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"Protect Wisconsin Families"? Rethinking Left Family Values in the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising

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Abstract: This article seeks to rethink the trope of the "working family" so prevalent in contemporary politics, with particular attention to its promise and constitutive limits for the Left. It takes up contemporary socialist, feminist, anti-racist and queer scholarship on the discourse of family, bringing it to bear on the case of "working family" rhetoric in the 2011 Wisconsin Uprising against austerity and public-sector union-busting. Reckoning with the term's racist and heteropatriachal valences, and its centrality in privatising social reproduction, I conclude by considering potential alternative horizons for thinking intimacy, labour, and social citizenship for the intersectional Left.
Resumen: Este artículo repiensa el tropo de 'la familia laboral' que prevalece en la política contemporánea, atendiendo especialmente las promesas y límites constitutivos de la izquierda. Se enfoca en el discurso de la familia dentro de los estudios contemporáneo socialistas, feministas, antirracistas y queer, trayendo a colación el caso de la retórica de 'la familia laboral' en el levantamiento de Wisconsin de 2011 contra la austeridad y las prácticas antisindicales. Calculando los terminos racistas y heteropatriarcales, y la centralidad de la privatización en la reproducción social, concluyo por considerar el potencial interseccional de las perspectivas alternativas para repensar la intimidad, el trabajo y la ciudadanía social para la izquierda.

Keywords: 2011 Wisconsin Uprising, family, social reproduction, race, heteronormativity
Palabras clave: El levantamiento de Wisconsin de 2011, familia, reproducción social, raza, heteronormatividad

"Protect Wisconsin Families"?

This article reflects on the proliferation of the figure of the "working family" in contemporary liberal and even Left politics, using a recent case study from the US state of Wisconsin as a departure point. To begin, consider an image of domesticity from a US political advocacy campaign from 2011 (Protect Wisconsin Families 2011). Donning a light pink cardigan, a svelte, thirtyish, conventionally attractive blonde white woman cheerfully pours orange juice to one of her identical twin sons (around age eight) dressed in matching baby blue sweaters as they enjoy breakfast in a neutral, off-white kitchen. An exhortation to "Protect Wisconsin Families", neatly framed by an outline of the US state of Wisconsin's official territorial borders, shaped something like a mitten, is superimposed over the scene.

That image has haunted me since I first caught a glimpse of it on social media in the winter of 2011. What struck me about it was that it was generated not by

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the Right, but by the state's pro-labour activists. Indeed, "Protect Wisconsin Families" was the name of an advocacy group that emerged to protest dramatic public-sector union-busting, so-called "right to work" austerity measures proposed by the state's Republican governor, Scott Walker, shortly after he took office in January 2011 (Goodman et al. 2011). Having grown up in Wisconsin and spent the better part of my teens engaged in LGBTQ activism there, much of what so deeply affected me about this "working family" imagery and rhetoric was that it uncannily echoed the rhetoric of local and national cultural conservatives. From 2004 to 2006, organisations including the Wisconsin Family Council campaigned successfully for an amendment to the state constitution banning same-sex marriage in the name of protecting the state's families. Such right-wing family rhetoric from 2006 echoed loudly and uncomfortably in pro-labour 2011 rhetoric, on the putative opposite of the political spectrum (e.g. Democratic Party of Wisconsin 2011; Pelzek 2011).

Indeed, although I was and remain thoroughly opposed to Walker's aggressive austerity reforms, I found myself apprehensive about family imagery highlighting normative whiteness, bourgeois domesticity, and normative gender performances re-purposed and recirculated by would-be allies or coalition partners—apprehensive, but not necessarily surprised. For indeed, a bevy of scholars have documented the normatively white and heteropatriarchal character of many of the social citizenship gains afforded by the post-war US Keynesian state, including unionised public-sector employment, as well as the robust contestation of those norms (Canaday 2011; Oliver and Shapiro 1995; Self 2012). Precisely because of such histories of attenuated social citizenship, radical critics have observed, there is a particular alacrity with which a wide range of contemporary actors, including on the broad Left, make political use of the figure of the family in a neoliberal moment (Duggan 2003). Indeed, what Neil Smith (2010:51) suggests of centre-Left concessions to neoliberalism in general could well apply to the neoliberal discourse of family in particular:

> Margaret Thatcher's much reviled yet brilliantly proscriptive assessment that there is no alternative (to free market capitalism) may have become the mantra of the political Right, but it also became the unspoken defeatism of much of the Left who, while we fought it, had no effective response to the dissolution of social choice into market necessity.

The apparent dominance of the figure of the "working family" across mainstream political discourse has led both to renewed socialist, feminist, antiracist, and queer critiques of the family, and to calls for more sustained curiosity about the geographically contingent and specific meanings and inflections of family rhetoric. In contributing to such a heterogeneous body of inquiry and critique, my goals in this article are both scholarly and political. On scholarly terms, I endeavour in this case study to advance theoretical and conceptual inquiry into both the constitutive limits and emancipatory potential of the figure of the working family, and in particular the working mother, by grounding one variant of that figure in the specific material and psychical geographies of racial formation and neoliberalism in Wisconsin. On political terms, and perhaps more indirectly, I aspire to make a modest,

speculative, even polemical offering to the myriad debates currently raging on the broad Left, in and beyond the USA. We live in a moment when long-fatigued debates wrongly pitting class against identity, fierce arguments about the limits of white liberal feminism, and the distinctions between Leftism and liberalism have regained intelligibility in "mainstream" US political discourse (Moss and Maddrell 2017; Taylor 2017). It seems an especially opportune time, then, to critically reconsider the "working family" trope, to ask whether it helps win a world in which public provisioning for social reproduction truly encompasses the entire public, and indeed, to grapple with whether it concedes too much to the very forces of privatization it may appear to oppose (Mitchell et al. 2012).

