

IT TAKES A VILLAGE: ALTERNATIVES TO THE NUCLEAR FAMILY AND HOW  
THE TRADITIONAL MODEL FAILS US

by

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## **DEDICATION**

To Dr. Ron Haas and Amy Meeks, for being encouraging and patient during the madness of the past year.

To my loving partner Jax, who lit the fire underneath me when I needed it most.

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## **ABSTRACT**

The nuclear family is not as friendly of an institution as we have been led to believe. Able to survive only by denying important resources to, and exploiting vulnerable parties- it is by examining the darker history of the nuclear family and its consistent recreation of racism, sexism, homophobia and transphobia that we can see the family style is unsustainable. However, there are other alternatives to this family style, called intentional communities, that provide tangible solutions to these systematic threats. By eliminating the isolation that allows abuse to thrive in the nuclear family, intentional communities provide diverse resources such as shared labor, skills, and a network of financial and emotional support that is the commonwealth of all of its members. Instead of family's fighting for resources and exploiting one another- intentional communities provide the framework for tribes to raise each other up.

### What is the Nuclear Family?

Cultivated as a primarily western structure, the nuclear family is categorized as a monogamous couple and their immediate children. When referring to this, many people envision greeting cards of the 1950's, Dick and Jane reading primers, or even Leave it to Beaver if you're a fan of classic TV. But diving down deeper, what is the nuclear family in terms of substance? Why do we call the images we do to mind? Does this structure include gay couples? Adoptive children or only biological? How inclusive or exclusive is the primary family structure of America?

### Definition of The Nuclear Family:

Looking at the way important organizations define family is a good way to start answering some questions. A Pew Research study in 2014 found that just under half of families could still say they lived with both birth parents growing up- which is a stark decrease from the three-fourths in the generation prior (Livingston, 2014). While seemingly irrelevant, in this study we can begin to understand that the Nuclear family is *most often* defined by two parents and their immediate *biological* children. Combined with the other categories of the study: cohabitating couples, remarried couples, and single parent families, we can assume that none of these are a part of the traditional nuclear unit to the PEW research team. However, this biological model isn't the only definition. Other sources such as the Encyclopedia Britannica claim that the nuclear family involves half siblings and other "socially recognized" children (*Nuclear family*, 2015) like adopted and foster children as well as same sex couples and their adoptive children. However, this last inclusion was only a recent addendum caused by the legalization of same sex marriage among all fifty states in 2015.

So, what does this all mean? Is there actually a common consensus on what the nuclear family is?

No. Not really.

Social understanding of the nuclear family varies widely between social groups and socio-economic spheres. Many conservative Americans claim that same sex and trans couples should not be involved in the legal institution of marriage or allowed to raise children, let alone be classified as an elementary (nuclear) family unit. Others demand the opposite- that same sex and trans couples legally and socially be counted as nuclear, and even farther that adopted and foster children of LGBT and heterosexual families be counted as well. The definition seems to depend greatly on who you ask and where you're located in terms of class and politics.

The only consensus that can be drawn seems to come from a tricky game of elimination. A nuclear family *is* what an a-typical family is *not*. And what we can gain from the overlap between so many vastly different opinions is this: those who are single parents, divorced, remarried, cohabitating but unwed parents, and multi-generational homes are *not* a part of our traditional elementary family, with LGBT individuals lying in a gray area.



Part A: The History of the Nuclear Family

So now that we've defined, to the best of our abilities, who is and isn't included in the nuclear family, it is a good time to ask- what is this family unit's purpose? Its substance? Is it a Socio-economic advantage? A unit of kinship based on love and emotional support with politics and law only a consequence?

If we want to see what makes the nuclear family tick, it is best to look at the clockwork behind it. What is its history and how does it function and most importantly *why*? Much like the criteria for who can and cannot be admitted under the definition of the nuclear family, there seems to be a lot of variations in history based on the location studied.

Author Kay Hymowitz for The Institute of Family Studies writes an article that clears up some of the myths about the history of the nuclear family. While many individuals assume that their family style is a result of the industrial revolution of the 18th and 19th century, Hymowitz states that it was as early as the thirteenth century that this "simple" family style was already prominent for the working class. This was because, "The young nuclear family had to be flexible and mobile as it searched for opportunity and property. Forced to rely on their own ingenuity, its members also needed to plan for the future and develop bourgeois habits of work and saving." this resulted in an easily uprooted and dispensable work force, lending a flexible base for the far future of the industrial revolution who needed workers not tied down by family trades and bonds. But of course, this was only in terms of the working-class poor, Hymowitz goes on to describe that-

"These habits [of mobility] were of little use to the idle, landed rich who

were wedded to, and defined by, the ancestral property... Similarly, in extended families, a newly married couple was required to move in with the larger maternal or paternal clan, and to work the family land or maintain the family trade. Under those circumstances, people, particularly women, married young, generally before 20. Between their youth and dependence, the couple was not capable of becoming effective strivers in a changing economy” (Hymowitz, 2013).

So, while the working-class poor moved about in an easily mobile unit of an elementary family, the wealthy elites were inclined and even duty bound to take care of the familial estate. And while Hymowitz is explicit about the nuclear family’s solid place in society at this time, she also notes that this is the opposite of Southern Europeans, who often remained in or married into the family home, maintaining their wealth and land status so that there was a large class divide between the two family styles.

Communist ideologists such as Frederick Engels elaborates on this divide and its impact in *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State*. It is documented by Engels that “love and marriage” in those existing simple families were not remotely similar to those we have today, as the family was intertwined with socioeconomics and class struggles. While mom and pop usually marry now because they want to wake up to the face of their spouse every morning, back then, marriage was more about eros and politics in the upper class than romantic love we enjoy now. A proverbial wolf ancestor to the selectively bred lap dog we now enjoy. Engels states that “Up to the end of the Middle Ages... marriage, in the overwhelming majority of cases, remained what it had been right from the beginning, an affair that was not decided by the parties concerned.”

This was referring to the way in which parents would arrange marriages for their children and that matrimony was much like a form of purchase for a life partner. But of course, this had to have changed eventually if we are to know the kind of familial love we do today, and the first steps towards monogamous weddings *for love* began to emerge exclusively among the upper class with the rise of non-ancestral private property.

