

An American Marriage – *'till the law do us part*

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INTRODUCTION

Ever since the initial imports and implementation of African slaves on US soil in the 1600s, the black body and its identity has constantly been negated and negotiated by the dominant white American – and in 2019, it still is. At present, the US currently has an African American population of 13% against a white majority of 76% (American Census Bureau, 2018). Despite the fact that race-based discrimination and segregation was formally outlawed in the Civil Rights Act in 1964, with other government initiatives such as Affirmative Action instilled to help tackle racial inequalities, racism is still at an all-time high in contemporary America. Then, what are the internal and external structures negating the experience of being a black family in 21st century America?

This paper seeks to investigate the means of which various structural forces of race, gender and socio-economic class negate the black family and its individual members' experiences of agency and selfhood; both from external, formal structural forces such as the state, law enforcement and the white majority, as well as inter-black tensions of class and ethnic loyalty. As noted in the introduction of Andrew Billingsley's "Black Families in White America", black families have been *"largely mistreated, ignored, and distorted in American scholarship in part because of the absence of general theories guiding studies of American families"* (Billingsley, 1968). By combining the research and sociological works of Billingsley's aforementioned text, as well as various essays and studies of Robert Staples' "The Black Family", this paper aims to combine hard facts and statistics with theoretical frameworks of the dynamics of black family and gender

in the context of "An American Marriage" by Tayari Jones.

The book deals with the issue and impacts of racial-grounded mass incarceration, reflecting a contemporary US where a majority of black men find themselves at mercy of the American justice system. Black men are continuously racially profiled, rooted in a common misconception and persistent stereotype of being more violent, aggressive, prone to violence and drugs (Rusher, 2013). The "State of Black America Report" from 2007, referenced in "Facets of Black Masculinity" by Taylor and Francis, reveals that *"16,5% of the black male population had been to prison, as opposed to 2.7% of white men"*, as well as *"young black males between the ages of 15-34 were nine times more likely to be killed by firearms"* (Taylor&Francis, 2007). By extension, by putting these African American men in a precarious state in the hands of the state and law enforcement, the extended family and community is further threatened by insecurity and instability, resulting in a state of "black anxiety" as they try to navigate their lives in a progressively more politically and racially polarized America. Additionally, there is inter-black tensions in terms of racial loyalty and class-loyalty to be addressed. This paper aims to analyze the intersectioning layers of gender, class and race, in the context of loyalty, roots and community within the context of "An American Marriage". By analyzing the protagonists and the way in which they interact with one-another, as well as the supporting characters response to their uynion, my aim is to point out the various layers of gendered, racial and class-vulnerabilities within the black family and community.

The goal of this paper is to argue how *An American Marriage* serves as a metaphor for the irony of black marriage and family life in America, in that – despite taking place in the so-called “land of the free” with several apparent tools for social advancement at their disposal, there are still several structural and intersectional fragilities outside and within the black community, limiting its upward mobility and making the black family and its community members as precarious as ever before.

This paper will investigate the internal and external factors governing the family and its members in terms of prescriptive gender roles and the modern myth of the American Dream. It will investigate the layered tensions between the different generations, as well as the members of opposing social classes, and the power dynamics that are involved in the formation of their perceived identities and aspirations. Next, the internal tensions within the black communities in the form of social class will be explored through the main protagonists’ backgrounds and aspirations, and finally, the immediate and extended impacts of African American mass incarceration in America and how these themes ties into this book serving as a fictional-but-realistic bibliographic reflection of the experience of being young and black in America.

Racialized anxiety and its dynamics

“*An American Marriage*” is a contemporary novel written by American Author Tayari Jones, published in 2018 by Algonquin Books. The story revolves around middle-class couple Roy and Celestial, who find themselves at the hands of society’s racialized injustices, with Roy being wrongfully convicted of a crime he did not commit. The

