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ARTICLE

Losing Black Mothers, Finding Revolutionary Mothering

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Abstract

My mother is losing her mother to Alzheimer's disease. Although my mother feels loss, I am connecting through my (maternal) grandmother to our ancestors, including a deceased father and paternal grandmother. I am also connecting to a daughter who has lost her mother, through a (maternal) grandmother who, through her loss of memory, is more open to kin networks than my mother. Through deepening connections to my maternal grandmother and to my daughter, I feel I am losing my mother. I look to revolutionary mothering as a way to reconnect shattered bonds and find lost mothers. This article honors the important work of Saidiya Hartman, Dorothy Roberts, and countless revolutionary mothers.

Keywords: Black mothers; slavery; adoption; memory; foster care; Black families; Saidiya Hartman; Dorothy Roberts; revolutionary mothering

"You ain't worth a shit"
That's the last thing I heard Grandma Gertie Lou say
Before I ran away to my mother
Whose family would never speak to me that way
Who loved me
Because I couldn't stop crying
My mother promised me
That I don't have to go back to Dad's mom's house
That even though I'm a child
I don't have to let someone talk to me that way
And I didn't go back
And never saw Grandma Gertie Lou
The same as before
And didn't think she loved me
Until
My Dad's sister told me
She said that to everybody
You were her favorite
By then

She was dead
But not gone
I am haunted by her
She calls to me
In harsh language
That does not respect Mom's rules of politeness and etiquette
She calls me to action
And recognition
Of love wrapped in different kinds of packages
Spoken in different languages
From people who have lived all kinds of lives
And might have more spice than sugar in their pies
Cuz that's what life's dealt them
Forgive me, Grandma Gertie Lou
For losing you
Before you left us
I understand now
What you meant to tell me
About making something out of myself
About not running away crying
When someone challenges you to be better
Cuz they know you are
I hear you now
And I love you too
Always did

Prologue

I am accompanied by spirits, mostly women in my family. But since my father died, he is among them, in front of them, beside them. He shows up everywhere. After he died, I purchased a new car. When I took it to the dealer, I was told that it had come off the manufacturing line on my father's birthday. My father always was a car man. After graduation, I moved to a different part of the country for a job, and rented a room from a Chinese mother and daughter. It was only a couple of weeks before I discovered that the little girl had the same birthday as my father. Even though in the normal course of events I would not have discovered this so soon, she came home one day with birthday balloons after attending someone else's party, and a discussion of birthdays ensued. Later, during my year-long stay, I found myself taking this same little girl to breakfast so that she would not hear her parents quarreling. When we arrived at the restaurant, I realized that it was Father's Day.

Even though it is my father who I sometimes hear or see, his words, I know, come from the women. I believe it is my Grandma Gertie Lou and others whose names I do not know. Grandma Gertie Lou had a way of speaking that my father never translated and my mother did not understand. It was years after my (paternal) grandmother's bodily death that my father's sister explained her language of love. Because I did not understand her, I abandoned her before she left this world. I felt harshness when she expressed love. Her love was not wrapped in the same kind of cloth worn by my mother's family. It is her way of speaking that I sense in these spirits that accompany

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me, saying things that my father would not. Their guidance leads me toward a kind of mothering care that is both ugly and essential, full of contradictions, rooted in our histories and pushing us to new futures. These spirits are my most consistent companions. I do not ignore them, even when in the company of academics and others who think themselves too rational to listen.

This essay is guided by the spirits of these women, who are never really lost to us, even when we miss them or misunderstand them. In the sections below, I write about losing mothers, even when they are present. Especially for Black mothers, the history of loss in the United States is well established. Keeping in mind this legacy, I discuss the complicated relationships of loss among the women in my family, including a grandmother who is losing her memory and a daughter who has lost her mother. From enslavement to foster care and adoption, the government continues to shatter Black maternal bonds. Highlighting my encounter with the foster (that is, pre-adoption) system, the next section of this essay discusses shattered bonds. Finally, I explore revolutionary mothering as a radical response to the deeply entrenched forces that seek to make us lose our mothers.

Lost mothers and losing mothers (honoring Saidiya Hartman)

Anyone can lose their mother, but there is something extremely violent about the trail of lost mothers that comes out of the history of enslaved Africans in the United States (and around the world). Genetic testing can never find what was "lost," can never mend what was severed. We have to understand something about the intent and structure of slavery in order to understand how our mothers were lost, and what might be required to find them. We can start by understanding what it meant to be a slave.