To those ends, this article proceeds in four segments. First, I perform a brief review of contemporary socialist, feminist, anti-racist and queer scholarship on the discourse of the working family, particularly in its neoliberal and "post-feminist" (McRobbie 2013) iterations. While "family values" conservatism is conventionally assumed to set its sights on gender and sexual freedom as its primary targets, critics have powerfully demonstrated its imbrications with white supremacy and its ideological work in naturalising economic exploitation, both of which are key to understanding family ideology's persistence across the political spectrum. Although I focus on framings of the family within the United States, this review also takes cues from transnational feminist and queer analyses of migrant care work. Second, I provide fuller context on the 2011 Wisconsin anti-austerity uprising, and attempt to situate centre-Left recourse to the trope of the "working family" in US and local material and psychic geographies of neoliberalism and white supremacy. Third, such contextualisation enables a critique of the concessions to racism, heteropatriarchy and neoliberalism that centre-Left "family" rhetoric makes, concessions that attest to the "interlocking" (Taylor 2017) character of class and identity in the privatisation of social reproduction. Finally, and in a more speculative and polemical vein, I will consider potential alternative horizons for thinking intimacy, labour, and social citizenship for the intersectional Left, using examples from the Wisconsin protests and elsewhere.

At least one caveat seems indispensable before proceeding any further. As I have already intimated, the stakes of this critique prove scholarly and political, but also, and inexorably, personal for me. I am a child and a beneficiary of white flight and suburbanisation, and also of public sector unionisation. I grew up in Wisconsin, a state with the invidious distinction of among the most disproportionate rates of mass incarceration of Black people in the country, just outside of Milwaukee, which routinely ranks as one of if not the most segregated metropolitan areas in the United States (Corley 2013; Dale 2016). More specifically, I came of age in a middle-class suburb called Wauwatosa, which remains overwhelmingly white, in profound contrast to the predominantly Black and Latino city of Milwaukee situated immediately adjacent to it. Although I have never voted for Walker, I have known him since meeting him at a neighbourhood block party when I was nine years old, and spent a day as an elementary school student shadowing him around the state capitol in Madison. To make matters still more personal, Walker's union-busting legislation directly affected my family, in particular my mother, who taught nursing at a public college.

I detail such history, both in the interest of full disclosure, and to situate myself in relation to liberal and even Left organisations in Wisconsin whose strategies and rhetoric I critique. As the son of a retired Wisconsin public employee, a product of the state's public schools, and a person convinced of the inhumanity, racism and unsustainability of neoliberal capitalism and US imperialism, it matters profoundly to me that proposals like Walker's be opposed en masse, and that alternative democratic modalities of economic, political and cultural organisation proliferate and thrive. Nevertheless, I approach such political commitments with serious hesitation as an anti-racist queer-feminist *and* as an anticapitalist regarding liberal or Leftist appeals to "working families". It seems crucial to insist on a politics capacious enough to both support public-sector workers, and to give voice to anxieties about the genealogies, functions, limitations, complicities and effects of certain discursive tactics. I offer this article, not as some kind of perverse, cynical indictment of union tactics as hypocritical and worthy of categorical rejection, but in the hopes that immanent critique might help us collectively envision bold, capacious strategies that not only resist austerity and privatisation, but also demand inclusive redistribution and public provisioning.

Focusing on the Family in Contemporary Left Critique

Feminist, antiracist, Leftist and queer critics of the discourse of the family are decidedly ambivalent as to its emancipatory potential. Contemporary feminist scholars such as Wendy Brown (2009a), Angela McRobbie (2013) and Meg Luxton (2015), have all called for a revisitation and reformulation of more longstanding socialist feminist critiques of the family as a site of gendered domination and economic exploitation (e.g. Dalla Costa and James 1972). Angela McRobbie (2013) interrogates the neoliberal figure of the "post-feminist" career woman, one who simultaneously asserts herself at the workplace and fully embraces normative gender roles, cheerfully taking on the dual burdens of full-time paid employment and full-time caregiving under the auspices of "having it all". In the context of precarious employment and an unravelling social safety net in the UK and elsewhere, McRobbie contends, positing such a regulatory ideal proves cruelly out of touch with the ordinary lives of most actual working parents and care providers—but not only that. Inciting working mothers to aspire to "have it all" under a "post-feminist" banner forecloses longstanding socialist feminist insights about how social reproduction could be organised differently in the present, foreclosing dormant potentialities for more feminist futures (see Hashimoto and Henry 2017).