central themes are focused on the strengths and weaknesses of the modern family unit and marriage, the effects of incarcerations and of tensions within the black community and families. The story is told, at first, through a first person narrative in which the main characters, Roy and Celestial, take turns explaining their stories, experiences and memories of certain events to the reader. Following the incarceration, the story is told through letter-exchanges with Roy Jr, Celestial, their lawyer Mr. Banks, and Celestial's father, Mr. Davenport. After Roy's release, the story resumes its original format, now with Andre, Celestial's childhood friend, added in as a third direct narrator. By using the first-person format, the individual characters are able to appeal to the readers' sympathies directly and indirectly, arguing and defending their case and point of view – exposing the subtle nuances of subjective memory and perception, based on the characters' point of view and emotive thought processes. One of the main themes of this book is the perception of love and marriage, with its utility and pitfalls, and what it means to be a family, especially through notions of fertility and parenthood. Statistics referenced in Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "The Negro Family: A Case For National Action", points out that one quarter of all Black families are headed by women – and that nearly a quarter of urban black marriages are dissolved – statistics that is consistent with the makeup of the various family units of "An American Marriage" (Moynihan, 1965). For example – hadn't Roy's mother met Big Roy, she would have been part of the single-mother/matriarch statistic herself. In some cases, the two combine – as evidenced with Andre's mother, divorcing his father at 7 years old and raising him alone. Even

with Celestial's upper-class family, we observe how Gloria, Celestial's mother, initially broke up Mr. Davenport's former marriage in order to be with him. The families of "An American Marriage" show that these families are vulnerable, as these disruptions take place in all levels of socio-economic class (from Roy's lower-middle class socio-economic background to Celestial's upper-social class). This wide spectrum of family dynamics and formations further points out the discrepancies and instabilities faced by the black individual and its family, negated by forces of gender and socio-economic class. Following modernization, a push for racial equality and a perception of increased opportunity for the black individual to supersede their class and socio-economic background, there is perhaps an even heightened sense of anxiety in terms of "performing white" for the sake of breaking such cycles of instability and poverty while still remaining true to one's roots. This could perhaps be considered a particular modern African-American anxiety in which, on paper, the black individual is now offered and allotted close to the same opportunities as other Americans (in theory), though the glass ceiling of systematic racism, with its extended domino effect of disrupting education, employment and family stability, in reality, makes this ideal less than achievable – as we see with the disruption of Roy's upward mobility due to the racialized nature of black incarceration.

This begs the question of the irony of the title - steeped with ambiguity as to whether it is meant to be read as 'American Marriage' as a noun phrase and a singular unit, or perhaps as an adjective – what connotations does 'American' have to the

average reader? Freedom? Choice? Opportunity? As evidenced in this book – perhaps, not so much.

Notions of self and family

Professor of Sociology and leading authority on Afro-American families, Robert Staples, argues that the family, as an institution, is a basic element of black social organization and of considerable importance for the history, present status and future of the black community. (Staples, 1994). He further argues that the black family dynamic has adapted as a unit, carrying among the conditions faced by black people – for instance being a “*strong and resilient institution*” in harsh times, and weakened under stresses and strains of relative “prosperity” or group unity. He attributes this family disruption to a variety of factors, such as economic deprivation (citing that the average black family income is 56% of that of the average white family) and an artificial off-balance black sex ratio (due to factors such as high mortality rates among black men due to early deaths, incarceration or military conscription). Factors like these result in an increase in female-headed household and a narrow role for black men to fill. However, with the advent of modernity and human rights advancements, the ‘American Dream’ is still alive and well – particularly among the minorities of America. According to Reniqua Allen’s “It Was All a Dream”, the myth of the American dream particularly persists in the black community, in which 62% of those surveyed stated they were on their way to achieving the Dream (as opposed to only 42% among white millennials) (Allen, 2019). The myth of the American Dream – being a working

man/woman with a stable and happy family, may be the most poignant double-edged sword of our times, particularly in terms of the black community – it gives them a false hope, and perhaps a sense of performance-anxiety, in which ‘anything is possible’, only to be crippled by the structural glass ceilings of wealth inequality, stagnating wages and increased difficulty *“even for Americans at any level to move above the social strata they were born into”* (Allen, 2019).

