial and structural violences for Black queer communities, but also necessitates their exploration and creation of family outside of rigid expectations of normative family formations. In "Gendering Racial Formations,"

Women, Gender, and Sexuality scholar, Priya Kandaswamy, argues that the development of racial projects cannot be separated from capitalist, heteropatriarchal systems. Instead, an intersectional approach is necessary to understand the violences Black queer people experience from their families and state welfare institutions. She asserts that the colorblind legislation developed in 1990s reform policy abandoned race specific language due to laws against Jim Crow and instead embraced language around gender deviance to "signify and constitute racial categories."[41] The emphasis on racialized gender deviance creates specific targets for Black single mothers, Black girls, and Black gender expansive people. Child welfare research often focuses on the impact of violent CPS tactics on Black communities at large, but by centering the gendered tactics from the state, inferiority narratives around race and gender are revealed.

Gendered language and racial categories institutionalize tactics to maintain heteronormative standards of family to capitalize on the vulnerabilities of Black womanhood and single motherhood; the conformity to normative family structures often occurs at the expense of Black queer people and their family formations. Kandaswamy and Roberts highlight how welfare policies like Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) shifted to the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWOR) with stipulations of a five-year lifetime limit on assistance, mandatory work and paternity identification requirements, and barriers in access for immigrants, unmarried women, and those convicted of federal drug crimes.[42] The gendered, and in turn racialized, language of these requirements not only bar Black single mothers from welfare access, but weaponize the potential for welfare and security to incentivize Black single mothers to reach the standards policies establish. Kandaswamy asserts that standards such as those in PRWOR measure Black mothers' "value as citizens by their

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[41] Kandaswamy,. "Gendering Racial Formations."
[42] Kandaswamy, "Gendering Racial Formations." Roberts, *Torn Apart*.

ability to conform to dominant ideals of the heteronormative family."[43] Those swayed, for many

complex reasons, to strive for inclusion and/or state resources rely on false promises of care and

respected citizenship from the state, while exposing those who choose and/or must deviate from

normativity to additional vulnerabilities. I do not argue that Black and brown queer youth should

seek state inclusion, as the state's illusion of care does not protect Black and brown queer people.

I point to Kandaswamy's work to emphasize the ways the state embraces welfare under their

stipulations to appear egalitarian and escape criticism, yet uses these stipulations to perpetuate

violence against communities of color.

The consolidation around normative family formations isolates queer youth from their

family of origin through homophobia and/or transphobia, and the potential lack of sociocultural

connection. Familial exclusion of queer youth results in various forms; exclusion entails physical

violence from family members who discover their sexuality and/or gender identities.

Simultaneously, Ernesto Javier Martinez names the negotiation of socio-cultural connection to

ethnic and racial demographics of origin and material rejection of queer people within these

communities as a "queer exodus." Queer exodus does not necessitate a geographical or physical

displacement, although it often does occur, but rather the lack of social belonging within

heteronormative expressions of ethnic and racial identities forces queer people to navigate

different hostilities within spaces and places. Martinez emphasizes that queer exodus is not a

passive choice, but rather one infused with potential physical, emotional, and certainly racialized

and sexualized violence as well as alienation.[44] Whether it be informed by the need to escape

physical violence, a familial devaluing of one's gender and/or sexuality, or a lack of sociocultural

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[43] Kandaswamy, "Gendering Racial Formations."
[44] Martinez, "Queer Latina/o Migrant Labor."

belonging, queer exodus reveals, in part, why Black and brown queer communities create family formations informed by cultural and social understanding.

Unlike white queer people rejected by their families, Black and Latinx queer people's connection to families of origin is complicated by their intersecting racial and gender identities and sexualities, which nuances familial rejection in opposition to a rejection/acceptance binary. Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies scholar, Katie Acosta, delves into this complicated relationship by examining the reliance on the family of origin for Latina queer women based on factors like race, ethnicity, and immigrant status.[45] Acosta found that certain saliencies existed because Latina queer women relied on their families of origin for support from oppressive state tactics based on race and class; many white queer people can completely cut ties with their queerphobic families of origin after experiences of physical, emotional, and verbal harm, but Black and brown queer youth must navigate a nebulous relationship with their families of origin due to how their race, ethnicity, gender, and sexuality interact with one another. Black and brown queer people's unique orientations to family challenge child welfare researchers to expand how to examine rejection, separation, and family formation through queer lenses.

In navigating rejection at the intersections of race, gender, sexuality, and class, historian Renè Esparza also distinguishes the ways queer people chose to align with normativity to reach state inclusion and the resistance of queer people to create communities of care and love, specifically during the AIDS epidemic as a healthcare intervention. Lisa Duggan coins the term "homonormativity" to name sociocultural assimilative tactics by queer people to reach

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[45] Acosta, Katie. "'How Could You Do This to Me?': How Lesbian, Bisexual, and Queer Latinas Negotiate Sexual Identity with Their Families." *Black Women, Gender + Families* 4, no. 1 (2010): 63–85. https://doi.org/10.5406/blacwomegendfami.4.1.0063.

acceptance as well as gain the financial and social benefits of state inclusion.[46] Throughout the 1990s, neoliberal political campaigns from federal, state, and local governments incentivized queer people to align with homonormative familial arrangements. Esparza focuses on New York City, finding that local governments rewarded same-sex couples for longevity in "fictitious relationships" with financial benefits such as rent stabilization.[47] State-incentivized conformity in the 1980s and 90s represents a larger neoliberal project to control queer people and their lived circumstances, while maintaining institutional violence against them.

Esparaza's work recognizes the complex relationship between different goals of LGBTQ AIDS activism, state co-optation of grassroots organizing, and the betrayal of many white gay men in favor of homonormative, respectability politics. His work is foundational to my understanding of queer communities' orientation to family, which has never been a monolithic development. I engage his work around "LGBTQ homemaking" as a site of "emotional ecosystems," that foregrounded resistance to state-sanctioned standards of biological, cisheterosexual family structures.[48] These emotional ecosystems include queer familial formations but works like Esparza's show how queer communities conceptualize care from expansive sources to create a more holistic approach to meeting the needs of communities. The actualization of various, expansive sources of care is representative of heterogeneity's endogeny to communities of color. I use the term "Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care" to characterize the multiplicities of care that queer communities cultivated to protect, love, and educate one another amidst systemic and interpersonal exclusion and violence during the AIDS epidemic.

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[46] Duggan, Lisa, Russ Castronovo, and Dana D. Nelson. "The New Homonormativity: The Sexual Politics of Neoliberalism." Essay. In *Materializing Democracy: Toward a Revitalized Cultural Politics*, 175–94. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2002.

[47] Esparza, René. "'We Lived as Do Spouses': AIDS, Neoliberalism, and Family-Based Apartment Succession Rights in 1980s New York City." *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 31, no. 1 (January 2022): 59–88. https://doi.org/10.7560/jhs31103.

[48] Esparza, "We Lived as Do Spouses'"

My thesis expands on this scholarship to place the political history of the child welfare system and its enforcement of normative family formation in conversation with queer family structures to reveal both the need to reject state-prescribed standards of valid families and the ways that queer ecosystems of care have, and continue, to create access to care practices for queer communities outside of the state. Black queer theorist and scholar, Marlon Bailey, ethnographically examines the Detroit ballroom scene in his book, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit.* I use his work to understand ballroom families' structural compositions and politics as well as care practices from ballroom members for family maintenance. The ballroom scene is a manifestation of how Black and Latinx queer people created families and networks for care outside of state-sanctioned families, but also to navigate and heal from rejection from families of origin. I center ecosystems of care for holistic understandings of the sociocultural, emotional, and physical care generated from different components of Black and brown queer communities. Ultimately, Queer of Color Critique recognizes that race, gender, sexuality, and class cannot be separated in our analysis of child welfare.

Chapter 2: The Failures of Reform Policy and Potentialities of Expansive Family Structures

Introduction

Hilltop is a working-class neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio. The neighborhood's origins come from the Civil War when Hilltop served as a Union Army training camp called Camp Chase in 1861 and a Union prisoner of war camp.[49] From then, Hilltop became a neighborhood deeply impacted by racial tensions and segregation. Nestled literally on the hilltop of West Columbus just outside of downtown, Hilltop housed General Motors in the early 1900s, and in turn, became a thriving, racially diverse working-class neighborhood throughout the 20th century.[50] Columbus's local news channel, 10TV, did a story on the history of Black communities in Hilltop where elder community members recalled, "'It was a very close-knit family on the Hilltop,' Potts said. 'I'm talking about family – not only blood relatives – but we all knew everyone. It was a very close-knit neighborhood.'"[51] Characterized by places like the Oakley Full Baptist Church and community centers like J. Ashburn Jr. Youth Center, Hilltop's Black community forged ways to support themselves and their youth through social programs and church-led initiatives that cultivated community spaces.

Most popular media outlets portray present-day Hilltop as a community plagued with violence. From impacts of the opioid crisis to high homicide rates, Hilltop's internet search results prompt questions like: "Is Hilltop safe?," and "Is Hilltop, Columbus Ohio the ghetto?" The New York Times identified Hilltop as a community with one of the highest crime rates in the

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[49] Brewer, Molly. "Columbus' Hilltop Neighborhood: A Rich History | 10tv.Com." 10 WBNS, February 26, 2021. https://www.10tv.com/article/news/local/columbus-hilltop-neighborhood-a-rich-history/530-b6691b7c-a2de-4309-b1fc-44329f4321c9.

[50] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."; "Greater Hilltop (Hilltop) Neighborhood in Columbus, Ohio (OH), 43223, 43204, 43228 Detailed Profile." subdivision profile. https://www.city-data.com/neighborhood/Greater-Hilltop-Columbus-OH.html.

[51] Brewer, "Columbus' Hilltop Neighborhood"

city.[52] But if you look further than news stations and blog posts about crime rates and "safety,"
you will find community organizations and Facebook groups filled with opportunities for music,
food, and neighborhood community events. Sunday church services, food trucks in the park,
back-to-school drives, live music, and student poetry performances are all advertised as
community-sponsored events on Hilltop's neighborhood Facebook page. There is love infused
within these communal spaces; they provide material needs for community members,
entertainment, and collective gathering spaces, all forged out of this historically
socioeconomically marginalized and racially segregated neighborhood.
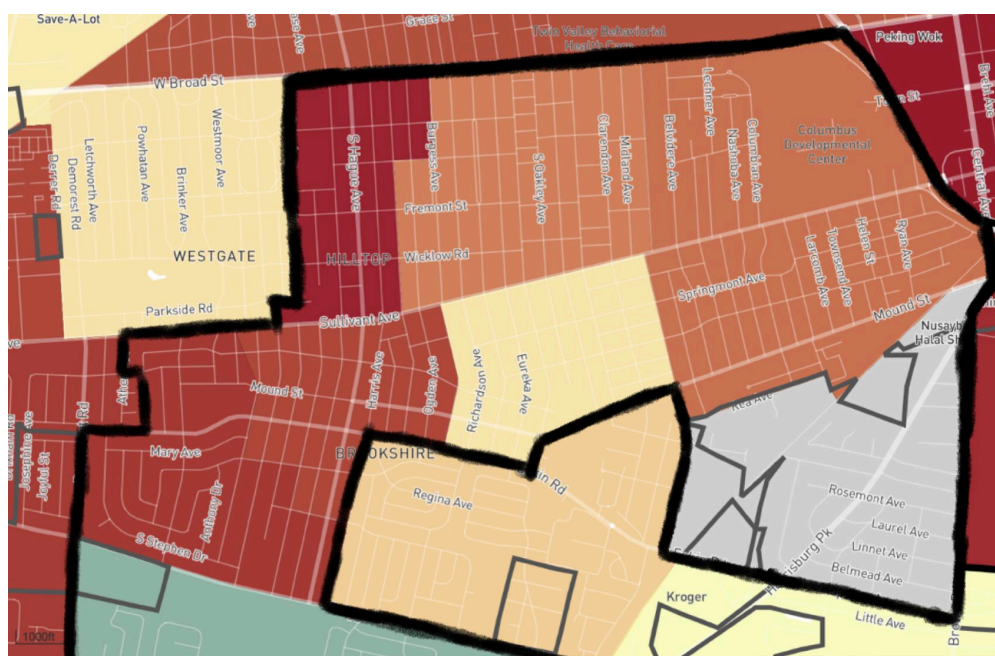
Hilltop, outlined in black, filtered for Black people's access to upward mobility[53]

While Black communities, like the ones in Hilltop, resisted the violence of spatialized
racism stemming from segregation by using concentrated population numbers to create robust
communities, the structural creation of racial geographies intentionally creates conditions for

[52] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."
[53] Chetty, Raj, Nathan Hendren, and John Friedman. "The Opportunity Atlas." The Opportunity Atlas, 2018.
https://www.opportunityatlas.org/.

easier execution of hyper-surveillance and policing. Thus, Hilltop was a place where two realities could exist simultaneously; one in which cultivates communal care for its residents while also experiencing systemic neglect and violence. Above is a photograph of Hilltop from the Opportunity Atlas. The Opportunity Atlas identifies access to upward mobility by taking parent data for those who made $25,000 from the late 1980s and compares it to the outcome measure of how much their children make around the age of 35. Besides the area in gray, which marks insufficient data for Black people and is an indication of the racial segregation of Hilltop, Black 35 year olds in Hilltop at the time make between $15,000 to $26,000 a year; this income range is compounded with the potential of supporting a larger family unit. The atlas outlines how spatial marginalization directly connects to the ways socioeconomic status and race interact in Hilltop to create systemic inequities for Black Hilltop residents across time. The communal efforts provide a window into the forms of spatial and collective resistance to the violence of policing and neglect of urban, low-income Black communities.[54]

Hilltop is where Ma'Khia Bryant moved with her mother, Paula Bryant, and four other siblings in 2018 from East Columbus. The move from the East side to the West side was "turbulent" for the girls, and created complicated relationships between her siblings and mother. Later that year, a neighbor overheard a verbal altercation that began inside and then moved to the lawn of their apartment building. Ma'Khia, her sister Ja'Niah, and their mother argued over bedtimes, and escalated until the neighbor called the police. The officers decided that Paula had "lost control as a parent" and they reported her as physically and emotionally abusive. Although those charges were dropped, the court still deemed Paula a neglectful parent. In child welfare legislation, the label "neglectful" automatically puts parents' rights over their children in

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[54] Kaba, *We do this 'til we free us.*

jeopardy. The officers detained Paula, and Franklin County Child Service (FCCS) took Ma'Khia and her siblings into state custody.[55]

This chapter uses Ma'Khia Bryant's story to interrogate the language, logic, and federal goals of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997 (ASFA). In the wake of President Reagan and Bush's administration's attack on Black families in the 1980s and early 1990s, President Clinton's administration released ASFA as a landmark piece of legislation that fundamentally changed the culture around reunification on the federal level. Clinton administration's policy agendas actually deepened the attack on Black families, despite deeply rooted support of his presidencies from some Black communities. From the top down, this federal policy directly established that states should prioritize adoption and family separation over family reunification. The federal government developed reform policies like ASFA to respond to community organizing in support of community control over local institutions; ASFA joined a legacy of "tough on crime" legislation justified through messaging that positioned children as "at risk" and biological parental failures as the cause and in need of intervention.[56] ASFA fostered this distinct transition from family reunification to family separation through two main mechanisms: the promotion of "permanency" as a child-saving initiative and federal fiscal incentives to states for exceeding their adoption quotas.[57]

Ma'Khia's journey through unstable and violent foster care placements represents the fatal impacts of failing reform policies like ASFA on urban, Black communities. ASFA is an assertion of state control and institutional intervention to enforce normative family structures in

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[55] Child Protective Services (CPS) and Franklin County Child Service (FCCS) refer to the same state/federal functionary. The difference is Columbus, Ohio's Child Protective Services is named "Franklin County Child Services," so when I refer to Ma'Khia's specific experience, I use FCCS. When I am referencing child welfare functions more broadly, I use CPS.