Indeed, although critiques of disingenuous brands of corporate feminism (e.g. Ivanka Trump) have proliferated as of late, socialist feminists have long produced incisive analyses of the constitutively patriarchal character of liberal equality. While it is not within the scope of this essay to review the history of socialist feminist thought, Brown's earlier work offers an elucidating and trenchant synthesis. In her landmark essay "Liberalism's Family Values" (Brown 1995), she argues that the abstract figure of the rational economic individual at the heart of enlightenment liberalism has always been implicitly subtended by the axiomatic exploitation of

gendered socially reproductive labour. More sustained genealogy of the family, Brown reveals, helps to explicate the limitations and frustrations that attend liberal feminist analogies to that (implicitly masculinist) figural rational economic individual. Extending Brown's line of thought in the idiom of queer theory, Janet R. Jakobsen (2005) excavates normatively Protestant European secularism's deep investment in the figure of the married man, supported by a household including a wife, children, and, in many cases, servants. European secularism took hold, Jakobsen argues, in part by privatising religious animosity among Christian men and simultaneously naturalising gendered, racialised and classed exploitation in domestic space. Such a secularised context, she suggests, becomes key to understanding why sexual revolutions in much of the global North have eventuated not in the breakdown of the normative family, but to family's expansion and consolidation as a regulatory ideal.

Indeed, perhaps paradoxically, such excavation of liberalism's implicit masculinism and heteronormativity also helps to explain why the turn to the family has grown all the more vociferous (and not just for some queers) on the broad centre-Left in the context of uneven, ongoing, and contested neoliberalisation. Elsewhere, Jakobsen (2002:50) argues that "family values" discourse:

> mediates between the economy and the "American" nation under contemporary market conditions by offering a discourse that can mediate between exploitation and domination. In other words, family (rather than the state) mediates between economy and nation, and "values" mediates between exploitation and domination.

In the context of a waning or receding commitment to public provisioning for social reproduction, Jakobsen and other queer anticapitalist feminists (Duggan 2003; Murphy 2016) suggest, the figural "family" naturalises the ways in which actual households and kinship structures must pick up the slack; the family's attendant figural "values" ideologically "supplement" capitalism by romanticising relations of hierarchy and inequality within actual families, and between those inside and outside family's privileged purview (Joseph 2002). "Thus", Jakobsen (2002:50) wryly adds, "I don't understand the bumper sticker that says, 'Hate is not a family value' … because hate may very well be one".

The question of family's (hated) constitutive outside—and of intimacies and labours that transect its boundaries—has been in many respects most richly theorised by critical-race feminists, and necessitates a reckoning with family's racial formation and position in racialised practices of social ordering. Indeed, as Black feminists such as bell hooks (1990) have demonstrated, where home or family may figure as a primary site of patriarchal confinement and exploited reproductive labour for white women, Black and other racialised women may experience family as a site of a related yet distinct contradiction. For hooks, family proffers respite and solidarity in contexts marred by quotidian and atmospheric white supremacy—even as it can simultaneously fail to deliver on that very promise of love and solidarity. At the same time, hooks points out, for working-class Black women, the homes of wealthy whites have historically portended a space of work, exploitation, and abuse. Dorothy Roberts (1998), likewise, painstakingly demonstrates how normatively white feminist contestations of the patriarchal reduction

of women to child-bearers and caregivers tend to occlude the ways in which Black and Brown women's freedom to form and maintain families as desired has been invasively attenuated, from the ongoing legacies of transatlantic slavery through to the predations of the contemporary post-welfare state.

Likewise, scholars of migration and domestic work have generated mappings of family as a racialised, classed, and also decidedly transnational category. Migrant care work proves a particularly fraught case study in the geographical rescaling of family and kinship, linking a series of economic, spatial and affective displacements and substitutions. According to one paradigmatic framing of these transformations, the "chain of care" (Hochschild 2003), as more middle-class women in many of the world's richest countries entered the domain of paid work considered skilled or highly skilled, migrant women from postcolonial and postsocialist poor countries have met the demand for domestic and care work in growing numbers, often facing exploitation, attenuated citizenship, and the pain and even shame of separation from their own families to do so. Though persuasive, this paradigm has also drawn criticism from queer scholars, who worry that it anchors its critique of patriarchal global capitalist inequality in the sentimentalised figure of the caring, always already heterosexual third world mother (Manalansan 2008), eschewing the gender and sexual diversity and affective sophistication and complexity of actually existing migrant care workers. Such critique extends provocative and ethically urgent questions about the cultural terms on which such workers contest their exploitation—questions that prove equally salient to reflecting on the rather geographically distinct displacements from US social citizenship that comprise the focus of this paper.

Such thoughtful attunement to the differential social and geographical constitution of figures of the family can lead both to a more thoroughgoing appreciation of the mutually constitutive relations of power that can fix family's meaning, and to more open-ended analyses of family's potentially emancipatory inhabitations and inflections. Thus, although their theoretical anchorage points are quite distinctive, both Heidi J. Nast (2000) and Ladelle McWhorter (2009) perform brilliant analyses of the profoundly racist historical roots of contemporary normative discourses of family in the United States. Nast focuses her attention on the ways colonial and plantation discourses infantilised and continue to infantilise Black people, generating Oedipal psychical economies in which parent–child hierarchies both naturalise racial domination and exploitation, and deeply trouble it. White fantasies that confine Black masculine sexuality to an Oedipal role, Nast contends, both play out and reproduce anxieties about interracial sexuality—anxieties pervasive and persistent in colonial encounters to this day (Stoler 1995). Such racialised fantasies, Nast persuasively argues, have played an essential role in the production of segregated and securitised built environments in the United States, and one irreducible to racism's instrumentalisation by capitalism (see also Shabazz 2015).