Roy is of a lower middle-class background, alongside his mother and step-father. Immediately, starts arguing for his social mobility despite his socio-economic background of Elie, Louisiana, referencing how his parents worked “too” hard and how they managed to live in a safe block. His socio-economic insecurities shine through when he references their home, gifted to them by his wife’s parents, as being willed *“only to her”* (p. 12). The fact that he never met his biological father serves as a massive insecurity to him, as he becomes (in part) part of the statistic and stereotype that African American families of lower socio-economic standings are broken and unstable (whereas his wife has a solid, stable family unit which he immediately amounts to their wealth). Roy himself keeps making references to the material goods he has acquired through climbing the ranks, such as his gold cuff-links and flying first class on their honeymoon, as he is introducing their success story to the reader. He is also eager to prove his education and his sexual appeal, as made clear in page 10: *“I enjoyed a little flirtation, what they call frisson”*. Likely due to his humble background, he is eager to be liked, wanted and desired – which is how he justifies *“collecting phone numbers like (he) was still in*

college" (p. 10) – a source of physical and mental validation for him as desirable.

His notion of being a good husband and man, is to "sit his woman down" – to provide enough for his wife to live a comfortable life. He earns the reader's loyalty and sympathy by being noble and hardworking, facilitating his wife to act upon her dream of running a full-time business of her own in the private sector, rooted in her art. This notion of 'sitting his woman down' mirrors his old Southern values, his roots at the courtesy of Roy Sr., while still giving her the economic freedom to be an entrepreneur of her own. When he becomes incarcerated, he gets emasculated in that he now no longer can provide any material goods for his wife to evidence his love and commitment to her, as seen in his letter to Celestial on page 59, where he clearly expresses his state of distress: "*You don't know how demoralizing it is to be a man with nothing to offer a woman (...), so many dudes in Atlanta with their Atlanta briefcases and Atlanta jobs and Atlanta degrees..*". This mirrors what Staples argues is the narrowly confined role of black men (in a majority matriarchy-centered black family) where the man's role is confined to that of "*economic provider and family leader*", both of which he is removed from (Staples, 1994). Now; all he has in able to perform his role as a husband is pen and paper, emasculated by his inability to provide for his wife, as well as providing a stable base on which to start a family on. However, even in jail, he tries to validate his position through climbing the internal ranks among fellow inmates, utilizing his penmanship and upper education to obtain something akin to a promotion. He attempts to validate his existence and efforts inside, reminding Celestial that he is now a '*relative white-collar*

worker', and that she still has *"your upwardly mobile husband. In here, I'm white collar. No need to be ashamed"* (p. 66), highlighting his performative anxiety on behalf of Celestial.

This is immediately followed by his closing note in the letter questioning whether or not Andre was there, foreshadowing his suspicions of his wife's fidelity and loyalty. The question of whether he is right for demanding Celestial to wait for him for twelve years, or if it is selfish, is called into question.

The reader's conflicting loyalties in terms of who to sympathize more with manifests in Celestial as well – finding herself torn between being an artist or a prisoner's wife – in a duality that is wholly 'either-or' for her. In the book *'Black Women, Identity and Cultural Theory'*, Kevin Everod Quashie dabbles with the concept of liminality and selfhood : *"... The tension between coupling, on one hand, and solitude, on the other – a me and an us"* (Quashie, 2004). The question of whether she should wait it out, staying truthful and celibate until Roy's release, or to move on as a working woman and new wife is further negated by her biological clock ticking (an issue men do not have to regard, as they generally stay fertile for most of their life). From a faithful girlfriend and wife, suddenly seemingly turning her back on him upon incarceration – we as readers become conflicted. The Celestial the reader is acquainted with – the strong and faithful, loyal and compassionate wife, now loses favor in our eyes – until she justifies her actions by the means of her social image, career (and the particular racialized link between the two) and her biological clock. We see this manifest in the particular craft in which she is involved with – making dolls; and babydolls at that. The

dolls are used as a means of her coping with her abortions – initially, her first abortion (by force) and later, her second (by circumstance); showing that even marriage doesn't serve as a guarantee for a stable family life, due to the disruptive force of the State. This potential was violently intercepted by the American justice system, wholly on the basis of Roy being black. The abortion drove a further divide between the two, seeing as Roy (and his parents) had eagerly been anticipating Celestial's pregnancy throughout their entire (brief) marriage – mentions of a 'Roy III' (p.8) and qualities that *will 'make her an excellent mother'* (p.8). To Celestial, the duality of their respective abortion and incarceration, is referenced as them *"bearing two different crosses"* (p. 55), juxtaposing the two traumatic events. Making babydolls may also give her some sense of agency, a more renewed coping mechanism, in making up for her own lack of biological fertility due to her troubled relationships and loyalties to her men – making little manifestations of a future she herself potentially could not have.

