

Hidden Heirlooms: Black Families and Their Stories of Continuity

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Introduction

On my wedding day, I wore a pair of cream slingback high heels that belonged to my grandmother. These shoes were not only my ‘something old’ to assure good luck and lasting love, but they also represented a history of disenfranchisement and mobility that is part of my family’s legacy. They embodied the hard work and subsequent payoff my grandmother often spoke about to members of my family. My grandmother was one of a handful of women machinists who worked for Caterpillar Inc., a tractor-trailer and heavy equipment company. Monday through Friday she wore steel toe boots, t-shirts, and jeans. Her hair was always either cut short or pulled back, and her safety goggles were planted securely on her face. During the work-week, she wore the uniform of a manufacturer, one responsible for assembling some of the largest machinery of that time.

However on the weekends, when she was not working overtime, she showcased another part of her persona. This elegant side sewed beautiful dresses and treated my mother and me to Saturday morning brunches and shopping. It was also the side that had the most impeccable taste in high-heeled shoes. I consider my grandmother’s shoes an heirloom because they epitomize a type of cultural capital within my familial context. They hold value and signify an ethos that is rooted in perseverance and reward. My grandmother’s shoes are dimensional and showcase how much my family has blurred boundaries and maintained an appreciation for aesthetics, even within harsh environments that call for austerity.

In the most traditional sense, an heirloom is a tangible artifact that is passed down from one generation to the next. My work in the academy has exposed me to the ways in which varied disciplines have endeavored to understand the importance that heirlooms play in cultural transmission. For example, museum studies provide a rich look into what constitutes an artifact, the circumstances that deem it valuable, and how artifacts represent people, places, ideas, and

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moments in time.¹ Research in anthropology offers a long tradition of investigating heirlooms as a specific type of artifact.² This work has advanced our understanding of the indelible ways temporality, culture, and memory can elevate the status of an object.

One might think that my own discipline of psychology would offer extensive investigations of heirlooms as well. However, that is not the case. In fact, the aims of this essay intended to address the gaps in psychological analysis and heirlooms, while providing a multidimensional view of family heirlooms; demonstrating how familial identities can be understood using an artifact like an heirloom; and highlighting conceptions of heirlooms and identity within the context of Black families.³ Rooting the project in the stories of Black families is significant because it acknowledges the history and current reality of racism and disenfranchisement that have often stifled more dimensionalized analyses of Black people. I believe heirlooms are wealth that have a propensity to shape how we can understand Black peoples' legacies and their possible futures. They can validate the ideas, events, and objects that Black families revere. In essence, heirlooms are currency or capital that can buoy our identity.

I've struggled with the ways the Black families have been studied and represented in much of academic research. Illustrations of the Black family in social science literature have historically focused on paradigms that emphasize fragmentation and pathology.⁴ These studies painted a bleak existence for families and often relied on government statistics and national data pools that did little to elucidate antecedents and explanations for the trends that were reported. Furthermore, they often inadvertently blamed Black families for the conditions that they faced without looking at the causes of racism, the policies that keep Black families in opportunity gaps, and the stereotypes that prevent diverse views of Black existences.

This essay, like more current social science research, continues to push for more texture in how Black families are characterized.⁵ We now have more nuanced analyses of why Black families continue to lag behind other racial groups. Our present understandings of Black

¹ Elaine Heumann Gurian. "What Is the Object of This Exercise? A Meandering Exploration of the Many Meanings of Objects in Museums," *Daedalus* 128 no. 3 (1999): 163-183.

² Nicolas Césard. "Heirlooms and Marriage Payments: Transmission and Circulation of Prestige Jars in Borneo," *Indonesia and the Malay World* 42, no. 122 (2014): 62-87; Elizabeth Hallam and Jennifer Lorna Hockey, *Death, Memory, and Material Culture*. (Oxford: Berg, 2001); Michael B Schiffer, and Andrea R. Miller, *The Material Life of Human Beings: Artifacts, Behavior, and Communication* (London: Routledge, 1999).

³ In this writing Black is used as a unifying term representing the experiences of people throughout the African diaspora. I use the term Black as an homage to political and social agendas that underscore the conditions of African diasporic people. There is a tremendous amount of diversity within the category of Black. However, there is a rich history of commonalities (See Hilliard, 1995 and Smitherman, 2000). In any instance where a specific group of Black people signifies the majority, or when a participant specifically self identifies, such as in the case of African American, that term will be honored.

