
The Symbolic Annihilation of Black Working-Class Women in *The Black Family* (aka *Good Times*)

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Good Times (CBS, 1974-1979), a television situation comedy about an urban African American working-class nuclear family, started as the idea of two African American men, Mike Evans and Eric Monte. Presented to white executive producer, Norman Lear in the fall of 1971, Monte's pilot teleplay "Who's Got the Rent?" for a series he titled *The Black Family* introduced James and Mattie Black, their children Junior, Thelma, and Michael, and their friend Willona. A textual analysis of Monte's teleplay reveals the symbolic annihilation—condemnation, trivialization, and victimization—of the Black working-class mother, Mattie, and daughter, Thelma. Though they shared condemnation and trivialization with mothers and daughters in white-cast sitcoms of the fifties and sixties, victimization through violence in Monte's teleplay distinguishes Mattie and Thelma from them. I review Monte's background and the work of the Black Women's Community Development Foundation to understand how the issue of violence against Black women resonated among them. This analysis of the fictional symbolic annihilation of Mattie and Thelma Black reflects the marginalization of Black women in American prime-time television as well as may serve as an indicator of the marginalized status of Black women in American society. This paper advances understandings of Black working-class women's intersectional identities in seventies primetime television portrayals, reveals the culpability of Black men writers in creating those depictions, acknowledges the challenges of Black men staff writers, and contextualizes a popular artifact within the discourses of grassroots Black women's advocacy.

KEYWORDS: Symbolic Annihilation, Black Women, *Good Times*, Eric Monte, Television

INTRODUCTION

Good Times (CBS, 1974-1979), a television situation comedy about an urban African American working-class nuclear family, started as an idea in the fall of 1971 by two African American men, Mike Evans, who played Lionel Jefferson in the situation comedy *All in the Family* (CBS, 1971-1979), and his new acquaintance, Eric Monte.¹ The plan for the series congealed through a collaboration between Monte, white executive producer, Norman Lear, and white producer, Allan Manings. Central to their meetings was a pilot teleplay written by Monte and that would eventually cast the Black woman actor, Esther Rolle, as its star.² Rolle became the focal point of a new Tandem Productions series by Lear's production company because she was enjoying success playing Florida Evans, the Black female domestic who worked for the Findlay family in another Tandem sitcom *Maude* (CBS, 1972-1978).

Responsible for writing the teleplay, or script, that Lear reviewed in 1971, Monte named his series (and the family he envisioned), *The Black Family*.³ "Who's Got the Rent?" (changed by 1973 to "Getting Up the Rent" for the series *Good Times*) introduces husband and father, James Black, wife and mother, Mattie Black, their children, James Jr., or Junior, Thelma, and Michael, and Mattie's friend, Willona. Lear and Tandem Productions' plans for developing a weekly primetime television series around the preexisting African American woman character in *Maude* included changing in Monte's draft the family's surname to "Evans" from "Black" and the wife and mother's name to "Florida" from "Mattie."

Without a model for a Black nuclear family sitcom, the closest examples of nuclear families in television were white, patriarchal, middle-class, suburban, and occupationally defined sitcoms such as *The Adventures of Ozzie and Harriet* (ABC, 1952-1966), *Leave It to Beaver* (CBS, 1957-1958, ABC, 1958-1963), *Father Knows Best* (CBS, 1954-1955, NBC, 1955-1958, CBS, 1959-1960), and *The Donna Reed Show* (ABC, 1958-1966). Monte and Evans's premise—an Af-

¹ "Good Times," *E! The True Hollywood Story*, season 4, episode 31, E! Entertainment Network, 20 August 2000, DailyMotion, <https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x7aop9r>.

² "#0101 Getting Up the Rent" (*Good Times*, TV Scripts Box 163, Folder 5, Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library, Jerome Library, Bowling Green State University, n.d.); Norman Lear, *Even This I Get to Experience*, (New York: The Penguin Press, 2014), 268; Ronald E. Kiskner, "New Comedy Brings Good Times to TV," *Jet* (23 May 1974): 59; Louie Robinson, "Bad Times on the 'Good Times' Set," *Ebony* 30, no. 11 (Sept. 1975): 34.