“The form of marriage by purchase disappears, the transaction itself is to an ever-increasing degree carried out in such a way that not only the woman but the man also is appraised...The idea that the mutual affection of the parties concerned should be the overriding reason for matrimony had been unheard of in the practice of the ruling classes from the very beginning. Such things took place, at best, in romance, or—among the oppressed classes, which did not count.”

(Engels, 2001)

While Engels thinks that the previous eros based marriage would become the norm due to the commodification that capitalism partakes in, he expresses his surprise by proclaiming that “the irony of world history is unfathomable—it was capitalist production that was to make the decisive breach... By transforming all things into commodities, it abolished all ancient traditional relations, and for inherited customs and historical rights it substituted purchase and sale, ‘free’ contract.” In other words, this is what we would define as a voluntary contract instead of one set up by someone else. In the years after the creation of these voluntary social contracts, the upper class was given more and more freedom to marry in this new and more emotionally defined way as social ties loosened. While people were still often required to marry within their class, those seen as “free and equal” landowners, found more and more that they were morally

obligated to enter marriage based on mutual love- a leap forward in the evolution of the family as we know it.

Treading through the flexible and variant history of the nuclear family based on class, it seems apparent that it was well established, at least in the sense that it did indeed *exist* for quite a period of time.

In the wealthy areas it did settle into, the nuclear family continued to evolve from a sex based relationship for politics and money, to a social contract based on mutual consideration. However, despite the similarities of class politics and capitalist influences, it should be noted that there is still a large history dividing the early purchase-based nuclear family and that of the developed family unit we know today. In the modern west, it is almost exclusively unheard of to bow to an arranged marriage based on parental judgement or to “purchase” a bride or groom for political means. Engels was correct that the upper class grew more and more free to choose their partners, and once wealth became more accessible to the working class after the second World War, a cultural shift landed us closer to what we have today.

An Analysis of a lecture given by family sociology pioneer Ethan Berges lends more momentum to the nuclear family being a different species from its common ancestor.

Bengtson focuses in his lecture on the industrial revolution, and how the modernization, individualism, and secularism of western culture had “transformed the family from a social institution based on law and custom to one based on companionship and love” (Bengtson, 2001). and consequently, the family from a social-institutional unit to that of an emotionally supportive one.

Our author explains that the family unit progressed once again with the innovation of the industrial age, evolving to something more recognizable to us now as family members became more specialized in their respective functions. Marriage based on love was becoming more and more widespread among the working class, and thus transformed the base of the modern family and how it functioned.

Burgess conceptualized the study of the family as a “unit of interacting personalities” more than a unit of class and wealth like times before. He proposes that the family is a process of interactions influenced by each member- their personalities and unique characteristics, and that no one exists in a vacuum. A child does not behave or misbehave totally independently of a father or mother, a sister not independent of their brother and so on. Burgess claims the attitudes and behaviors of one family member cannot be understood without the whole familial ecosystem being involved. This kind of thinking gave way to the basis of family and marriage counseling in America, originally founded in the 1940’s and 1950’s (Bond, 2009) and opens the door to the nuclear family as we know it- no longer a wolf but a dog that could potentially fit into a purse. At its peak, this family system was culturally viewed as being based on individuality, independence, and was the social evidence of a successful life and career, so much so that over 70% of the population adhered to it for better or worse.

But almost a full century later and we see that not everything is as neat and clean when looking at this family structure- even back in the “golden age of the family” in the 1950’s.

While some claim that the nuclear family is still alive and strong but simply evolving again with the time, others believe that the nuclear family is of a dying breed

and phasing out of existence entirely. Our author Bengtson cites sources claiming that neither is necessarily false.

“Some family experts have hypothesized that families have lost most of their social functions... because of high divorce rates and the growing absence of fathers in the lives of many children...A contrasting hypothesis is that families are becoming more diverse in structure and forms” (Bengtson, 2001).

This brings us back to the question, what is the primary role of the nuclear family, what is its substance?

Initially the simple family was a means to an economic leg up, or an exchange of goods between wealthy families- after capitalism began to take hold the family was a moral position of the elite, an exploration outside of tradition which resulted in marrying for love. But now the foundation of the nuclear family supposedly lays on the mutual love of parents as the wealth gap closed little by little over the years, and the ways in which all members of the family interact with each other.

Looking at the history of the nuclear family we can see its changing functions and meaning. So, if society has taken to the “moral of love” as Engels put it- then why do we see the continued decline of its recreation? Why is there so much strain on the nuclear family that we see its use decrease by almost 30% since the 50’s? (Livingston, 2014)

Is the modern family really based on mutual love and a means of support? Or has nostalgia tampered with our cultural memory?

Part B: Why the Nuclear Family is Failing Us

While it absolutely has been viewed as a western goal and paradigm, the reason the nuclear family has been experiencing a steady decline, despite its popularity, is due to its own unsustainable practices.

Nostalgia of the 50's and the golden age of America has created a narrative that the nuclear family's moral wholesomeness, and reciprocal love is what has kept it afloat. However, looking deeper into its past and its climb to popularity, it can be revealed that the nuclear family as an institution has only been able to survive due to its habitual exploitation of vulnerable persons. And because of this, it is starting to collapse under its own duress.

While its history is long and complicated, the nuclear family as we know it was really a unique accident of the post-war boom of the 50's. Simple families before this time were vastly different, as we explored in the previous section. Yet several consistencies prevailed- its exploitation and exclusivity.

The Victorian family's success was based off of the subjugation of others, either on the principle of wealth or by slavery.

“For every nineteenth-century middle-class family that protected its wife and child within the family circle, then, there was an Irish or a German girl scrubbing floors in that middle-class home, a Welsh boy mining coal to keep the home-baked goodies warm, a black girl doing the family laundry, a black mother and child picking cotton to be made into clothes for the family, and a Jewish or an Italian daughter in a sweatshop making “ladies” dresses or artificial flowers for

the family to purchase” (Coontz, 2016).

The fondness and nostalgia we carry for the nuclear family is entirely a modern myth. Even colonial and Puritan era American families were not morally pure and could hardly be considered nuclear, as many members of the family would suffer premature death by disease or natural disaster. If one did survive to have a brief simple family, this was only possible by the bloodshed brought on indigenous and black people in order to steal their land and create the white paradise of the “New World.”