McWhorter (2009), by contrast, undertakes a Foucaultian genealogy of early-20th century US racial eugenics discourse and its afterlives. Yet her findings, like Nast's, point to the dense linkages between normative discourses of family and racial domination. As revulsion at Nazi genocide led eugenics to fall out of favour within the "enlightened" US middle classes that had once embraced it, eugenics

proponents sought to find alternative, "meritocratic" discursive proxies for their racial projects (there are, indeed, close links here to immigration policy; see FitzGerald and Cook-Martín 2014). Eugenics advocates found an ample stand-in, McWhorter (2009:248–249) notes, in the figure of the family. Rather than persisting in the use of explicitly racialised language to describe those they deemed fit to reproduce, eugenicists:

> … dropped the talk about inferior and superior races altogether to speak only of superior and inferior traits in America's families. They wanted to find ways to support families likely to produce children who would be intelligent, hard-working, sane, temperate, and moral and to discourage the formation of families likely to produce children who would be retarded, mentally ill, criminal, and sexually perverse.

McWhorter thus reads the infamous 1965 Moynihan report, which blamed putatively deficient Black heteropatriarchal family bonds for the poverty induced by racial capitalism (see Cohen 1997; Ferguson 2003; Kelley 1998), as an exemplary document of the new eugenicist language of healthy family formation. Thus Cathy J. Cohen (1997), asks whether the "welfare queen" might be considered the ethical horizon for a kind of *queer* solidarity, based not on sexual identity alone, but on shared alienation from repressive sexual, racial, class and gender norms. The racial coding of the white family as healthy and productive, in turn, proves a powerful marketing tool for state and capitalist actors alike (see e.g. Cairns et al. 2015).

Not despite, but rather precisely because of these variegated and differentiated histories of figurations of the family, Deborah Cowen and Emily Gilbert (2008) advocate for a more undecided reading of the political uses of the family. Although critical of the ways in which the discourse of "homeland" has been deployed within the so-called War on Terror, particularly the synechdochic slippage between white, bourgeois heteronormative visions of home and those of a nation under siege, Cowen and Gilbert also point to alternative inflections of family that situate it as unknowable in advance. They note the left-wing Working Families Party in the US, which now include chapters in 16 states and Washington DC, and endorsed queer activist and actress Cynthia Nixon's 2018 New York state gubernatorial bid, and the uptake of the Staple Singers' campy disco hit, "We Are Family" (1979) in sexually and racially discrepant polities as modest but promising evidence of the other valences of family that might be put to political work. Indeed, while a vast anthropological and queer literature has quite successfully contested the putative monopoly of bourgeois, white, heteronormative family on kinship (see e.g. Eng 2010), what makes Cowen and Gilbert's gesture particularly insightful is that they point to "minor" inhabitations of the discourse of family that do not seek to replace it with another master language or narrative, but rather to transmogrify the conditions of intelligibility from within (Deleuze and Guattari 1986).

Such a call for a lack of surety about the political valences of family resonates in Meg Luxton's longstanding and recent work on family. Building on the rich tradition of feminist, particularly socialist feminist, critiques of ideologies of the family and their role in the subordination of women and the maldistribution of socially

reproductive labour, Luxton (2015:217) has invited the Left to offer alternative, more capacious and more downwardly redistributive family politics, and called for more careful study of prevailing contemporary ideologies of the family, insisting: "We need research that interrogates the existing political discourses about family. Why do the main political parties focus so much of their rhetoric on families? What is this discourse appealing to? Is it effective and if so why?" Though Luxton's questions vastly exceed the ambit of this paper, I aim in the space that remains to follow her directive to ask after the *appeals* and *effects* of the discourse of the "working Wisconsin family", as well as to consider *alternatives*. To set the stage for such an investigation, I will first provide a bit more context on the 2011 anti-austerity uprising in Madison that sparked my curiosity about the working family trope.

The 2011 Wisconsin Uprising and its Aftermath

Although both private- and public-sector employment in Wisconsin have always had profoundly uneven, highly racialised geographies (Trotter 2007), Wisconsin has historically been understood as a stronghold for organised labour in the United States, and remained so well after the trend of declining union participation hit in the late 1970s. Public sector unions were crucial contributors to that staying power. Indeed, Wisconsin was the birthplace of the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees, and unions representing public sector primary, secondary, college and university educators had long played a powerful role in state politics—until 2011. Like many geographers, I am generally resistant to analyses that focus on a single political actor, or that regard electoral politics as an axiomatic horizon for political organising or analysis. Wisconsin was racked with race, glass, gender and sexual inequality well before the 2010 election; its schools, municipal services, and employment opportunities have long and disproportionately benefitted white residents, and its police, prisons and workfare programmes have long disproportionately criminalised, infantilised, confined and killed Black and Latino Wisconsinites (Corley 2013; Dale 2016). It is nevertheless difficult to exaggerate the impact of the 2010 elections, which ushered in right-wing legislative majorities and Republican Governor Walker, in accelerating the decline in union participation in the state. After spending over eight years cutting mental health, public transit, and park services as Milwaukee County Executive, Walker assumed the governorship, rapidly introduced $140 million in business tax cuts for future budgets, and simultaneously bombarded the media with frenzied news of a $137 million "budget shortfall" for the current year (*The Capital Times* 2011). To remedy this manufactured crisis (Donegan 2012), Walker proposed a "budget repair bill" effectively eliminating the rights of public sector unions to collect dues, and to bargain collectively over pensions and healthcare. It should be noted the legislation, 2011 Wisconsin Act 10, carefully exempted unions representing firefighters and police, a decidedly gendered valuation of "productive" public-sector work (Collins 2017).