³ "#0101 Getting Up the Rent."

rican American family consisting of a husband, wife, and children—broke new ground for the “gateway” family that the Evanses in *Good Times* would become. It also blazed a trail for gateway depictions of Black women. Symbolic annihilation, or acts of condemnation and trivialization, and traditional gender roles connected the Black working-class mother, Mattie and Black working-class daughter, Thelma in Monte’s teleplay to the earlier, white-cast sitcom mothers and daughters. Unfortunately, symbolic annihilation through acts of victimization further distinguished their portrayals.⁴

Symbolic annihilation was a concept that communications scholar George Gerbner mentioned briefly in his 1972 research report, “Violence in Television Drama.” When noting that “representation in the fictional world” symbolizes or “signifies social existence,” Gerbner asserted that condemnation, trivialization, or “absence means symbolic annihilation.”⁵ Sociologist Gaye Tuchman applied the concept to her 1978 introductory discussion of the possible impact of mass media sex-role stereotypes upon national life, and in particular, the impact of sex-role stereotypes on the depiction of women in television, the women’s pages of newspapers, and women’s magazines.⁶ She further noted that the victimization of women qualified as symbolic annihilation. This paper describes the absence of edifying and agentive relationships between Black women and Black men in Eric Monte’s pilot teleplay. Black women are not absent from Monte’s pilot (in fact the cast is quite balanced with three women and three men). Rather, the treatment of two of the Black women, one an adult and the other a teenager, is of particular interest here.

The victimization of Mattie and Thelma through violence, in addition to their trivialization and condemnation, is noteworthy because public and political attention to violence against women and girls surfaced distinctly in the 1960s and 1970s, precisely at the time of Monte’s completed teleplay.

⁴ For discussions of symbolic annihilation in marketing, see Lauren Gurrieri, “Patriarchal Marketing and the Symbolic Annihilation of Women,” *Journal of Marketing Management*, 37, nos. 3-4, (2021): 364-370, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0267257X.2020.1826179>; and for discussions of the symbolic annihilation of race, see Robin Means Coleman and Emily Chivers Yochim, “The Symbolic Annihilation of Race: A Review of the ‘Blackness’ Literature,” *African American Research Perspectives*, 12 (2008): 1-10, <https://deepblue.lib.umich.edu/handle/2027.42/60140>.

⁵ George Gerbner, “Violence in Television Drama: Trends and Symbolic Functions,” in *Television and Social Behavior*, Vol. 1, Content and control, ed. George A. Comstock and Eli A. Rubinstein, (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Government Printing Office, 1972), 44.

⁶ Gaye Tuchman, “Introduction: The Symbolic Annihilation of Women by the Mass Media,” in *Hearth and Home: The Images of Women in the Mass Media*, ed. Gaye Tuchman, Arlene Kaplan Daniels, and James Benét, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978): 3-38.

While his work does not provide an understanding of the nature, causes, and consequences of such violence, it does show that he made it a reality for the fictional Mattie and Thelma, which then suggests that it was a reality he may have known as well. I review Monte's background and the discourse of Black women's advocacy to map their potential convergence—and divergence—regarding violence against Black women. The focus of this paper is to detail the ways in which Monte symbolically annihilated Mattie and Thelma and to contextualize these depictions within Monte's life and the discourse of the Black Women's Community Development Foundation. What follows next is a brief summary of Monte's story to help us visualize this new pathbreaking family-protagonist.

“WHO'S GOT THE RENT?” TELEPLAY SUMMARY

Monte's teleplay—that includes two acts, two scenes in the second act, and a tag at the end—opens with Mattie, Thelma, Junior, and Michael sitting around the dining room table eating breakfast. Typical sibling squabbling occurs as Mattie repeatedly reminds the children that they need to finish eating and leave for school. James joins them a little later after having been out “all night.” His appearance also introduces the plot problem which is that the family lacks that month's rent money. After verbal exchanges between James, Mattie, and their children, Thelma, Junior, and Michael go to school, Willona enters the apartment to visit with Mattie, and James leaves to meet up with his friend Sylvester to “hustle pool.”

Three avenues for raising the rent money unfold, two of which employed the informal methods of “hustle economics” were successful.⁷ Although Mattie and James argue over his “pool hustling” to raise money for the rent, James finds a “game” and wins enough money to pay it. Junior's unidentified hustling activity that involves “stealing” also results in enough money to pay the rent. The unsuccessful attempt—and the only one following a formal and bureaucratic, but legal route—was by Mattie. Upon Willona's suggestion, Mattie agrees to apply for “welfare assistance.” In the end, Mattie left the welfare “emergency center” with “forms to fill out” but no rent money.