[56] Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow;* Roberts, Roberts, *Torn Apart.*

[57] Roberts, *Torn Apart.*

communities that often operate outside of the nuclear family. This chapter examines ASFA's neoliberal ties to nuclear families to subjugate Black, urban communities, and its reliance on state control through funding and white supremacist ideologies about what is a legitimate family. Through layering the key interventions of ASFA with Ma'Khia's story, I argue that ASFA's commitment to permanency and adoption as mechanisms of "child saving" are dehumanizing, carceral, and fatal to Black girls and their families. Understanding the foster care system from the perspective of those most affected by its violence combats dominant narratives that position Black girls as inferior and unknowing.

Ma'Khia's story shows how policy implications can be dramatically life-altering and, far too often, fatal. Her life shows the potential for abolition as an everyday practice through her loving relationships and commitment to dreams because, despite existing in a system that devalued her potential, she imagined a self-determined future for herself.[58] Her story also points to a larger issue of federal reform policies and governmental actors ontologically and tangibly dehumanizing Black girls to create conditions where police and child welfare actors not only kill them, but their deaths are justified in the eyes of the state and/or state-sanctioned. The specific targeting of Ma'Khia, her sister Ja'Niah, her mother Paula, and her grandmother Jeanene Hammonds represents what Black feminist and queer scholars assert across time, Black women and girls "bear the brunt of the labor associated with state violence and captivity."[59] I engage Ma'Khia Bryant and her family's journey through child removal and foster care to contend, alongside a growing body of scholarship, for the abolition of the child welfare system. The foster

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[58] Kaba, Mariame, Naomi Murakawa, and Tamara K. Nopper. *We do this 'til we free us: Abolitionist organizing and Transforming Justice*. Chicago, Illinois: Haymarket Books, 2021.

[59] Shange, Savannah. "Play Aunties and Dyke Bitches: Gender, Generation, and the Ethics of Black Queer Kinship." The Black Scholar 49, no. 1 (January 2, 2019): 40–54. https://doi.org/10.1080/00064246.2019.1548058.

care system is an industrial complex, inextricably connected to policing.[60] My work, and other works like it, situate the child welfare system as one that sustains itself through the brutalization of Black children.

Recognition and Positionality

As I continue to retell parts of Ma'Khia's story throughout this chapter, I need to acknowledge that the story of MaKhia Bryant that I present cannot and will not be complete. I understand her story through a body of mainstream news reports that use first-hand accounts from her family, friends, peers, foster parents, family lawyers, and witnesses, but such media is often a site of violence for Black people, especially after fatal interactions with police.[61] Many mainstream media sources like news reports fuel and embolden white supremacist anti-Blackness, so I read between the lines of these stories and remain focused on the words of those who lovingly interacted with Ma'Khia. Her personality and essence remain intact through her widely known TikTok videos, yet her online presence still creates limitations in authenticating stories. The only person who can authentically tell Ma'Khia's story is Ma'Khia, and her ability to share her experiences was violently stolen from her by Columbus police officer, Nicholas Reardon and FCCS. My interpretation will have gaps where her voice should fill, but I center the life she led as told by her loved ones to humanize her and her story in ways that were violently dispossessed from her in life, and in death. My retelling of her story models ideologies from bell hooks in her foundational text, *All About Love*, which explains living life by a love ethic.[62] She uses love ethic in terms of scholarship as an ethic rooted in critically thinking about how one produces knowledge and its impact on those both engaging with it and those

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[60] Burton et al., "Toward Community Control of Child Welfare Funding."
[61] Duncan-Shippy, Ebony M., Sarah Caroline Murphy, and Michelle A. Purdy. "An Examination of Mainstream Media as an Educating Institution: The Black Lives Matter Movement and Contemporary Social Protest." *The Power of Resistance*, September 14, 2017, 99–142. https://doi.org/10.1108/s1479-358x20140000012007.
[62] hooks, bell. *All about love: New visions*. New York, New York : New York: William Morrow, 2000.

whom the knowledge is about. She writes: To live our lives based on the principles of a love ethic (showing care, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate), we have to be courageous."[63]

"She didn't want to leave me… I think about that all the time."

-Jeanene Hammonds

ASFA's legacy implements an investment in foster families over kinship caregivers, resulting in inadequate distribution of funding to family members to maintain care for the larger family unit as justification for the further disruption of families; housing develops as the primary locale to actualize this familial disruption. For Ma'Khia's family, being aware of the long-term risks and dangers of FCCS removing Ma'Khia and her siblings from their mother Paula in February of 2019 whom the state deemed neglectful, Ma'Khia's grandmother took in the children through kinship care into her two-bedroom apartment in Hilltop.[64] Her grandmother received financial assistance of $1,200 a month from FCCS after six months of caring for them. In Ohio, this amount is 10 times less than registered foster care parents, thus making it financially difficult for Ma'Khia's grandmother to keep her family intact. When the landlord found out about the children living in the apartment, the landlord evicted the family on the basis of violating the property's occupancy agreement. Rather than offering financial assistance for housing security, FCCS removed the children from Ma'Khia's grandmother. Ma'Khia's grandmother's struggle to maintain custody of her grandchildren against the barriers of landlords and limited governmental support is a part of a legacy of neoliberal interventions that gave birth to ASFA. Ma'Khia's grandmother navigated the lasting impacts of neoliberal ideology and

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[63] hooks, *All About Love.* 101
[64] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."

political agenda that divested from public goods and social services, and invested in carceral systems.[65]

Dorothy Roberts, as previously noted, argues that the child welfare system developed out of white supremacist ideologies disproportionately impacting Black people, and targets Black, urban families through layered arms of the state to demonize and disrupt Black communities on a physical, ideological, and cultural level. She outlines a specific layered attack on Black, low-income families using ASFA and complementary legislation as the foundation. She highlights how policies including the 1994 Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act, which increased federal funding to states for policing and imposed harsher prison sentences, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, which ended the guarantee for cash assistance to families living in poverty and gave states discretion over how to spend federal funding, and the ASFA of 1997 conjointly operate to not only diminish Black families, but eliminate any grace for family reconstruction. Roberts says,

> "The coincidence of the welfare and adoption laws marked the first time in US history
> that the federal government mandated that states protect children from parent neglect but
> failed to guarantee a minimum economic safety net for impoverished families. The
> federal government's expenditures on foster care increased by 30 percent between 1996
> and 2000, while spending on food stamps and welfare benefits fell by 33 percent and 19
> percent, respectively.[66]

These aforementioned policies laid the foundation for current child welfare policy, as the same expedited family termination regulations and fiscal incentives for states to exceed adoption quotas exist in current child welfare policy. The triangulation of these policies results in families

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[65] Monbiot, George. "Neoliberalism – the ideology at the root of all our problems."; Harvey, David. *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford, London: Oxford University Press, 2005.
[66] Roberts, *Torn Part.* 122-123

receiving little support to take care of their children, while also experiencing increased rates of incarceration for the impacts of poverty.

The federal government eliminated the opportunity for families to regain their footing if financial struggles arose, and further marginalized those experiencing systemic and racialized impoverishment; the lack of grace and support from the state is rooted in the neoliberal ideology of individualism.[67] The pathologization of individuals for the failings of the government is fundamental to neoliberalism, as the state seeks to remove blame from itself for structural disparities it could resolve by centering its most marginalized constituents. For Ma'Khia, that meant that the state demonized her primary caretaker, her grandmother, for her inability to access resources the state deemed necessary, and the occupancy limit for her apartment unit created the circumstances for Ma'Khia's grandmother and the siblings to experience housing insecurity. Ohio's statutes for kinship care establish a per diem amount of no more than $12.10 per day per child. The per diem allows for approximately $300 a month per child, meaning Ma'Khia's grandmother received approximately 1,200 dollars a month to take care of Ma'Khia and her siblings as a part of her kinship care financial allotment.[68] In Ohio, financial assistance processing takes about six months for kinship caregivers, so the 1,200 dollar monthly payment started after six months of caring for Ma'Khia and her siblings and would continue for the next 10 months.[69] Yet for the initial six months, Ma'Khia's grandmother was left to support an additional four people on her own. With more financial assistance, the family's relationship to housing security may have been different, but the landlord required fewer people to occupy the

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[67] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism.* 53
[68] "Payment amount." (2020). Section 5101.885. Chapter 5101: Department Of Job And Family Services- General Provisions. *Ohio Legislative Service*
[69] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."

apartment. Ma'Khia's grandmother was in an impossible situation, and she had little choice about what happened to her grandchildren.

The state demonizes families that operate outside of the nuclear family model to delegitimize alternative family structures. Ma'Khia's family was disrupted when her mother was a single parent, working full time, and caring for four children. Rather than understanding the circumstances and meeting the financial and emotional needs of the children and their mother, FCCS separated Ma'Khia's family. ASFA situates these families as inferior in order to legitimize the termination of parental rights. The reliance on traditional family structures is rooted in an anti-Black politic that begins in enslavement with the prevailing ideology that Black people are not human and therefore cannot create and sustain legitimate families. ASFA is an extension of this ideology that situates Black people, and by extension non-normative Black families, as deviant, deficient, and somehow inherently flawed. Clinton-era policies like ASFA is a contribution to the colorblind legislation Michelle Alexander examines in *The New Jim Crow*; the stipulations and barriers placed on reunification do not explicitly mention race, but every single barrier targets Black, low-come, urban communities. This paired with the intentional investment from the state in physically invading Black communities with police and CPS furthers how policies are racialized.

When the child welfare state is centered in conversations about punitive systems, it becomes evident that carceral systems in the United States rely on the foster care system because it fuels policing and mass incarceration. The government started a war on Black families because the state does not realize a collective responsibility for children. In turn, any moment of vulnerability for an individual parent(s) is characterized as a moral flaw. Burton et al state:

"By defining "child abuse and neglect" as a singular phenomenon, lawmakers knowingly

created a false equivalence between intentional physical harm to children by their parents

and conditions of poverty, effectively transforming child poverty from a social,

economic, and racial justice issue into a problem of individual parental pathology and

deviant behavior sets the federal definition of child maltreatment."[70]

This hegemonic belief in systemic neglect of Black communities as individual, moral failures

fuels people's misplaced confidence in the child welfare system as a social system meant to

protect the lives of children.

"We can go to Mommy or Grandma, it doesn't matter, as long as we can get off the system"

-   *Ja'Niah quoting Ma'Khia Bryant*

FCCS removed Ma'Khia and her siblings from her grandmother's custody based on her

inability to provide housing that met state standards creating uncertain and inconsistent familial

circumstances for Ma'Khia and her siblings. When Ma'Khia's grandmother asked for additional

assistance from FCCS to combat child removal, the state denied the requests. After removal from

their grandmother's care, Ma'Khia and her siblings were placed in foster care, bouncing from

group homes to short-term placements. Over the span of two years, the state placed Ma'Khia in

six different homes.[71] In 2019, their mother petitioned for their return and the court denied her

under the terms that she had not met the state-sanctioned requirements to prove she was a "fit"

parent. The caseworker required her to attend counseling and scheduled visits, which she was

struggling to meet. Paula's lawyer told the New York Times that FCCS implemented

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[70] Burton et al., "Toward Community Control of Child Welfare Funding." 29

[71] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet." Lagatta, Eric. "Ma'khia Bryant's Mother Praises Lawmakers' Call for Investigation into Foster Care System." The Columbus Dispatch, July 7, 2021.
https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2021/06/01/ohio-lawmakers-request-probe-into-makhia-bryants-time-foster-care/7492803002/.

"unreasonable" reunification stipulations, so FCCS made reinstating her parental rights inaccessible. Meanwhile, every reported foster parent of Ma'Khia detailed her desire to return to her closest sister, Ja'Niah, and her family. Ja'Niah recalls Ma'Khia saying to her and her siblings, "'We can go to Mommy or Grandma, it doesn't matter, as long as we can get off the system,' That was her biggest thing, she didn't want to be in the foster care system until she was 18."[72]

The idea of "permanency" is foundational to modern child welfare legislation. Beginning in the 1970s, it became a way for Child Protective Services (CPS) and social workers to address what welfare advocates called foster care drift or being lost in the system between multiple foster care homes.[73] The federal government codified permanence as a tool in family preservation through the Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980 (CWA). While the foster care system still inflicted violence against children and their families, child welfare legislation maintained more extensive parameters that required reunification efforts for the protection of family rights. When the Reagan administration cut welfare while promoting negative stereotypes of Black families through caricatures like the "welfare queen," legislation and legislators abandoned terms like reunification and replaced them with termination, largely known as parental rights termination; this legislative shift marks the beginning of a militarized child welfare system alongside an intentional effort to separate families.

ASFA significantly altered how permanency functions within child welfare cases. One of the largest amendments to CWA through ASFA centers permanency, as ASFA limits situations where family preservation is mandated and requires permanency hearings within 30 days of a

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[72] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."
[73] Alder, "The Meanings of Permanence."

child entering foster care. During permanency hearings, the state outlines a permanency plan that includes the steps a parent/parents must take to reunify with their child including but not limited to: parenting classes, therapy and/or psychological exams, drug testing, random home visits and searches, and job assessments, all of which ASFA establishes must be completed within twelve months of a child entering the system. If the parents fail to complete every task, the state can exercise parental rights termination; ASFA also establishes that:

> "in the case of a child who has been in foster care under the responsibility of the State for 15 of the most recent 22 months… the State shall file a petition to terminate the parental rights of the child's parents… and, concurrently, to identify, recruit, process, and approve a qualified family for an adoption"[74]

The terms of ASFA concretely position parental rights termination at the center of child welfare, as permanency plans outline that the state must make "reasonable efforts" for finding adoption or legal guardianship placements concurrently with evaluating if parents are abiding by the terms of their permanency plan.[75] In other words, caseworkers and social workers often seek adoptive parents for the child prior to official parental rights termination under the guise of providing a permanent home the state deems safer, which caseworkers use against parents in termination hearings.[76] The use of intentionally vague terminology like "reasonable efforts" allows the state to use complete discretion in what it deems "reasonable." Because the criminal legal system is rooted in anti-Blackness, "reasonable efforts" are often efforts in opposition to Black children and families.

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[74] Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. Pub. L. No. 105-89, 111 STAT. 2115.
[75] Adoption Assistance and Child Welfare Act of 1980. Pub. L. No. 96-272. 94 Stat. 500.
[76] Burton et al., "Toward Community Control of Child Welfare Funding."