Even Celestial herself seems crudely aware that a baby would be the source of validation needed for Roy's parents to accept her – forcing her to act upon her fertility in order to be accepted into the family. Upon Roy reflecting that Celestial 'looked right' – their separate roots and origins demarcate them, at least in the eyes of the generation before them. *"There is only one thing that will win me any ground with your mother (...), she looks me up and down like I might be holding her grandbabies hostage in my body"* (p.7).

Further, she's entrapped by the concept of having all her ducks in a row, all the factors needed, to have a baby – in place; a burden that immobilizes her from having a say in

postponing pregnancy; *"Is motherhood really optional when you're a perfectly normal woman married to a perfectly normal man?"* (p. 40). Because of their ideal marriage and circumstances, they would be able to break the negative cycles of disrupted or illicit families that their previous generations were founded on. This is perhaps why the selective abortion Celestial had, was such a defining breaking point for the two of them. She could technically carry to term, she had a supportive network eager to help, but the ideal of a nuclear family and fathering the child of an inmate, being part of yet another statistic, debilitates her. To Roy – he was robbed of fatherhood, his main aspiration and goal beyond a good career, and that Celestial didn't trust herself nor his extended family (Olive and Big Roy) enough to carry the child, which he referenced previously as wanting to name 'Future' (p.8), to term. As for Celestial, her entire identity as an artist would be compromised by the fact that she is the 'living widow' of an incarcerated black man, locked up on violent (false) charges. This image would then overshadow her artistic achievements and aspirations, ultimately hindering her entire career trajectory. However, the reader gets conflicted in their sympathies towards Celestial when it's revealed she used Roy's incarceration case, a baby doll dressed in prison blues, to win an art contest – without mention of Roy nor his case, under the excuse that it was *"so personal that I don't want to see it in the newspaper"* (p.64). It can be argued that this was a mere excuse for the sake of profiting off of a modern day living and breathing tragedy – such as her husband. He points out her hypocrisy, that her shallow guise of *'wanting to raise consciousness about mass incarceration'* was not doing anything for the real cause –

for instance for the man dying the other day for not giving him his insulin (p. 65). Parallels like these show the conflicting discourses of the protagonists, rooted in their gendered experiences and expectations in terms of performative roles and fertility, in the name of marriage and its sanctity. In a gendered perspective of this performative burden, Celestial mentions that *"women's work is never easy, never clean"* (p. 285), showing how the burden of womanhood – of being able to, or having to, mend a man, at the expense of another. These men are using the women in their communities as strongholds, as homes, as comfort – compromising, or perhaps confining, their roles to that of a caretaker, a comforter and a sense of home. She references *how "guilt seeks through the cracks in my logic"* (p. 111), subjecting her previous husband to another state decree through making their divorce official, while shifting her romantic dedication to Andre – now a woman with *"both a husband and a fiancé"* (p. 111). She becomes yet another homewrecker, like that of her mother before her. Additionally, she suffers the burden of *'repaying the universe'* on account of her multiple abortions (p. 55) through her dolls, comforting crack babies, and finally herself, and eventually – making a political statement with her incarcerated, award-winning doll.

Towards the end, in their second round of letter exchange after their formal separation, Celestial mentions that she doesn't *'want to be anyone's wife'* (p. 304), perhaps due to the weight of the burden placed within such a role as she experienced during her brief marriage to Roy – where she was expected to be chaste, loyal, supportive and fertile in order to bring on his family name further. Rather, she references her new