Romanticization of the rich south and the wealthy, white, plantation family was no exception. While a paradise for the southern bells of much literature and film- white men could only build their homes with the labor of abused slaves. White women of wealth assuring the health and security of their children by battering black women- selling their newly born children, having other slaves assault them so they would become pregnant, and more in order to have them wet-nurse their own white babies. (West, E. and Knight, R. J., 2017)

Primarily recycled from the highly romanticized era of the 1950’s, we rely on propaganda to mask the exploitation of the nuclear family. With the cheap mass production of the automobile and highways to allow for travel to and from the city, and the freedom of the post WWII economy, people fled from their previous residence in the dirty city. Previous to the 50’s, suffocatingly high rent and scarcity forced individuals to live in cramped multi-generational homes- or to shack up with other families due to economic stress. Those who had been waiting out the harsh conditions to have children no longer needed to lay low, resulting in what we now call today “the baby boom.” This explosion of young families paired with the opening availability of mass manufactured,



dirt cheap homes in the suburbs was a dream come true for the now booming white middle class and was enough to create a story of greatness in the family. (HISTORY, 2019)

During this time however, few black families were able to afford the American Dream of a white picket fence and backyard for their sons and daughters. Even when they managed to climb to the ranks of the bourgeoisie, they were rarely admitted to join the mass exodus to “the burbs” due to segregation sentiment- kept in the same cramped inner-city apartments their white counterparts left. Much like times passed, the nuclear family depended on the scapegoating of another race or class in order to happily exist.

From this practice of segregation came severely impoverished communities that are sometimes callously referred to as “ghettos” today. Not only were black families kept from the golden age of the nuclear family by being forced into poorer, cramped homes and neighborhoods, but they have been continually subjected to abuse in order to keep them there.

During the Nixon presidency of the 1960’s began the infamous war on drugs, incarcerating more black individuals than any other ethnic group- claiming to target those who used drugs including cannabis, and heroin. Nixon’s former advisor John Ehrlichman sheds light on what the war on drugs was really about.

“You want to know what this was really all about. The Nixon campaign in 1968, and the Nixon White House after that, had two enemies: the antiwar left and black people. You understand what I’m saying. We knew we couldn’t make it illegal to be either against the war or black, but by getting the public to associate the hippies with marijuana and blacks with heroin, and then criminalizing both

heavily, we could disrupt those communities.” (Baum, 2016)

While this might seemingly be unrelated to the concept of family, the continuous oppression of an individual’s community through violence and incarceration is directly related to how that community and its families’ function.

For example, single motherhood is often forced on young black women due to the aforementioned high incarceration rates of black men. From these circumstances have risen a unique family style not often publicized in our white-centric culture. “African Americans have always relied on extended family more than white Americans do.” says Mia Birdsong in an interview with David Brooks,

“Despite the forces working to separate us—slavery, Jim Crow, forced migration, the prison system, gentrification—we have maintained an incredible commitment to each other...The reality is, black families are expansive, fluid, and brilliantly rely on the support, knowledge, and capacity of ‘the village’ to take care of each other. Here’s an illustration: The white researcher/social worker/whatever sees a child moving between their mother’s house, their grandparents’ house, and their uncle’s house and sees that as ‘instability.’ But what’s actually happening is the family (extended and chosen) is leveraging all of its resources to raise that child” (Brooks, 2020).

Since its peak in the 50’s, we can see that not only is the inherent nature of the nuclear family’s history exploitative and white, but even now the nuclear model ostracizes all other family types as being unstable and therefore unacceptable such as with black extended families and fictive kin.

Communities of color aren’t the only vulnerable parties set up to fail by the

nuclear family either. A hot topic even in the year 2020, same sex marriage and the legal equality of LGBT families are still under heavy attack from conservative congress and social programs. While 63% of the public smiles on the legal validity of same sex marriages, (Gallup Inc, 2007), that does not mean that same sex families are not under consistent social or legal harassment.

This legal and social persecutions for same sex families is left over primarily from two events: The Lavender Scare during the 50's Cold War, and the AIDS crisis of the 80's.

“The Cold War Era was a time of fear and suspicion. The fear of the spread of communism throughout the world and especially to the United States led many to become highly suspicious of anything or anyone outside of the norm. In 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy claimed that 205 Communists were working within the State Department. However, what is less frequently remembered is that McCarthy also claimed 91 homosexuals were working within the State Department and were also considered “security risks.” These 91 people had been asked to step down from their jobs. This event brought propaganda into the public light that claimed gays were everywhere and that they should be considered a threat to national security and the moral standard of family due to their deviancy. It was also believed that gays and lesbians would be security risks because they were susceptible to blackmail and because they were already “morally debased” (Toops, 2013).

More than the 91 specified lost their jobs in the end, many government representatives were smeared as being gay only in an effort to weed out political competition. It was from McCarthyism that sprang the idea of gays and lesbians (and

consequently bisexuals and trans individuals) as being abhorrent and degenerate. The cold-war tensions and Lavender Scare helping to further define the nuclear family as a self-sustaining, white, and heterosexual institution.

Thirty years later the AIDS epidemic struck the United States, and an entire generation of LGBT individuals were lost due to the Ronald Reagan administration's refusal to fund research of HIV via the Federal Drug Administration (Aizenman, 2019). Now, several decades after the crisis that forced the LGBT community from out of the shadows, there are still McCarthyian style laws that impact the same-sex family.

The American Bar Association notes that "10 states now permit state-licensed welfare agencies to refuse to place children with LGBTQ individuals and same-sex couples if doing so conflicts with the agency's religious or moral beliefs. While North Dakota's law goes back to 2003 and Virginia's dates back to 2012, eight of these states passed such laws after the Obergefell decision [in 2015]. These states include Michigan, Mississippi, South Dakota, Alabama, Texas, Oklahoma, Kansas and South Carolina." The Trump administration within the past four years has granted a waiver to the state of South Carolina foster care agencies to deny services to same-sex couples and others who might not fall in line with their religious beliefs as well. If a same sex couple finds themselves lucky enough to adopt or conceive a child, their parental rights are further jeopardized by inconsistent and regressive laws across state lines. "the nongenetic parent of a child may have their parentage recognized in California, but without going through an adoption procedure or obtaining a court order, she could lose any parental rights by relocating to Alabama" (Moreau, 2019).

However, it is not just parental rights at risk with LGBT families. While the

nuclear family has rejected both black individuals via racist segregation, and LGBT parents under the Lavender Scare and AIDS crisis. It can also be a real and critical danger for LGBT children to be born into a nuclear household with heterosexual parents.