⁴ Franklin Frazier, *The Negro Family in Chicago*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1932); Daniel P. Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (Washington, DC: US Department of Labor, 1965); James T. Patterson, *Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America's Struggle Over Black Family Life: From LBJ to Obama*. (New York: Basic Books, 2010).

⁵ Angela Hattery, and Earl Smith, *African American Families*. (Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2007); Harriette Pipes McAdoo, *Black Families*. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2007); Robert Staples, *The Black Family: Essays and Studies*. (Belmont, California: Wadsworth, 1994).

disenfranchisement expose the persistence of racism, the institutional structures that keep racism thriving, and the damage that racism does to the bodies and minds of individuals and families.⁶

When I think of my own family, I think of a continuous body that has dynamism and agency. I've learned that one of the key ingredients to understanding family identity is to underscore a family's "subjective sense of its own continuity over time, its present situation, and its character."⁷ This essay's introductory paragraph is a small vignette that helps cement my family identity. When families engage vignettes and storytelling, they enter a collaborative construction between individual family members and a family's narrative ecology. The narrative ecology is an amalgam of narrative identity, personal stories, stories of the family, and cultural stories. The narrative ecology is made up of anecdotes families tell and retell which are then used to shape a family's understanding of itself.⁸

When I make note of my family identity, I pay homage to a system of features that is unique to us. Our narrative ecology also helps me to create opportunities for a multifaceted familial framework that eschews narrow stereotypes. There is link between understanding family structure and identity that can be investigated through exploring familial heirlooms. Work exploring heirlooms have endeavored to investigate why, how, and what objects, tangible and intangible, people choose to possess.⁹ As scholars have endeavored to define an heirloom, they have also explored the relationship between heirlooms and identity.¹⁰ Research in heirlooms and identity indicate that when someone transfers a possession to another family member, that transaction is an intentional approach for givers to reveal parts of their personal history.¹¹

While I wait to do a more intimate investigation of my family, as I need some distance to explore how these concepts work with one another, I interviewed four people willing to share a family heirloom. Three of the interviewees identified as women. One female identified as Black/African American, one female identified as African American and Jamaican, and one female identified as East African/Somali. The male interviewee identified as Haitian.

⁶ Derrick Bell, *And We Are Not Saved: The Elusive Quest for Racial Justice*. (New York: Basic Books, 1987); Michelle Alexander, *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. (The New Press: New York, 2010); Ta-Nehisi Coates, *Between the World and Me*. (Penguin Random House: New York, 2015).

⁷ Linda Bennett, Steven Wolin, and Katherine McAulty, "Family Identity Ritual And Myth: A Cultural Perspective On Life Cycle Transitions", in *Family Transitions*, ed. C. Falicov (Guilford: New York, 1998), 218-241, 212.

⁸ Kate McLean, *The Co-Authored Self: Family Stories and the Construction of Personal Identity*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁹ Richard Banks, David Kirk, and Abigail Sellen, "A Design Perspective on Three Technology Heirlooms". *Human-Computer Interaction* 27, no. 1/2 (2012): 63–91; Jamie White-Farnham, "Revising the Menu to Fit the Budget": Grocery Lists and Other Rhetorical Heirlooms. *College English* 76, no. 3 (2014) 208–226.

¹⁰ Russell Belk, "The Role of Possessions In Constructing and Maintaining A Sense of Past". *Advances in Consumer Research* 17, no. 1 (1990): 669–676; Helga Dittmar, *The Social Psychology of Material Possessions: To Have Is To Be*. (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1992).

¹¹ Fiona Cram and H. Paton, "Personal Possessions and Self-Identity: The Experiences of Elderly Women in Three Residential Settings", *Australian Journal on Ageing* 12, no. 1(1993): 19-24; Carolyn Curasi, "Intergenerational Possession Transfers and Identity Maintenance", *Journal of Consumer Behaviour* 10, no.12 (2001): 111-118.

Family Definitions

One of my goals was to understand, through the words and stories embedded within the interviews, how one names and conceptualizes their family. Obtaining definitions of family fosters an appreciation of how interviewees understand their family identity and ultimately how they perceive their family heirloom. Nahla¹², who is of East African/Somali descent, described her family using the term *network*. When asked how she characterized her family, she mentioned a large structure that expands all over the world.

Nahla: My family is small. It's really like my mom, my brother and I, and my sister, but then I feel like there's another layer, like my dad and my half-sister. My mom is one of 28 on her side of the family. My dad is one of 11. Then there's like this whole other, like, I call them networks at this point because they're like all over the world. They're like a little bit of here, a little bit there, and we're all connected. Some I've never seen before. Some I've never heard of, but I swear there's not a place that I've gone to, as of yet, [where there is not someone I am related to]. [My mom and dad] seem to know someone everywhere, which is nice when I'm traveling for work and other things. That's how I see family.