relationship with Andre as "*a communion*", which perhaps has more of a sense of agency to her, having lived through an unsuccessful marriage. Roy has also shown significant growth in terms of his definition of what it means to be a family – stating that, with his new wife, "*she and I are enough to be a family. If you need a kid to keep you together, then how together are you?*" (p. 305), pointing out the shallow heteronormative ideal of having a child for the sake of validating one's relationship. He references his new wife as being a sense of 'home' (p. 306), evidencing that an emotional bond and sense of validation can truly go beyond the material manifestation in the form of a biological child. This ending shows the new and emerging family systems within the black family, now more alternative as opposed to that of the traditional husband-wife-child unit of the new generations; mirroring perhaps a cyclical tendency of the unstable family units of the generation before the protagonists; Roy's mother was abandoned as a pregnant teenager, with Big Roy taking Roy in as his (non-biological) son, Celestial's father was already married upon meeting with, and impregnating, her mother – meaning the destruction of one family unit for the sake of another. Andre's parents divorced when he was at the tender age of seven – and a nasty one at that, leaving him and his mother abandoned for the sake of his father, Carlos, starting a new family elsewhere. Davina, Roy's lover and new wife, also had a runaway father – paralleling both Roy and Andre's experiences with absent biological fathers. All these side stories prove how the cycles tend to repeat, that even amongst the newer generation, there's no such thing as a truly stable and ideal family unit.

Us versus them – the strains of social class

Another layer of conflict in this story is the backgrounds of the two characters in terms of their families and their respective formations. Roy's family is founded on old Southern values of a working husband and a doting stay-at-home wife, prompting him to want to supersede their social class as they have had to work "too hard" to make it by, reflecting the distressed political economy of suburban black family life (here, represented in Eloe, Louisiana – the last state to ratify the Equal Rights Amendment, and ranking 47 in the nationwide equality index, courtesy of USNews. His way out was his educational attainment at Morehouse University in Atlanta – symbolically a historically black college (which serves as a powerful metaphor when juxtaposing the student body with the number of black inmates). There's no coincidence in the temporal setting of the novel – in the aforementioned nationwide equality index, the state of Georgia (also aptly Celestial's nickname due to the sense of 'home'), ranks 12th with a significantly smaller income- and education-gap compared to that of Louisiana. Georgia, with its historically black colleges and higher equality rates across the board, thus serves as a metaphorical launching board into Roy's American Dream – only to have his race cut him off short despite all its efforts – proving the hypocrisy of the Dream.

Meanwhile, Celestial is from a pedigree of new money and dual-income earners, with both her parents in respected positions pertaining to education – ironic, as it is, given that Black individuals from the South (like Roy) have the lowest levels of

educational attainment nationally (Allen, 2019). Roy's narration persistently points out this fact, particularly with that of a working mother; *"Her mother worked in education, not as a teacher or a principal but as an assistant superintendent to the whole school system"* (Jones, p. 17). He juxtaposes Celestial's parents, as 'a hard room' with his own family, '(a piece of) cake'. The distrust and the gaps between these two families and their respective backgrounds become clearer when the issue of marriage is brought up; *"Roy, with his aspirations raw and pink like the skin under a scab, made my father like him as a person but not as a husband for me (...) 'I respect his ambition; I had mine. But you don't want to spend the rest of your life with a man who has something to prove'"* (p. 175). Even Celestial's father, having come from a somewhat humble background himself, is skeptical of an 'outsider' and his raw ambition – signaling class distrust, even of a fellow black man.

After marriage, as they go to visit Roy's parents for a family, Celestial also points out how she feels self-conscious around his parents – proving herself worthy as a wife and daughter in law despite her high educational attainment and career trajectory which opposes their traditional Southern values. This cold front is further emphasized by Olive's initial greeting veiled as a near-accusation of *"Celestial, I hear you're famous (...) Why didn't you tell us you were making waves in the world?"* (p. 15). This commentary is almost spiteful of her career, and/or her lack of communication with them. The distance between them further deepens when Olive, Roy's mother, offhandedly dismisses her career of making thousand-dollar dolls for rich people. Celestial bites back, subtly, by pointing out that her dolls are real art, unlike the African-inspired