⁷ Adrien Sebro, *Scratchin' and Survivin': Hustle Economics and the Black Sitcoms of Tandem Productions* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2023): 11.

MATTIE BLACK

Mattie Black is a stay-at-home wife and mother. Monte's script shares little about her or her background except for when she and James discuss their first apartment in a "tenement building" with the "bathroom in the hall" and their lack of income so grave that they needed a "bag of beans to last a week."⁸ Mattie and James's discussion of their first apartment, the year he had eighteen jobs, and when James gave up "pool hustling" was the only time they expressed outward care and affection towards each other.

Although a hardworking husband and father, James trivialized and victimized Mattie. In two scenes in Monte's teleplay, James intimidates and threatens physical aggression towards Mattie, demanding that she acquiesces to him as husband and father in the home. The first mention of potential physical harm towards Mattie occurs in James's comments to the children about their mother's disrespect towards him:

JAMES: Junior, if you say one more word, I'm gon' tie a knot in your tongue.

MATTIE: James, don't fuss at him, I got....

JAMES: Mattie, a wife shouldn't argue with her husband in front of the kids. One: it makes the kids confused to see the two most important people in they lives [arguing]. Two: it causes them to lose respect for the father image and; Three: she might get smacked in the mouth.⁹

James verbally hinted at physical aggression towards Mattie while not carrying out a direct act of physical aggression. Mattie was not attacked, but the threat still loomed large. Another time that James threatens violence against Mattie is over the rent money. James wins enough money from playing pool to cover the rent. He and his friend, Sylvester, return to the apartment to leave the money for Mattie while she and Willona are gone at the welfare office. James puts the money in Mattie's purse, writes and places a note on the dining room table, and leaves the apartment. Junior then returns home to find the movers in the apartment packing their belongings to begin the

⁸ "Who's Got the Rent?," 12B.

⁹ "Who's Got the Rent?," 9.

eviction process. Junior gives the movers the rent money he raised and uses James's note for a receipt, which he then places in his pocket.

Junior, Thelma, and Michael have all returned home from school. Mattie comes home to find money in her purse. Astonished, Mattie thinks that someone wrongfully placed the money in it. She writes a note and addresses an envelope to the police department and directs Michael to take the letter to the mailbox. Returning home, James is livid when he realizes that Mattie has mailed the money to the police: "Mattie, you too old to be believing in Santa Claus."¹⁰ Speaking to Mattie as if she were a child, thus trivializing her, James dismisses and puts her down. James casts Mattie as a naive child because after all, only children believe in Santa Claus.

Realizing that Mattie mailed the rent money to the police ("don't tell me you gave our money away"), the stage direction notes that James "advanced on her." At that point, Thelma "jumped between" James and Mattie.¹¹ After commanding Thelma to sit down, Junior grabs his father telling him: "wait a minute, man." James decides that he will go to the police department to retrieve the money: "and when I get back, we gon have a long talk on what those Jehova Witnesses been telling you."¹² Here is the clearest example of James intending to inflict physical harm on Mattie, but she does not fight back, argue, cry, or yell. She is silent in response to what is happening to her. No explanation for this response is described in the teleplay. Thelma and Junior did more to protect Mattie than she did for herself.

Monte used the comment about the Jehovah's Witnesses for comic effect. James's condescending comment reveals one of their distinguishing characteristics. Founded in the late nineteenth-century, the Jehovah's Witnesses are a United States Protestant Christian denomination and the butts of cultural jokes because of their door-to-door evangelism and proselytism.¹³ James's potential wariness of all religion could have provoked his response, perhaps with good reason. A primary criticism of African Americans' attachment to Christianity is their willingness to engage with and trust in messages

¹⁰ "Who's Got the Rent?," 38.

¹¹ "Who's Got the Rent?," 38.

¹² "Who's Got the Rent?," 39.

¹³ Michael Lipka, "A Closer Look at Jehovah's Witnesses in the United States," Pew Research Center, April 26, 2016, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2016/04/26/a-closer-look-at-jehovahs-witnesses-living-in-the-u-s/#:~:text=Jehovah's%20Witnesses%20are%20among%20the,another%20race%20or%20mixed%20race.>

encouraging “compensatory” rewards in the “sweet by and by” for the hardships and struggles they experience in the “nasty here and now.” A future compensation does little for distressed urban African Americans such as the Evanses. Since religion is a “hustle,” in James’s mind, Mattie and other believers are gullible for believing in God. After all, Mattie’s gullibility caused her to make a nonsensical decision to mail money to the police!