> The most universal definition of the slave is a stranger. Torn from kin and community, exiled from one's country, dishonored and violated, the slave defines the position of the outsider. She is the perpetual outsider, the coerced migrant, the foreigner, the shamefaced child in the lineage. Contrary to popular belief, Africans did not sell their brothers and sisters into slavery. They sold strangers: those outside of their web of kin and clan relationships, nonmembers of the polity, foreigners and barbarians at the outskirts of their country, and lawbreakers expelled from society. (Hartman 2007, 5)

This description spoils the fantasy of a foremother's abduction from a family that must have loved and cherished her. She must have been missed, right? The stealers of people must have been clever to isolate her so thoroughly from loved ones. They must have been masterminds to lure her from her community to a place where she could be captured. That's what I need to tell myself. But things are more complicated and tragic than that simple story. When I consider the conflicts between ethnic groups on the African continent today, I know as much. Yet I still yearn for a story of love that preceded the brutal separation that led to enslavement in foreign lands. Living in the afterlife of slavery, I try to stretch my mind to a time before those miseries in order to move forward, but I struggle in the present.

> If slavery persists as an issue in the political life of black America, it is not because of an antiquarian obsession with bygone days or the burden of a too-long memory, but because black lives are still imperiled and devalued by a racial calculus and a

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> political arithmetic that were entrenched centuries ago. This is the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment. I, too, am the afterlife of slavery. (6)

This article touches four generations of women living in the afterlife of slavery. My mother's side of the family comes from colorist privilege; they are (politically, socially, and racially) Black, without having dark skin. For this reason, they have had more access to health care and education than most. My mother, maternal grandmother, and I are all the daughters of Black medical doctors. We all attended college, and my mother and I have doctoral degrees. We are smart enough to know what my grandmother's kind of light skin must mean, but we do not talk about the white owners who will always be strangers to us. At times, my mother struggles to feel that she belongs among darker-skinned Black people, especially those who do not have her class privilege and who speak of an authentic (and often economically disadvantaged) Black experience (Hall and Hall 2020). Sometimes she feels a stranger. Even among those living in the afterlife of slavery, often we are not familiar with one another. In the context of this estrangement, we reach for memories.

What are we to do with our memories? What must we do to find our way back(wards) to our lost foremothers? I look to my mother and her mother for answers. What are our shared memories? What happens when there is a break—a separation—in the memory? That's our story, the story of my mother's mother and me. My maternal grandmother has Alzheimer's disease. Oftentimes, I am her memory. I ask myself, "What happens when the younger person has the longer memory? What happens when the grandmother relies on the granddaughter to recreate herself? And what happens if, in the process of doing this work, the mother between them is lost in her own memories that are truer, to her? What does it really mean to be strangers to one another, to our mothers, and to our mother country, in ways that are accentuated by different shades of brown skin?" Hartman writes, "To lose your mother was to be denied your kin, country, and identity. To lose your mother was to forget your past" (Hartman 2007, 85). I see that my mother is suffering a loss of identity, as her mother forgets the past. Her mother forgets her. She is losing access to places that might still be available to her, if only my grandmother could remember.

Since we are talking about family, and specifically mothers, we should also speak of love. Maybe love can heal some of what has been damaged. According to Hartman, "Love encourages forgetting" (87). It is a selective forgetting that distinguishes between family and stranger. What happens when your kin aren't kin to you anymore? What happens when your love makes them kin and their forgetting makes you a stranger? We are on new territory, in this land of forgetting. Hartman writes, "We may have forgotten our country, but we haven't forgotten our dispossessions. It's why we never tire of dreaming of a place that we can call home, a place better than here, wherever here might be" (87). My grandmother perpetually lives in Southern Pines, North Carolina. I never knew this place, but it was her home before I was born. It exists as a physical place, but more vividly as a place in her imagination, always warm, with family and comfort.

We don't live in North Carolina anymore. I convinced my mother to move with her mother to Massachusetts so that we could be together, supporting one another. I pressured them to move, even though I knew that they would be unable to find the warmth of the South in this cold New England state. This territory is hostile in ways that are difficult to explain if one has not experienced them. Although I have been in my house for nearly four years, I have never met my neighbors. I can tell they find my

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Blackness disruptive. The town's building commissioner forced me to file an affidavit in the county records, indicating that I had no intention to illegally rent the basement apartment that was being renovated for my mother. He admitted that this was the first time he had ever made any such request. Without his approval, the renovations for my mother's basement apartment could not have happened. He did not care that my mother was already here, all the things from her home packed into my garage, waiting for the basement to be ready.

The county officials were so baffled when I showed up with the notarized letter, which the commissioner insisted had to be recorded before he would approve the building permit, that they scrambled for the appropriate category under which to file the letter. Apparently, they don't have a section for "Black Person Trying to Live in white Neighborhood." These hostilities make me nostalgic for another home. Hartman writes, "It is only when you are stranded in a hostile country that you need a romance of origins; it is only when you *lose your mother* that she becomes a myth" (98). We are stranded in this place to which I have escaped, where I am hiding out until I can find a less hostile home for myself and for my mother, grandmother, and daughter.