43% of youth that were surveyed at drop-in centers- a type of service agency for the mentally ill or homeless to obtain food, information, and other services- self identified as LGBT. In both street outreach, and housing programs 30% of their populations were LGBT as well. And it is not gambling, drinking, drugs, or teenage angst to be blamed for why so many LGBT youth are at risk. The top reported reasons for trans, gay, bi, and lesbian individuals being forced into homelessness were almost exclusively because of the violence inflicted by their own isolated nuclear family.

46% of LGBT children ran away due to family rejection, 43% were forced out due to gender or sexuality, 32% experienced physical, emotional, or sexual abuse at home, while 17% were aged out of the foster care system with no fictive kin, and 14% experiencing financial/emotional neglect from family. (Durso & Gates, 2012).

It is obvious that, despite claims that it takes a cis-heterosexual man and woman to humanely raise a child, the nuclear family does not nurture or support a child if they are LGBT.

Trans children are especially at risk of lifelong trauma because of this unsustainable family. While it is often cited by advocates of the cis-heterosexual family that trans individuals have high rates of mental illness and are therefore inherently unstable, it is usually left out that this is not because being trans is synonymous with being ill, but because being trans is associated with higher rates of rejection, isolation, and abuse. "Family support was associated with positive outcomes while family rejection

was associated with negative outcomes. Respondents who were rejected were: Nearly twice as likely to have experienced homelessness (40%) as those who were not rejected (22%). Almost twice as likely to have engaged in sex work (16%) as those who were not rejected (9%). More likely to have attempted suicide (49%) than those who were not rejected (33%).” In faith groups especially, nearly one in five trans individuals left due to rejection, and under half of those who were rejected found an accepting faith community after. (James et al., 2016)

Not only are trans individuals more at risk of rejection and isolation due to the cis-gender norms of Nuclear Families, but even when attempting to reach out to other communities, they are isolated in an attempt to punish them for their transgressions and keep the golden line of the nuclear family “pure.”

It might seem extreme to insinuate that rejection from a nuclear family type is akin to a noble keeping a strictly royal bloodline. But with the Lavender Scare, being able to reject vulnerable LGBT parties was akin to national and personal safety as well as the luxury of a flourishing social and career life.

So far, we have examined how black and LGBT individuals are rejected from the nuclear family- doing so results in exclusive rights to suburban housing and its luxuries, as well as safety from the “morally repugnant or politically corrupt.” But seeing as how these are not the only groups impacted by the grip of the nuclear family, and that nobody is depraved for being black or LGBT, maybe it can be said that there is something more that is sought after by founding and continuing a nuclear family style.

We can begin to see a sort of privilege given to those within Nuclear Families beyond that previously mentioned. Examining a diverse panel of houseless women, we

can see their success in improving their situations outside of the Nuclear set-up by using a form of non-monetary currency called “social capital.”

In a study labeled *The Social Network*, Robert Putnam defines social capital as the “features of social organization such as networks, norms, and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit.” But in this study this social capital is not given freely by parents like it is with many American citizens, indeed that being the reason why most of the participants were houseless to begin with.

“For many of the young homeless women in this study, nuclear families of origin had not provided traditional bonding social capital, but rather relationships characterized by instability, abuse, or neglect. The young women were quick to refute the assumptions made about the protective and stable nature of immediate families:

God, I love them, but they just disappointed me so many times. It’s so hard. It’s so hard to deal with it. So hard to put your trust in them. But here, there’s always something here for me, and that’s why I’ll stay. You know, because for me a family is something, a family should be able to provide, but if they can’t, sorry. (Danika)

Most of the women had distanced themselves, or been removed, from their mothers and fathers in an effort to live safer, healthier, and more independent lives. Other research supports these findings and shows that although homeless and runaway youth may receive support from their parents at critical times, they often cannot count on them for sustained support and often choose to distance themselves from dysfunctional homes in order to make changes and healthier

decisions in their lives...” (Oliver & Cheff, 2014).

Like with Danika, it is when these young women reach outside of toxic nuclear family and seek instead extended family, fictive kin, service providers and even online social networks, that they can begin to find the stability taken from them by leaving the protective custody of the nuclear family. In other words, the nuclear family tends to hold a monopoly on social capital- a privilege that provides freely given, social, financial, housing, and employment security that can be easily lost if one does not conform to the rules by which it was formed.

However, even those who are lucky enough to fall into line with these unspoken rules would be hard pressed to call it a perfect existence. During its peak in the 1950’s, middle class women were often forced into domesticity both culturally and interpersonally. Those who did not comply with heterosexual marriage were often punished by being labeled as mentally incompetent and sent to in-patient facilities for electroshock therapy “treatments” and sedation. (Coontz, 2016) Due to the high cost of noncompliance, many wives chose tranquilizers willingly from their doctors or stimulants when they could not keep up with home life- even more wives stashing their liquor at home in order to cope with domestic bliss.

Considering that wife battering and sexual assault were pathologized by professionals as masochistic wives provoking their husbands- unable to leave- it makes sense that they would turn to substances to cope (Coontz, 2016).

During this period, we once again see the influence of the cold war. Family members could be investigated as communists or homosexuals on the basis of just about anything, including music, literature tastes, moral beliefs and how the family interacted



with the outside world. “A ‘normal’ family and vigilant mother became the ‘front line’ of defense against treason; anticommunists linked deviant family or sexual behavior to sedition. The FBI and other government agencies instituted unprecedented state intrusion into private life under the guise of investigating subversives.” Because of this, families warned children of wolves in sheep’s clothing- friendly neighbors who could be gay or communist spies attempting to indoctrinate them into moral corruption and treason. “children learned to confine their opinions to the family for fear that their father’s job or reputation might be threatened” (Coontz, 2016).

Wives and children were simultaneously fear mongered *and* tasked with keeping the face of the public family even under heinous abuse in order to not alert the authorities of any malcontent. Children subjected to sexual or physical abuse were trained well to keep their feelings under wraps, and any acts of violence witnessed such as previous mentions of wife battering or assault were kept to the self.

It seems that when sponging away the gentleness of nostalgia, the nuclear family is somewhat of a horror show of the post war boom. Fueled by the subjugation of minorities, even those most “successful” of families usually struggled to hold themselves together under their own crushing dysfunction.

