

All in the family

My family tree does not branch. It never has. As with many black families in the rural South, the distinction between nuclear and extended faded long ago. Today, as it has been for centuries, cousins are siblings, aunts are mothers, uncles are fathers. While I recognized that some of my relatives had different fathers, the concept of "illegitimacy," often presented as the crux of America's moral decline, was foreign to me. Southern black families don't see the need to make social pariahs of children who have no control over the circumstances of their birth. It's not just that we were unable to replicate the Ozzie and Harriet model; we subconsciously rejected it as undesirable, alienating in its quest for invented separation of blood from blood.

The moralists of the radical right would have me believe I grew up in the midst of immorality. Granted, my family had its share of alcoholics, and failed marriages and domestic abuse. But, far from being the cause of these sufferings, our unconventional, multi-layered family structure protected against them, and against what caused them: the deep poverty, hopelessness, and occasional terror, of black life in the South. From the same patch of the South Carolina Midlands, generations in my family weathered the departures and celebrated the homecomings this culture brought about. What sustained us was a reliance upon each other.

It worked on its own terms, and, after all, we had nowhere else to go. But now, for the first generations of black Southerners with a chance at the middle class, the disjunction between white and black family life is causing tremendous problems. While barely visible outside this small group of young black strivers, it represents a formidable obstacle to upward mobility and a tremendous emotional strain.

Walk around the mainly white campus of an elite college today, and you will meet young, gifted black men and women from such little-noticed locales as Cadiz, Kentucky, and Eufala, Alabama. Before them lie tremendous financial opportunities. The day after graduation, they can earn many times what their parents do. And if they save a good portion of their high-flying salary, and use it to create a small household of their own, their children will grow up with all the chances white kids have.

Simple enough, right? Actually, wrenchingly difficult. The deep logic of black and rural family life means that resources—medical care, tuition, whatever—are spread to whomever needs them most. Denying them to cousins, aunts, uncles, because they are "only" cousins, aunts, uncles is not merely alien, but offensive. For people with decent salaries but no inherited wealth, this endless succession of family obligations can make it impossible to accumulate wealth. Everyone survives, but people with the ability and opportunity are prevented from moving ahead.

Except, of course, for those who turn inward, providing only for self, spouse and their issue. But this choice, too, has its costs. Sharing those elite campuses with the strivers from Eufala are black kids from Scarsdale and Greenwich: the offspring of the last generation of black success stories—success stories partly because they adopted white patterns of family life.

In my college experience (at Harvard), it was more often than not these students—Cosby kids run amok—who spoke most stridently for black solidarity and a return to the tranquil collectivity of Mother Africa. All the while, they stratified the African American community on campus into what one friend described as the "inner-circle, periphery, and Third World."

Relegated to a place somewhere between periphery and Third World, I found it ironic that I was ostracized by this radical bourgeoisie when it seemed clear to me that the kind of connectedness they craved was precisely what I had grown up with in my sleepy Southland. Most of Harvard's self-anointed grade-A Negroes viewed the South (with the possible exception of Atlanta) as a garden patch of backwards, dull-witted, steppin' fetchits. The in-crowd did not have, nor did they want to have, all manner of aunts, uncles and cousins living under their roofs. They had grown up with just parents and children—"normal" nuclear families.

The parents of these kids had faced the same choices I now have to make: to cut the family ties and create financial stability for themselves or attempt to help any and all relatives. They chose the former. Their kids, having grown up in middle-class, integrated environments, assumed the ideals of their white counterparts. Each group underwent a startling transformation during the "self-discovery" of their col-

lege years. Preppy, well-scrubbed black kids from suburbia transmogrified into saggy jeans-wearing, ghetto rhetoricians, reflecting the images of blacks adapted from the prevailing urban aesthetic. They scorned the family-centered principles of the rural South and the spiritual attraction of the black church in favor of the craven, secular, egocentric braggadocio of rap culture.

My fellow students came from black families who had bought completely into the American dream. Little wonder that they had unknowingly become yet another generation of Gunnar Myrdal's "exaggerated Americans." Only this time, they weren't zealous Negroes eager to prove their patriotism by dying on foreign soil. Now it was their allegiance to the liberal middle class they were proving, taking on all its values—including its penchant for cultural experimentation and comfortable rebellion. In short, the boogie insurgents at Harvard were really no different from the crunchy-feely white grandpa kids from the North. College was their four-year playground, to be forgotten at graduation as they took respectable jobs in the private sector.

Many of the Southern kids from small towns adopted a beroused attitude toward our brethren and toward the campus dialogue they helped create. But beneath the bemusement lay the anxiety of looking into a generational crystal ball and seeing the emptiness that material success can bring. The irony is that the highly individualistic, radical-chic silliness of the angry black pre-yuppies, while glorified as African, was deeply American. Perhaps too deeply American. I came away from the first rung on my ladder to upward mobility strangely radicalized: finding the mindset undergirding white America's family structure unappetizing, and its militant African American parallel equally so.

I can't really abide a narrow conception of family that cherishes each relation to its appropriate degree. Grandma and Grandpa receive the requisite hug and kiss. Cousins elicit a modicum of detached fond regard. I'm still close enough to an alternative to see the price of that model. Maybe I'll reject it after all, upward mobility be damned.

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