There are so many awful memories in this place, on this land. My grandmother's loss of memory is troubling for my mother. I see it as an opening, an opportunity for her to lead us into another existence. My mother is terrified that she will end up like her mother. A generation removed from the painful loss of a woman who used to be someone else, I welcome this softer, freer version of my grandmother. I know that many people reading this, who may have lost their loved ones to Alzheimer's, might think this statement romanticizes the harsh realities of this illness. It does so no more than my mother's memories of her mother romanticize their relationship; my mother focuses on positive memories of a woman who was harsh and judgmental with her. Much of the suffering that relatives experience when family members suffer with Alzheimer's is about a relative who has become a stranger who no longer conforms to their memories. I never did conform in this hostile place, where I am perpetually a stranger and estranged. Together, my grandmother and I travel to other worlds, inaccessible to my mother, who is searching for her lost mother in the woman who has replaced her.

Grandma and I are entering new worlds together, and I am ready. I have been waiting. Because I am going with my grandmother to worlds refused by my mother, I am losing my mother in this act. My mother seems resentful. She thinks I have a choice and wants me to stay with her. My mother is an only child who always yearned for a large family, and my father could make anyone feel at home, like part of the family. Known for being the life of the party, he had a reputation for dancing with women who were strangers in a crowd, who had arrived at the party alone. In this way, my parents' dance of intimacy makes sense. As my father's daughter, I will not leave my (maternal) grandmother to be alone in a world between worlds. We will dance together.

In a way, I am betraying my mother, who gave so much to me that she has lost important parts of herself. Some mothers would give their children anything and everything. That is the way my mother has been with me. For that reason, I know that if, at any moment, she finds herself without enough of anything, it is likely because she has poured more into me than she could without losing her own footing. Was this a miscalculation? Or an intentional (over)investment? Was it a kind of all-or-nothing gamble on the future, embodied by a daughter? I do not know, but I do know that my mother has been responsible for the freedom I have experienced. She shielded me from the adults who would have made me more obedient, less creative, more practical, less imaginative. She moved them out of my way so that I could arrive here with the woman who

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gave birth to her, prepared to imagine a world that has been lost. It is a world where my grandmother and I can visit places that have been (physically) destroyed. There is no looking back. We are moving to a different country, a place where mothering requires the embrace of strangers.

From Lost Mothers to Shattered Bonds

I am descended from enslaved Africans who were sold by strangers
In a foreign land
I am living (and dying) in the afterlife of slavery
I am a lost mother with a daughter who has lost her mother
I met my daughter November 1, 2018
She has lost her mother
She calls me Mom
I tell her that I will always be her mother
And that we will never lose one another
I tell her that she can have as many mothers as she wants
I cannot tell her that I will help her find her "real" mom
Because her government family would not approve
I live with my mother
And grandmother, who has no memory
My mother has lost her mom
I do not know whether my daughter will ever be allowed to live with me
My mother called me delusional for calling the child who does not live with me my daughter
She thinks the government makes families
I think the government knows nothing about family
Or Blackness that is valuable
Or femaleness that is not subservient
Or mothering that can happen in groups
When she talks about her granddaughter
She does not mean my child
She means my brother's daughter
In becoming a mother, I am losing my mother
Yet another mother lost
I am betraying the mother who lost herself
To give me life
And freedom
In order to become the mother
Of a girl who has also lost her mother
Guided by my mother's lost mother
Who in her loss of memory
Can lead us to new worlds
Worlds with lots of mothers
"Real" and imagined
I tell my daughter that she can have as many mothers as she wants
I will help her find her mother
I will prove that mothers can be found

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I hope that she will help me find my mother
Again
I have my doubts
Because I know this system is built to destroy us

Black child welfare as shattering bonds (honoring Dorothy Roberts)

Dorothy Roberts reports, "More than half a million children taken from their parents are currently in foster care. African Americans are the most likely of any group to be disrupted in this way by government authorities. Black children make up nearly half of the foster care population, although they constitute less than one-fifth of the nation's children" (Roberts 2002, vi). My daughter is one of these children; her life has been disrupted by government authorities who have separated her from her mother.

I remember the year when I decided to adopt a child. It was my first (and what turned out to be my only) year working at an elite, (predominantly) white boarding school in Massachusetts. Because I was hired late, after many of the other teachers had been given housing assignments, I was given the only available house. It was a two-bedroom house with a covered carport. After moving in all of my belongings, the house still seemed empty. I did not need two bedrooms; I barely used one. I did not spend much time in the house, given my teaching, coaching, and advising responsibilities. I had access to a cafeteria that served more food (with vegetarian, vegan, gluten-free, and low-carb options) than I could ever possibly consume. For the first time in my adult life, I had no housing expenses, which enabled me to save more than half of my salary. In the evenings, I thought about families without homes.

Many of the teachers' children attended the school and lived on campus. I was surprised to learn that teachers would be provided housing to accommodate a limitless number of their children. No matter how many children a teacher had, all of those children would be guaranteed housing, food, health insurance (through the teacher's health plan), and education (likely at the school). Before working at the school, I had no idea that such a place and system existed in the United States. Exhausted by the idea of it all, I became determined to figure out ways to extend my privilege to others. The excess of resources was troubling. When I spoke with other teachers, there seemed to be no limit to the amount of unearned privilege they were willing to absorb.