Organised critical response to Act 10 was immediate and massive. Affected workers and their allies in student, migrant justice, LGBTQ, and other connected

movements gathered in and outside the state capitol in Madison in the tens of thousands. Democratic legislators skipped town, hiding out in Illinois for weeks to deny labour foes their needed quorum to vote on Act 10. Within weeks of the legislation's introduction, crowds gathered to register their opposition to Walker's austerity measures swelled to as many as 185,000 (Goodman et al. 2011). The protests elicited sympathy, both in local and national media and polling, and from those engaged in rather differently situated anti-austerity struggles across the globe, and have been hailed as a world-historical event by many on the Left. Since 2011, the protests have been the subject of myriad journalistic, activist and scholarly texts. Act 10's eventual passage at the hands of a Republican-dominated legislature led to an unprecedented popular effort to recall Walker from his seat less than halfway through his term. But in a painful defeat for labour advocates and allies, Walker cruised to victory in a June 2012 recall election by an even wider margin than the one that installed him in the Governor's chair in 2010, though many Left organisers in Wisconsin consistently had voiced scepticism, both about the limited capacity of Democratic Party electoral politics to proffer a meaningful alternative, and about the viability of Walker's would-be recall election opponents. After another easy re-election over a moderate Democratic entrepreneur in 2014, Walker exploited his high-profile recall victory as a mandate for his particular brand of austerity politics, and as fuel for his ultimately failed bid for the presidency in 2016.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the disjuncture between the huge and inspiring protests opposing austerity in 2011 and Walker's solid margins of victory in 2012 and 2014, coupled with Donald Trump's narrow victory in 2016, continue to vex and puzzle both liberals and Leftists in and beyond Wisconsin. Again, electoral politics are certainly not the horizon for Left coalitional organising, and election results are often at odds with mass popular movements. Still, there is a painful contradiction between the 2011 protests, which enacted and engendered a powerful and widespread sense of solidarity and democratic possibility in the face of austerity, and the harsh policies, often drawn more-or-less directly from the playbook of right-wing policy transfer vehicles like the American Legislative Exchange Committee (ALEC), that Walker and his legislative allies have pursued (Donegan 2012). Above, I mentioned that the 2010 elections had played a decisive role in recasting the role of public sector unions in Wisconsin politics. Consider: in 1989, 22.2% of waged and salaried workers in Wisconsin were represented by organised labour. Over two decades later, in 2010, that share had decreased by roughly one-third, to 15.1%. Just six years later, the number had decreased to 9% (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2017). The brief period since 2010, then, has seen a 40% reduction in the overall share of workers represented by unions—a far more rapid rate of decline than in the two preceding decades, which saw multiple recessions and disastrous free trade agreements wreak havoc on the state's labour landscape.

I am not interested in offering a causal explanation of Walker's (or Trump's) electoral victories. Instead, I want to trace and critically evaluate local inflections of a key term that popped up relentlessly in the mediation of the 2011 uprising, a figure that organises a wide range of people's claims on and fantasies about the good life, labour and social citizenship—the working family—in the hopes that it

might generate speculative insight into Left strategy, in and beyond Wisconsin. It may well be asked what is to be gained from playing Monday morning quarterback, from retrospectively scrutinising a trope mobilised by the broad Left in a resistance struggle that didn't (yet) eventuate in the kind of world many on the Left might want. My response would be that the 2011 Wisconsin uprising *is not over*, that it in a very real sense remains live and ongoing as long as new interpretations, new meanings, new valences proliferate. In that respect, the 2011 Wisconsin uprising might be approached not as an axiomatic or settled failure, but on terms that Lauren Berlant (2005), drawing from Jean-François Lyotard, has called "keeping the event open". Keeping an event like the Wisconsin uprising *open* matters, because it enables antiracists, feminist, Leftists and queers to refuse to cede the last word on the event to dominant interpretations of the protests—such as Walker's dubious claim to be "unintimidated" by them (Davidoff 2013). Indeed, Wisconsin's frequent invocation in the 2018 teacher strikes across much of the US offer ample evidence of the Uprising's liveness. Better still, having the humility to admit we do not yet and will never finally know or fix the ultimate meaning of the Uprising invites us to revivify our historical and geographical imaginations, to do the listening, soul-searching, self-reflection and dreaming necessary to compose and posit alternative maps of the world as it could and ought to be. Following Berlant (1994:128), what might we yet learn from "occupying history on the ground of discourses of possibility and contestatory experimentation, seen here as modes of *practical* politics"? To find out, we must begin with immanent critique.

The Uprising's Family Values

In a question and answer session shortly after the Wisconsin Uprising, the geographer Ruth Wilson Gilmore (2011) suggested that the protests could enjoy successful national press coverage and reception precisely because of their normative whiteness, and the normative whiteness that suffuses popular cultural imaginations of the American Midwest (as opposed to its lived reality; see Manalansan et al. 2014). A more visibly Black and Brown public employee base, Gilmore suggests, would have figured in national media as an entitled horde of people of colour making unreasonable demands on the state, eliciting longstanding white anxieties about what some have called "the Black state" (Haney-López 2010). Keith Woodward and Mario Bruzzone (2015:552–553), in their theoretically innovative in-person ethnographic account of policing practices at the Wisconsin uprising, concur, noting that normative whiteness and fraught gender dynamics gave contour to the sympathy that many though not all protesters received from law enforcement.