Sociologist, Patricia Hill Collins, argues that Eurocentric ideologies of Black masculinity and Black femininity—particularly ideas advanced by the traditional family ideal—and intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality provide a backdrop for Black heterosexual love relationships.¹⁴ In Mattie’s love relationship with James, she may have perceived his threatening and abusive interactions with her as routine and that she and Thelma were not victims. Although Monte did not present Mattie as a “superstrong” Black woman—she never spoke up for herself, demonstrated self-reliance, or expressed authority over their children, her silence towards James’s attempt to hit her was likely *because* of the “superstrong” Black woman myth. Because Black women are expected to be self-reliant and independent, then Mattie may have felt that she should be able to handle the violence on her own, which could encourage denying the seriousness of her situation. Mattie subordinated her needs to James’s needs. Mattie’s silence and passivity allowed James to control *her* physically and emotionally and to retain *his* manhood. Racism and powerlessness further exacerbate the violence surrounding Mattie establishing it as simply a relational standard within her home and community.¹⁵

THELMA BLACK

A junior in high school, Thelma Black is the only daughter of Mattie and James Black. Men within and outside of Thelma’s home trivialize, condemn, and victimize her. Junior is the main family member who condemns and trivializes Thelma. Putdowns relate to Thelma’s face, hair and makeup, and mental capacity. Calling Thelma “ugly” is used for comic effect but it does not negate the long history of white American society’s reference to Black women being “ugly” as compared to “beautiful” white women. At the same time, Thelma does her share of trivializing Junior’s painting abilities and

¹⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, (London: Routledge, 2000), 165, 171.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 171-72.

educational status—he spent “three semesters a sophomore.” On the other hand, all the men in the home—James, Junior, and Michael—criticize Thelma’s cooking. Monte tapped into a major thematic artery of nuclear family sitcoms. Cooking is of importance for nuclear family sitcom mothers, as well as their daughters. White-cast nuclear family sitcoms of the fifties and sixties highlighted the wife’s domesticity including childcare, cooking, and cleaning. While sons were more actively involved with domestic tasks than their fathers, daughters such as Thelma, Betty Anderson in *Father Knows Best*, and Mary Stone in *The Donna Reed Show*, helped with domestic duties and preparing meals as expected.¹⁶ Likewise in *Good Times*, J.J. and Michael contributed to domestic tasks to a greater extent than James but Thelma was expected to help.

Monte devotes roughly three pages of dialogue to Thelma’s cooking. Michael’s opinion plays on the theme of Black Power which his character espouses often: “Mama, JUNIOR’s right. When I said Black was beautiful, I wasn’t talking about oatmeal.”¹⁷ A lengthy exchange between James, Junior, and Thelma illustrates the condemning comments they freely share:

JAMES (TO THELMA): Get me something to eat; I had a hard night. (THELMA GETS IT AND HE LOOKS AT IT) What the hell is this?

JUNIOR: Charcoal broiled poison.

THELMA: Oatmeal.

JAMES: MATTIE why you let THELMA do this to the little food we got.

THELMA: How I’m gon learn to cook if I don’t practice?

JAMES: I don’t know; but there’s got to be a way that’s easier on my stomach.

JUNIOR: Does that mean we don’t have to eat it?

¹⁶ Mary R. Desjardins, *Father Knows Best* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2015), 78-79; Nina C. Leibman, *Living Room Lectures: The Fifties Family in Film and Television* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1995), 221, 233; Joanne Morreale, *The Donna Reed Show* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2012), 78-84.

¹⁷ “Who’s Got the Rent?,” 3.

JAMES: No, we ain't throwing no food away in this house, I don't care what THELMA does to it.¹⁸

Thelma did not live up to the domestic standards of cooking, and so the men in her home condemn her. At the same time, they offer no help presumably because cooking is "women's work." While Thelma defends herself pointing out the need to "practice" cooking, Mattie never backs her. Rather than support Thelma, she changes the subject—the children will be late if they do not finish their breakfast, her nerves cannot handle the commotion, and they cannot throw out food because of its exorbitant costs.¹⁹

In another scene in Monte's teleplay, Thelma faces the intimation and threat of physical aggression coupled with a demand that she acquiesces to male dominance. Returning home from school, four young Black men are in the hallway near her apartment singing as if in a doo-wop group. Larry leaves the group to "rap," or engage in romantic talk, with Thelma.²⁰

LARRY: ... I got to rap to Thelma for a minute.