One idea I had was to provide transitional housing for a family. Then I learned that there were all sorts of rules governing the extent to which my access to resources could be shared. Even though I could bring a guest with me to a meal, it would be considered inappropriate for me to simply invite someone who was hungry, but with whom I did not have a relationship. People sharing homes had to be kin. In this way, family was the legitimizing structure for extending privilege. This meant I needed to grow my family. I decided that I would do that through the adoption of a daughter. I could not bear this excess in the face of so much need. Were there no limits in this place where children flew private jets home over school breaks and returned to heated sidewalks that melted snow? It was unjust. I committed myself to either breaking the system or breaking out of it. In the end, I did a little of both. After one year, the school's dean drafted a resignation letter that he suggested I sign. Although I didn't sign the letter, I did leave. When I left, I was far along in the process of becoming approved to adopt in the state of Massachusetts. Since leaving this job meant losing my home, I had to temporarily suspend the adoption process until I found another home and job.

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In writing this article, I returned to my original adoption application. Pre-adoptive parents must complete an exhaustive profile, detailing their childhood experiences and family relationships. Everything about the adoption process, including the application questions, was geared to the white, privileged adult. Most of the "good" (presumed trauma-free) pre-adoptive parents were white, whereas many of the children of (presumed defective) so-called "bio-moms" (that is, biological mothers) were not white. As Roberts writes, "The number of Black children in state custody—those in foster care as well as those in juvenile detention, prisons, and other state institutions—is a startling injustice that calls for radical reform.. . . The fact that the system supposedly designed to protect children remains one of the most segregated institutions in the country should arouse our suspicion" (Roberts 2002, vi). The class for pre-adoptive parents paid a lot of attention to the lack of cultural competency of white parents and the (potential) damage to nonwhite children. It is likely that the following profile questions were written with these white families in mind: "How would you help a child from another race or ethnic heritage? What supports would help you parent a child of another race/ethnicity?" Below is the response from my profile:

> My responsibility to community is directly related to the racist history of the US. As such, I intend to provide care for a Black child. While my preference is for an African American child, I am open to adopting a Black child from another national and cultural context. Because of the way Blackness is constructed historically in the US (i.e., the "one drop rule"), many aspects of the Black experience are the same across ethnic differences. However, because I interact frequently with a broader Black diasporic community, I have the resources to cultivate cultural awareness for Black children with diverse ethnic origins. (unpublished December 2017 pre-adoptive profile)

I knew that with this statement, I was coming out as an unapologetically Black pre-adoptive parent who understood the government to be at fault for many of the conditions that created the difficult circumstances of Black families. In her work, Roberts describes a policy shift "away from preserving families toward 'freeing' children in foster care for adoption by terminating parental rights" (Roberts 2002, vii). Historically, African American mothers have cultivated ways to provide support for our children and families, in ways that extend beyond biological ties.

It took a village of community othermothers (Collins 2009, 187–215), Afrocentric mamas, and aunties to raise me. The government, in its narrow focus on biological mothers, understands little about how Black children are raised before they enter the (foster care and adoption) system. In the demonization of bio-moms—a term I did not know before applying to become an adoptive parent—the government system trains pre-adoptive families to have tunnel vision that judges Black mothers harshly and unfairly. The Black mothers I know who have been successful in raising their children have done so in the context of a social and community network. They/we do not operate in isolation. Without any understanding of, or respect for, these networks, governments have been central to their undoing: "Child protection authorities are taking custody of Black children at alarming rates, and in doing so, they are dismantling social networks that are critical to Black community welfare" (Roberts 2002, vii). Roberts described the child welfare system as "a state-run program that disrupts, restructures, and polices Black families" (viii). Roberts goes on to assert, "There is little evidence that the foster care system has improved the well-being of Black children and much

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evidence that it supports the disadvantaged position of Black people as a whole" (viii). That has been my experience.

Along my path to becoming a pre-adoptive parent, I have had many challenges. Several involve my experiences in the required class for adults becoming certified to foster and adopt children. Talking to the group about children's trauma, the course instructors indicated that we would have to work hard to educate ourselves about child trauma. When I raised my hand (in the room of mostly white adults) and suggested that many of us had likely experienced similar kinds of trauma, the adults in the room insisted that if we had had any trauma, we had worked through it, unlike the (broken) children. At all times, it seemed the group was determined to maintain the distance between "us" and "them." For these reasons, I was always clear that I was not one of them. I had no intentions of being some kind of savior. The distinction between saving and freeing hinges on questions of control. I started this long process because I felt the need to learn how to free (at least) one of my community's children. Free children owe nothing to those who have helped them escape this cruel system. Contrastingly, saved children owe everything to their saviors.