prints on their walls – showing yet another gap in the aesthetics and views of the generations and their classes. Between the two of them, Celestial and Roy try to reconcile the inherent gap in their socio-economic backgrounds by bonding over the fact that both their parents were involved in illicit affairs leading up to their marriages, showing that neither of them are immune from a disruptive family system, despite their apparent modernity and higher class (Celestial) and ‘traditional’ values (Roy). Their marriage, then, is a hope of breaking this aforementioned negative cycle of illicit foundations and corrupt family backgrounds. Prior to their marriage and dating, the two also bonded over their racial loyalties in terms of dealing with white people – reconciling in a racial ‘us against them’ and a shifted power dynamic of Celestial being a server and Roy being a seemingly important business-man. We notice an inherent hostility towards him in her inner dialogue, she points out that he was the only person of color among a party of eight – accusing him of being ‘that’ kind of brother (page 232) – alluding to a racial traitor that discards his racial heritage and acts ‘white’. The subtle racism of the white crowd becomes evident when they disregard her as having a ‘yankee accent’, likened to *“the verbal equivalent of the rebel flag”*. Roy regains ground by ensuring her that he is merely using them for profit, that they were all business, and that, in turning back to Roy, they were ‘a team now’. A similar kind of bonding over the ridiculous hypocrisy of ‘white folk’ is seen when Olive expresses incredulity over someone dropping over 5000 dollars on a doll. This racially grounded alliance serves as a common ground for the characters, disregarding their backgrounds and classes, as a

mutual framework from which they have all suffered from to some extent.

This mismatch of backgrounds, values and beliefs are aptly metaphorized in the form of Celestial's father's tree experimentation, where he grafted a limb from the woods onto a dogwood tree in their garden. The fusion took two years, with lots of burlap and twine (external forces) to fuse the two together, and even then – it was an unnatural and eerie thing to behold. The tree may represent the marriage of the two, in how Roy was brought in from 'the woods', or someone off their territory and of a more rustic background, and grafted into the family. The tree took two years to fuse, to form a solid connection, which was shorter than the duration of the consummated marriage between the two. This, perhaps, proves that their marriage was not mature enough to last – that they were torn apart too early to be properly fused together. Even if they had properly blended, Roy would still be rendered as some unnatural addition to the family and the composition of it all, due to his 'foreign' background in terms of location and locational background of Louisiana. The tree itself is even referred to as "something not quite natural (about the tree)" (p. 193), perhaps signifying the inevitability of their marriage's failure.

Incarceration and racialized anxiety

The disruptive force of mass incarceration and gendered, colored anxiety appears both explicitly and implicitly in several aspects of the book, and across a plethora of characters – reflecting its omnipresence in real life. One of the gendered aspects is revealed in the aftermath of Roy and Andre's fight, wherein Celestial tries to

justify her moving on while Roy was incarcerated. In an attempt to flip the script, inquiring about whether he would wait for her if she was set to be locked up for five years, he answers, condescendingly, that "...*this shit wouldn't have happened to you in the first place*" (p. 283), referencing that the mass incarceration is a directly male problem – and only involves women by extension. This is further accentuated in Roy's letter to Celestial, where he mentions that, among 'fifteen hundred men in this facility', a majority were black men (p. 44), paralleled by the amount of male students at Dear Morehouse, a historically black college. This parallel truly emphasizes the racialized nature of American criminal justice, where mass incarceration robs several black men of higher educational opportunity in colleges such as Morehouse – all due to systematized racism.

Even in the court of law, Celestial mentions that not even a co-ethnic, a black juror, would be her husband's saving grace – proving that there is no true sense of community and sympathy among the black community if they have been corrupted by the means of the white legal system (the one that prosecuted him without further investigation) – "*not even the black lady juror would look at me*" (p.39). This sense of betrayal, particularly in a community that has been rooted on a sense of brotherhood and sisterhood throughout the years, proves deeply traumatizing to Roy. The point is driven home by Celestial reflecting; "... *No black man is really safe in America*" (p. 39). Upon such a violent encounter with the justice system, Celestial experiences an emotional and spiritual emancipation previously assumed she was shielded from due to her higher

social class. Upon reflecting on Roy's sentencing, she mentions having faith in 'those' days, prior to this event – "*I believed in things*" (p. 37), showing the pure innocence of Celestial's experience of being black, previously untainted by such a violent incident on the account of her, and her partner's, race.