I seek to take such critique a step further. Many on the Left have celebrated the Wisconsin Uprising as an inspiring groundswell of resistance to neoliberalism. Indeed, Wisconsin has been a frequent reference point for making sense of the wave of teacher strikes across Arizona, Kentucky, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and elsewhere in 2018. But few have noted or confronted a thorny and related fact: for many Wisconsin public employees, attacks on collective bargaining

simultaneously registered as failures of white and heterosexual privilege to guarantee continued protection from neoliberal attacks on the welfare state, a kind of exception to neoliberalism (Ong 2006). Indeed, racialised heteronormativity suffused both the terms on which certain subjects understand themselves to be entitled to an exemption from the worst of neoliberalism's onslaught, and the terms on which subjects confront and contest their location within Walker's austere sights. As Hannah Walker and Dylan Bennett (2015) point out, the meritocratic rhetoric of "worthiness" in pro-union appeals participates in a tacitly white supremacist economy, one in which the public sector, which does employ a more equitable share of people of colour, is imagined to be overrun with "undeserving" racialised employees.

I am suggesting that the trope of the "working family" risks additional concessions to a white supremacist and heteropatriarchal view of the public good, and simultaneously, to neoliberalism itself. It may well be empirically true that for many Wisconsinites, "Joe the Plumber [is] living with Betty the Teacher"—i.e. that union-busting does indeed harm many actual white middle-class families of the kind most often figured as ideal-typical Wisconsinites (Collins 2017:103). But the trope of the white family nevertheless fails to offer an adequate case for public provisioning for social reproduction, precisely because of the white family's figural and material centrality in privatising it. Compromises and contestations over the extent of neoliberal reforms are not new, and the exceptions and exemptions that are issued are invariably localised, provisional and temporary. As Brown (2009b) once said of neoliberalism, "the beast is already inside the house". But crucially, if grimly, even the grammars through which the resisting subject insists "enough is enough!" at times evince something more akin to negotiation or triangulation than total negation, revolution, or historical rupture. In the instance at hand, the "working Wisconsin family" has emerged as the key term that attests to and certifies the subject's innocence and productivity, and thus her/his right to lay claim to an exception—long after neoliberalism has come for Others.

Mary Louise Fellows and Sherene Razack (1998:339) helpfully define *innocence* as "the belief that because we are ourselves in a subordinate position, we [and our political strategies] are unimplicated in the oppression of others". In the Wisconsin Uprising, such claims on innocence become crystal clear in the strategic figure of the white mother-schoolteacher. Recall the "Protecting Wisconsin Families" campaign that opened this article (Protect Wisconsin Families 2011). In the domestic scene on the group's logo—of the white mother serving breakfast to her two sons—it remains ambiguous whether the mother in question works outside the home, say, as a public-school teacher, or whether the danger posed to her by the attack on collective bargaining stems solely from her children's public-school attendance. (Since she is serving breakfast, it seems we are meant to assume their education must be on her mind.) And although a single image could hardly be expected to establish as much, this oscillation—between white women as mothers and white women as teachers—proves neither isolated, nor incidental in Wisconsin public employees' efforts to protect collective bargaining rights. Dozens, if not hundreds of signs from the protests speak from a position of plaintive innocence in the vocation of edifying and nurturing children, while at the same

time comically occupying a knowing, stern maternal pose vis-à-vis the relatively young, comparatively undereducated Walker.

What are we to make of this slippage between white heterosexual motherhood and public-sector work? "Within neoliberalism's gendered family values", writes Rebecca Dingo (2004:174–175), "women's roles are both public and private since their familial reproduction and enacted personal moral convictions (perhaps executed through social and political organizing) is tethered to securing national cultural values". Indeed, the "Protect Wisconsin Families" image presents us with a particular geography of social reproduction. As McRobbie (2013) points out, the middle class, professional white woman who does it all, even if she can't quite have it all, who pulls a double day without complaint, comprises a specifically neoliberal permutation of the white maternal feminine ideal image.

Yet crucially, at stake here isn't simply just the superordination of a respectable white middle class femininity, as though in a vacuum, but also the active disavowal and abjection (Kristeva 1982) of criminality and thuggery—terms profoundly coded as Black, particularly in Wisconsin, which, as mentioned earlier, has among the most disproportionate Black–white incarceration ratios in the country. When conservative political actors, like Governor Walker, and personalities, like Sarah Palin, Michelle Malkin and Rush Limbaugh sought to taint the Uprising with the imputation of "thuggishness" and criminality, unions, and particularly teachers unions, deftly and playfully responded with the broadly diffused quip: "Do I Look Like a Thug?" Variations of this slogan popped up on homemade signs and tellingly feminised pink pins produced and distributed by several teachers unions, including my mother's chapter of the American Federation of Teachers.

Imputing teachers, and public-sector workers more broadly, with "thuggishness" proves a decidedly multivalent right-wing tactic. To begin with, "thuggishness" centrally connotes theft, having derived one's livelihood through the illegitimate dispossession of others; this valence thus reverberates with the libertarian and right-wing populist caricature of public sector workers as "tax-eaters" (Collins 2017; Cramer 2017). As Walker and Bennett (2015) suggest, such language also constitutes a kind of dog-whistle gesture to the fact that the public sector, because it is less discriminatory, employs a more diverse workforce, consolidating the racist and anti-public image of a greedy "Black state" (Haney-López 2010). What might it mean, then, for public-sector workers to *disavow* the thug?