It is easy to get lost in this system that lies about mothers, and I want my daughter and other children to know the truth. Even during the application process, I was transparent. The detailed profile required for the application asked the following questions: "Why do you want to do foster care or adopt? How did you arrive at this decision?" Below is the response included in my application:

> I believe that the existence of foster children is a symptom of a broken government, one that has failed to care for the most vulnerable of its citizens. The adults of this society must rectify this issue. I intend to be part of the solution, saying to one of the children that has been failed by our system the following: "I am sorry that we have failed you. Please allow me to do what I can to try to fix it." (unpublished December 2017 pre-adoptive profile)

In stark contrast to my clarity about government harm, I was surrounded by people who were being convinced, through a government-run education program, to place an unreasonable amount of blame on (especially Black and brown) mothers. When I tried to challenge such assertions, I was met with resistance. Swimming against the tide, it was clear to me that, given the (very unrealistic) expectations of bio-moms, many of the healthy Black families I know would have been split up if those standards and scrutiny were applied to them. Although I entered the pre-adoptive classes with a clear mission—to free at least one Black child from the system—I soon realized that the classes were an indictment of the very community care that had sustained me. As Roberts describes, the child welfare system causes "serious group-based harms by reinforcing disparaging stereotypes about Black family unfitness and need for white supervision, by destroying a sense of family autonomy and self-determination among many Black Americans, and by weakening Blacks' collective ability to overcome institutionalized discrimination" (Roberts 2002, ix). Of course, this is the history of our country.

The truth is that I have always been ashamed of living in a wealthy country that would allow children to go without the basic things they need to grow into healthy adults. In my adoption profile, I was transparent about where I was placing blame: "It is the fault of society that children can be born and have no place to call home. That should not be the case. It is a symptom of a broken government that we would

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have so many children without loving homes, and it is a characteristic of an underdeveloped society" (unpublished December 2017 pre-adoptive profile).

Because of my time in elite white institutions, including a small liberal arts college and a New England boarding school, I knew that the government's treatment of Black families was very different from its treatment of (wealthier) white families. Elite boarding schools, similar to colleges, do a considerable amount of parenting. The punitive measures that I knew targeted Black families were hardly visible in these elite white institutions that had access to a range of family supportive services (from drug treatment programs to temporary care options) that were not available in the predominantly nonwhite schools where I have worked. I was aware of the hierarchy that existed, and knew that it was rooted in racial difference: "The foster care system in the nation's cities operates as an apartheid institution. It is a system designed to deal with the problems of minority families—primarily Black families—whereas the problems of white families are handled by separate and less disruptive mechanisms" (Roberts 2002, 10).

Although the disruption to Black families can begin with removal of children, it does not end there: "Once Black children enter the foster care system, they remain there longer, are moved more often, and receive less desirable placements than white children. White children tend to return home quickly, whereas Black children tend to languish in foster care" (19). I met my daughter when she was eleven, and she had been at the same facility since she was eight. Her government family (that is, her social worker, clinicians, and various government workers who are supposed to do the job of one supposedly negligent mother) warned me that her bio-mom had tried to find out where she was. Their expectation was that I would be worried, since the assumption is that (pre-) adoptive parents will be singularly focused on their legal rights to the children. For this reason, many (pre-)adoptive parents will refuse to meet children who are "at legal risk," meaning that parental rights (of the biological parents) have not been terminated. In the foster/adoption class, there was much discussion about this issue, always with a focus on the emotional challenges for the (pre-)adoptive family. There was little discussion about how wonderful it was that a child had been reunited with (biological) family. The emphasis was not on the child; instead, it was on (insecure and needy) adults.

When I was in the foster/adoption class, I was surrounded by people who wanted to be saviors. That was not my motivation. I know Black families who have been at risk of having their children taken from them. Once, I had a Black mother and her two sons stay with me when they were fleeing an abusive husband (and father). They had been moving from one shelter to another, but he knew people in the system and could track them easily. She needed to escape, but also had to appear for regular court dates, in order not to be characterized as kidnapping her own children. I know well the lack of support for Black mothers who are trying to stop the state from taking their children. Even though Black children in the system are more likely to come from families with housing insecurity, white families are offered housing services at almost twice the rate as Black families (Roberts 2002, 21). But when it comes to parenting, Black caregivers are more likely to be offered services than white caregivers (21).

In this way, the government provides little material support to Black families, but is quick to judge the inadequacy of Black parenting. The government focuses on Black children's potential placement in (white) homes in ways that privilege the desire of (white) foster and adoptive parents to have full "ownership" of, and legal control over, Black children. These behaviors often result in Black children becoming "legal orphans."

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> When children in foster care have neither biological nor adoptive homes to go to, they often become legal orphans. Courts may terminate the rights of their parents but have no new parents to give them, so the children remain in foster care, with no legal ties to any parent. Black children are the most likely to acquire the unenviable status because their odds of being reunited with their parents and of adoption are both so miserable. (24)

This is my daughter's case. She is a legal orphan. Her mother's legal rights have been terminated, which is a reality I have been encouraged to celebrate. No other (biological) adult family members are visiting her. Her younger sisters have gone to other adoptive homes. She was considered less desirable at the advanced age of eleven, when I met her. I had decided to adopt an older child because I wanted a child who could protest if she (for any number of reasons) decided that she did not want to be adopted by me.