THELMA: About what?

LARRY: About us getting together.

THELMA: I wouldn't get together with you if we was siamese twins.

LARRY: Don't get smart with me.

THELMA: I'm getting smart all by myself cause you can't keep up.²¹

As their interaction continues, Thelma's insults and disinterest in Larry angers him. Grabbing her, he says: "You better watch your mouth." Thelma calls out to Junior for help. As Larry's friends pull him off Thelma, they tell him to "cool it." Larry tells them that he will "lay that broad out."²² Junior appears but does not fight these young men. One of Larry's friends discourages the fight because he and Junior are "tight," which in Black language means they know each other well and have a good relationship. Afterwards, back in the apartment, Junior scolds Thelma telling her that she "better

¹⁸ "Who's Got the Rent?," 6.

¹⁹ "Who's Got the Rent?," 3.

²⁰ Thomas Kochman, *Black and White Styles in Conflict* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981), 76.

²¹ "Who's Got the Rent?," 25.

²² "Who's Got the Rent?," 25.

learn to quit fat mouthing people.”²³ Junior was telling Thelma to know “her place.” Unfortunately, Thelma’s home in a housing project includes the potential for harm from her male neighbors.

Eurocentric ideologies of Black masculinity and Black femininity and intersecting oppressions of race, gender, class, and sexuality affected Thelma as well.²⁴ Observing her parents’ relationship, experiencing the young Black men in her housing project, and “knowing her place” may well set Thelma up to mirror her mother’s life, behaviors, and emotional posture. On the other hand, Monte revealed glimmers of hope for Thelma’s relational future and self-definition. For one, Thelma did not accept Larry’s treatment of her—she called out to Junior for help. There is hope because of Thelma’s response to her father James when he “advanced on” her mother Mattie. Thelma stood between them to defend her mother. Thelma was not complicit with a “conspiracy of silence” and passivity the same way her mother is—a conspiracy that in fact plagues both African American women and men. Thelma is on her journey to *not* accept violence as a relational standard. Thelma’s actions are pregnant with the potential that she will not embrace self-reliance and independence as a defense covering truth and enabling violence against her, will not handle violence on her own, and will not subordinate her needs to her husband’s or partner’s needs.²⁵

ERIC MONTE

Ironically, but not surprisingly, symbolic annihilation, particularly acts of trivialization, best described Monte’s own position within the expanding American television industry as he struggled with Lear and Manings to present his vision of authentic Black culture, even as he symbolically annihilated the Black working-class mother, Mattie, and daughter, Thelma. The verbal threat and intimation of physical aggression towards Mattie and Thelma existed clearly in Monte’s script and may serve as a sign of how systematic and widespread violence was against Black working-class women in urban cities such as Chicago.

Monte grew up in the Cabrini-Green Housing Project in Chicago and enjoyed his childhood describing it as “one of the best childhoods imaginable

²³ “Who’s Got the Rent?,” 25B.

²⁴ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 165, 171

²⁵ Collins, 170, 172.

in the history of the species.” Monte’s parents divorced when he was “seven or eight years old.” His “wonderful mother, who worked three jobs—two full-time jobs and one part-time job,” entered a relationship with a Black male steel factory worker when Monte was twelve. Monte considered him to be like a “stepfather.” The middle child between two sisters, Monte gives no sign as to whether his mother or sisters were abused by his father, mother’s partner, men relatives, or neighbors.²⁶ Nevertheless, Monte either saw violence against Black women and girls in Cabrini-Green or took his inspiration from television and film.

Chicago in the late sixties and seventies was plagued by racial segregation just as the South. In January 1966, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) drafted a proposal known as the “Chicago Plan” for the development of a nonviolent action movement in the greater Chicago area. They believed that Black Americans were economically exploited and that the actual existence—and metaphor—of the “slum” best encapsulated the most pressing aspects of the lives of African Americans.²⁷ In their description of the “dynamics of the slum,” the SCLC in conjunction with the Chicago-based Coordinating Council of Community Organizations (CCCCO) noted education, building trades unions, real estate, banks and mortgage companies, slum landlords, the welfare system, federal housing agencies, the courts, the police, the political system, the city administration, and the federal government. The plan does not specifically highlight the relationships between Black women and Black men but one could quickly discern that the general oppressive environment stoked problems among and within relationships of all types.

