



## Review of Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow

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Review: Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow:

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Black Women and the Family from Slavery to Present (J. Jones)

Outside of its own members, a <sup>flourishing</sup> ~~stable~~ black family is of no value to anybody. There is no legislation, social policy, or economic planning designed exclusively for its health--and there never has been. <sup>After the civil war when</sup> ~~once~~ fresh born slaves and a continuous supply of cheap labor became superfluous, agents of the law, economy, academy, and government saw black families as problematic in every way: the education of its children, the employment of its adults, its movements from one place to another, its housing, its medical care, its hunger--all these "normal" family needs <sup>became</sup> ~~are~~ insupportable burdens where black people are concerned, and the solutions to the "problem" <sup>the</sup> ~~black family~~ presented were to ignore, destroy or disfigure it.

Like the grand old men of scientific racism, statesmen and bureaucrats from 1830 to 1985, when contemplating black families, have found no difficulty in accepting Malthus' economic <sup>CONCLUSIONS</sup> ~~what state~~ that "the infant is, comparatively speaking, of little value to society, as others will immediately take his place," or Galton's eugenics which place "the average intellectual standard of the negro race...some two grades below our own." Both of those nineteenth century statements are as popular today as they were when first printed and they make up a good portion of the thinking that informs current social policy. "Promotion of the general welfare", sanctity of the family never meant or included the black family.

That there ever was such a unit, and that it lasted beyond 1869 is so amazing it's no wonder it is usually treated as a special, isolated phenomenon or trivialized beyond recognition. Placing this

~~family~~



[ family center stage in a labor history of black women is itself a singular idea for which we owe Jacqueline Jones gratitude. Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow is a supremely valuable contribution to the scholarship of black women for a number of reasons. It exorcises several malignant stereotypes and stubborn myths. It is free of the sexism and racism it describes. It interprets old data in new ways, revealing Ms. Jones' perceptions as both wide and deep. It is also wonderfully well written. The purpose of the study is to show how the needs of the family shaped the work habits, choices, patterns of the black population in general and the strategies these needs required of black women in particular. To examine black women as laborers is one thing; to examine this labor force in the context of its life and death struggle to save the family <sup>is</sup> ~~is~~ quite another. All working classes and races have had family uppermost in mind, but the annihilation scheduled for black families was so spirited, each and every effort made to protect it was seen as nothing less than sabotage. Just as a male slave who ducked off the plantation to go fishing was called loafer, lazy, idler etc, instead of admired for trying to feed his family, so staying home to care for children ( a duty and virtue for white women) was, for black women, "doing nothing" and "playing the lady" by demanding their husbands "support them in idleness." (page 51).

Like a silent underground river, family priorities run through the labor patterns and choices blacks made. "freed blacks resisted both the northern work ethic and the southern system of neoslavery... The full import of their preference for family sharecropping over



gang labor becomes apparent when viewed in a national context. The industrial North was increasingly coming to rely on workers who had yielded to employers all authority over their working conditions. In contrast, sharecropping husbands and wives retained a minimal amount of control over their own productive energies and those of their children on both a daily and seasonal basis. Furthermore, the sharecropping system enabled mothers to divide their time between field and housework in a way that reflected a family's needs. The system also removed wives and daughters from the menacing reach of white supervisors. Here were tangible benefits of freedom that could not be reckoned in financial terms." (page 38).

Contrary to the stereotype of the slave woman as house servant, ninety-five per cent were field workers with the same work load as men. And contrary to the notion that female slaves regarded kitchen work as a "promotion" from the field, most sought the latter in order to be farther away from hands-on white supervision and closer to their own families. In the evidence Ms. Jones produces, deliberate ineptitude in the kitchen was the easiest route out of the big house, and has its echoes in the refusal of black domestics to "live in" when they reached the city. <sup>Of signal</sup> ~~Finally~~ importance is the part educational opportunity for their children played in decisions to migrate to the city ~~and~~ <sup>g</sup> equal to (if not greater than) the hope of more and better work. Another very interesting aspect of the priority of family is the repeated subordination of "individualistic opportunity" to collectivism (based on kinship). It is a seldom recognized characteristic of black people that Ms. Jones does justice to, suggesting how it accounts for the brush fire effect forms of resistance took as well as choices of so-called welfare mothers.



Once again the myth of the black matriarch is deftly punctured here, and Ms. Jones supplies more evidence ( there seems never to be enough to get rid of it) to show the overwhelming number, consistency and life threatening efforts of black men to defend and protect wives and children, and she is careful to note that the place gender played in the division of labor (different in slave communities from the gender-blind structures the masters imposed) was arrived at by both males and females. This refusal to document female competence by reducing male roles is as refreshing and accurate as her refusal <sup>a</sup> to merge white women who sprayed insecticide on marchers or called "lynch her!" to black girls in Little Rock, with those who worked hard ~~from~~ <sup>for</sup> Black causes.