The system that has torn her from her biological family is aimed at poor families, and especially poor Black families: "Child welfare workers and judges find it easier to break up Black families than any other families. But even without definitive proof of racial bias on the part of these individuals, it is accurate to say that the overrepresentation of Black children in the child welfare system results from racism" (47). This racism is easy to see in the color-coded adoption advertisements, enticing white adults to take Black and brown legal orphans who have lost their mothers.

The foster/adoptive parent class didn't detail the racism of the system. Instead, the instructors spoke incidentally about the fact that so many of the children were Black and brown, demonizing the adults from those communities and pitying the children, who needed rescue. As Roberts describes, "Black children's family bonds are portrayed as a barrier to adoption, and extinguishing them is seen as the critical first step in the adoption process. Adoption is no longer presented as a remedy for a minority of unsalvageable families but as a viable option—indeed, the preferred option—for *all* children in foster care" (150). A system so destructive to the integrity of Black families should be abolished.

From my earliest interactions with the system, it has been clear to me that the foster/adoption system was not created for me. When, after more than six months of knowing me, my daughter did not jump at the opportunity to move into my home, the system treated us both with suspicion. Did she really want a home? Didn't she know that I would abandon her, as so many others had, if she refused to come home? She told her government mom (that is, her social worker and legal guardian) that I was not "the one." Of course, I've seen the Disney-like promotional materials about adoption. It did not surprise me that I was not "the one." In fact, very few, if any, of my friends think that way about their biological families. When my father's mother, Grandma Gertie Lou, married a man other than his father, my father moved into his maternal grandparents' home. My family could not be in the kinds of movies that are made about perfect adoptive families. My daughter's government family expected that I would go away after this declaration, from a twelve-year-old child, that I was not "the one." Instead, I became part of her government family, as her special education surrogate parent. I continue to visit her, with no expectations, with no demands, with only unconditional love. The truth is that she may never come home.

My pre-adoptive social worker assumed that I would be moving on to another child, since this match hadn't worked (according to the rules of the system). The system was set up to be similar to a dating service. In fact, I had been to an adoption event where there were children running around, their "brokers" off in a side room ready to provide

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details of their every trauma and broken bio-families. Was this how the system was supposed to work? Were adults supposed to be shopping for children and returning the ones that were faulty? If there was any question of the underlying logic, the adoption event was held at a large furniture store that was set up with a carnival-like atmosphere, complete with a popcorn machine. As it turns out, this approach of a speedy resolution, or none, is intentional.

> Current policy is based on the assumption that there are only two routes to permanency for children in foster care—either speedy reunification with their parents or adoption into a new family. The conviction that children in the system who cannot return home must be immediately adopted is especially harmful to Black children. Because Black children have poor odds at being adopted, this view leads to pointless terminations of their parents' rights. Black children are also more likely to be placed in the care of relatives, who often do not wish to adopt them. The limited view of permanency, then, can result not only in needlessly destroying their ties with their parents but also in moving them from the homes of loving relatives. Black children's lives are often disrupted in the name of permanency. (161)

When I left the boarding school, I purchased a house in Massachusetts for two reasons: I wanted a place for my grandmother, who has just turned 100, to be able to live her final years, and I wanted to give my daughter, whom I had not yet met, a permanent home. I've told my daughter that once she can pay the bills of the household, the home will be hers. She does not have to be nice to me. She does not have to earn the home. I am not testing her. I am trying to do right by her. Once she is free of the system, I can tell her that I hope that her "real" mother will return. I hope that her sisters will stay for long periods of time in this home. The home is not about her joining my family; it is about me providing a place where her family can be reunited, if that is what she wants, or re-imagined.

Creating space for the possible reunification of my daughter's family is not a charitable act. I understand how her family, and Black families more generally, are treated unjustly by the system: "Not only does the child welfare system inflict general harms disproportionately on Black families, but it also inflicts harm—a racial harm—on Black people as a group" (225). We are being targeted. Our bonds are being strategically and systematically shattered.

I am a Black woman, a Black mother, living with/in a system that is targeting Black children. That system is creating harm for all Black families. In the same ways that we organize to care for our children as a community, we must organize to destroy this system, to free all of our children. Here is another excerpt from my foster/adoption profile, indicating my desire to be part of a society that takes greater responsibility for our children: "I will be grateful to my child for teaching me so much about our society. It will be gratifying to learn from my child. It will also be challenging and painful to learn about the broken-ness of this place that has failed so many children" (unpublished December 2017 pre-adoptive profile).

Wanting the best for my child and all (Black) children, I yearn for collective action and community-based responses that will dismantle this system that is harming Black families, not simply from the perspective of individual cases, but especially when we evaluate group-based harm. Roberts describes how "the child welfare system's racial disparity has negative material and ideological consequences for Black families that affect

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the status of Blacks in America as a whole" (230). The system undermines the integrity of Black families.