Hitchhiking his way to Hollywood, Monte eventually settled there and through his crucial connection to Mike Evans, sold his teleplay to Tandem Productions which later became the foundation for the episode, “Getting Up the Rent.”²⁸ Relinquishing final authorial rights was typical for writers-for-hire and staff writers such as Monte. The industry’s centralized brokerage

²⁶ “Eric Monte-The Unseen Interview (2006),” Reelblack Two, June 20, 2022, video, 57:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1C8tZ413O1Q&t=266s>

²⁷ Claybourne Carson, David J. Garrow, Gerald Gill, Vincent Harding, and Darlene Clark Hine, general editors. *The Eyes on the Prize: Civil Rights Reader* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), pp. 294-296.

²⁸ “Eric Monte-The Unseen Interview (2006),” Reelblack Two, June 20, 2022, video, 57:28, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1C8tZ413O1Q&t=266s>

administration system demanded it.²⁹ For example, involved in the first six revisions of his teleplay, the primary script developers after Monte included Allan Manings and Norman Lear in the final six revisions.³⁰ Considering Monte's pilot teleplay to be a "very strong germ of an idea," Manings was brought in to revise it in the fall of 1973. Lear's direct involvement with script revisions appeared with his "polish" dated December 16, 1973, and in the "as broadcast" script dated January 4, 1974.

Dialogue in Monte's script changed significantly from the initial idea he presented to Norman Lear in 1971.³¹ Changes also revolved around plot complications, settings, characters, and narrative. One example centers Mattie's resistance to James "hustling pool" to raise the rent money. James's response, which was the scene that related to him playing pool, touched upon the awareness of and expression of male dominance.

MATTIE: I thought you had given up pool.

JAMES: I thought I had too till I got that pink slip and that eviction notice, then I said "Look like you a pool hustler again."

MATTIE: I don't want no pool hustler living in my house.

JAMES: Your house? You been watching too much TV[.] This is my house; I pay the rent here.³²

Lear's "polished" draft of the same scene mitigated the domination of James over Florida by reducing his male supremacist leanings and expanding Florida's dominance. Humor is introduced and religion is raised as a reason for James to not shoot pool.

FLORIDA: James, I don't want you hustling no pool. You promised.
(JAMES TAKES OUT AN OLD POOL CUE CASE; BLOWS THE
DUST OFF IT)

²⁹ Paul DiMaggio, "Market Structure, the Creative Process, and Popular Culture: Toward an Organizational Reinterpretation of Mass-Culture Theory," *Journal of Popular Culture*, 11, no. 2, (Fall 1977): 443-444.

³⁰ "#0101 Getting Up the Rent."

³¹ "Getting Up the Rent," (*Good Times*, TV Scripts Box 163, Folder 10-13, Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library, Jerome Library, Bowling Green State University, n.d.).

³² "Who's Got the Rent?," 7.

JAMES: I also promised to take care of my family. Now, if anybody here knows another way I can raise the rent by five o'clock, I'll lay this up.

...

FLORIDA: James!! The Lord don't want you hustlin' no pool.

JAMES: Yeah, well, I'm gonna have to work out an understanding with the Lord some other time, Florida. Now, move. (JAMES PICKS FLORIDA UP AND KISSES HER QUICKLY. EXITS WITH HIS POOL CUE)

FLORIDA: Damn, that man always could move me. Willona, don't all the magazines say that our women are supposed to be head of the house?

WILLONA: They sure do.

FLORIDA: Well, somebody oughta tell James.³³

What was most vexing for Monte was Lear's resistance to his vision for presenting Black culture in the new series. This issue complicated his working relationship with Lear and Manings. For a time, the most significant sticking point in the revision of Monte's teleplay concerned the inclusion of the father. Monte asserts that he received "one note" at every meeting about his script telling him that he had to "get rid of the father because a strong Black man is not funny in a sitcom."³⁴ The strong Black father, James Evans, remained in the series but Monte fought to keep him there.

In addition to insisting that certain characters be in this new Black nuclear family sitcom, Monte used Black language, especially in the dialogue of the Black men, and included realistic scenes from the projects. For example, before Thelma's conflict with Larry, Monte set up the scene with Larry and three other young Black men in the hallway singing and drinking wine. Manings cut the scene in his first revision of Monte's teleplay.³⁵ Important to Monte, Black language using such grammatical forms as the negative concord ("ain't no don't find them"), *be* for habituation ("before you be late"), and

³³ "Getting Up the Rent," 22.

³⁴ *E! The True Hollywood Story*.

