Families: Extended and Fictive Kin, Racial Socialization, Diligence

When I see what has happened to children today, the importance of family to the survival of black people over the centuries and decades becomes more—becomes clearer to me than ever. When you consider that African Americans had nothing but their family and their church—the government not only didn’t care about them but was working against them—and you see what’s happened to so many black children today, then you have special appreciation for your own family.1 —Eleanor Holmes Norton

Eleanor Holmes Norton, in talking about her family, remembers that the back door and backyards of her grandmother and her aunt faced the backyard of her parents’ home, allowing her to run back and forth all the time. She was able to know her grandmother and her cousins intimately, living in an extended network of family members. She credits her grandmother, especially, with setting a standard—and doing so in a way that reflected wisdom. Returning from the errand that sent her to a local store to buy lamb chops when she was a mere seven years old, her grandmother said:

“Eleanor, tell me about how you got him to give you these chops.” This was when the Safeway had an actual butcher behind the counter. And I said, “Well, he asked me which did I want, and I said, ‘I don’t want that one, I want this one and this one.’” … In the summer and spring after school I would often sit with my grandmother on the front porch and there were some orange and green chairs, rocking chairs, and we’d rock and everybody goes by, [she] knows everybody, and you pass the news of the day. And the news of the day for days running was, “Let me tell you what this child did today. Well, I sent her to the Safeway and the man—she’d never been before—this was her first time. And when it came to
choosing lamb chops and you know how difficult that is to do,” she would say, “This is what the child said—” Now, here I am sitting there rocking with grandmother, looking at her, listening to her brag on me that way… She told other people about it. And somehow that said to me, “Well, my goodness, that’s a standard.” I think it said to me that is a standard I must try to meet more often.²

Holmes’s story tells us a lot about black families and the strategies they developed for nurturing children. In this chapter, four leaders who come from very different kinds of family structures credit their families or specific family members for their own successes. As they reach back to their own memories of growing up, they remember the values they were taught and the support they received. They recognize the personal strengths that evolved from family relationships. They talk about support systems and the powerful internalized messages delivered by family members and others that helped them endure the implications of racism in America in the late twentieth century. Their memories and their stories are invaluable for fully understanding the African American experience in both sociological and historical terms. Their experiences corroborate some of the existing literature on ways in which ethnic subsocieties develop adaptive measures to both survive and excel.³

In many ways, their stories are inconsistent with the bulk of sociological, psychological, and historical research that focuses on the decline and failures of the black family in America.⁴ In fact, some of the personal stories shared reveal family patterns that today would be considered dysfunctional. What was it, then, that these individuals point to as being so critical to their upbringing? What was so different within their own experiences from the vast literature today that suggests that black families are in deep trouble?

The family experiences of Amiri Baraka, Carol Moseley Braun, Yvonne Scruggs Leftwich, and Clarence Thomas form the centerpiece for this analysis of black family life. The reflections of numerous others supplement those of these central figures.⁵ On the surface, the four primary figures could not be more different in terms of careers chosen, family structures, economic comfort, regional limitations, and sociopolitical values. Yet that is precisely the point for selecting them. For beneath the apparent differences, they remark on aspects of their family teachings that may well be more important.

All credit their families first and foremost for providing the ground beneath their feet. They recognize the ways they benefitted from a combination of love, support, discipline, toughness, understanding, and high expectations. These are the values that all healthy families support. But focusing on such aspects of family life would not highlight the most salient lessons that emerged from a collective analysis of stories shared.