In the hands of a white-supremacist state, Black adults have had their family and community structures of support destroyed. Of course, this is a familiar state (of affairs): "It replicates the notion created in chattel slavery that there is no such thing as a Black family" (244). Once again, we are forced to lose our mothers in this foreign land that has separated us from our mothers many times. As Roberts described, "The public devalues Black mothers' work in particular because it sees these mothers as inherently unfit and even affirmatively harmful to their children" (179). What, then, are Black mothers to do? How are we to respond to a state that intends to force the loss of Black mothers and the disintegration of Black families? We must look to creative approaches to mothering in the context of conditions designed to destroy our most intimate bonds. We must look to revolutionary mothering.

From Shattered Bonds to Revolutionary Mothering

People asked why I didn't go through a private agency
    That way I wouldn't have to bother with all the inconveniences of the Department
People asked why I didn't select a younger child
    They said that would allow me to mold her
    I asked, "Just as your parents molded you?"
One mother said that if I selected a younger child I could better influence the child
    I could ensure that she would only do things that would make me proud
    As I drove her to visit one of her two sons in prison
        I asked her if that had worked for her
        She said nothing
In the Department's class, they tell us how different we are from the bio-moms
    I tell them that I'm not so different
    They say that those women have had trauma
    I say that I have too
    Everyone looks at me suspiciously
    I stop speaking
        So that I can free my daughter
I do not want to be like these other women in the class
    They intend to be saviors
I do not want to meet with them
    And listen to talk about broken bio-moms
I want to be a revolutionary mother
I am a revolutionary mother

Building communities of resistance (honoring revolutionary mothers)

In her introduction to *Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Front Lines,* Mai'a Williams writes, "No matter where I go, in this life of exile, revolution and mamas, front lines and daughters, are what feed my life. This book came from a vision I had of mamas who believe in themselves and their children, in the future and the ancestors so fiercely they will face down the ugly violence of the present time and time again"

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(Williams 2016a, 2). My daughter and I are on the front line, although she has been in this position much longer than I. We must fight against a system that makes Black children lose their mothers. We must fight this system, in community, with others on the front lines.

In my struggle, I am connecting to the vision of other revolutionary mothers who know "revolution ain't cute and neither is mothering usually. But like our visions, revolutionary mothering is necessary and real and happening every day" (2). More than being constructed by one person or one generation, revolutionary mothering requires community quilting of resistance strategies, rooted in love. As Alexis Pauline Gumbs describes, "It is an act of love to participate in the resistance work of childraising. It is an act of love to envision and actualize an intergenerationally participatory movement" (Gumbs 2016b, 26). We resist the ways that the state defines, constructs, contorts, distorts, and destroys our families. We claim another kind of mothering, which is "a creative practice defined not by the state, but by our evolving collective relationship to each other, our moments together and a possible future" (29). Together with my grandmother, who has lost much of her memory, I am envisioning a future with a new kind of love that doesn't depend on the past, but on a million small decisions repeatedly made in the present.

Williams writes about the potential mothers have to be revolutionary, across time, in infinite ways:

> All mothers have the potential to be revolutionary. Some mothers stand on the shoreline, are born and reborn here, inside the flux of time and space, overcoming the traumatic repetition of oppression. Our very existence is disobedience to the powers that be. At times, we as mothers choose to stand in a zone of claimed risk and fierce transformation, on the front lines. In infinite ways, both practiced and yet imagined, we put our bodies between the violent repetition of the norm and the future we already deserve, exactly because our children deserve it too. We make this choice for many reasons and in different contexts, but at the core we have this in common: we refuse to obey. We refuse to give in to fear. We insist on joy no matter what and by every means necessary and possible. (Williams 2016b, 41)

My grandmother is here, and also traveling. She is both forgetting and remembering. She is both lost and guiding. She is guiding me through the overcoming of trauma. When I think about all that she would have to remember from 100 years of life, I am sometimes glad that she does not remember. Sometimes, I think it is her form of resistance. She is emboldening me to put my body on the front line "between the violent repetition of the norm and the future we already deserve" (41). I am able to refuse to obey, in part, because she has forgotten how to obey. Her mind has let loose of the norms that used to rule our lives.

Both my daughter and my grandmother are viewed, by many people, as too old. My daughter is too old to be adopted. A younger, malleable child is more desirable. My grandmother is too old, and forgetful, to affirm common histories and realities. We are fighting for our lives. We are fighting to be acknowledged as worthy, as we are. We are resisting the shattering of our bonds, in defense of our mothers, our grandmothers, and our children. As revolutionary mother Cynthia Dewi Oka writes, "Mothering as revolutionary praxis involves exploring how we might reorganize ourselves to meet common needs in this historical moment, including the capacity to raise and nurture whole, resilient individuals as well as autonomous communities of

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resistance" (Oka 2016, 53). This building of resilient communities out of necessity is a familiar feeling. We have done it before, in many different places, where we have been trafficked. We remember this kind of community-building. We remember having survived this. Gumbs remembers:

> My mother is Black. So the means through which I was produced is a matter of national instability. My mother is Black. So the trace of slavery waits every moment to ink my body with meaninglessness. My mother is Black. So my living is a question of whether or not racism will be reproduced today. My mother is Black. This same piece of information threatens my survival. But my mother is Black, which is at the same time the only thing that makes my survival possible. (Gumbs 2016a, 117)

Gumbs's words return us to the past, which is where this essay started, in the afterlives of slavery, forgotten by my grandmother, remembered by my mother, and unknown to my daughter. We are struggling to survive in this land, where their systems are designed to make us lose our mothers (again). I persist, holding onto my grandmother, as she shows me the way to my daughter, even though in the process I am losing my mother, who holds tightly to the memory of a mother long gone; my mother insists that only government documents would make me a real mother. I hope that she is not permanently lost.