³⁵ "Getting Up the Rent" (Good Times, TV Scripts Box 163, Folder 7, Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library, Jerome Library, Bowling Green State University, n.d.).

words (“scratch” for “money” and the “man” for the “police”) is prominent throughout.³⁶ It is evident in Junior’s dialogue with his mother Mattie:

MATTIE: I don’t see how you two can always be quoting out the Bible when an act of Congress couldn’t get either of you in church.

JUNIOR: I don *scoped* out the error of my ways.

MATTIE: When you say that, it means you found a hole in one of your schemes.

JUNIOR: I mean I finally checked out what you was *rapping* about and I *dig* it. I agree *one hundred* with you sending that *scratch* to the *man* (emphasis mine).³⁷

On the positive side, Lear (and Manings) removed most of the symbolically annihilating acts against the women from Monte’s provisional script. The victimization of Mattie and Thelma, or references to physical harm, was removed entirely. On the negative side, they dialed back the use of Black language. The passage quoted above was deleted. Also, later in the revisioning process, Monte inserted two scenes that highlighted Black characters other than the family and the movers. One involved a Black woman named Melody who worked in the housing project office and the other included a Black man as a womanizer-hustler in the welfare office when Mattie went there to receive help with the rent.³⁸ The less than uplifting figure of African American culture—the hustler—remained in the as-broadcast version to make the episode funny: “Hey there, foxy mama. Come to pick up some of that long green, huh?” It would have been intriguing to witness the potentially dynamic interactions between Mattie and Melody, a Black working class or Black middle class woman and employee for an office that is oppressive at its worse and ambivalent at best regarding its Black residents. What were Melody’s challenges working in such as white-controlled and Black-dependent public services environment? Would Melody value Black solidarity or would she

³⁶ “Who’s Got the Rent?” (*Good Times*, TV Scripts Box 163, Folder 1, Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library, Jerome Library, Bowling Green State University, n.d.), 4,7,36.

³⁷ “Who’s Got the Rent?,” 36.

³⁸ “Getting Up the Rent” (*Good Times*, TV Scripts Box 163, Folder 5, Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library, Jerome Library, Bowling Green State University, n.d.); “Getting Up the Rent” (*Good Times*, TV Scripts Box 163, Folder 8, Ray and Pat Browne Popular Culture Library, Jerome Library, Bowling Green State University, n.d.).

perpetuate working-class Black women's subordination?³⁹ Unfortunately, we will never know.

GRASSROOTS BLACK WOMEN'S ADVOCACY IN THE 1970S

Violence against women in the United States gained recognition as a social problem in the sixties and seventies.⁴⁰ Grassroots African American women's advocacy discourse such as that disseminated by the Black Women's Community Development Foundation, however, did not match the clarity in Monte's treatment of Black women. The Black Women's Community Development Foundation (BWCDF) created in 1968 in Washington, D.C., was largely funded by grant awards from the Irwin Sweeney Miller Foundation located in Columbus, Indiana. From 1969 to 1972, the BWCDF received \$632,750 in grants,⁴¹ \$624,250 of which was awarded by the Irwin Sweeney Miller Foundation with the remaining funding from the Abelard Foundation, Carol Buttenweiser Loeb Foundation, and the Joyce and John Gutfreund Foundation. Irwin Sweeney Miller's first awards in 1970 were to support the BWCDF's Black Child Development Institute (\$7,000) and general operating expenses (\$226,250). Its third award in 1971 was an astonishing \$390,750.

The grassroots group commissioned a study of "militant" Black women in 1970 that was published in 1972, organized three symposia in 1972 and 1974, and produced an annual report in 1973 that coincided with the timeline of Monte's conception of the first Black televisual nuclear family through to its first six weeks on air. The study, published as *"Together" Black Women*, involved in-depth interviews with "militant" Black women to determine their "thinking on a variety of matters as well as to gain some insight into their interests and activities as they relate to the current Black struggle."⁴² The women discussed the liberation movement, politics and politicians, Pan-Africanism, organized action, and their ambivalences about the next stage of the "Black struggle." While these "militant" women discussed Black women and Black men relationships of different sorts, abuse and violence, if uncovered at all, did not appear in the study's finished form.

³⁹ Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 65-75.

⁴⁰ Jody Miller, "Violence Against Urban African American Girls: Challenges for Feminist Advocacy," *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 24, no. 2 (2008): 148-162, doi:10.1177/1043986208315477.