Not to mention that another cornerstone of the 50’s family was based off the obedience, or rather subjugation of wives and children to the man of the house. A trade of financial and social security for domestic abuse and secrecy. Rarely defined by work, it was this “household harmony” that defined a man among the public, “In sit-com families, a middle-class man’s work was totally irrelevant to his identity; by the same token, the problems of working-class families did not lie in their economic situation but in their

failure to create harmonious gender roles. Working-class and ethnic men on television had one defining characteristic: They were unable to control their wives. The families of middle-class men, by contrast, were generally well behaved” (Coontz, 2016).

Women today certainly have more power than they did during this formative time. While no longer lobotomized or forced to undergo electroshock therapy as punishment for rejecting domestic servitude, women are only so emancipated from the nuclear family and marriage. No longer must women be suffered to have a husband co-sign in order to obtain as little as a credit card, resulting in more independence, but again, even those middle-class white women are forced to continue to trade themselves and certain freedoms for the promises the nuclear family can bring.

It is often assumed that modern sexual assault laws in the United States are strict in not allowing men to assault their wives. This is the twenty-first century, we don't institutionalize women as masochists for being beaten by their husbands anymore, and a divorce is normal while electroshock therapy is archaic. And yet that assumption of progress is incorrect. Many states still have separate clauses for spousal rape than for non-spousal rape, the former coming with much laxer punishments. The current state of Connecticut's penal code states that “No spouse or cohabitor shall compel the other spouse or cohabitor to engage in sexual intercourse by the use of force against such other spouse or cohabitor, or by the threat of the use of force against such other spouse or cohabitor which reasonably causes such other spouse or cohabitor to fear physical injury” (*Chapter 952 - Penal Code: Sec. 53a-70b*, 2020). This does not mean that married women who have been sexually assaulted can get justice- it means there can only be the hope of criminal conviction if there is direct and narrowly defined violence. Sleeping

pills, nonphysical injury such as blackmail or financial extortion are all unaccounted for. And yes, even those few who are charged with spousal rape have less harsh punishment than if their wives were strangers. Other states such as Mississippi only charge sexual battery of a wife if it involved sexual penetration, (*2013 Mississippi Code*, 2013) once again leaving more than enough wiggle room to acquit a husband of sexual violence and handing over ownership of a woman's body and safety to him in matrimony.

Of course, higher rates of divorce and lower rates of marriage in the past few decades (Norton & Moorman, 1987) have shown that women are becoming more selective in that legal and emotional power struggle with their husbands. According to previously mentioned author David Brooks, single women are ultimately fairing far better than their male counterparts, so they are increasingly choosing the single life over that of marriage, while their would-be partners now suffer from higher rates of loneliness and depression without a wife to keep tabs on them.

But single life isn't always paradise. Those who chose, or are yoked, with raising children as a single mother are often thrust into a life of chaos and economic struggle without social support (Brooks, 2020). While men find the security of emotional stability with their wives, women find that the security co-child-rearing provides can greatly outweigh the possible costs previously mentioned when one opts out of nuclear family life.

The children of these families however, much like in the formative years of the 50's tend to be put in vulnerable or abusive situations. A cross-cultural analysis revealed that abusive families could be significantly determined by their communal interaction and community bonding. Those families studied who were abusive were significantly more

likely to be isolated than non-abusive families. (Gracia & Musitu, 2003) And when considering the ways in which the nuclear family has cut itself off from outside connection during the Cold War, it is no wonder that over 700,000 children are abused annually in the US.

Over 78% of the children mentioned, listed their parents as their abusers, with only 23% of children 17 or younger actually being able to be investigated due to the same isolation and extortive power of social capital that the nuclear family holds. (National Children's Alliance, 2015)

Isolated family groups that have led to this kind of neglect and abuse for children, has also impacted the same extended family it rebuffs, the elderly, such as grandparents, great-uncles and aunts also suffer under the exclusivity of the nuclear family.

In this family style, the elderly are not considered close kin like they are in extended familial groups. Due to the post war conditions of the 50's when young adults fled the homes of their parents, it grew over the years to become taboo to live with parents past your mid-twenties. Because of this, the 50's style model of family that we so often recreate has given rise to unprecedented amounts of elder neglect and abuse.

Because of their vulnerability, this kind of abuse is often seen as a media trope for giggles. Movies such as *Happy Gilmore* (1996) produce scenes where a grandmother is crammed into a nursing home with the best intentions by her grandson, whenever he leaves, she is thrown around and abused so much so she tries to escape. This is inspired by the real-life fear and tendency for young nuclear families to "push the old mother/father-in-law into a nursing home" as a means to get them out of a couple's hair. There are even programs specifically made for volunteers and animals to visit the elderly

when so often their blood relations can't or won't show up.

The father of family sociology himself met this fate in the mid 1960's.

“Shortly after I first met him [Ernest W. Burgess], he became increasingly frail and unable to live on his own. This led to a situation of profound irony. This giant of American family studies, who had never married and had outlived his biological kin, had no family to take care of his needs in his declining years. He had lived with his sister, also unmarried, for almost 40 years until her death. In early 1965, he quietly checked himself into a neighborhood board-and-care home for the elderly, which turned out to be in deplorable condition. Discovering this, Bernice Neugarten, Robert Havighurst, and other University of Chicago faculty arranged for his transfer to the Drexel Home for the Aged. He died there in December 1966 at the age of 80, without family except for the "fictive kin" represented by the warm care of the Drexel Home staff and his University of Chicago colleagues” (Bengtson, 2001).

The House Government Reform Committee found that one in three nursing homes abuse their elderly patients. While the most common form of elder abuse are financial abuse and neglect, an ABC article goes on to explain how the elderly can often be physically battered, having their rights abused by physical restraints or subjected to borderline torture. Some spokespeople for elder care facilities have said that this kind of abuse is in fact inflated for the fact that staff has to report anything and everything from one patient hitting another. (Ruppe, 2006) But between government investigations, anecdotal reports, and the ever-looming fear of winding up in a nursing home by the average citizen in their twilight years, it seems to hint that the abuse is attempting to be

swept under the rug.

It is indeed the same exact isolation that entraps young children with abusive parents that excludes the elderly and leaves them to be neglected and battered by underpaid, under trained and under-surveilled nursing home employees. The nuclear family already struggles enough with its own dysfunction, fighting to exclude others as a means to have control, and privilege. It does not seem to have room for the keen eyes of elderly family members who could provide resources and social capital to children and wives who could otherwise break away from their own toxic scenarios.