Permanency is a subjective criterion the state weaponizes to remove children from their parents and place them in foster and/or adoptive homes quickly. Permanency defined as stability allows the state to create impassable barriers for birth parents to be reunified with their children.[77] These barriers are compounded by the expectation of working full time, having transportation, and navigating poverty.[78] Caseworkers use social problems upheld by systems of oppression as justification for child removal, "Neglect may be categorized as the inability to afford adequate food, clothing, shelter, or medical care – social problems."[79] While the state takes an egalitarian stance of equal opportunity for familial reunification and promises child protection through legal and narrative production, removing a child for the state's failure to provide for its people is an activation of neoliberalism and white supremacy. Child removal without adequate opportunity for reunification is a tactic to contort Black mothers and children into criminals that require policing and surveillance, rather than seeing them as people deeply impacted by social disparities embedded in the capitalist system.[80] ASFA and its amendments contribute to the shift of child welfare from a social service system meant to help families in need to a "child protection" system that investigates allegations of abuse and neglect; CPS and social work became a functionary of the United States legal system working in conjunction with police departments and the courts.

The subjectivity of permanency gives the state discretion over what is deemed safe parenting and what is neglect, and this discretion is rooted in middle class, white values that neglect the needs of Black children and cultural differences in parenting practices. Ma'Khia's mother, Paula, experienced the impact of this through her trials to reach reunification that

[77] Alder, "The Meanings of Permanence."
[78] Roberts, *Torn Apart.*
[79] Roberts, *Shattered Bonds*.
[80] Burton et al., "Toward Community Control of Child Welfare Funding."

repeatedly failed because of arbitrary barriers put in place through legislation like ASFA. Reports stated that Paula's reunification petitions failed because the court ruled her completion of the stipulations of her permanency plan insufficient. FCCS removed Ma'Khia in 2018 and Paula petitioned for reunification in 2019 after Ma'Khia's grandmother lost custody of the children. She petitioned for reunification within one year, meaning the petition occurred within the terms of ASFA yet the state still denied Paula. Reports state that Ma'Khia's mother had "no chance" of gaining parental rights, meaning the state made a decision about Paula's ability to reunify with her children despite her demonstrated efforts.[81] Meanwhile, Ma'Khia bounced between multiple homes with foster families who looked to adopt. The persistence of family separation put Ma'Khia in six different violent and unstable homes. ASFA's establishment of permanency as the foundation to child welfare did not support Ma'Khia, and the actualization of ASFA results in unstable, state-sanctioned family structures. The inconsistency of six foster placements is the opposite of permanence.

"They could've just given me what they give one foster parent."

- Ms. Hammonds, Ma'Khia's Grandmother

In 2021, Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah reunified in their last foster home placement on the Southeast side of Columbus. Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah grew closer through TikTok dances and video games. They loved skating together and going to the amusement park. Ma'Khia gained a following on Tiktok for videos of her hair in styles ranging from swoop bangs to side ponytails and puffs. She accessorized with beaded headbands and different clips, teaching her audience how to lay their edges and elevate styles with plaits. These hair and dance videos, and her interactions with family and friends, emulate that the everyday for Ma'Khia consisted of care from her loved ones; this everyday movement, virtual or with loved ones, is an actualization of

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[81] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."

Black feminist scholar, Saidya Hartman's, "everyday choreography of the possible," where Black girls engage with inspirations and love in everyday, mundane moments and creative endeavors.[82] Her friends say Ma'Khia's trademark look was her rainbow crocs and butterfly clips. She grew close to her teacher aide, who told reporters that Ma'Khia hugged her every day of school. Ma'Khia was an honor roll student with future dreams she articulated to her teachers and friends. I do not depict her academic success to position Black girls as inherently exceptional, or to use academic achievement as a metric to justify her childhood, but to highlight the aspirations and futurity that Ma'Khia saw for herself. Hartman further examines the integration of dreams, creativity, and imagination as a subversion to systemic violence and harm for Black girls through embodying "wayward." Ma'Khia conceptualized another way of living that did not include the foster care system and its impact as an act of waywardness.

But Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah's time in this placement was also infused with violence. Ja'Niah called the police in late March 2021 to report fighting in their foster home. She cried to the dispatcher, "I want to leave this foster home, I want to leave this foster home." The state ignored her plea, and her voice was not considered important. On April 20, 2021, Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah were alone at their foster mother's house, which is not uncommon due to the expectation that foster parents also hold full-time jobs, when a 22-year-old former foster child, Tionna Bonner began to threaten the girls over the cleanliness of the house. In response to Bonner's threats, Ma'Khia proclaims that Bonner is "not her guardian," so she will not follow through with Bonner's demands. After a series of back and forth fighting, Bonner pulls out a knife. Ma'Khia runs to the kitchen for a knife to protect herself and her sister. She lunges at Bonner in self-defense. During the fight, Ja'Niah calls the police in fear for her sister's life, and just as she

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[82] Hartman, Saidiya. "The Anarchy of Colored Girls Assembled in a Riotous Manner." *South Atlantic Quarterly* 117, no. 3 (July 1, 2018): 465–90. https://doi.org/10.1215/00382876-6942093.

grabs the knife, Officer Nicholas Reardon arrives at the house. His body camera footage runs 11 seconds until gunshots fill the audio. Reardon shot Ma'Khia four times, and on April 20, 2021, MaKhia Bryant died. Across their time in foster care, Ma'Khia and Ja'Niah pleaded to return to their family. If their pleas had been taken seriously, Ma'Khia might still be alive.

Ma'Khia's placement with the foster family that led to her death is rooted in ASFA through the failure of distributing monetary support to her mother and grandmother, yet investing in state-sanctioned families that enacted violence on them throughout their time in foster care. Ma'Khia's mother lost custody due to family tensions rooted in their socioeconomic status and discretionary intervention by FCCS. Ma'Khia's grandmother further lost custody of the children in response to landlord occupancy regulations and being unable to afford rent in a larger apartment. Being low-income families does not provide them with additional support, rather meeting their needs is de-prioritized under neoliberal reform regimes. Meeting the needs of families with lower incomes is primarily rooted in addressing the material impact of poverty on the lives of Black families, which means reviewing budgets for police, CPS, and social workers. Such funding needs to be divested from these entities and reinvested in the communities most affected by the web of carceral systems of policing, prisons, and child welfare.

ASFA shows that fiscal investment in child welfare is not the barrier to funding families, as there is no shortage of money flow to states; the allocation of these funds to states for discretionary spending practices such as bonuses for caseworkers and social workers, CPS budgets, etc. reveals how the state maintains itself and its actors over supporting the families impacted by the racial geography of child welfare. ASFA establishes that 4,000 dollars is given to each state for every child adopted over the state's base level adoption rate, 6,000 for children

designated "special needs," and 8,000 for "older" children (nine and older). The Congressional Research Service synthesizes:

> In the four years (FY2008-FY2011) that the current incentive structure has been in place, states were eligible for incentive payments of $166 million. Of that amount, states earned $74 million for increases in the number of foster child adoptions, $45 million for increases in older child adoptions, and $37 million for increases in special needs (under age 9) adoptions, and they were eligible for increases of $10 million in their incentive payments for improvements in their rates of adoption.

This translates into millions of dollars funneled into state agencies in the form of bonuses for adoption rather than into the hands of families neglected by the state. States report that their budget allocates incentive payments to adoption support services, recruitment of adoptive families/homes, and training for adoption caseworkers. Even less so, states report funding adoption assistance (AA) payments, more critical adoption home studies, and casework on "child protection."[83] Adoption incentives are discretionary funding, meaning the state can choose how the money is divided and implemented in their child welfare systems.

Narratives around Black families' ability to care for their children serve as legitimization for neglectful funding practices. Ma'Khia and her siblings moved between six foster families, all of which received funding per child that could have radically changed the circumstances of Ma'Khia's mother and grandmother's home situation. Congress asserts that ASFA's two primary goals are: "(1) to ensure that consideration of children's safety is paramount in child welfare

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[83] (name redacted), Specialist in Domestic Social Policy and Division Research Coordinator. "Child Welfare: Implementation of the Adoption and Safe Families Act (P.L. 105-89)." *Congression Research Service*. November 8, 2004.

decisions, so that children are not returned to unsafe homes; and (2) to ensure that necessary legal procedures occur expeditiously, so that children who cannot return home may be placed for adoption or another permanent arrangement quickly."[84] The government financially invests in state child welfare programs to create robust networks that execute their goals, which both center the removal of children from their parents. The neoliberal approach to policy work positions the state in deficit, meaning that CPS caseworkers and social workers often position the state as lacking the funds to support individual families, and therefore family separation is the only option; however, ASFA reveals that the federal government alone allocates millions of extra dollars to states to further displace and disrupt families embedded in the child welfare system. These funding practices show the need for a radical departure from punitive and oppressive systems. I further argue for the dismantling of institutions that perpetuate structural inequities for Black families, and uphold systems that actively kill Black girls. Reform policies not only fail to center the needs of Black, single mother families specifically, but they also serve as justification for police and CPS violence against Black girls like Ma'Khia by positioning their lives and livelihoods as inferior. Policies like ASFA could never realize the humanity of Ma'Khia and her family, rather ASFA is meant to disrupt and destroy family networks.

"Those were her favorite crocs… so we knew it was her…"

Fifteen minutes after Ma'Khia's death, the state of Minnesota convicted Derek Chauvin, the police officer who murdered George Floyd on May 25, 2020. He faces a 21 year federal sentence for "depriving Floyd of his civil rights."[85] The Assistant Attorney General told CNN,

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[84] Stoltzfus, Emilie, "Child Welfare: Structure and Funding of the Adoption Incentives Program along with Reauthorization Issues." *Congression Research Service.* April 18, 2013.

[85] Vercammen, Paul, and Steve Almasy. "Derek Chauvin Sentenced to 21 Years in Federal Prison for Depriving George Floyd of His Civil Rights." CNN, July 7, 2022. https://www.cnn.com/2022/07/07/us/derek-chauvin-federal-sentencing/index.html.

"This sentence should send a strong message that the Justice Department stands ready to prosecute law enforcement officers who use deadly force without basis"[86] Chauvin murdered George Floyd, yet his sentence was on the basis of "civil rights." Through statements like the Attorney General's, the state shows that imprisonment for selective cases of police brutality and murder is supposed to be evidence of the state's ability to hold itself accountable. Meanwhile, across the country, the police still murder Black people. Not only are there extensive cases, both widely known and unrecognized on larger platforms, of murder and brutality that go unpunished, but also imprisonment does not change the lived circumstances of hyper-policing, violence, and community disruption for Black communities. The state's efforts to appear egalitarian through inclusion but also in the appearance of self-accountability is to maintain their ability to execute violence while seeking to escape more nuanced critique.

Mayor Andrew Ginther
@MayorGinther

This afternoon a young woman tragically lost her life. We do not know all of the details. There is body-worn camera footage of the incident. We are working to review it as soon as possible. BCI is on the scene conducting an independent investigation . . .

6:29 PM · Apr 20, 2021

3.4K   3.8K   4.3K   120

Columbus, Ohio Mayor, Andrew Ginther, just after Ma'Khia Bryant died.

While the state promoted its ability to hold itself accountable for the murder of George Floyd, the city of Columbus reacted to Ma'Khia's murder. The Mayor took to Twitter, now X, to address the tragedy. The mayor's choice to use Twitter to communicate information about her

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[86] Vercammen, "Derek Chauvin Sentenced to 21 Years."

death quickly and widely within hours of her death, and on an international platform, shows the sense of urgency in addressing police murder. Perhaps to circumvent protest or uprisings, or to begin a controlled narrative around the details of her death. His recognition of the body camera footage and emphasis on the state's intention to review said footage, rather than about the public release of body camera footage, as well as his specific wording of "lost her life" rather than killed or murdered, shows how the state is constructing a case, using passive language, and a story for the public immediately after her death that excludes clear language that states she was murdered and by who.[87] Most notably, Ginther begins his tweet by calling Ma'Khia Bryant, a 16-year-old Black girl, a "young woman." In similar ways to reform policies, Ginther's efforts to control the messaging around Ma'Khia's death manifested through vague language and lack of detail to allow for individual discretion, and deeply racialized word choice through positioning her as a woman.

The state and its actors, like Andrew Ginther, removed Ma'Khia's childhood through foster care and a denial of familial connections during her life, and again in death through messages of adultification to justify her murder. The state uses child innocence to justify child welfare's extreme interventions in communities, yet conceptions of childhood and innocence do not protect Black children in the foster care system, The state subjects Black girls like Ma'Khia to a unique form of dehumanization named adultification.[88] Monique Morris describes the adultification of Black girls in her seminal text, *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black Girls in Schools*, stating, "The assignment of more adult-like characteristics to the expressions of young

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[87] Mayor Andrew Ginther (@MayorGinther). 2021. "This afternoon a young woman tragically lost her life. We do not know all of the details. There is body-worn camera footage of the incident. We are working to review it as soon as possible. BCI is on the scene conducting an independent investigation" Twitter, April 20, 2021, 6:29pm. https://x.com/MayorGinther/status/1384650492303732740?s=20

[88] Morris, Monique. *Pushout: The Criminalization of Black girls in Schools*; Epstein, Rebecca, Jamilia Blake, and Thalia Gonzàlez. "Girlhood Interrupted: The Erasure of Black Girlss Childhood." *SSRN Electronic Journal*, July 18, 2017. https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3000695.

Black girls is a form of age compression. Along this truncated age continuum, Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women."[89] Ma'Khia wielded a knife to protect herself and her sister from two grown women attackers. By attaching womanhood to Ma'Khia, Twitter interacters, mainstream media consumers, and broader audiences demonized Ma'Khia as violent, dangerous, and deserving to die. Tweets claimed that she was to blame for her own death because she was "attacking" another person, some invalidated her fears claiming she was not threatened, but the common themes of demonization and blame from public dissenters of Ma'Khia mirror the adultification from the state.[90] Claiming that a Black girl must be held responsible for a situation infused with fear and imminent danger under a foster care system that denied her protection and care for the entirety of her time in the system is a tactic of dehumanization.

The state, and the country at large, did not afford Ma'Khia the innocence that is associated with childhood when her story became public, yet for decades politicians and actors in the child welfare system justify child removal and parental rights termination through the lens of "child protection." This manifestation is indicative of a contradiction in coded language from a policy level and in public media because, in the same way the "War on Drugs" and the "War on Families" specifically target Black, urban, low-income communities, "child protection" also only considers white, middle class, and wealthy children worthy of protecting.[91] While child

[89] Morris, *Pushout.*

[90] Calico Jack (@SupremeTyrell). 2021. "I guess we also gotta tell y'all to learn the laws, because you can't attack somebody that's no longer a threat and get away with it." Twitter, June 18, 2021, 7:48am. https://x.com/SupremeTyrell/status/1405870004923404290?s=20; ⚖️Logic & Psychology🧠 (@TrumpsPsycholo2) 2021. "Well I do blame her, because she had a knife and clearly attacked people in front of the cop. Cops actions are justifiable at that point. But I blame the other adults in the situation and foster care system for allowing the situation to escalate to that." Twitter, June 15, 2021, 7:54pm.

[91] Alexander, Michelle. *The New Jim Crow.*

protection removes Black children from their families, it does not guarantee them any level of safety when they enter the foster care system or state-sanctioned family structures. The pathological assertion that Black parents are fundamentally inferior paired with Black children's denial from childhood creates conditions for the state to use child abuse and neglect to establish moral inferiority as a measure of parental suitability as well as justification for Black children's abuse within the system.