⁴¹ Marjorie Fine Knowles, "Foundation Grants to Women's Groups." *Women's Studies Newsletter*, 1, no. 5 (Fall 1973): 9.

⁴² Inez Smith Reid, *"Together" Black Women* (New York: The Third Press, 1975), p. ix.

Held January 8-9, 1972, the first symposium organized by the BWCDF was in Chicago, Illinois, also Eric Monte's hometown as noted above, the second on April 8-9, 1972, in Atlanta, Georgia, and the third on March 29-30, 1974, in Washington, D.C. The Chicago symposium was titled "Black Women: The Ties that Divide and Bind-Program for Action" and was held at the Roberts Motel. The Executive Director, Inez Smith Reid, described the Chicago symposium as "fantastic, frustrating, incredible and turbulent." She viewed Chicago as significant among the cities to hold their symposium, "pondering its impact upon individual lives as well as upon the total Black struggle."⁴³ Reid did not mention violence against Black women in Chicago as a topic discussed in her follow-up letter and neither did Charlayne Hunter in her 1972 *New York Times* article reporting on the symposium.⁴⁴

Based on available written records, the symposia panel sessions and workshops did not engage with the topic of physical violence and aggression against Black women. There was some awareness of the problem, however, during the 1974 symposia planning process. An undated letter from Reid sent to the "friends" of the foundation included a workshop instruction sheet for the "miniconsultation" planned for Washington, D.C., in March of 1974. In addition to hypertension, sterilization, cancer, suicide, and depression, Reid requested information, thoughts, and ideas on "victims of violence."⁴⁵ However, neither the final program nor the report of the miniconsultation in the June 1974 *Ebony* magazine article mention victims of violence.⁴⁶ It is difficult to know whether grassroots organizations such as the Black Women's Community Development Foundation participated in a "conspiracy of silence," much like Mattie Black, but only on a larger social organizational level.

⁴³ Inez Smith Reid, "January 26, 1972, correspondence," Black Women's Community Development Foundation, 1972-1974, L1979-24_1624_028, Box 1624, Folder 28, Item 71, National Domestic Workers Union (U.S.) records, L1979-24. Special Collections, accessed January 19, 2025, https://archivesspace.library.gsu.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/54302.

⁴⁴ Charlayne Hunter, "200 Black Women Have Dialogue," Special to *The New York Times*, January 10, 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/01/10/archives/200-black-women-have-dialogue-debate-issues-that-differ-from-white.html>.

⁴⁵ Inez Smith Reid, "n.d., correspondence," Black Women's Community Development Foundation, 1972-1974, L1979-24_1624_028, Box 1624, Folder 28, Item 79, National Domestic Workers Union (U.S.) records, L1979-24. Special Collections, accessed January 19, 2025, https://archivesspace.library.gsu.edu/repositories/2/archival_objects/54302.

⁴⁶ "Stresses and Strains on Black Women," *Ebony* (June 1974): 33-40.

CONCLUSION

Eric Monte's pilot teleplay, "Who's Got the Rent," for the series *The Black Family* (which later became *Good Times*) presented a perspective of the intersectional identities of Black working-class women in a distressed urban community. Behind the scenes, Monte experienced his own symbolic annihilation fighting for an approximation of authentic Blackness on the soon-to-be sitcom about an urban, working-class, Black, nuclear family. Racist ideologies caused Norman Lear to trivialize Monte's knowledge of Black culture. Monte oppressed the women he envisioned through sexism. The teleplay shows that the possibility of physical aggression and violence towards Black working-class women, including Mattie and Thelma, were issues that existed in the Black's family culture and in their community's public housing culture. At the same time, Black women's advocacy groups did not appear prepared or equipped to discuss violence against Black women and girls publicly.

This analysis of the fictional symbolic annihilation of Mattie and Thelma Black reflects the marginalization of Black women in American primetime television, as well as may serve as an indicator of the marginalized status of Black women in American society. Unfortunately, symbolic annihilation, specifically condemnation, continues into the twenty-first century towards Mattie's counterpart, Florida, in Maroon Alchemist's 2019 Twitter thread, "DEBUNKING THE MYTH: A thread exposing the truth about one of America's favorite T.V. mothers, FLORIDA EVANS": "Though highly revered by most as a strong, black mother figure for '70s television, behind the thin veil of virtue she hid behind, was a woman who caused nothing but pain and suffering to those around her with her actions." Written almost fifty years apart, symbolic annihilation still follows Florida today.

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