Celestial herself displays several instances of intersectional internalized racialized behavior, such as in the court room when she found herself *too* articulate and too well spoken (p. 39), not 'localized' enough as a southerner to be believable. This, perhaps, is symptomatic of her black upper-class upbringing, prizing articulation and eloquence to prove oneself as educated and eloquent as her white peers. Now, this learned behavior is working against her favor in the court of law – where she's too 'white', too composed, to sound convincing in order to save Roy from imprisonment. There's also the imagery of racialized memory within Celestial's reflections of the arrest; "*What I remember as kicking in the door, what everyone else remembers as opening it with a plastic key*" (p. 40) shows the conflicting narratives of victim versus perpetrator. Her bodily memory also manifests in a metaphoric comparison of them laying side by side; '*parallel like burial plots*' (p. 40), a powerful mental imagery emphasizing how one's life and death, when black, is truly at the hands of the racialized authorities and the state. This newfound anxiety and racial realization is mirrored in her usage of past tense of having faith '*those days*' and "*I believed in things*" (p.37), her now being subjected to racialized violence despite her social status – evidencing that no black individual is safe from the racially stratified legal system of the US.

Even Andre, a secondary but major character in the story, displays features of this racialized anxiety. He points out that his 'conspicuous skin' paired with his high class vehicle was the immediate object of suspicion, requiring him to act beyond appropriately. This reflects the general distrust between the public (particularly that of the black community) with law enforcements such as police – 23% of those killed by police in 2018 were black (229 people), many targeted because of racial profiling and accidental shootings in the cases of, for example, being pulled over (Washington Post, 2019). He details how having a Mercedes M-Class as a black man had gotten him pulled over half a dozen times in the last three years, even to the point of being slammed against the hood at one point (p. 203). He points out that not even in Atlanta, with its seemingly racially equal and representative environment, was he safe from racial profiling.

Even within Louisiana, even children are profiled and fall victims to the criminal system, with Davina's son, at 16, being caught on a weapon's charge and charged as an adult. She pointedly states; *"I don't know what's worse, police or everyday people"* (p. 203), pointing out the disconnect between law enforcement and regular people – and even the disconnect between regular citizens themselves. The bodily memory of violent encounters with law enforcement manifests in Celestial, when police are called during Andre and Roy's fight – despite one of the officers being a black female, and thus a supposed ally, she tenses up significantly yet speaks with *"perfect eloquence"* to neutralize the situation to the best of her ability (p. 282). As she aptly puts

it in her letter to Roy; "There's no appealing a cop's bullet" (p. 43).

CONCLUSION

An American Marriage represents the black contemporary family in that it is governed by external factors of negating them, such as institutionalized racism and structural glass ceilings. These factors enable a cyclical tendency, and perhaps a paradox, of how the family gets more disintegrated the more superficial opportunities and equality is offered. Roy and Celestial's marriage serves as a metaphor for the fragility of the family at the mercy of a reckless and relentless legal system that benefits the majority and further suppresses the minority. This suppression, in turn, results in a further convergence of a 'we versus them' mentality, bonding the Black Americans together in their shared racial experiences of racial profiling and suppression. However, this bonding is disrupted by the internal strains of social class and supposed loyalty to one's background and the self-imposed conviction of realizing the mythical American Dream. Tensions arise between the working class and the middle class, and having to prove oneself while staying true to one's roots and background proves to be a source of anxiety and perhaps even a breaking point for the characters depicted in this book. The book emphasizes the various experiences of a broken family, a mended family and a new family – with the gendered and socio-economic burdens of the individual experiences, to elevate their socio-economic status (Roy) or to surpass their gendered expectations of mother versus working, black professional (Celestial). Not only are the external factors, such as a dominant white majority and racial stratification, negating

their experiences, but also inner factors such as policing gender and accusations of race loyalties govern the interactions and experiences between the average Black American navigating the myth of a 'new America' where anything is, supposedly, possible. At the end of the day, this story serves as proof that no black individual, regardless of their hard work, dedication, loyalties or socio-economic class, is safe from the iron fist of the American justice system, and that its implications, paired with the myth of the American Dream, proves a dangerous (perhaps even life-threatening) obstacle for the average Black American to succeed.

The story challenges the reader to consider the structural limitations and externally/mutually imposed glass-ceilings that the modern black American has to grapple with, as well as challenging the notions of morality and loyalty through depicting intimate and relatable characters in (unfortunately) realistic scenarios not too far removed from the average reader. It challenges the notion of choice and agency, as well as persisting stereotypes and shifting values among the modern society alongside the persistent, sluggish American Dream – causing us to question; does the American Dream indeed do more harm than good? Is America really all that great, all that free, and all that good? Despite all its advances and developments – it may just, indeed *still*, depend on the color of your skin.

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