Ma'Khia's death exemplifies a network of systems that work together to surveil and enact physical and emotional violence onto Black children and their families. While she lacked autonomy over where the state placed her, her lack of access to innocence and explicit reference to her as a woman shows the impact of adultification.[92] This shows how child welfare policies that emphasize the innocence of childhood do not center Black girls' humanity in practice. Ma'Khia understood the violence she experienced and took an action of self-defense that she should not have had to take to protect herself and her family. Nazera Wright names this awareness that Black girls assume before adulthood premature knowing, as their experiences force them to learn and understand the ways their gender and race, and often class, impact how they're treated by the world. She asserts that this quickened maturation process forces them to contend with issues and take specific actions for their survival and safety in ways other racial and gender identities do not experience, stating, "the prematurely knowing Black girl had already begun to look for ways to survive. She had become alert and had experienced a shift in her consciousness."[93] Ma'Khia as prematurely knowing in the context of her foster care experiences

[92] McShane, Julianne. "The Columbus Mayor Called Ma'Khia Bryant a 'Young Woman.' Here's Why People Are Angry." The Washington Post, April 21, 2021.
https://www.thelily.com/the-columbus-mayor-called-makhia-bryant-a-young-woman-heres-why-people-are-angry/.
[93] Wright, Nazera Sadiq. *Black Girlhood in the nineteenth century*. Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2016. 61.

as a Black girl represents perhaps why she felt responsible for protecting her sister, and why she instinctively protected herself. We do not know how many times situations of fear and violence Ma'Khia experienced, but her foster care experiences informed her as a prematurely knowing Black girl.

Ma'Khia's death sparked protests across Columbus. Spray paint art read, "She was just a girl," and "She's a baby," across building walls, and "Say Her Name" chants rang through city streets. People protested the police killing of Black girls by painting over the property they protected before her own life. Through policies like ASFA, the child welfare system establishes the intrinsic and intentional protection of profit over the children they claim as central to their infrastructure. The act of painting over property protected by the state, a simple act of creation and messaging of her humanity, represents a communal act of reclamation. These public proclamations of her girlhood combat adultification narratives from the state and its actors, and the communal mobilization for her is an embodiment of advocacy for safer futures for Black girls. Most news media about Ma'Khia depicted the moments before her death and her death itself, but her family, friends, and other media sources told Ma'Khia's story as an act of humanization and care. Framing her life as the 11 seconds that led to her death erases the life she lived and her experiences apart from death. Ma'Khia's death shows the interaction between hypervisibility and the erasure of Black girlhood in foster care. Ma'Khia and her childhood were erased through methods of adultification because Ma'Khia's girlhood did not protect her from the vulnerabilities or violence of the systems she was forcibly embedded. The state, and the country at large, considered Ma'Khia an adult and treated her as such before, during, and after her death.

A year later, Nicholas Reardon sat in front of the court that chose not to indict him for the murder of Ma'Khia Bryant. Jeff Simpson, president of the Fraternal Order of Police Capital City Lodge No. 9, stated to the Grand Jury, "Reardon 'acted appropriately,' Simpson said. 'It's unfortunate when anyone loses their life, but the officer saved lives that day and did what he was trained to do.'"[94] The articulation that Reardon acted as he was trained to emphasizes that police, and state policing institutions like child welfare, are designed and trained to enact violence against Black communities and Black girls. My emphasis on this statement is rooted in an abolitionist understanding of policing that establishes those meant to police and enforce, often by physical force, cannot see or protect the humanity and needs of Black girls. The labors of care during her life and after her death represent the potential of communities to mobilize to care for Black youth. Ma'Khia's story, and stories like it, illustrate a need for a radical reimagination of institutions like child welfare. The next section speaks on an abolitionist approach to redistributing funds into low-income, Black families and communities to meet financial needs and preserve family structures.

Coda

Riddle for Black Girl by Jasmine Mans

> *May we remember her name as we repeat her fate*
>> *May we seek her story, in truth it's told*
>>> *May we paint her skin in a hue of gold…*
>>>> *May we remember how she laughed and cried*
>>>>> *May we speak of who she was before she died.*[95]

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[94] Trombly, Monroe. "Grand Jury Decides Not to Indict Columbus Police Officer in Death of Ma'khia Bryant." The Columbus Dispatch, March 14, 2022. https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/local/2022/03/11/columbus-grand-jury-declines-indict-nicholas-reardon-death-makhia-bryant/7007644001/.

[95] Mans, Jasmine. *Black Girl, Call Home*. New York City, New York: Berkley, 2021.

Ma'Khia's story pushes us to think both about the ways the state targets non-normative families and how these families and their communities still commit to care practices for their members. Further, I engage abolitionist principles of mutual aid, kinship care, state divestment, and community self-determination and control to illustrate the possibilities for families like Ma'Khia's without state intervention. I center the life Ma'Khia lived, her loved ones, and her memory as told by those who loved her as a commitment to remembering her beyond her death and the moments that led to it. Abolitionist orientations to child welfare and care reveal that the reallocation of state funding to communities and community-based care practices better support a holistic approach to care for Black youth.

The failures of the state, as revealed in Ma'Khia's story and policy reform, demonstrate how essential it is to work outside the system to support the needs of Black girls and their families. One mechanism to do so is through mutual aid. I define mutual aid as not only an act of care, but also a dedicated life practice that works outside of systems to collectively meet the survival, material, and social needs of communities. They often work alongside social movements, like the abolition of police and child welfare, to support where the state refuses or fails. Saidya Hartman traces mutual aid societies as far back as different stateless, African communities on the continent prior to colonization, and their maintenance throughout enslavement and antebellum, and eventually to more contemporary movements; she asserts, "The ongoing and open-ended creation of new conditions of existence and the improvisation of life-enhancing and free association was a practice crafted in social clubs, tenements, taverns, dance halls, disorderly houses, and the streets."[96] Mutual aid refuses state intervention, and develops in communities outside the state's purview. Mutual aid exists as a collaborative and

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[96] Hartman, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls." 471.

reciprocal practice of care for sustaining communities with values of collective and mutual investment. Mutual aid orientations to care look at needs holistically, and actively seek different methods to meet said needs.

Mutual aid manifests in events like those in Hilltop I outlined earlier: Sunday church services, food trucks in the park, back-to-school drives, live music, and student poetry performances. It can also serve as a place where community members can request funds for rent, groceries, clothes, travel, etc. Mutual aid is funded by the community and the funds are reinvested back into the community including programs like the Black Panther free lunch program during the Black Power Movement and the current mutual aid networks like St. Louis Mutual Aid. When people feel committed to the communities they are a part of and invested in by their neighbors, communal and collective culture is established. This is a primary goal of abolition: to cultivate strong, supportive communities until state intervention is no longer needed or possible.

Working outside of the state also translates into life practices that deviate from societal norms. Ma'Khia's relationship with her grandmother challenges the dominant reliance on the nuclear family by the child welfare system and more broadly the United States. The extended family is a care network that refuses to align with a privatized family structure. The state demonizes extended family care because it is culturally rooted across different Black and brown cultures. By criminalizing that care system, the state effectively targets Black and brown families for CPS intervention. This lineage of Black family disruption began in enslavement through the forced family separation of enslaved communities.[97] However, Ma'Khia's story shows the

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[97] Gomez, Michael Angelo. *Exchanging our country marks the transformation of African identities in the colonial and antebellum south*. Chapel Hill, North Carolina: Univ. of North Carolina Press, 2001.

potential of kinship care through her grandmother's willingness to care for her and her siblings, and her consistent efforts to regain guardianship. ASFA establishes kinship care as an option for permanency plans, but is often disregarded or, like Ma'Khia's family, sabotaged by the state in order to promote foster care. This intentional divestment from kinship care is a manifestation of the state's condemnation of non-normative family structures. The state realized the potential of communal structures as sites of people power, which is why child welfare invests in disrupting non-traditional family structures. Kinship care and other communal care structures push against ASFA's presumption that parenting issues are moral failures and not a result of societal issues. Communal family structures represent that child care should not happen in isolation. Centering community disrupts gendered notions that a family should only consist of a mother and father. Kinship care preserves family structures rather than punishing parents for social, emotional, or financial hardships.

Abolition is actualized through state investment of the money from the ASFA into communities like Hilltop, where Ma'Khia grew up, for more autonomy over how money is used and managed to best support their specific needs and experiences. Abolition means that the millions of dollars from adoption incentive money is divested from state agencies that inflict harm onto Black communities and reinvested into people and families who are housing and food insecure, for physical and mental health and medical care, transportation, and educational systems. There must be an effort to proactively prevent circumstances of poverty-based neglect because standards of neglect are based on both Anti-Blackness and the effects of poverty.

Ma'Khia was 16 years old in her junior year of high school. She was a cook and loved music. She found passion in making TikTok videos and doing her hair in styles her friends called

"outrageous," because she "didn't care what other people thought of her'."[98] Ma'Khia walked through the world with Crocs on her feet no matter the season and a deep love for everyone around her. "She taught us how to love ourselves," her friend Aaliyaha said. Her business teacher helped her develop a five-year plan for her own lash company, and if she set her mind to it she would excel.[99] Ma'Khia is described by her family as helpful, funny, and sweet.[100] Speaking her story, love, and passion allows us to recognize the humanity in those who have been demonized by the public and media. For me, MaKhia's death cemented the gravity and burden of mourning people we do not know. We learn their names, so their stories are never erased. Ma'Khia's death has launched a campaign for child welfare reform, but through the failures of reform policies like the ASFA, we must look beyond policy reform to cultivate a world where Black girls like Ma'Khia are protected and valued. Abolition addresses the root of the failures of the state to support its constituents in meaningful and material ways. When child welfare is defined as a carceral system, we can center new and generative ways to think about family. In the next chapter, I look at different forms of community, family, and care cultivated through more expansive views of familial love and kinship by Black and Latinx queer people.

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[98] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."
[99] Ferenchik, Mark, and Holly Zachariah. "Ma'khia Bryant Was Helpful and Kind, Her Friends and Family Say." The Columbus Dispatch, April 24, 2021. https://www.dispatch.com/story/news/2021/04/24/makhia-bryant-killed-police-shooting-described-helpful-kind/7341250002/.
[100] Burroughs et al. "Ma'Khia Bryant's Journey Through Foster Care Ended With an Officer's Bullet."

Chapter Three
Models of Abolitionist Futures: Black/Latinx Queer Ecosystems of Care

Introduction

Luscious/Ali Forney (she/he) is a Black gender non-conforming, Muslim person born in 1975 in Charlotte, North Carolina, but relocated to Brooklyn housing projects with her single mother as a young child.[101] Most documentation of Luscious/Ali's story strictly uses Ali (he/him) to characterize the life and story in which she lived, with only a mention of Luscious as another identity she held. For the purposes of my project, which is a story of rearticulation and recentering of marginalized experiences, I will use Luscious (she/her) as a loving recentering of her trans identity erased and/or concealed by media sources.

Luscious's mother knew she moved through the world differently than other children her age. Luscious joyfully tried on their mother's clothing and was known around their East New York neighborhood for her elaborate clothing and expressive dancing and singing. At 13 years old, Luscious's family rejected her on the basis of her sexual and gender identities, and put her into a group home for "troubled youth." Months after her arrival, Luscious ran away choosing to traverse New York City streets instead of living in foster care.[102] Luscious's escape from the group home came after experiencing physical abuse from other children as a result of her gender expression. A social worker close to Luscious recollected, "They [queer youth] felt safer on the streets. It [group home] was just as violent and dangerous as the streets could be."[103] Luscious's choice, informed by physical and emotional violence, to leave the foster care system represents

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[101] Luscious/Ali interchangeably used he/she pronouns. He used he/him pronouns when he went by Ali and she used she/her pronouns when she went by Luscious. I use Luscious (she/her) to recenter an identity that has largely been written out of mainstream reconceptualizations of Luscious's story.

[102] Carter, Chelsea. "Life and Death on NYC Streets." A Life and Death on NYC Streets , August 28, 1999. http://www.aliforneycenter.org/ap-article.html.

[103] Raleigh, David, and Carl Siciliano. "The Ali Forney Story." YouTube, December 1, 2010. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vmiks18tKlA. 1:02-1:08 min.

the opposition queerness has to systems built on normativity, as the child welfare system could never see the wholeness of Luscious's racial, gender, and/or sexual identities.

Luscious left the group home and began sex work with Dion Webster and Kevin/KiKi Freeman, a group of friends she met at a LGBTQ youth shelter who she considered her "found family."[104] Rather than limiting their racial and ethnic and queer identities in child welfare systems, Luscious and her family created their own network of care for one another. Throughout the late 80s into the early 90s, Luscious and her family found "tricks" in Times Square to sustain a living income.[105] The 1990s marked a specific national and local time in the US and in New York City that geographically relocated sex work and legally invested in policing. A 1994 *New York Times* article highlights the New York Police Department's (NYPD) initiative to get tough on "minor" crimes such as public urination, marijuana crimes, and sex work, thus targeting homeless New Yorkers like Luscious and her family. The Quality of Life campaign was rooted in mayor Rudy Giuliani's campaign to "restore quality of life to the city."[106] Under these new provisions, police jurisdiction included arresting, photographing, interrogating, and holding "violators" until their arraignment if they did not have a government-issued photo identification. NYPD said they hope these penalties, "deter disorderly behavior."[107]

Alongside increased policing under the leadership of NYPD's William Bratton implementing racist Stop and Frisk policy, the "Quality-of-Life" initiative translated into new New York City zoning codes that targeted public sex work. Article III, Chapter II, Section 32-01a of NYC's City Planning codes prohibits "adult establishments" in districts C1 through

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[104] Turner, Allison Marie. "Queer History 101: Ali Forney." Campus Pride, October 13, 2015. https://www.campuspride.org/queer-history-101-ali-forney/. ; For the same reasons I use Luscious, I will also continue to use KiKi.

[105] Carter, Chelsea. "Life and Death on NYC Streets."

[106] Onishi, Norimitsu. "Police Announce Crackdown On Quality-of-Life Offenses." *The New York Times*. March 13, 1994, sec. 1.

[107] Onishi, "Police Announce Crackdown On Quality-of-Life Offenses."

C6-3; these districts encompass predominantly local and regional commercial and residential areas, the central business district as well as waterfronts.[108] Additionally, Section 32-01b asserts, in districts C6-4 through C-8, an "adult establishment" may not be "established less than 500 feet from a house of worship, a school, a Residence District, a C1, C2, C3, C4, C5-1, C6-1, C6-2 or C6-3 District, or a Manufacturing District, other than an M1-6M District, in which new residences or new joint living-work quarters for artists are allowed as-of-right or by special permit or authorization."[109] In other words, these amendments to zoning codes banned "adult establishments," and in turn public sex work, from the majority of commercial and residential districts where most business/professional people travel as well as high-income residential areas exist.