While many US citizens have been fed media and social normalization that the nuclear family is the wholesome face of America and what should be striven for as an adult, one can clearly examine the cruel discrepancies that show the nuclear family to be an exploitative and resource hoarding cultural phenomenon.

### Part C: Alternatives to the Nuclear Family

So, what might be a better alternative than this post WWII phenomena? If the nuclear family is based off white, patriarchal heterosexuality and isolation, is the only answer then a polyamorous LGBT family run by a non-white matriarch?

Of course not. Although families like this do exist, they are not the only way to rectify the damage done by the nuclear family. (Although societal fear about this kind of family is irrational, it also shows fundamental prejudice against these groups, let alone when smashed together.) So, if the nuclear family is so unsustainable, maybe it's time to look towards something different.

There are several exceptional alternatives that could (and do) have books and books written about them, mostly consisting of indigenous family structures that have been pushed to the far corners and reservations of the world. It is here that I would like to mention that it would make my year to research and give space to Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) in this paper and to discuss their non-colonial family styles and the way non-white families have harbored harmony in the face of violent colonialism. But as a white student in the middle of a pandemic and its consequential movements to uplift black and indigenous lives- I do not think it is my place to take the time and effort of those individuals; or attempt to use their experience for a personal assignment. Instead, I would like to uplift the voices of those BIPOC who have already written about their lives and families and plan to list several recommended books at the end of this paper for those who would enjoy further information straight from the source.

That being said, there are other family alternatives that I have both the credibility

and the enthusiasm to discuss for this paper, such as those that fall under Intentional Communities (ICs).

Intentional Communities (ICs) are not as self-explanatory as they may seem. While these *are* groups of people who come together with the intention of mutual cooperation, the ways in which these groups form, as well as operate, are entirely unique depending on the specific IC being discussed.

It could be argued that your average nuclear family is technically intentional- don't families come together with the intention of cooperation? The kids can't choose their parents, but that's within any group. So, couldn't remarried couples and stepfamilies or even extended families be considered intentional? Aren't those purposeful communities as well?

While under some rare circumstances and technicalities, a single or extended family could possibly be seen as an intentional community; The definition of an IC ultimately rides on the loose requirement that there be multiple people from *multiple families* working together to intentionally create or organize their own cultural space.

Despite the uniqueness of each individual IC, there are three umbrella categories under which they can be put under. 1) Building Together, 2) Sharing Everyday Life, or 3) Serving a Common Ideal. (Korpela 2012) *Building Together* usually describes those groups that would come together to help friends, neighbors, or even strangers to build their *personal* spaces, such as homes, studios/galleries, an apartment complex, or other significant mediums without the intention of necessarily sharing that space/item. *Sharing Everyday Life* however tends to focus on *community* spaces and fraternity from sharing them, such as community kitchens, gardens, pools, play areas and even co-living where



more than one family or individuals share a home. These are often called communes as they communally share resources, and even more so, they share their labor- such as cooking, cleaning, and child/elder care. There is a sliding scale for these communities' involvement of course, one does not have to be all or nothing. In the U.S., many citizens have a shared plot of land and individual housing for their families with maybe a community tool shed or pool, but do not share any labor. Other communities like in Helsinki, however, have shared common areas, saunas, shared labor for cooking and child-rearing, with only private bedrooms and bathrooms.

Finally, there are those ICs based off of *Serving a Common Ideal*. These can be religious groups like monasteries that have existed for centuries, or the much more recent Eco-Villages and Eco-neighborhoods in the US. All ICs based off a Common Ideal are built with a community-based goals, not just to share life but to share life towards a specific purpose. Sometimes these ICs are one economic entity sharing all expenses and income, while others are more private, like a much more friendly and “green” neighborhood. The aforementioned privacy scale also applies to these communities and their individual rules. One IC could be more rigid than a nunnery, or only as strict as a Homeowners Association or Parent Teacher Alliance depending on the ideology served.

It is both this kind of *Community of Ideals*, as well as the *Everyday* commune that we will be referring to primarily, focusing specifically on co-living arrangements as well as eco-villages and other more modern ICs.

So why communes over say, extended family- which has been shown to have significantly more positive aspects than negative? (Harrigan, 1992)

Because, while no family system is going to be perfect, it should be noted that in this same study there were self-reported negatives as well. Have you ever discussed the holidays with a friend who seems to dread the inevitable interaction with toxic family? The overly drunk uncle or the nosey cousin who interrogates you on every moral characteristic? While tangible resources and closeness were a plus in all the intergenerational families interviewed- there was also significant relationship stress and issues with privacy. This family style comes with its own unique set of stress while providing little solution to the *structural* issues of oppression explored in the last section. Although it does provide some relief to individual stressors such as economic tension and elder/childcare- it does not provide solutions to more serious symptoms of isolation that the nuclear family brings.

In a similar vein, it seems intuitive to include LGBT families in this paper because they lay outside the norm of the typical nuclear family, and are a hotbed of controversy considering that same sex marriage has only been legal about five years in the US. But the LGBT community is not so simple to pin down- while it could be categorized as an intentional global community that creates temporary spaces (such as their popular pride festivals), as well as lasting structures such as youth homeless shelters and trans medical care offices It is more complex than an IC. The LGBT community is an *ideological movement* around the world- and while having everything to do with love and family, same sex/trans couples are often too intertwined with typical nuclear family politics for a paper about its unsustainability. Although some LGBT family types could be technically considered ICs, the LGBT community itself is a global political movement- and much harder to pin down than small pockets of tangible communes such

as eco-villages and co-living arrangements.

So then, what about the ICs we *will* be discussing?

As mentioned, this paper will be hashing over ideologically based communities as well as everyday style communities- specifically those that are well established and share labor and common living-spaces/items like the co-living arrangements in Helsinki Finland.

Helsinki is home to several co-living programs, but one being currently built, called Casa Malta, is one to focus on. Set to be complete by 2025, it is built with the intention of community and resource sharing in mind. Casa Malta is a multi-story apartment complex with 61 flats, restaurant quality community kitchens, shared saunas (a Finnish tradition), multiple living areas with fireplaces and even a rooftop greenhouse. There are few amenities at this complex that one would not *want* to share.