Visioning and Remembering Communities of Revolutionary Mothers

My daughter makes up stories about her mother
She says that she is coming for her
She says she does not want to go with her
I tell her she does not have to go with her
I tell her that there is a team of people who will keep her safe
My daughter makes up stories about my grandmother
She says that she is dying
I tell her we are all dying
My daughter calls me to tell me stories
The stories are dramatic
And traumatic
I don't want to encourage them
I also don't want to discourage them
Maybe she is weaving together a protective quilt
My mother said that my daughter is not her granddaughter
I wonder whether I can weave together a community of mothers
A quilt of revolutionary mothers
Mothers who will refuse to obey
Mothers who will break the rules
And make new stories
And face death
And breathe new life into the afterlives of slavery
And the violence of the Department
I wonder what we can create with these patches of memory
What kind of family can we make?
What kind of (abolitionist) community must we build?
For freedom!

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Epilogue

My grandmother is not dead, but she is also not the same kind of alive she was ten years ago. Someone else is here. The someone here is showing me my future. My mother panics because she thinks that her mother's fate will be her future. I don't tell her it is mine because she is uncomfortable with these kinds of visions. I am thankful that my grandmother has stayed around to teach me about my future. Of course, when the time comes, I will not remember. Maybe some part of my body will capture the memories that my mind will not hold.

Grandma used to say that she "needs to be needed." We all agreed that she would probably die if none of us needed her. My mom doesn't know that Grandma is here for me. Everyone thinks that I'm being generous to care for her, but she needs little from me. She calls my name, when all the other names fade into the background, because she knows that I need her. I also know I need her.

She is teaching me how to love my daughter, how to send love through her even if it doesn't stay with her. I have to hold her loosely so that my embrace does not feel like a cage. I'm here to free her; I am her abolitionist. I must forget all the things she did to hurt me, because she was aiming for someone else, something else. My grandmother is showing me how to be with someone, but also not be with them. My daughter needs that space; she is holding it for her other mother(s). Grandma is teaching me something whispered to her by my Grandma Gertie Lou, sometimes shown to me by my father. It is a rare, transcendent love. It runs through us without capturing us.

I think this kind of transcendent love was (re)born during the most cruel parts of the histories of enslaved African Americans in this country. It is what emerged to connect us, even as our families were being ripped apart. It resisted the losing of mothers, defied state classifications of us belonging to anyone other than ourselves and those who loved us most; it required revolutionary mothering. It is what stitches us together, even when the official records of their property have been destroyed. Their records are faulty anyway. This explains why my father's birth certificate lists a date other than the one his mother and he had celebrated her entire life.

It continues to be the case that there is little care taken with our records. During the coronavirus global health pandemic, visits with my daughter have been subject to greater restrictions. We meet outside with masks covering our faces, standing apart, at a distance. Recently, I went to visit her, only to find that my name had been left off the list. My daughter yelled from a window that she would not be allowed to come outside and visit with me. When I followed up, I was told that there was a mistake in the record.

In the weeks following this event, my daughter called asking me to take her out of the residential program where she lives and attends school. Telling me of the overnight visits of other child residents, she is angry that I will not allow an extended home visit. She lives with more than thirty people, and poses a health risk to my one-hundred-year-old grandmother. The program will not permit day visits, which would allow her to do outdoor activities with me. She tells me that I don't love her; if I did, I would let her come home. On tough days, she calls me a bitch. I forget it. Love encourages forgetting. I refuse to let her loose, even as I hold on to her loosely. She will not lose another Black mother. I encourage my friends to other-mother her, at a distance.

It is likely that I won't remember these events in the future. I am writing this essay so that I can be reminded, so that someone can help me live in a future with these memories of resistance, shared with the spirits. Maybe one day, my daughter will find me,

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and know how much I loved her. Revolutionary mothering is a form of resistance. No matter what is in the government records, this essay documents my bond with a daughter who has lost her mother. Our bond is without memory; it is forgetful and forgiving. It is present and presence. It is uncomfortable in the way relationships are among strangers. My love for my daughter is the kind of love my Grandma Gertie Lou showed me, ugly and transformative. This transcendent love, even if temporarily lost, will always be present. My deepest prayer is that my daughter will find it, along with all of her (other)mothers. This is a map for her.

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