Zoning changes worked to police gender and sexually deviant people, regulating them to specific geographies for both hyper-policing and erasure. Saidya Hartman examines how New York City penal laws interrupted the lives of gender and sexually deviant women who engaged in prostitution in the early 1900s, stating the laws intended to "regulate intimacy and association, police styles of comportment, dictate how one assumed a gender and who one loved, and thwart free movement and errant paths through the city."[110] Like the penal laws in the early 1900s, these zoning changes completely altered how public sex work operated in the city in the interest of gaining control and regulating the bounds of public sex work, as sex work like private escorts predominantly employed by the wealthy did not feel the impacts of these legal changes.[111] The city pushed these establishments out of areas like Times Square, Midtown, South of Central Park around 5th and 6th Avenue, and more broadly, Manhattan while developing policing to enforce

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[108] See zoning specifics here https://www.nyc.gov/site/planning/zoning/districts-tools/c3-c3a.page

[109] "Use Regulations." Ch. 2. Section 32. General Provisions. *NYC Planning: Zoning Resolution;* "Use Regulations." Ch. 2. Section 32-01. Special Provisions for Adult Establishments. *NYC Planning: Zoning Resolution*

[110] Hartman, "The Anarchy of Colored Girls." 476

[111] Spangenberg, Mia. "Prostituted Youth in New York City: An Overview," 2001.

these legal boundaries. Sex workers migrated to areas like the South Bronx, Sunset Park in Brooklyn, and Queens Plaza in Queens to protect themselves from police presence and criminalization increase in Manhattan.[112] Sex retailers and performers protested Giuliani's restrictive zoning regulations, which purged them from most of the city.

For Luscious and her chosen family, this meant moving their home in between subway train cars and East Harlem's Marcus Garvey Park, as they aged out of shelters for youth at 18 years old. Luscious's exposure to other queer people at the LGBTQ group home setting allowed her to explore her gender expression. Friends recall that her pants turned to skirts, and she began experimenting with different wigs and hairstyles to present more feminine.[113] Simultaneously, Luscious began educating other Black and Latinx queer youth about street safety and HIV/AIDS prevention by handing out kits to other homeless youth and attending peer counseling sessions at local outreach groups. Reports said that Luscious would carry condoms in a black vest so she could pass them out throughout the parks she occupied; hesitant passerbyers could grab condoms discreetly as they walked by. She participated in the AIDS Coalition, a grassroots organization that promoted sexual health and education during the HIV/AIDS epidemic, yet uniquely bridged her street experiences with her advocacy work, stating she would "approach the drug dealers and say 'I'm buying some drugs, you want some condoms?'"[114] She traversed areas of the city marginalized by lack of healthcare and sexual education access to promote HIV/AIDS prevention. NYPD became aware of Luscious's work after she criticized their lack of investigation of the murder of transgender people. [115] KiKi, Dion, and Luscious performed, educated, partied, and lived together across the city, but this did not come without the struggle of

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[112] Spangenberg, "Prostituted Youth in New York City."
[113] Carter, "Life and Death on NYC Streets."
[114] Carter, "Life and Death on NYC Streets."
[115] Turner, "Queer History 101."

poverty, homelessness, and homophobic/transphobic violence. As a family, they coped with crack cocaine usage as each of them struggled with the effects of addiction.

Luscious Forney in *Meg Handler: Acting Up and Acting Out*; LGBTQ & AIDS Activism, 1992-94 Collection; photographed by Meg Handler

Luscious and her found family maintained their sex work throughout this period. For gender queer youth between 19-21 years old, queerphobic violence was an imminent threat. For KiKi, this violence resulted in her murder which remains unresolved. Her death devastated Luscious and Dion. Luscious continued her advocacy work in community with other LGBTQ advocates, but her crack-cocaine usage escalated and her sense of self-preservation decreased, especially in sex work safety precautions. As she searched for KiKi's murderer, NYPD targeted her; NYPD arrested Luscious on 42 separate occasions across her life for petty crimes like subway turnstile jumping, but also her activism for Black/Latinx transgender people[116] In 1996, she traveled to San Francisco to educate social workers on the specific needs of trans youth experiencing homelessness, yet never offered an official job, which necessitated her continued sex work. In December of 1997, by the housing project on East 135th St and 5th Avenue – just a

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[116] Carter, "Life and Death on NYC Streets"; Turner, Allison. "Queer History 101: Ali Forney"

five minute walk from the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture in which I found pieces of this story – Luscious was murdered at 22 years old. Her murder remains unresolved alongside three other trans women murdered in the same area within the year.

Luscious's story represents an exodus from her family of origin and a rearticulation of family through Black/Latinx ecosystems of care. Luscious rejected familial and state coercion to normative gender and sexual identities by refusing assimilation to her family of origin, and actively leaving the foster care system. While she experienced queerphobic violence that resulted in her murder, during her life she found ways to cultivate care and familial purpose by building queer ecosystems of care built on advocacy, education, and protection. Her work for other queer youth participating in sex work and experiencing houselessness is an actualization of community work that centers labors of love for the communities she was a part of. Luscious's story foregrounds this chapter's engagement with Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care through a larger dynamic in Black/Latinx queer communities' rejection of normativity and engagement in care practices not based in state intervention.

Chapter 2 of this thesis explored a contemporary example of the layered carceral, anti-Black tactics of the child welfare system, and the lived implications these methods have on Black families that resist the state's investment in the nuclear family. In this chapter, I take us back in time to examine kinship and family formations that operate outside of the state to create generative spaces of safety and care for Black/Latinx queer communities, which I position as Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care, specifically in New York City. These interacting spaces are examples of resistance to state-sanctioned kinship and families with awareness of their racial/ethnic, gender, and sexual identities. While the child welfare system positions the nuclear family as the only modality for care and family, Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care represent

how Black/Latinx queer communities have, and continue to, create family and kinship that supports the specific needs of their youth. Black/Latinx queer ecosystems center holistic methods to providing care, recognizing needs must be met by centering multiplicity and expansion. In this way, these spaces also provide us with examples of education, reciprocal care, accountability, identity validation, and imaginative work, which could function as abolitionist alternatives to the carceral, anti-black child welfare system.

I use depictions of Ballroom families from 1988 to 1996 in *Pose* and a community forged out of sex parties in the 1990s to represent what I am naming Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care, which Black and Latinx queer communities have cultivated to subvert the specific racialized queerphobia the state, and broader society, imposes on them. I aim to examine the specific ways queer kinship networks and family formations create ecosystems for identity exploration, education, protection, and advocacy that state-sanctioned families and queerphobic families of origin often neglect. I argue that the kinship formed in Black/Latinx Ballroom families and Black gay sex party communities provide spaces for three critically important things: (1) they allow marginalized youth to make meaning of their histories, identities, and cultures; (2) they allow marginalized communities to invest in their own protection; and (3) they foster and encourage interpersonal and structural advocacy. I also recognize that not all queer people operate in opposition to neoliberal, homonormative standards, and sometimes families who intend to resist said standards reproduce harm. However, families and kinship formations who cannot, or choose not to, assimilate to hegemonic standards of family provide models for more flexible, communal alternatives to the rigidity of the state.

I begin my analysis with *Pose,* a FX series written and produced by Ryan Murphy, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals. I coded for two large themes: 1) family dynamics defined by the

relationships characters develop and the social/emotional roles they assume and 2) support

systems being the actualization of these dynamics and actions the characters take to maintain

care practices for their family members. I identified sub-themes of advocacy, accountability,

protection, and meaning making. I define advocacy as support against interpersonal and

structural violence and the empowerment to advocate for oneself. I define accountability as the

care to challenge each other to live by agreed upon standards and/or communal rules. I define

protection as an investment in physical and emotional resources and educational tools that

support the safety of family members. Lastly, I define meaning making as a nexus of care that

supports individuals' identity exploration, understanding of their cultural roots, and wherewithal

to navigate their social position (and how to accept/reject it) as well as communal coping with a

shared socio-cultural rejection.

My second analysis is of a community developed out of a series of sex parties by a Black

queer organization called A1BlackElite. A1BlackElite began in 1995 as an organization to

support Black and Latino gay men during the HIV/AIDS crisis amidst structural neglect from the

state. The sex parties, named Bla-tino, began in New York City and later expanded to multiple

cities across the country. The parties ran consistently from 1997 to 1999, just following the

FDA's approval of antiretroviral medicine, colloquially known as the "AIDS cocktail." Although

the federal government released lifesaving medication for those living with HIV/AIDS, the state

placed barriers for Black and Latinx queer people accessing this medication through financial

stipulations, upholding stigmas around HIV/AIDS, and medical racism. The state-sanctioned

barriers structurally pathologized HIV/AIDS to Black/Latinx queer individuals and communities,

blaming Black/Latinx people for the failures of the US healthcare system.[117] Bla-tino, safe sex

parties, cultivated safe sex practice amidst public health denying Black and Latinx people

medication while uplifting sexual and identity exploration. I use the themes from *Pose* as a

model to understand the sex parties as a kinship formation that operated in extension to the

family. I distinguish this from a family formation like ballroom because it did not necessarily

operate as a formalized familial system like ballroom, but still provided the space for Black and

Latino men to cultivate kinship and care rooted in understanding and identity formation.[118]

Exodus and Ecosystems of Care Amidst Racial Geographies in New York City

"Voguing doesn't just exist in the balls, it exists in the streets too." – Blanca Evangelista[119]

Through the aforementioned zoning policies and mayoral campaigns like "Quality of

Life," New York City's local government created barriers to deny Black and Latinx queer people

access to safety and joy, and simultaneously privileged white, cisheterosexual people's needs and

comfort.[120] Zoning codes uphold anti-queer, anti-black spatial politics by regulating where Black

and Latinx queer people could live, where businesses that served them could be located, and

transportation. The socio-political dynamics around racialized geographies stem from neoliberal

orientations towards city layouts and marginalizing queer people to specific areas of the city like

the Christopher Street piers.[121] *Pose* depicts the impact of the state-sanctioned concentration of

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[117] Levy, Matthew E., Leo Wilton, Gregory Phillips, Sara Nelson Glick, Irene Kuo, Russell A. Brewer, Ayana Elliott, Christopher Watson, and Manya Magnus. "Understanding Structural Barriers to Accessing HIV Testing and Prevention Services among Black Men Who Have Sex with Men (BMSM) in the United States." *AIDS and Behavior* 18, no. 5 (February 15, 2014): 972–96. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10461-014-0719-x.

[118] Bailey, Marlon M. *Butch Queens up in pumps: Gender, performance, and ballroom culture in Detroit*. Ann Arbor, Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2013. 23-25.

[119] Murphy, Ryan, Brad Falchuk, and Steven Canals. "Pilot." Episode. *Pose* 1, no. 1. New York City, New York: FX , June 3, 2018. *56:00*

[120] Manalansan, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City."; Esparza, "We Lived as Do Spouses'"

[121] Manalansan, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City."; Esparza, "We Lived as Do Spouses'"; Walker, Rachel Loewen. "Toward a FIERCE Nomadology: Contesting Queer Geographies on the Christopher Street Pier." *PhaenEx* 6, no. 1 (May 27, 2011): 90–120. https://doi.org/10.22329/p.v6i1.3153.

Black and Latinx queer people in areas like the piers. Whether it be through the scenes of the

girls working the piers as sex workers or through voguing with their houses, *Pose* depicts the

role these othered geographies played in meeting the needs of these gendered and racially

marginalized individuals. Simultaneously, the spatial concentration of these marginalized

individuals also created conditions to more easily enact anti-trans, homophobic, white

supremacist violence. Black/Latinx queer people frequent these spaces, in part, due to an

interpersonal and structural queer exodus.[122] Families of origin often use racial and ethnic

connections and support to maintain queer people in a devaluing family structure, while the state

invests in coercive tactics to enforce normative familial structures through mechanisms like

state-sanctioned foster care and group home placements. Black and Latinx queer people

imagined and realized lives outside of this rigidity, deprioritizing social and/or economic profit

and centering love, affinity, and community. I do not seek to position these family structures as

idealistic or utopic, as flaws still exist and impacts of violence still exist. However, queer exodus

created nebulous relationships with families of origins and the state could and would never

embrace Black/Latinx queer people or their specific sociocultural positions. In turn, Black/Latinx

queer people created ecosystems of care informed by their gender and sexual identities out of

necessity, but cultivated them for cultural, social, and educational innovation.

While experiencing spatialized oppressive tactics from the state and simultaneously

creating cultural formations like voguing, Black and Latinx queer people experienced extreme

state neglect during the HIV/AIDS epidemic. The overwhelming devastation of this crisis

permeated queer people across race, class, and gender, yet death, grief, and poverty impacted

Black and Latinx queer people disproportionately.[123] The combination of national, widespread

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[122] Martinez, "Queer Latina/o Migrant Labor."

[123] Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). "Racial/Ethnic Disparities in Diagnoses of HIV/AIDS --- 33 States, 2001--2005." PsycEXTRA Dataset, 2007, 189–93. https://doi.org/10.1037/e611352007-001.

stigmatization of HIV/AIDS and transphobia and homophobia in family units resulted in an

increase in homelessness for Black and Latinx queer youth as well as an influx in migration of

youth rejected from their families to the city, which is a result of queer exodus.[124] Ballroom

operated as a refuge for homeless, especially newly rejected, youth to "share and acquire skills

that helped Black and Latino/a LGBT individuals to survive the urban world."[125] Balls and

organizations like A1BlackElite partnered with community organizations that supported safe sex

education and raised money to support research efforts to prevent the spread of HIV/AIDS.[126]

Amidst a public health crisis and structural neglect resulting in the death of queer people,

Black and Latinx communities created ecosystems to protect and care for one another.

Black/Latinx ecosystems of care is a framework that is not based on state intervention; rather,

these ecosystems recognize that the state cannot provide necessary care for Black/Latinx queer

people, and that the state often works to destroy the sites of care they cultivate. These ecosystems

resist the state's notion that the nuclear family is the only site for legitimate care by engaging

different sites of care simultaneously to meet the variety of needs Black/Latinx queer people

need. While carceral systems like policing, child welfare, zoning codes, and prisons function as

mechanisms of confinement, ecosystems of care provide education, intimacy, affinity, protection,

and advocacy that oppose limitation and confinement.

Black/Latinx ecosystems of care operate in a mutual aid model, as there is an expectation

of reciprocal and communal maintenance of these physical, communal, and emotional spaces.

Individuals maintain the ecosystem through their commitment to collective principles and goals,

and larger components of the ecosystem uphold each other through mutual investment. I position

the ballroom scene and Black/Latinx gay sex parties as a part of a larger ecosystem of care for

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[124] Walker, "Toward a FIERCE Nomadology"
[125] Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*. 7.
[126] Bailey, *Butch Queens Up in Pumps*.

Black/Latinx queer people amidst the AIDS epidemic. The ecosystem encompasses familial bonds, validated forms of intimacy, identity exploration and experimentation, healthcare, and education in various forms to support a more holistic approach to carework. In Ballroom families, Black/Latinx queer people assume familial positions while also exploring gender and sexual expression through performance. The carework Ballroom provides for Black/Latinx queer people includes, but is not limited to, space for identity exploration and expansion, family love, sexual health education, the transfer of life skills across generations, accountability and commitment, and survival needs like housing and food.[127] The Black/Latinx sex parties provide care through validating queer sexual expression as necessary to selfhood, communal self-exploration and pleasure, and sexual healthcare and education.[128] Both of these components of Black/Latinx queer ecosystems utilize the resources of community-based organizations for HIV/AIDS prevention and sex education as well as donation-based organizations to raise money for HIV/AIDS research to support the members of their communities. The ecosystem does not operate in isolation, rather the larger ecosystem is supported by smaller networks of care within it. By centering these larger ecosystems of care and their smaller networks, I intend to demystify the state as the sole provider of social welfare for Black/Latinx communities.