Nahla's description of her family reminded me of a layered conceptualization of family that is often noted within kinships. Kinships are a creation of distant relatives and close community. What is unique about a kinship is that there is no real distinction between who is genetically bonded and who is connected through some other configuration.

Similarly, Dion remembers a core group of about 40 individuals who were a constant throughout his childhood.

Dion: We were always coming together as my immediate family and then my extended family. We were literally a community within a community. I would say a group of about 40 people were the core of my childhood and the community that I grew up with. I'd say it was a mix, but there was no distinguishing. There were the Polycaps. Those aren't blood relatives, but we grew up as if they were part of the family. They were family. There wasn't really that blood distinction. This community of 40 consisted of blood and others, but all Haitian, I would say. Yeah, my father's house was the center of that Haitian community, so a lot of people knew that as the place.

In both Nahla and Dion's descriptions, the family is a system of connections. Their definitions acknowledge that family is made up of different associations. They underscore that, although there may be various arrangements within the family, differences among them are not definitive. I am struck on how traditional conceptualizations of the family often paint pictures of structures that work within concentric circles. They typically start with a nuclear family and move outward toward larger social systems. Each person I interviewed recognized the immediate (nuclear) members of their families, but none discussed them in a way that was separate from the broader

¹² Participants' names have been replaced by pseudonyms.

familial community. Instead, symbolic representations of their families were more akin to a bunch of overlapping or conjoined circles within a larger circle. Nahla and Dion's interviews verify the expanse of the Black family. Their interviews also hint to a mismatch between how researchers study Black family systems and how we (Black people) may conceptualize them.

Participant interviews turned out to be an excellent vehicle to honor the uniqueness of each family while engaging stories that characterize the family. I found it interesting that none of the interviewees retold a particular event. They all chose to describe traditions, continued experiences, or even master narratives or those stories that are told and retold within a family that help to explain a family's identity.¹³ Vivian, who is of African American and Jamaican descent, discussed her family as it related to a Christmas morning tradition.

Vivian: When I think of the word family, what comes to mind is Christmas morning. On Christmas Day we would go to my mom's family when I was little. So to her cousin's or to her aunt's house, and we'd have breakfast and open presents. You know, just be with people that you're related to, or maybe not related to but just be with them. You know, so it was always fun. [Christmas] just kind of makes me [think] to what family means to me. And just kind of being close and accepting. Really accepting people for who they are no matter who they are because everybody brings something different to the table. Everybody's different in how they do things. But they bring so much to me in my life that I consider them, you know, little parts that create this family.

Vivian's many descriptions of her family were rooted in acknowledging the individual and the group. However, even within her recognition that any individual may be different from others within the group, Vivian noted everyone within her family shared the goal of working toward acceptance.

Yvette, also discussed an annual tradition as she described her family. Yvette, who described herself as African American, chose to view her family through the lens of family reunions. She described the reunions in somewhat obligatory terms, as her family often served as hosts.

Yvette: There's loyalty [in families]. I'm a daddy's girl, and my dad was the glue for the family. He helped plan family reunions. He was the backbone, always there for people. When folks came out of town, my family would host. My parents retired years ago and moved to Florida, but even when we were here, even when they lived in New York, everyone came to my house and stayed. Sometimes they overstayed their welcome. My mother would let them know.

Patterns of acceptance and loyalty provide a view of how interviewees understand their families and serve as characterizations that organize how they speak about their family structure. These ideas also submit an understanding their families' identities.

¹³ See McLean, 2016

What is an heirloom?

Interviewees also helped to widen the definition of heirlooms to incorporate tangible objects, intangible events, ethos, and aphorisms that carry personal and familial value. However, first I needed to explore how interviewees conceptualized the word heirloom. Many of their responses were traditional definitions that centered on tangible items with monetary value. In an exchange with Yvette, she described heirlooms in such a way.

Yvette: I think of Faberge eggs. An emerald that your great-great-great grandmamma gave you. I grew up with this big giant Bible that we have. I think my mom has it. I never really thought of it as an heirloom, but I'm sure one of us will get it when the time comes. I think it's [a heirloom] something of value that's passed down.

Many of the interviewees often stated that they did not grow up thinking that their family possessed heirlooms.