Casa Malta is an Intentional Community in the physical- conceptualized by a group of old friends who worked with the city to build the apartment complex- and with fair rent prices to boot.

With the growing area being home to over 6,000 jobs and public transport to help get people where they need to be, the complex could be dubbed a future paradise. But why would this building be a possible antithesis to the nuclear family? Why is a shared kitchen and a garden so important?

If we are to look back at the ways the nuclear family has failed us- with LGBT parents and children discriminated against, domestic abuse, child and elder neglect, homelessness, depression, and the stress of single-parenthood all common due to isolation; a space built to share and connect becomes crucial.

Not only is the factor of isolation and the upward mobility of social capital taken out of the equation, but accountability and equity are added- creating an environment where the community members can flourish. While the nuclear family is a structure that relies on exploitation to survive- a community can only sustain itself with a number of diverse participants present and willing to share their skills and labor. While a nuclear family can easily hide domestic abuse, a black eye is much harder to conceal when walking past a group of people just to get to the kitchen. An LGBT child can, and is often, thrown on the street with no family to turn to when made to just rely on immediate family, but in a community of 61 families such as Casa Malta, there is bound to be somebody that will take them in with little fuss- and there are always familiar common room couches and community dinners to attend for further support.

Instead of elders being left alone all day in abusive nursing homes, an adult child can have their own living space next door and visit often without stress. Community meals offer aid to those who might not be able to make dinner themselves- and the socialization keeps the mind sharp for those who may be at risk of Alzheimer's. (Arkin 2007)

Not to mention the shifting schedules of work and retirement mean that there is probably somebody who can help with childcare- a teenage neighbor who needs some extra spending money, a grandparent who wants to spend more time with their grandchildren- a stay at home parent who wants to share their sewing, cooking, or other crafting skills with their younger peers- resulting in less stress for single parents who must work with more reliability. This also means more social capital and resources for everyone involved and more eyes attuned to fellow neighbor's needs and habits.

Not to mention the possibility of resource sharing, such as clothing swaps, skill shares so that not only does a person get their laptop/plumbing/car fixed by a neighbor, but in the process can learn to maintain their own items and teach others. Those with special interests are able to express their knowledge to others and feel like valuable members of the community. And of course, the low rent price means an IC isn't just a playground for the wealthy but a way for those struggling to gain social capital and a network of support.

Of course, co-living won't fix everything. If introduced widespread to the US, buildings like this would not single-handedly stop racism or ageism or poverty since colonialism and classism have such deep roots. But instead of re-creating a nuclear family that helps reinforce these structural exploitations, an Intentional Community could create pockets of abundance for diverse groups and help to instill a cultural identity not based in the familiar rat race of, "every family for themselves" but give a sense of personal belonging and worth.

And since by no means are humans perfect or well-behaved, there are considerable obstacles that are unique to these Intentional Communities.

When interviewing an American Eco-village located in central Texas, Mrs. Shawnda Clawson- a sort of representative of the IC named Earth Mother Studios- she briefly mentioned a situation between past members that resulted in a large loss of land and consequential falling out of part of the community. This led me to ask the question- what struggles do communes like Earth Mother and others face? And do these internal issues outweigh the benefits? (Clawson, 2020)

One thing many people seem to think first when pointing out community life is

their fear of conformity and the possibility of cultish behavior. But upon further reading on ICs, it seems one of the main issues listed within communes is quite the opposite. A commune member by the name of Lee Warren writes very clearly about the sibling-like squabbling and differences of opinion on how their respective group should be run and the way conflict impacts their daily lives. (Warren, 2019)

In the same vein, much like those who have fled from small towns with a lack of privacy, a main complaint is that everyone knows everyone else's business. Unlike with a nuclear family, one has to be vulnerable to the group in an IC instead of privately dealing with an issue, which can be much more comfortable and require less emotional energy. Among other issues listed by Warren in her community was the prominent lack of relationship skills, classism, and even unresolved trauma that comes from working closely with others.

Warren found that newer members tended to struggle with a large learning curve while getting used to something as different as her Eco-village, but an especially hard curve is the one associated with communication skills and group dynamics. America runs on an individualistic "pull yourself up by your bootstraps" mentality that makes things like playing nice with others a little difficult. It's much easier to get things done when you don't have to consult with other people first, and although not as bad as a decade's long argument over a candle, such as Ayn Rand thought might happen- working with a community to accommodate everyone can be very slow and frustrating, and Americans especially are not taught or equipped with how to deal with the frustration that can come from group cooperation.

Even when people learned how to get along, there is a sort of classism that can

divide a group against itself. Of course, while Warren does not refer to classism as we know it financially, she does talk about the ways in which people will divide up into “the talkers and the doers” and how humans gravitate to those most like them and will exclude the rest- causing discord over being ignored or creating a hierarchy of treatment in social settings.

And of course, there's the surprising dynamic of group settings and trauma. One of the main factors associated with whether a person will develop a mental illness after experiencing trauma is whether they will receive support from others. Considering the isolated, secretive nature of our nuclear families, many of those who have trauma find that a transparent social group will uproot all the buried past and bring it to the surface to be dealt with.

“Our culture is pathological: rife with species extinction, mass incarceration, abysmal race relations, rampant misogyny, and no safety net for the most vulnerable, to name just a few of the problems. Anyone who has lived decades immersed in this insanity has a good amount of trauma. Those of us privileged enough to find ourselves in an intentional community often imagine that our environment will be free of the horrors and evils of the world. But alas, we bring it all with us. And what’s more, we tend to bring it into our relationships and groups at full volume. Each person is psychologically integrated only to the extent they have done the work to unwind their issues. Groups push all our buttons at one time or another. In my example of the failed agricultural plan, so many factors were at play including an immature governance process, triggered people, and an inability to navigate towards whole systems thinking due to lack of

skills and larger context” (Warren, 2019).

Another red flag that has sprung up along with the popularity of communes and Intentional Communities- not surprisingly, in our modern capitalist world, there are those that seek to commodify the concept of community- green-washing both the nuclear family and the concept of ICs to make them compatible with consumerism and exploitation- run by wealthy elites.