Pose and Representations of Ballroom Families

FX Network's three-season series, *Pose,* creatively depicts the communal experiences of joy, care, and struggle in the Black/Latinx ballroom scene in New York City from 1988 to 1996, specifically the "legends, icons, and ferocious house mothers" that led the scene to its current status.[129] The season one finale depicts the awarding of "Mother of the Year" at the Princess Ball.

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[127] Bailey, Marlon. *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit.*; Pose
[128] Nash, *The Black Body in Ecstasy.*
[129] "Pose: An FX Original Series." FX, n.d. https://www.fxnetworks.com/shows/pose.

Praytell, a House Father and the emcee for each Ball, describes the qualifications to win such an honor before he awards the winner:

> "Each year, this award is presented to a mother who has been a nurturing presence in her children's lives. A mother who has provided moral and social support to her children. She's kept them in line, and she's taught them what it means to move through life with grace and humility… the recipient has taught us that a house is much more than a home. It's family, and every family needs a mother who is affirming, caring, loyal, and inspiring… she has saved many a soul lost in darkness by simply shining her light."[130]

Praytell goes on to award Blanca Evangelista, Mother of the House of Evangelista, as Mother of the Year. This scene depicts the qualities of care, investment, love, and sacrifice embedded in the culture of Ballroom that quantify holistic motherhood. Despite Ballroom culture, and other forms of queer kinship in the 1980s and 1990s, the socio-political period was devastating to queer life because of the HIV/AIDS crisis, violent policing tactics, and structural neglect. Yet, Black queer people cultivated family structures rooted in generative care, safety, and love.[131] Black queer people's conceptualization of motherhood, and more broadly family as a whole, emphasizes supporting youth while also giving them the tools to cope with, learn, and navigate the world; whereas to justify the need for child welfare, federal child welfare policy hones in on the weaknesses of the biological family. [132] In other words, Black queer kinship and family formations focus on generating support for youths' needs, while the state's interest lies in the failures of parents/guardians. Black queer people's commitment to protecting and guiding their youth while creating spaces for identity exploration, education, and physical and emotional

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[130] Murphy et al. "Mother of the Year.." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 51:22-53:45
[131] Manalansan, "Race, Violence, and Neoliberal Spatial Politics in the Global City."
[132] See CAPTA, ASFA

protection foregrounds this chapter's rejection of the state's imposition of "family" whom they deem to care for the "well-being" of the child.[133]

The Ballroom Scene: Pose as a Representation of Queer Family Formation

Ballroom families follow a structure with house mothers and fathers who guide, teach, and care for their house children. While competition and performance are foundational to the existence of Ballroom, houses operate not only as kinship networks but often as physical places for Black and Latinx people to live.[134] The balls allowed queer people to explore and imagine their position in the world, while also providing tangible support systems, especially to those whose biological families failed them.

How the state defines child welfare relies on the nuclear family structure as the model for quality parenting. An investment in the nuclear family is embedded in values of privatization and individualism, each essential to neoliberal political ideology.[135] hooks asserts that "replacing the family community with a more privatized small autocratic unit helped increase alienation and made abuses of power more possible."[136] Whether it be in the context of biological families' rejection of gender and/or sexual deviation from cisheterosexuality or in foster care placements where the state controls the familial dynamics, Ballroom houses reject notions of confinement to limiting conceptions of kinship and family.

Through legislation like the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997, the child welfare system demonizes biological families who are perceived to be abusive or neglectful and thus criminal or immoral, and there is no consideration of the effects of the state's structural neglect of low-income Black urban communities. *Pose* depicts how, even amid physical and emotional

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[133]Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997. Pub. L. No. 105-89, 111 STAT. 2115.
[134] Bailey, Marlon. *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit.*
[135] Monbiot, "Neoliberalism – the Ideology at the Root of All Our Problems"
[136] hooks, *All About Love.* 130

abuse and neglect, the house family never fundamentally demonizes any member's biological family. In fact, there are multiple examples throughout the series of members' attempts for reconciliation with their biological families, mirroring Acosta's work on the nebulous relationship racial/ethnically marginalized queer people have with their families of origin because of their racial/ethnic connections. When Blanca's biological mother dies, Pray Tell, a Black gay man, encourages Blanca, a Latinx transwoman, to still attend the funeral despite their long term estrangement. The episode explores the complicated feelings of love and loss Blanca experiences in connection to her biological mother. She fondly remembers them cooking together alongside flashbacks of misgendering and rejection. Queer of Color Critique scholar, Rodriquez, would call this complex relationship between chosen families and biological families that is difficult to map an embracing of the "messy."[137] The child welfare system treats non-nuclear families as problems that require solutions and resolutions, but queer kinship proves that embracing the messiness gives space for meaning-making, healing, and exploration across different stages and forms of family.

Lil Papi: A Case Study

> *"Houses are homes to all the little boys and girls who never had one, and they keep*
>
> *coming every day just as sure as the sun rises" - Pray Tell[138]*

Esteban Rodriguez Martinez, better known throughout the show as Lil Papi or Papi, is a Latino, queer man who joins the House of Evangelista in the pilot episode. Before joining Blanca's house, Papi grew up between foster and group homes until he befriended Pito, who took him into his home and provided him income in exchange for drug distribution. In the pilot, Papi

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[137] Rodríguez, Juana María. *Sexual futures, queer gestures, and other Latina longings*. New York City, New York : New York University Press, 2014. 40

[138] Murphy et al. "Pilot." Episode. *Pose*. no. 1, 1:06:20-24.

watches the newly formed House of Evangelista walk in a Ball. Afterward, Blanca and her

children, Angel, a trans Afro-Latina woman, and Damon, a cis Black gay man, sit outside the

front door expressing disappointment in their loss to the House of Abundance when Papi

introduces himself to Blanca. Despite their loss, Papi expresses to Blanca his interest in joining

her house.[139] Blanca asks him if he's living on the streets, to which he responds "mostly" but that

he works at a bodega so he can provide food to everyone in the house. Blanca responds, "Go

collect your things and come back here. The House of Evangelista welcomes any lost soul."[140]

Papi balls his fists and smiles at the night sky in excitement before running to grab his things.

Before he can go, Angel recites their house rules, "Uh uh, we got rules. No drugs, no gentleman

callers, and anything you mop belongs to the community."[141] Papi becomes a house child to

Blanca Evangelista, often walking butch queen categories at the Balls, which are defined as

categories for queer cisgender men in Ballroom who also present as masculine. Blanca's

embracing of Papi is her acceptance of him into the ecosystem of care she created for her

Ballroom family.

  Blanca's instant acceptance and adoption of Papi into her house, with the understanding

that he follows her rules, is the beginning of her unrelenting efforts to protect and advocate for

Papi. Blanca's investment in educational and occupational opportunities for her children,

insistence on safe sex education and testing, and ability to grow and learn with her children

depicts her commitment to care; her house serves as a support system to children with no other

option. While Blanca adopts multiple children throughout the series, my choice to focus on Papi

as a case study is rooted in his relationship to both state-sanctioned family structures and queer

family formations. I analyze his character arc from being a foster child to navigating his chosen

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[139] Murphy et al. "Pilot." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 1:05:08
[140] Murphy et al. "Pilot." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 1:05:44-1:05:50
[141] Mop is commonly used in *Pose* as slang for "steal."

family with whom he had challenging relationships at first, to his eventual acceptance into the family and educational and relationship successes that stem from his house family. Papi's character represents the lived impact of generative care networks that center the social, emotional, and physical needs of the child.

"Ain't Nobody Gave Me Shit"

When Papi asked to join the House of Evangelista, Angel and Blanca emphasized that any drug use and/or distribution results in removal from the house. Papi chose to hide his drug dealing to still be part of the family while making quick cash. In episode two of season one, Damon sees Papi hand off a baggy of unnamed drugs to a man on the piers. Papi emphasizes that the only way Blanca would find out is if Damon snitched, so Damon agreed to keep Papi's secret. Damon's love for Papi as his brother came before the house rules; Damon realized the consequences if Blanca discovered where Papi received his income, including the jeopardization of their official brotherhood and Papi potentially living on the streets again. Damon's loyalty to Papi represents a level of care and protection under their brotherly relationship.

Later in Season 1 in Episode 7, Papi leaves for the piers to do his rounds, but he forgets his pager in the Evangelista apartment. Before he realizes his mistake, Blanca finds the pager and suspects what he uses it for. When Papi leaves the apartment again after retrieving it, Blanca questions all of her children about their knowledge of Papi's drug use and distribution. Both Angel and Damon deny the accusations against Papi, but Ricky, the last child adopted by Blanca and Damon's current partner, reveals what he knows about Papi's drug distribution. Ricky and Papi both lived on the streets together before becoming Evangelistas, and Ricky fears living under those conditions again. He says, "This is the first place I've been that feels like a home." Blanca follows up by saying, "And we have to keep it that way." After further questions, Ricky

tells Blanca he's selling drugs at the piers, pleading, "Please don't kick me out."[142] Blanca's

interrogation is informed by her feelings of personal responsibility for the protection of her house

children; she believes that drug use and distribution jeopardizes the safety of her children. Her

orientation to drugs shows that Ballroom houses have a community responsibility component for

the maintenance of the larger ecosystem of care, which foregrounds how she approaches

consequences. Bailey names the work that goes into maintaining a house as "housework," which

is necessary for maintaining the kinship network. Bailey argues that housework exists outside of

the physical because "a building – is not the locus of Ballroom kinship." Rather, housework is a

social phenomenon rooted in "friendship, protection from violence, and parenting."[143] Therefore,

housework is the labor of love that contributes to sustaining the ecosystem of care; investment in

the nuclear family is rooted in profit and capital, but these ecosystems root their investments in

practices of care. Blanca's rules for her house are intended to maintain the safety and longevity

of her family, so Papi's violation is also a violation of the social contract of the house's

community responsibility.

Blanca rushes to the piers to confront Papi. This conversation is informed by Blanca's

feelings of betrayal and Papi's personal belief in his potential in this world:

> Blanca: I knew it, you lied to me and the worst part is you did it right to my face
> Papi: I didn't lie–
> Blanca: Yes you did, everytime you walked out of that apartment you came here to sell drugs.
> Papi: What else am I supposed to do?
> Blanca: Follow my rules. Find a real job.
> Papi: Yo, you wasn't complaining where my loot was coming from when it was paying for your groceries
> Blanca: You never told me it was dirty money, you told me you worked at a bodega. And I believed you. Papi, you put your family at risk![144]

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[142] Murphy et al. "Pink Slip." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 11:30-40.
[143] Bailey, Marlon. *Butch Queen Up in Pumps: Gender, Performance, and Ballroom Culture in Detroit.*
[144] Murphy et al. "Pink Slip." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 12:19-39

Again, Blanca emphasizes their responsibility to the rest of her family's safety while

acknowledging feeling hurt by Papi, who misled her about the source of his income. She also

asserts that Papi has a responsibility for his family's safety as well, recognizing that family is a

collective; Blanca consistently instills that her family is a unit. It seems her disappointment stems

from Papi's lack of consideration of how his choices could impact others, especially those he

loves. Blanca's confrontation is a form of accountability for the rules she established for her

children as well as for how she expects to be treated as his mother. However, while in a

frustrated tone and with pointed language, Papi explains that despite breaking the rules of the

house, his income is used to support his mother and siblings. He perceives his action as

excusable because he still provides for his family.

Further into this conversation, Papi reveals more details not only about his upbringing but

also how he perceives his social position, worthiness of care, and hope for his future.

> Papi: What family? Ain't nobody here! I been on my own since I was 13, in and out of
> foster homes. Ain't nobody gave me shit.
> Blanca: I did. Warm food, shelter, and you ain't the only one who had to learn how to
> survive on they own, but I didn't resort to dealing. You can get arrested or worse!
> Papi: It can't get no worse. What other choices are there for a 20 year old with an 8th
> grade education![145]

Papi is deeply aware of his limited options as a low income, Latino queer man without a high

school diploma. He is still making meaning of how his identities impact his options to sustain

himself and find a larger purpose in the world. Blanca claims that he could be "arrested or

worse," which emphasizes that he needs to look beyond short term satisfactions. Papi struggles

to see that other options exist for him given his social position. Papi describes feelings of neglect

and general disregard for his livelihood rooted in being a child in the foster care system, despite

neglect being a foundational standard for the state's justification for placing children in foster

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[145] Murphy et al. "Pink Slip." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 12:39-13:09

care, meaning the foster care system perpetuates the same issues it critiques.[146] The child welfare

system's goal for children is permanence, defined as long-term family placements and financial

and social stability.[147] However, Papi's inability to see and believe in a future beyond his current

situation indicates he struggles to see his future, goals, and selfhood as permanent or long term.

Papi's life choices are informed by a sense of precarity, which often stems from drastic

inconsistencies in living circumstances and a lack of safety and security. While Papi experienced

shelter, safety, love, and care in Blanca's home, Papi may lack trust in its longevity due to his

past experiences with "home." This foregrounds a component of ecosystems of care being the

contending with past rejection, and healing through new and generative relationships. The

argument continues:

> Blanca: I'm so disappointed in you–
> Papi: Yo, stop acting like you're my moms because you're not.
> (pause)
> Blanca: I want you out by morning, and if you don't pick up your shit imma put it on the
> street myself. (Blanca walks off)
> Papi: (yells) You gonna just turn around and leave me? Without giving me another
> chance? Where am I supposed to go? ...   Blanca! Aye I didn't mean it, you hear what I
> said, I didn't mean it![148]

Blanca accepted Papi into her family, and at first conflict, Papi weaponizes Blanca's

non-biological motherhood against her. Visibly hurt, Blanca follows through with her house rules

and disinvites Papi from her home. Blanca's decision to kick Papi out is complex. Blanca chose

to hold Papi accountable for a choice she felt put her family in danger. This model of

accountability follows some community models that assert that community care means removing

people who violate the community or member(s) of the community.[149] Contrary to foundational

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[146] Roberts, *Torn Apart.*
[147] Alder, Libby The Meanings of Permanence: A Critical Analysis of the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997."
[148] Murphy et al. "Pink Slip." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 13:09-49.
[149] Kaba, *We do this 'til we free us.*

critiques of abolitionist thought, communal families do not translate into zero consequences for harm.

Papi comes back to the apartment the next morning and collects his things and leaves after arguing with Ricky about confessing to Blanca. Papi returns to his work prior to being an Evangelista with Pito, but this time Pito requires him to sell "hard" drugs away from the piers and instead in the "hood;" given the time period, it can be inferred that the drug is crack cocaine. While executing a regular distribution, the police arrest Papi. Papi dumped the drugs he had on him just before the officer stopped him and threw him to the ground during the arrest, so Papi only spent one night in jail and was released the next day.[150] The state policed Papi through foster care and group home placements and physical jail, but failed to protect him from homelessness, poverty, and familial rejection. Through both foster care and incarceration, Papi experienced the state's investment in force for its own benefit.