In seeing data rather than simply looking at them, Ms. Jones has ~~turned~~ <sup>turned</sup> ~~runed~~ a klieg light up in several dim and unexplored corners. There is a marvelous passage on dressing up--how important ribbons, hats, ~~and~~ <sup>7</sup> shoes and colorful dresses were to black women after the slave years when "after work " clothes did not exist. Theaters, newspaper cartoons and advertisements were jammed with universal jokes about black women dressed up. (Testimony to the outrage and contempt white women felt about this "liberty" is found in the ~~refusal~~ <sup>decision</sup> of Charleston women <sup>not</sup> to wear veils when black women began to. There is a substantial (and surprising) analysis of Ebony Magazine as an index of the support and encouragement black men gave their women. There is an ample discussion of the ways in which the Civil Rights movement depended totally on the "everyday" nourishment of black women--a nourishment carried on in the same ways it had been during slavery: feeding runaways from the mistress' pantry became feasts for members of SNCC and SLC. Spirituals sung in clandestine slave <sup>l</sup> services became rallying songs at protest meetings--



providing a text and context that joined the African past to the Afro American future.

Speaking of which--the future--Ms. Jones is not optimistic. The unprecedented vigor of black women is no longer enough to ward off the quite preceded attacks on the family. She calls for "a massive public works program administered without discrimination on the basis of race or sex, institution of a 'solidarity wage' to narrow the gap between the pay scales of of lower and upper-echelon workers." (page 285) If she is right, if the "way out of no way" resourcefulness of black women can't do it, the race is facing its gravest danger yet.

Fully half of this book is devoted to strategies <sup>of</sup> slave and newly freed women in balancing forced labor with family <sup>prosperity</sup> ~~health~~. Well done as it is, it is a luxury we pay for by having less of Ms. Jones' astute scholarship given to the changes that have taken place since the 70's. The sections <sup>f</sup> dealing with more recent history, all the way from the Civil Rights movement, "a compelling historical moment, the culmination of the black family's resistance to racism (page 257) to the subsequent "cult of virility" that emerged among black men, is adequate in tracking the tradition, noting its distortion and summarizing the concerns. But it needs perhaps a separate text to tell us exactly how "mama" got to be a perjorative word among modern blacks; how <sup>"marriage"</sup> ~~"marriage"~~ came to be a barrier to self-fulfilment; and how black children came to be the Typhoid Marys of poverty--its carrier and agent, rather than its victim.

Such an analysis is outside the scope of this book, but not beyond Ms. Jones considerable gifts.

Tom M. Jones



## SHE AND ME

by

TONI MORRISON

The best news was the two dollars and fifty cents. Each Friday She would give me, a twelve year old, enough money to see sixteen movies or buy fifty Baby Ruth candy bars. And all I had to do for it was clean Her house for a few hours after school. A beautiful house, too, with plastic covered sofa and chairs, wall to wall blue and white carpeting, a white enamel stove, automatic washing machine—things common in Her neighborhood; rare in mine. In the middle of the War, She had butter, sugar, steaks and seam-up-the-back hose. Around the house Her grass was mowed and Her bushes were clipped to balls the size of balloons . Amazed and happy, I fairly skipped down sidewalks too new for hop scotch to my first job.



I wasn't very good at it. I knew how to scrub floors on my knees but not with a mop and I'd never encountered a Hoover or used an iron that was not heated by fire. So I understood Her impatience, Her nagging, Her sigh of despair. And I tried harder each day to be worth the heap of Friday coins She left on the counter by the back door. My pride in earning money that I could squander, if I chose to, was increased by the fact that half of it my mother took. That is, part of my wages were used for real things: an insurance policy payment maybe or the milkman. Pleasure, at that age, at being necessary to my parents was profound. I was not like the children in folk tales—a burdensome mouth to feed, a problem to be solved, a nuisance to be corrected. I had the status that routine chores at home did not provide—a slow smile, an approving nod from an adult. All suggestions that a place for me among them was immanent.

I got better at cleaning Her house, so good I was given more to do, much more. I remember being asked to move a piano from one side of the room to another and once to carry book cases upstairs. My arms and legs hurt and I wanted to complain but, other than my sister, there was no one to go to. If I refused Her I would be fired. If I told my mother she would make



me quit. Either way my finances and my family standing would be lost. It was being slowly eroded anyway because She began to offer me her clothes—for a price. And impressed by these worn things that looked simply gorgeous to a little girl with two dresses for school, I eagerly bought them. Until my mother asked me if I really wanted to work for cast offs. So I learned to say “No thank you” to a faded sweater offered for half a week’s pay. Still I had trouble summoning the courage to discuss or object to the increasing demands made on me.

One day, alone in the kitchen with my father, I let drop a few whines about the job. I know I gave him details, examples, but while he listened intently, I saw no sympathy in his eyes. No “Oh, you poor little thing.” Perhaps he understood I wanted a solution to work, not an escape from it. In any case, he put down his cup of coffee finally and said,

“Listen. You don’t live there. You live here. At home, with your people. Just go to work; get your money and come on home.”

That is what he said. This is what I heard.

1. Whatever the work, do it well; not for the boss but for yourself.
2. You make the job; it doesn’t make you.



3. Your real life is with us, your family.
4. You are not the work you do; you are the person you are.

I have worked for all sorts of people since then, geniuses and morons, quick-witted and dull, wide-hearted and narrow, and had many kinds of jobs, but from that moment on I never considered the level of labor to be the measure of self or placed the security of a job above the value of home.