One of these is the Eco-Village of Ithaca New York. Their “Welcome to Ecovillage” homepage states that “Our mission is to promote experiential learning about ways of meeting human needs for shelter, food, energy, livelihood and social connectedness that are aligned with the long-term health and viability of Earth and all its inhabitants.” (*Ecovillage at Ithaca*, 2020) which is all well and good... accept that they charge over 260,000 dollars to live in as much as a small 2-bedroom home and extravagant rent when their exclusive community is accepting new members.

While filed under a tax-exempt nonprofit organization owned by Cornell (called the Center for Transformative Action) projects like Eco-Village are not 501(c)3 organizations themselves- meaning that while all the funding from their initial funding must go towards “charitable causes” (*Fiscal Sponsorship - CTA*, 2020) such as building an ecovillage for the greater good of a community- profit can still be made. Even if the convoluted business aspects of Ithaca Eco-Village were not the case, the requirement to pay over 200,000 dollars to participate in an eco-centric community is a way to greenwash a wealthy playground and is funded by an Ivy-league college. This is a pitfall not because it is easy to enter these kinds of organizations, but because they are the most visible and tend to make common people believe they must be wealthy to seek the



belonging and resources of Intentional Communities and co-living. Such that community living is seen as cheap hippy garbage- unless one is willing to pay for the luxuries associated with the upper class, so people continue to turn to the nuclear family over and over again thinking it is their only option.

And yet all of these problems seem relatively solvable compared to the outright violent happenings that birthed the nuclear family.

In comparison, Mrs. Shawnda Clawson from Earth Mother Studios talks about the importance of community in the face of the modern world. “We left our core values behind, family and hearth,” referring not just to the family of parents and children, but the familial bonds with those in our circle, “Tribal, Village, these are two words that are important, they need to be brought back” (Clawson, 2020).

Describing everyday life for those at Earth Mother, Mrs. Clawson elaborated that the dozen or so individuals who live on property function under a resource-based economy- a type of system where all basic resources are a common heritage of the community. And while not sharing every meal, things such as tools, skills, time, and labor can be asked for without the need for monetary compensation. Everyone works a certain number of hours per a week to keep things maintained- and while saying her own nuclear family life is “the same as anywhere else,” she also mentions that Earth Mother has been relatively unaffected by the Pandemic. “this hasn't been a crisis for what we do here.”

While any community may have its problems with privacy and communication- Earth Mother included with its disagreements- what this specific IC shows is that during the COVID-19 Pandemic, the inhabitants were sufficiently self-sustaining in a way

everywhere else has been sucker punched. While many have become gravely ill, lost their jobs and end up impoverished or homeless, the tribal inhabitants of Earth Mother were able to share resources in order to uplift and protect each other while standing a distance away from illness. And they have done so not just with their problems in tow, but in spite of them.

Even with the news that there are communities seemingly safe from COVID-19, uprooting and moving to Helsinki or spending a chunk of time tending to a community's needs may seem unattainable without the help of wealth to soften the blow. But luckily there are innumerable smaller alternatives that can help generate the kind of stability found in ICs since not everyone wants to, or can, take the leap.

Take co-mothering as an example. One of the issues discussed in the last section was that of the stress put on mothers both single and married. Co-mothering is fairly simple to implement, all it takes is two or more mothers that decide to share labor and resources to better live their lives and support their children. This doesn't necessarily require a big move, a shift in lifestyle choices, irritating community meetings, or lots of cash.

Two women, Ashley and Tia have come together as a perfect small-scale example of Intentional Community,

“Ashley and Tia have been best friends for the last ten years and have embarked on marriage, career and motherhood journeys in parallel lanes. When both of their relationships took a bit of a turn — Tia's marriage began to reach an end while Ashley and her boyfriend decided to take a break to work out some of their conflicts — they decided to move in together with their children to save on a

New York City apartment” (Marr, 2018).

Instead of commissioning a building from scratch or moving to an existing community, Ashley and Tia decided to create their own slice of commune by joining together with the explicit intention to “be each other’s line of defense when dealing with parental ups and downs.”

It is this example of co-mothering that illustrates there are even small ways to introduce community to one’s life. That it is possible to lift the stress the nuclear family puts on mothers and children through cooperation and the sharing of labor and social wealth. The two not just sharing a living-space but childcare, meal prep, and more so that they can balance work, kids, and the self all at once. Something seemingly impossible for single mothers due to the resource hoarding of the simple family.

### Conclusion and Final Notes:

Intentional communities fill one more role that is hard to summarize- and that is the feeling of *belonging*. The stress of one's worth being weighed against the physical scale of how much cash you can produce per hour is back breaking. When we know we are valuable to our tribe- because who else would supervise Sunday school? Or prepare the recipes for dinner three nights out of every week, or tend the garden with the biggest strawberries every year- or *because so many people would notice if we were gone*- we cultivate a feeling of home, of value and belonging. Humans have survived for so long as a species because our ancestors learned to work together- so much so that we created languages from nil just to make it easier.

The nuclear family on the other hand is one of several tires on a vehicle built in exploitation- and is rewarded for being in good working condition. The extreme isolation of the simple family provides an easily manipulatable market of people who will continue the western abuse-cycles of colonialism, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, domestic abuse and even poverty- which is a violence all its own.

The nuclear family as we know it might be entirely antithetical to human psychology and healthy emotional connections. And while it's true that Intentional Communities cannot save the world- I do believe that there is something to be said for them creating an enriched- if not a less hostile culture- and is a step to help mend the wrongs the nuclear family has done to vulnerable people. Their widespread implementation (which would require another paper to discuss) could foreseeably create a shift in cultural values and the quality of life. Intentional Communities would have the

means to help spare individuals from homelessness, isolation, single parenthood, and more- all while weaving an intricate network of empathetic individuals with a diverse background of stories and support to guide them in life. Instead of families engaging in a competitive race for survival with other families, a village can come to support a single person and vice versa.

“Oran a azu nwa.”

“It takes a village to raise a child.”

-Nigeran Proverb

### **BIPOC Author List**

Decolonising Indigenous Child	The Stolen Children : Their Stories
Welfare: Comparative Perspectives	<i>Carmel Bird</i>
<i>Terri Libesman</i>	
	African American Families Today: Myths
We Are Grateful: Otsaliheliga	and Realities
<i>Traci Sorell</i>	<i>Angela J Hattery and Earl Smith</i>
All Our Relatives: Traditional Native	The Traditional African Family
American Thoughts about Nature	<i>Mwizenge S. Tembo, Ph. D.</i>
<i>Paul Goble</i>	
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