Contrary to the state's efforts to confine Black/Latinx youth through force, Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care center self-determination, autonomy, and forgiveness. Rattled by his night in jail, Papi decides to reenter the Ballroom Scene for his support system. After briefly joining his family's rival house, the House of Ferocity, he makes amends with Blanca and warmly reconnects with his family to compete to win the Princess Ball. From that point on, Papi commits to following Blanca's rules, including finding legal work. Blanca supports Papi through getting his GED, and he eventually starts his own modeling management company for trans women models inspired by his girlfriend turned wife, Angel. I do not highlight the writer's choice to give Papi academic and occupational success to position queer people's incorporation into capitalism as an abolitionist future. Rather, I seek to highlight the labors of love for Papi

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[150] Murphy et al."Pink Slip." Episode. *Pose.* no. 1, 22:39-24

from his family that changed his perspective on his futurity. Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies scholar, Juana Maria Rodriguez, offers "queer gestures" as "the everyday labor of political, social, and sexual energies that mark our collective will to survive this day," highlighting racialized queer socialities and connections through embodied experiences.[151] She realizes "how a cascade of everyday actions is capable of altering a political life." Papi's sense of futurity, and his life trajectory, is an embodiment of both the small, quotidian gestures of care and larger, intentional gestures that inform the sense of self and confidence he develops across his character arc. Blanca's choice to adopt him into her home, Damon's willingness to protect him from exile, regular and communal family dinners in their apartment, and familial investment in developing his Ballroom performance are all examples of communally legible, culturally informed gestures of care. Papi's orientation to love and his future completely changed through the housework and reciprocal care he received when his Ballroom family became a core part of his ecosystem of care.
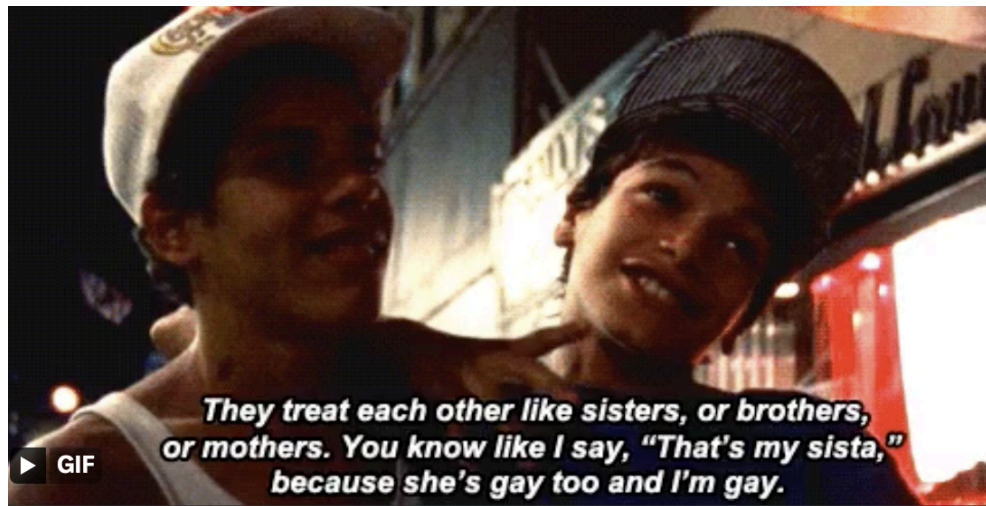
GIF Tweeted by @BlackMajiik from the final scenes in *Paris is Burning*

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[151] Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings.*

Jenny Livingston's 1990 documentary *Paris is Burning* directly inspired the characters in

Pose, which blends past realities of Ballroom legends from *Paris is Burning* with creative

interpretations of Ballroom in *Pose.* Tweets speculate Papi's character is inspired by a gay,

Latino boy experiencing homelessness depicted at the end of *Paris is Burning* describing how

Ballroom families support each other.[152] This cinematic interpretation represents how

rearticulations of queer pasts, with speculative futures, blends realities with the potentialities and

imaginative futures of Black/Latinx queer people. I assert *Pose,* as a digital creative formation, is

a queer gesture. Rodriguez asserts gestures embody Black/Latinx futurity while also ossifying

racialized and sexualized histories. In this way, gestures like cinema signal past, present, and

future conceptions of Black/Latinx queerness as windows to memory and imagination.

"I never had men who would stand for me, by me… thank you for being my brothers."

Lil Papi[153]

Bla-tino: Sex Parties as Communal Spaces

The state's investment in controlling sexual desire during the AIDS epidemic

disproportionately impacted those engaging in queer sex. This demonization resulted in

dehumanization rooted in deviant sexual and gender expression. Foundational to the denial of

full personhood is the denial of the right to pleasure and joy, including sexual pleasure,

experimentation, exploration, and joy. My analysis of Bla-tino rests on the notion that sexual

care and desire are essential to selfhood, and deeply connected to the human experience. Sex

provides a site for self-discovery and identifying one's needs that are equitable to

state-sanctioned standards of care. My analysis refuses dominant discourses of sexual

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[152] ToraShae (@BlackMajiik). 2018. "I love that Lil Papi on #PoseFX reminds me of lil baby who touched my heart in Paris Is Burning. One of my favorite quotes about queer family." Twitter, June 11, 2018, 7:20pm. https://twitter.com/BlackMajiik/status/1006330277403209728
[153] Murphy et al."Something Old, Something New." Episode. *Pose.* no. 3, 38:15

respectability rooted in erotophobic notions that position sex as strictly recreational. Black/Latinx queer communal sex clubs and parties evoke sexual desires and futures as forms of care through the investment in pleasure amidst widespread structural and interpersonal demonization of queer sex and queerphobic abstinence messaging. In *The Black Body in Ecstasy*, Jennifer Nash writes, "The erotic is a practice of self, a way of feeling in one's body, a kind of self-actualization… and a practice that is articulated in a host of sites."[154] My understanding of Bla-tino is rooted in Nash's conception of the erotic as intrinsically tied to selfhood. My analysis is counter discourse to sex as recreational, rather I see sexual exploration and communal forms of romantic and sexual intimacy as essential to selfhood, and therefore, necessary forms of care.

"The Club was like Church for Us"

Bla-tino's main audience consisted of "street" Black and Latino men, men that scholar Jason King characterized as "hardcore thugs."[155] Often labeled colloquially as "down low" (DL), these men embody normative ideas of Black and Latino masculinity in their everyday lives, yet express their queer sexual desires within private spheres. King asks us to expand definitions of "DL" outside of narratives often predicated on ideas of white sexuality and gender that position "DL" as self-hating or ashamed of their sexual and romantic interests; he says, "Unlike the traditional closet narrative, where men are in isolation, DL brothers tend to be relatively open about their sexuality—if only to each other—but under the radar. Creeping is not the same as being invisible."[156] This is not to position these men's conformity to normative gender expressions as explicitly liberatory or to negate the privilege that comes with the ability to conceal one's sexuality or gender identity. Rather, I position that they challenge the Western

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[154] Nash, Jennifer C. *The Black Body in Ecstasy: Reading race, reading pornography*. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2014. 54.
[155] King, Jason. "Remixing the Closet - The Village Voice." The Village Voice, June 24, 2003. https://www.villagevoice.com/remixing-the-closet/.
[156] King, "Remixing the Closet."

concept of "coming out" by practicing sexuality and gender formation as in motion and fluid, rejecting the conception of identity as a final destination or state of being.[157] These "DL" men create spaces to cultivate and develop new ways to articulate their identity in community with people who share similar lived experiences as their own. Their community and knowledge formation as queer men is not inherently liberatory, but the spaces they create provide safety and escape from a world actively rejecting them on the intersection of their gender identity, race, sexuality, and class status.[158] Legibility is not their main concern in expressing their sexual and romantic interests, and choosing not to publicly name themselves rejects the notion of identity markers as a liberatory function. Removing their identity formation from the lived experiences of urban Black and Latino men embedded in New York City street life is a form of discursive violence because it removes the context in which they are performing their gender from their expressions of pleasure.

"Blatino Bucks, $5 off for non-members"

Safe sex parties like Bla-tino provided a platform for open conversations about sexual health, aiming to destigmatize discussions surrounding HIV/AIDS. Attendees were not only there to engage in sexual desires, but also to exchange information, share experiences, and support each other in navigating the challenges posed by institutional violence and community rejection. Sex parties not only created space for sexual exploration and actualized imaginations, but they also provided connections to larger ecosystems of care for sexual health resources. More specifically, Blatino placed Black/Latinx men in conversation with community-based organizations, health advocacy groups, and LGBTQ+ activists who recognized the importance of creating safe spaces for queer people. One Bla-tino ad states, "MAD SHOUTOUT TO THE DJS

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[157] Ross, Marlon. "Beyond the Closet as a Raceless Paradigm." Essay. In Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology, 161–89. Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2005.
[158] Rodriguez, *Sexual Futures, Queer Gestures, and Other Latina Longings.*

WHO BEEN KEEPING U BUMPING AT THE PARTIES AND AS ALWAYS SHOUT OUT

TO R SAFE SEX SPONSORS… REMEMBER THESE R THE GROUPS THAT SUPPORT R

COMMUNITY SO SUPPORT THEM ALSO." The language of the advertisement that

emphasizes that the support the organizations provide should elicit community support of the

organization is a mutual aid orientation to care.

Bla-tino also created ways for the men to transition from casual participants to active

members. Featured on some of their fliers were "Blatino Bucks," a community-centered currency

that provided discounts from entry fees while also creating a membership option for discounted

entry. While A1BlackElite charged for entry to maintain their DJ sets, venues, and service

organizations, which emphasized the requirement of collective investment being essential to

maintenance, they also created ways to make the space more accessible to those interested in

participation. This model resembles and models mutual aid networks that provide care and

services to members, and are maintained by the community themselves. Sex parties act as

communal spaces where visibility and accountability coincide. Membership itself operates as a

sexual health practice, as communal sex spaces amongst the same members is also a STI

preventative measure.

Fantasies as Meaning Making and Liberatory Practice

In Judith Butler's *Undoing Gender,* they engage the idea of fantasy. Butler's perspective

on fantasy reveals the potential for subversion and resistance within the realm of the imaginary.

By embracing and exploring fantasies that diverge from normative gender scripts, individuals

can actively challenge and undo restrictive gender norms.[159] In this way, fantasy becomes a site

of resistance, a space where the boundaries of gender sexuality can be negotiated. Sex parties

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[159] Butler, Judith. "Beside Oneself: On the Limits of Sexual Autonomy." Essay. In *Undoing Gender*, 1st ed., 17–39. New York City, New York: Routledge, 2005.

operate as facilitated spaces for joy in a context marked by state and social pressure for sexual abstinence for Black/Latinx queer people due to HIV/AIDS. The creation of a physical space for joy and lived, actualizations of sexual fantasies is carework to support the humanness and holistic development of Black/Latinx gay men beyond baseline survival needs.

Within the realm of sex parties, fantasy operates as a tool for the undoing of restrictive gender norms and the subversion of established sexual scripts. Individuals use these environments to explore diverse roles, power dynamics, and expressions of desire that may be considered unconventional or taboo in mainstream contexts. The act of engaging in fantasies during sex parties becomes a performative challenge to the binary and fixed understandings of gender and sexuality. It is a deliberate and conscious embrace of the fluid and dynamic aspects of identity, allowing participants to actively shape and negotiate their own sexual narratives. Systems like child welfare use force to stratify youth and their families to limited resources and deficit ideologies about their selfhoods. The state insists that Black/Latinx people lack self-determination, but these parties are a manifestation of self-claimed autonomy. Places like sex parties make space to negotiate these narratives, and physically see themselves in different social positions. Sex parties provide a sense of community where individuals can share and celebrate their fantasies. The collective nature of sex parties encourages a form of communal fantasy exploration, contributing to a sense of communal understanding and acceptance among participants. Additionally, participating in sex in a facilitated community space limits exposure to violence in comparison to individual sexual pursuits because of the number of members present and the communal emphasis placed on the parties. This collective engagement with fantasy and safety aligns with Butler's emphasis on the social and performative aspects of identity, highlighting how these gatherings can be transformative spaces for both individual and collective

identity formation and knowledge production.[160] Bla-tino participants created new forms of kinship through these sex party networks, but they also created alternative worlds within these parties that did what many of their families and larger society could/would not: embraced the complexities and multiplicities of their gender and sexual identities in relationship with their racial and ethnic identities.

While understanding the extent of Bla-tino's sexual fantasies is limited through analysis of the fliers, an example of gender performance and execution of sexual fantasies can be seen through body contests where men would compete for the "best" body and "big scary dicks." While still engaging in normative formations of hypermasculinity, these men engaged in gender performance that contributed to modeling standards of manhood that protected them in their everyday lives. In this way, the care practice is learning to perform gender for safety in a world actively enacting violence against sexually non-normative people. Bla-tino provided the space to explore this gender performance amongst others living in similar realities.
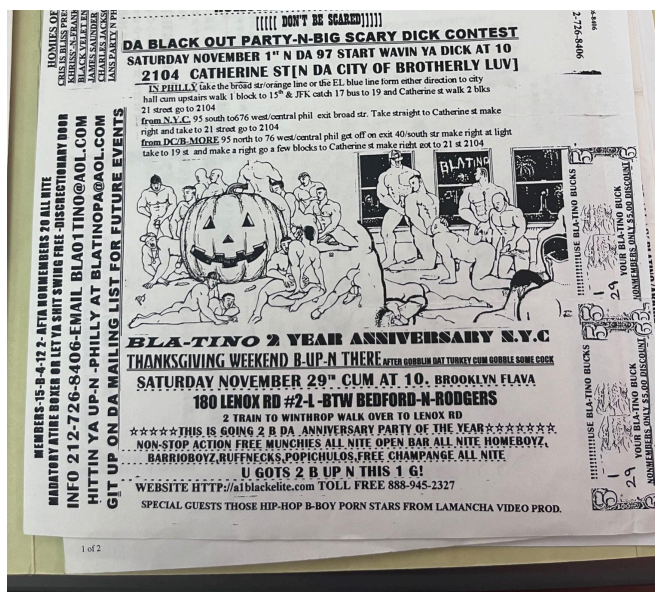
"DA BLACK OUT PARTY- N- BIG SCARY DICK PARTY." Bla-tino Advertisement.

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[160] Butler, *Undoing Gender.*

Transcending Geographies and Negotiating Confinement:

>*"You are not to touch other flesh*
>
>>*without a police permit*
>>
>>>*You have no privacy –*
>>>
>>>*the State wants to seize your bed*
>>>
>>>*and sleep with you.*
>>>
>>>>*The State wants to control*
>>>>
>>>>*your sexuality, your birth rate,*
>>>>
>>>>*your passion"* - Essex Hemphill in "Occupied Territories"[161]

Political narratives from politicians and other institutional actors asserted that queer people, especially gay men, should maintain abstinence to protect themselves from contracting HIV/AIDS. The emphasis on the individual models a neoliberal framing of the epidemic as an issue of individual responsibility rather than a systemic public health failure. This narrative also promoted state-sanctioned regulation of gender and sexually marginalized individuals. Explicitly sexual spaces like Bla-tino resisted these narratives that asserted isolation and intervention onto queer communities. This time period is not the first example of a queer reconceptualization of community outside of state-sanctioned ideologies as the bathhouses, early forms of Ballroom, and gay clubs rooted in the 1920s Harlem Renaissance also mark legacies of queer resistance to state-sanctioned community or family structures. However, spaces of kinship like Bla-tino reject notions that family, kinship, and community must exist within biological or nuclear families, and that care can only be provided by familial networks. By examining these sex parties as a site of cultural and group formation within a communal framework, I position the knowledge and

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[161] Hemphill, Essex. "The Occupied Territories." Essay. In *Ceremonies: Prose and Poetry*, 72–73. London, England: Penguin Books, 1992.

cultural production within Bla-tino as deeply tied to a larger ecosystem of care for Black/Latinx queer people.