In my view, a defence of organised labour that mobilises white femininity to dispute right-wing insinuations of "thuggishness" further fleshes out the analytical utility of Nast's (2000) account of the psychical character of the racialisation of space. As noted above, Nast argues that colonial discourses historically understood racialised colonial subjects as without and outside civilised family structures. Thus, Nast argues, all racialised subjects, whether adults or children, figured in colonial imaginations as infants, relative to the paternal authority of white men. Consequently, Black men appear—and are experienced psychically in the bodies and unconscious of whites—not as full human beings but as incestuous sons, menaces to the purity of white mothers and daughters, who must be castrated in the name of maintaining civilisation and preserving the integrity and virility of white paternity. For Nast, such erotically charged racial anxieties—and not only

the logic of capital accumulation—in turn animate the production of space, including spatial processes like criminalisation, mass incarceration, and the privatisation of social reproduction.

Nast's account proves elucidating when considering the geographies of race and class in Milwaukee and Wisconsin. Since at least the widely publicised political organising by Black Milwaukeeans in the 1960s, Wisconsin's economic, social, and cultural politics have been organised around an imagined diametric opposition between two putatively discrete spaces: the white, heteronormative, suburban or rural family home, on the one side, and the criminal, dysfunctional and Black city of Milwaukee on the other (Walker and Bennett 2015). As Katherine J. Cramer (2017) notes in her careful and sustained study of everyday political opinion-making practices in rural Wisconsin, white rural Wisconsinites feel a profound sense of resentment over abandonment by the state and by capital. Both everyday practices of opinion-making, and right-wing populist political actors like Walker and former governor Tommy Thompson, Cramer suggests, have effectively redirected such resentment away from elites toward *other Wisconsinites* (cities, public employees, people of colour) using racially and geographically coded idioms. "In this way", Cramer (2017:18) writes, "many appeals that are labelled populist rarely cut against the grain of society or against the grain of elite values". What I am suggesting is that the family is one such racially, geographically coded term. In this racialised spatial schema, Black, criminal Milwaukee comprises the Wisconsin family's constitutive outside, its condition of permanent psychic and economic insecurity, the menace that always keeps the fantasy of the family home just beyond reach, just beyond realisation. Black masculinity, routinely coded in the proxy languages of "thuggery" and "crime", is imagined as a key source of white Wisconsinites' anxieties, and constitutes the main target for the resolution of those anxieties.

The bodies of Black women, likewise, have served as targets for intimately connected and vicious forms of racialised anxiety and antipathy. Wisconsin played a prominent role among localised laboratories of so-called welfare reform, a profoundly racialised, sexualised, and gendered neoliberal project. As Brenda Parker (2015:120) puts it, "Milwaukee, and Wisconsin more broadly, are home to some of the most conservative foundations and strictest workfare programs in the country". Indeed, Wisconsin's W-2 or "Wisconsin Works" programme was hailed as so "compassionately conservative" it won its architect, former Governor Tommy Thompson, a Bush administration cabinet post. Where Black men are cast as threats to the working Wisconsin family due to violent, criminal behaviour, Black "welfare queens" (Cohen 1997) and their children are cast as cheats who live off the largesse of increasingly overburdened and overtaxed working Wisconsin families. Together, these gendered, racist tropes—of dangerous, poorly parented men, on the one hand, and lazy, "tax-eating", failed mothers, on the other—work to justify both the criminalisation of Blackness and the aggressive privatisation of social reproduction, processes that converge in Wisconsin's especially punitive workfare programs. Indeed, Parker (2015:124) highlights that Wisconsin's workfare programme supervisors disproportionately sanction Black women when compared with white women, depriving them of a full day's pay for such "infractions" as visiting a doctor or caring for a sick child. Such racist tropes and

practices utterly belie the rich and contested histories of Black women's work, paid and unpaid, in Milwaukee, including in industrial employment, labour and housing organising, political leadership, the service industry, and small business entrepreneurship (see Hashimoto and Henry 2017; Moten 2016; Parker 2015), yet they endure, in part because they are animated by irrational but persistent, structured, and shared racialised fantasies (Nast 2000).

Reconsidering the figure of the working Wisconsin family and its respectable white working mother spokeswoman in light of its constitutive relationships to the thug and the welfare queen returns us to Gilmore's (2011) suggestion about what made the Wisconsin protests so intelligible, so affectively salient within local and national political cultures. I would suggest that efforts on the Right to conflate union organisers and their allies with "thuggishness" failed, in part because the collapsing of the thug, coded as Black, masculine and urban, with the exalted white mother-schoolteacher, conflates positions that are structurally opposed in local and national political cultures and psychic registers. Asking "Am I a Union Thug?" from the position of the white mother-schoolteacher gave the lie to the Right's smear campaign—not through interruption or exposure of the discursive technologies through which certain bodies are rendered more thuggish than others, but disavowal and abjection. In short, the imagery and rhetoric of working families, and the recourse to white middle class women's innocence as a kind of immunisation from accusations of criminality, relies upon an affective economy of meaning, and what Berlant (2000:43) would call a "structure of sympathetic normativity", that remains profoundly heteronormative, racist and classist.

Such imagery clearly concedes a great deal to the Right on *cultural* terms. But just as important, and as McRobbie (2013) suggests, such tropes ultimately makes for disastrous class politics as well, precisely in leaving untroubled the "pro-work, pro-family ideology" (Murphy 2016) that consigns social reproduction to the private space of the (white, middle-class, heterosexual) home. Indeed, even if the Right *failed* in calling a bunch of mostly white teachers thugs, it seems to be laughing all the way to the bank. As Walker and Bennett (2015:198) put it in an incisive reading of newspaper discourse in Wisconsin surrounding Act 10: "Even pro-union liberals, with the rare exception … enjoy a race-free defense of their worthiness as workers, thus reinforcing the theme of labor worthiness that triggers the latent whiteness of the anti-union voter." My reading adds gendered and sexualised dimensions to that antiracist and anticapitalist critique, pointing to the centrality of figural white femininity and domesticity to such fantasmatic economies of merit, respectability, and worth. This figure normalises the cultural domination and economic exploitation of a range of racial and sexual others, seeking to leverage its cultural dominance for an exception from the worst of class exploitation—but not only that. Ironically, in making such an appeal to innocence and respectability, and reifying the binary between those deserving and undeserving of social citizenship, the figure ideologically consolidates the capitalist exploitation of heterosexual white women workers as well.

What has yet to emerge in the examples I have considered here is a more thoroughgoing case for the public good, a robust commitment to public provisioning for social reproduction on substantively inclusive, downwardly redistributive

terms. By way of conclusion, it seems crucial to consider what less respectable inflections of the kinship and social citizenship might look like, both in critical response to austerity politics, and in imagining a future beyond it.

Toward "Slutty and Lazy" Futures?

It is vital to acknowledge that although some troubling patterns did emerge and predominate, the symbols and sentiments circulating at the Wisconsin Uprising were richly multifarious and contestatory. Many claims were far less hygienic than those appealing to the working Wisconsin family. Radical, racialised, queer and trans activists played a key role in high school, college, graduate student, and teacher organising. Disabled scholars and activists showed up in force at the capitol, despite it being a very inaccessible space; one contingent using mobility devices cheekily referred to themselves as "Wheelers against Walker" (Peers et al. 2012:154). Among my favourites was a sign that scuttled innocence, worthiness and merit as metaphors for state obligations in a scene of social citizenship, and instead renamed social provisioning as a matter of negotiated, pleasurable, consensual exchange, asking, "Why can't we be friends with benefits?"

At the time of this writing in April 2018, the teachers' strikes across much of the US South and Interior West may well offer glimmers of hope, insisting on the public good for its own sake, and shirking more neoliberal public appeals anchored in respectability or innocence (Goodman and Shakih 2018). Yet as critics, organisers and thinkers might eagerly read the uprising and those that have followed for more radical and intersectional permutations of anti-austerity demands, I would suggest that a thoroughgoing critique of the dominance of the working family trope remains crucial. I want to end with a little deliberate provocation: What would Left politics look like if people didn't need to be working, didn't need to be white, didn't need to be respectable, and didn't need to have recognisable and officially palatable kinship structures in order to access non-exploitative conditions of life, including the reproduction of life (Mitchell et al. 2012)?

There is certainly an intellectual and ethical genealogy to support such a line of inquiry. Black queer and feminist scholar LaMonda Horton-Stallings (2015) turns to the works of James Boggs (1968), the Black anticapitalist American revolutionary, and anti-work feminist scholar Kathi Weeks (2011) to consider what it would mean to displace "productive" waged work as *the* basis for conferring or denying human worth and survival, to imagine a future without or beyond work, in which bartering and other forms of exchange displace waged work. Horton-Stallings focuses on sexual cultures, particularly Black sex work cultures, for alternatives to the waged work economy.

Another, resonant answer might come from the Canadian queer comedian Julia Stretch (2008), who concludes some of her performances by recounting an uncomfortable conversation:

> A woman I know sat me down a little while ago and told me that she thought that I was slutty. And I said, "Well, no, cuz I really haven't gotten that much action lately—I mean, I don't think I am."

> And she said, "Yeah, but you're not trying hard enough."
> So she's calling me slutty *and* lazy! Like, that hurts: "You have no moral fiber *and* no work ethic." That *hurts!* Oh my gosh.
> And I had to really take a hard look in the mirror, right, cuz who knows you like your mom?

To be sure, any politicisation of "sluttiness" must contend with the profound racialised, classed and queer baggage of the term. As the recent controversy over the Toronto SlutWalk attests, access to "slut" as an object of reclamation proves profoundly uneven, striated by a range of intersecting relations of difference and power (Black Women's Blueprint 2016). Yet in this regard, Horton-Stallings offers a dazzling model that synthesises Black feminism, anticapitalism and sex-positivity, cognisant of the limits of the more normative forms of any one of those idioms without the others, yet insistent on not throwing any proverbial babies out with the bathwater.

What might it mean for the "slutty and lazy"—both those *wrongly* imputed with sluttiness and laziness because of a range of oppressive stereotypes, *and* people who are in fact empirically slutty and lazy—rather than the working, deserving, waged, white and familial, to be understood, not as idealised images or exemplars of anything in particular, but as figural ethical horizons that must not be sacrificed in bargains with heteropatriarchy, racism or neoliberal austerity? I gesture to such ethical horizons, not to advocate an abandonment of actually existing working families as such, but in the hopes that subsequent writing, thinking and organising will continue to take up the task of imagining more capacious alternatives to neoliberalism than the "working family" trope makes possible. Concluding on such a speculative note may frustrate the demands of normative conceptions of "practical politics"—yet it is the grim, unimaginative invocation of "practical politics" on the broad Left that incessantly returns us to the "working family" trope in the first place. Both sobriety about the limits of existing strategy, and a willingness to be changed by entertaining seemingly "frivolous" or "minor" alternatives, seem crucial first steps in what Marx (1963) famously called the poetry of the future.

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