In *Homes, House, and Nonidentity:'Paris is Burning'*, Chandan Reddy, a scholar of Queer of Color Critique asserts, "Unaccounted for in both Marxist and liberal pluralist discussions of the home and the nations, queers of color as people of color… take up the critical task of both remembering and rejecting the model of the "home" offered in the US… by expanding the locations and moments of that critique of the home to interrogate processes of group formation and self formation."[162] Many Black queer people experience a disidentification with their biological family networks, and simultaneously a disidentification with the familial, gender, and sexual expectations rooted in the socio-cultural context of that family, which Martinez names as a queer exodus.[163] However, with disidentification comes a collective response: creation. Sex parties like Bla-tino are an example of this creation. Rather than state-sanctioned families, created by the same state that exercises physical, emotional, and cultural violence onto queer people through executions of power like violent policing practices, Black and Latino men created their own spaces to experience kinship, love, and pleasure within contexts they felt safe to do so. Men in Bla-tino, at least in its initial formation, were still situated in New York City physically and geographically, but them being largely Black, gay, and hyper-masculine in New York street scenes positions them in exodus with Black cultural production at the time, especially in Hip-Hop scenes in New York City which were often explicitly homophobic.

While still situated in New York City, these queer men still experience a form of migration as a result of queer exodus that contributes to community cultivation. The migration

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[162] Reddy, Chandan C. "Home, Houses, Nonidentity: Paris Is Burning." *Burning Down the House*, April 9, 2019, 355–79. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429039775-16. 356-57; Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black.*
[163] Martinez, "Queer Latina/o Migrant Labor."

being a commitment to the physical journey, often described on the Bla-tino flier explicitly

through specific directions, to traveling to these communal spaces. Whether it be a walk or

subway trip on the two train to Flatbush, participants and members of Bla-tino transited to these

parties. Queer studies scholar, Rachel Walker, discusses queer youth in New York City traversing

geographies within the city to create community as a nomadology, where the queer subject

migration is cyclical within the established community spaces in the city. Understanding

geography as a point of analysis rejects "standardized research" through expanding analysis from

strictly race, gender, sex, and class to understand "embodied geographies" of those who occupy

multiple and complex subjectivities "inextricably bound to place, space, materialities, and

temporalities." She writes,

> "Where the nomad is a 'cohesion engendered by repetitions, cyclical moves, and
>
> rhythmic displacement, the youth traveling to the pier reference this cyclical journey to
>
> find community day after day. This daily migration… situates the youth as 'in transit' and
>
> as 'neither here nor there' and furthermore it accomplishes a continuous and rhythmic
>
> creation of the new, as in new and different connections, relations, and experiences with
>
> others who visit the spaces…"[164]

Her use of rhythmic to describe displacement while centering geography as an embodied

experience rooted in the materiality of Black queer subjects is especially pertinent to Bla-tino as

a site of Hip-Hop through DJ sets and explicit marketing of Hip-Hip as their framework of

bringing in and sustaining community. While read as not legibly queer, their resistance to the

confinements of Black heteronormative familial expectations and gender/sexual expression

paired with their centering pleasure during widespread demonization represents a cultural

creation during exodus. While Bla-tino was a private sex party, so principles of the cultural

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[164] Walker, "Toward a FIERCE Nomadology." 109.

formation aligned with neoliberal notions of privatization, Bla-tino's organizer's refusal to geographically confine themselves or to privatize promotion to limit exposure represents a rejection of neoliberal assertions of both private and heterosexual sexual desires and fantasy as acceptable sex.

Coda:

Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care are windows into an abolitionist framework of meeting needs in holistic, collective ways that are not based in state interventions or standards. Luscious's sex education work for shelters and non-profits, the Ballroom Scene and family formations, and Bla-tino sex parties and sex education resources all exist in overlapping temporal and geographical locations. While I cannot connect specific people across each of these sites of analysis, I argue that they all exist within a larger Black/Latinx queer ecosystem of care in New York City to circumvent state violence and familial rejection during the AIDS epidemic.

More broadly, these sites provide examples of how Black/Latinx queer people developed social, emotional, and physical spaces for intimacy, connection, and deeper human experiences in opposition to normativity. I do not contend that these spaces, or people within them, solely work in liberatory, non-normative frameworks, as replication of normativity exists across queer spaces. I position that the cultivation and sustainment of these spaces is a practice of queer care work. Black/Latinx queer people created these spaces to exist in community with the resources and support to navigate the realities of medical, police, familial, and sexual violence. In the face of intentional inferiorization and misinterpretation, Black/Latinx queer people within these ecosystems continued to destabilize conceptions of family and kinship relegated to nuclearity, biology, and rigidity; the ecosystems they participated in provided them with the resources to do

so, but also the social and relational intimacy, pleasure, and joy to experience love and care through actualized, affirmative connection.

Abolition hinges on the ability to cultivate salient resources for communities, and ecosystems create a way to maintain a network through a living exchange of intimacy, education, and loving investment in communal selfhood. Through her analysis of gestures, Rodriguez asserts the need for gestures of recognition as a collective approach to forge political coalitions of people whose families and kinships fall outside of heteronormative formations. Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care exist as a way to build robust care networks in a mutual aid model that supports Black/Latinx queer people's needs outside of the state. Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care are unique because the members cultivate the ecosystem on the basis of shared experience and commitment to various forms of love. These frameworks push abolition to consider the depths of human experience beyond survival and communal needs. Rather, community rests on the exploration and fantasy of sexual, romantic, friendship, and familial love not in isolation, but as deeply intertwined.

Conclusion

Child welfare research is just beginning to imagine alternatives to a system rooted in chattel slavery and its legacy that continues to violently disrupt Black, low-income families. However, dominant child welfare research fails to interrogate how certain communities refused state intervention through curations of their own family networks. Across time, Black queer communities show us alternatives to child welfare intervention, and my project examines those spaces of refusal and generative reimagination. My project is essential to the rising child welfare abolitionist work because it highlights communities structurally erased from conversations. It also analyzes ways to think about family, despite queer people consistently refusing and rejecting state-imposed boundaries of family and kinship.

I still remember the first time I saw Ma'Khia Bryant. On the day of her death, I was in my Freshman year College Writing class. Sheepishly, I scrolled on Twitter as the professor lectured. A young girl's face came up on my feed from a TikTok, she was doing her hair. I smiled under my mask watching her lip-sync across carefully edited transitions because she looked so genuinely happy. I clicked off the video to read the caption, and it read that the girl had just been murdered by the Columbus, Ohio police. Since then, I have spent three years examining Ma'Khia Bryant's story, speaking of her love, creativity, and curiosity at every research conference and presentation I had the opportunity to attend, and at every protest where "Say Her Name" rang through crowds of people.

Throughout this time, I could not help but imagine what her life would look like now, three years later. When Ma'Khia died, she was a junior at Independence High School.[165] On September 29th of 2024, Ma'Khia would turn 20 years old. She'd be three years into the five

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[165] Gary, Marlan. "Ma'khia Zhi'Riana Ty'lea Bryant." Marlan J. Gary Funeral Home, April 27, 2021. https://www.thechapelofpeace.com/makhia-zhiriana-tylea-bryant/.

year business plan she curated with her teacher and perhaps she'd be completing her last year of cosmetology school and working towards the lash company she dreamed about with her friends and sister. If she chose the college path, she would be in the class of 2026. Last school year I was a Resident Advisor (RA), and perhaps she would have been among one of my mentees, eagerly meeting new people and running around campus discovering a whole new stage in her life. Maybe her dreams of YouTube fame would have manifested, and her name and face would be widely known for the lively, goofy personality her friends described and for her dedication to hair videos, not for her premature death. My speculations do not alter that Ma'Khia's life was violently stolen from her by police violence, but they do allow us to use analytics of imaginative futures, blending the memory of her life with the potentialities of her future. I use these analytics to infer what her life may have looked like in a world where an anti-black, violent child welfare system did not disrupt her family connections. A world where she lived within the walls of her grandmother's apartment surrounded by home cooked meals and endless dance videos with her sister. A world where her mother was given a second chance, where she had the grace and opportunity to get back on her feet in community with her mother and her children's support. Perhaps the community organizations in Hilltop would have supported her through this process, so her ecosystem of care extended further than a singular familial unit.

Similarly, I searched through the "In the Life" archive at the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture for stories of Black/Latinx queer people. I found advertisements from the Ali Forney Center about stopping homophobia in Black and Latinx communities, and I became curious about who Ali Forney was. When I discovered sources detailing the life of Ali, simultaneously these sources erased Luscious. When I found the details of her death, and the expansiveness of expression and love she embraced in her life, I began to dream about what

Luscious's life may have looked like without the imminent threats of familial rejection, poverty, homelessness, and transphobic/homophobic violence. On April 12th of 2024, just eight days before the anniversary of Ma'Khia's death, Luscious would turn 49 years old. I imagine a world that embraced Luscious's gender and sexual identities solely for the validity of the expansiveness of trans identities that embrace the multiplicities in queer socialities. This imaginative world does not depend on her life and death as a mechanism to *appear* egalitarian and inclusive in a neoliberal state by using her labor and her death to promote Centers and policies. Instead, I dream of a world where Luscious and her family's identities do not exist on the margins. I imagine heteropatriarchal violence no longer results in the premature death of Black/Latinx queer people. We destroy binaries and boundaries on gender and sexuality for liberatory embodiments of full, expansive selfhoods and romantic and sexual freedom. I imagine KiKi, Dion, and Luscious growing old together as a family, laughing about adventures they took across their lifetimes, and having the space to realize their own futurity. They would have the community-based resources to treat their addiction, and full access to housing informed completely by their choice, unconstrained by socio-political limitations.

The implications of my project are tied to the lives of Black girls like Ma'Khia and Black trans people like Luscious. I dedicated my thesis to the reconstruction of stories erased, sanitized, and/or marginalized by race, gender, sexuality, and class as a commitment to largely untold narratives of love and life, rather than strictly death and violence. Abolitionist approaches to child welfare must produce new definitions that resist the current child welfare system as a function of the criminal-legal system. The historical development of child welfare out of enslavement, Indigenous boarding schools, and Black codes represent its commitment to upholding deficit narratives about Black family formations, and enforcing the family separation

and sociocultural disconnect.[166] The current child welfare system could never realize the humanity and deeply loving commitment to care that exists in Black family formations. The child welfare system's rejection of these care networks is, in part, the cause of Luscious's death in 1997 and Ma'Khia's death in 2021.

For future work that engages with family formations, narrative reconstruction, and ecosystems of care, we need to contend with the ways our voices, experiences, understandings, and positionalities impact how we retell stories. Bridging ethnography and interviews with these historical retellings may offer a more holistic and community-engaging research approach. I see my future work being connected to Black feminist epistemological and ethnographic approaches that center the familiar, focusing specifically on their felt, embodied experiences. I hope to expand this conceptualization of the familiar to Black queer communities as well. I look to the work of Jennifer Nash to understand the felt life of Black queer communities within the realm of my critique and deconstruction of policies and law. At the same time, I draw inspiration from Kenly Brown's efforts to center the affective life and knowledge of Black queer communities through a lens of "mutual vulnerability" and love.[167]

I conclude this paper here, but this is an ongoing project I am committed to continuing through graduate studies. Black youth – their stories, imaginations, and dreams–remain deeply personal to the work I wish to continue. In this commitment, I embrace Savannah Shange's conceptualization of queer kinship as a practice rooted in both the intellectual and interpersonal, which serves as resistance to normativity. Queer kinship will be foundational to my future approaches to researching familial formations and broader Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care.[168] More importantly, my thesis is a representation of my personal politics. Shange

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[166] Adam, *Education for Extinction*; Jacobs et al, "Defund the Police"; Roberts, *Torn Apart.*
[167] Brown, "Love, Loss, and Loyalty"; Nash, *Black Feminism Reimagined.*
[168] Shange, "Play Aunties and Dyke Bitches."

emphasizes the interpersonal and the intellectual as interconnected, so living and actualizing these concepts, frameworks, and understandings of care underlies how I will continue to move through the world. I feel motivated to continue my studies, carrying with me the stories I have engaged with over the last three years, and the curiosity to learn more.

Appendix

Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997: This policy stablishes permanency as a criterion for child removal, positioning permanency through adoption as the solution to high numbers of children embedded in the foster care system. In turn, this policy demonizes biological families with no consideration of the effects of the state's structural neglect of low-income Black urban communities.

Adultification: I use Monique Morris's definition which reads, "The assignment of more adult-like characteristics to the expressions of young Black girls is a form of age compression. Along this truncated age continuum, Black girls are likened more to adults than to children and are treated as if they are willfully engaging in behaviors typically expected of Black women."[169]

Black/Latinx Queer Ecosystems of Care: Black/Latinx queer ecosystems of care characterize the multiplicities of care that queer communities cultivated to protect, love, and educate one another amidst systemic and interpersonal exclusion and violence; this is rejects the normative state-sanctioned definition of family as a singular familial unit, rather care exists within a larger network. Black/Latinx ecosystems of care provide education, intimacy, affinity, protection, and advocacy that oppose limitation and confinement.

Queer Exodus: Ernesto Javier Martinez names queer exodus as the the negotiation of socio-cultural connection to ethnic and racial demographics of origin and material rejection of queer people within these communities; exodus does not necessitate a geographical or physical displacement, although it often does occur, but rather the lack of social belonging within heteronormative expressions of ethnic and racial identities forces queer people to navigate different hostilities within spaces and places.

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[169] Morris, *Pushout.*

Family Formation(s): Through normative terms, family formation is often defined by a set of parents choosing to have children. I use family formation as a flexible term that emphasizes the labor of creating community through an ethic of love and care. This term also acknowledges that there is not a singular way a family is created or a singular way that families should look. Family formations can include a larger network, but it can also blend biological and chosen families, which furthers that family is flexible, and transcends normative conceptions of family.

Family of Origin: I use this term to reference queer people's biological family and/or the family one is born into.

Normative Family: This is two fold: 1) the state's investment into white, midde to upper class, suburban, cis/heterosexual families and people who choose to uphold it. 2) families aspirations to align with these family structure despite racial/sexual misalignment (i.e. a Black gay family or a Black single mother household).

Housework: Dr. Marlon Bailey defines housework as a social phenomenon rooted in "friendship, protection from violence, and parenting" including loving labor to maintain the familial network and the relationships within it.

Kinship: Queer kinship proves that embracing the non-normativity gives space for meaning-making, healing, and exploration across different experiences and forms of family. Rejects notions that love must exist within biological or nuclear families, and that care can only be provided by familial networks.

Love ethic: In *All About Love*, bell hooks uses love ethic in terms of scholarship as an ethic rooted in critically thinking about how one produces knowledge and its impact on those both engaging with it and those that the knowledge is about through the following principles: showing care, knowledge, integrity, and the will to cooperate.

Mutual Aid: An act of care as well as a dedicated life practice that works outside of systems to collectively meet the survival, material, and social needs of communities, which emphasizes that community investment; it is a collaborative and reciprocal practice of care for sustaining communities with values of collective and mutual investment, often working alongside social movements, like the abolition of police and child welfare, to support where the state refuses or fails.

Racial Geography of Child Welfare: Dorothy Roberts defines the racial geography of childwelfare as a concentration of family-policing surveillance in Black, low-income, urban communities intentionally and, in turn, family policing becomes entrenched in neighborhood culture.

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