Dion: [When I think of an heirloom] For me, I think of a certain heritage and legacy. We didn't really grow up in a house with things that my mom or dad could point to and say, "That was my mom's. This or that was my dad's." But the things we did, the lessons we learned, the holidays we celebrated, and the ways we celebrated them, all of those aspects of our family culture I'd say are heirlooms. So [we did not possess] material things. Although my dad just passed, he left me a ring that will become an heirloom for my son and hopefully his son. My mom similarly left things to my sisters and to my daughter that, I think, in their life, too, will become these material heirlooms, I guess.

Interviewees often spoke of traditions, customs, and rituals as heirlooms. Their conceptualizations were not restricted to things. An essential component that surfaced as they discussed their definitions of heirlooms was that the heirloom needed to be passed down so that it was necessary to have some continuity.¹⁴

Nahla: As much as I try to fight some of the gender tasks of my culture and country, there's this one tradition where you give your jewelry to the daughters in your family. And so when my grandmother died, there was like this parceling out of her jewelry. I have some jewelry that my grandmother gave me. I've had it now for 20 years, 20 plus years. I mean, it's not something I can give to [my son], but if I ever had a girl, if I ever decide to have more kids, I'd give it to her. The jewelry is a big tradition within the Somali/Ethiopian, [culture]. I think more Somali than it is Ethiopian. In Somali traditions, you pass down the jewelry.

¹⁴ In this paper, I only considered heirlooms that have one transmission, those in which the recipient has had direct contact with the person with whom the object initially belonged.

Interviewees often spoke about their family heirloom in dimensions. First were descriptions of traditions and ethos that was characteristic of their family that had been passed down from one generation to the next. They then extended their characterization to show tangible exemplars of the tradition or ethos.

Dion: This ring that my dad left for me [is an heirloom]. You know that he wanted to leave it to me, although he did leave stuff to my brothers, too. But this particular ring, he left for me. I look at pictures of him, and he's always got this ring on. I feel his energy when I put it on, and it's a thing that I associate with him that's of value. So I think in a very traditional way, it's an heirloom and that it actually went through experiences with him. This was with him, so I really love that. I remember when he got it [ring] after he retired. After working for a company for 35 years and doing all the things he did in terms of my family and the Haitian community, and he just ... It was the first time I really saw him reward himself with something because he wasn't really a flashy person. He always had a nice car. He always liked his Continentals, but gold and stuff like that, he didn't have. [My dad] had very distinct hands that were just very strong, beautiful, black hands. When I think of him, I see this piece of gold on his hand sparkling against his skin, and it just immediately evokes an image of him and what he actually looked like.

Keep in mind that Dion speaks about the heirloom from two perspectives. He characterizes the ring as an embodiment of his father's hard work and dedication. The ring is a symbol of an ethos that Dion alluded to earlier in his interview as he spoke about his father and family's commitment to loyalty. He also mentions that same commitment as he says, "all the things he did in terms of my family and the Haitian community." Likewise, Dion acknowledges the traditional aspect of the heirloom as he notes that it is an object "that went through experiences with [his father]."

Heirlooms as Identity Markers

Through narratives, people engage in meaning-making about their world and themselves.¹⁵ Paying close attention to the stories that people retell reveals much about how they understand their sense of self and the people they are directly connected to. In her interview, Vivian retold many stories about her father. She discussed the more than 300,000 photography negatives that she found that belonged to her father. In her discovery, she began to see her father in a new light. She admitted that when she was younger, she did not recognize the breadth and depth of her father's passion and profession.

Vivian: It saddened me a little because I learned more about my dad [after he died] and saw that he did have a lot more. It really showed how intelligent he was. Just really how smart he was. And how he really truly learned a craft. But he didn't only learn it; he

¹⁵ Amia Lieblich, Rivka Tuval-Mashiach, and Tamar Zilber 1998. *Narrative Research: Reading, Analysis and Interpretation*. (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications 1998).

excelled at it. He was just like brilliant at it. So it kind of gave me a different perspective of him. It saddened me because I can't ask anything. Because I'm like, "Damn, all those times when he asked if I wanted to go out and shoot with him or he wanted to show me something. I'd be like, No. All those times that I didn't participate, you know, I wasn't interested. But what it did for me is that it gave me a love for photography, so now I am a photographer.

There is both regret and renewal in Vivian's interview. She discusses how she wished that she had spent more time getting to know her father's profession. However, there is renewal as she has, through direct contact with the negatives, tapped into a part of her own sense of self. Through her journey, Vivian acknowledges that she not only began to understand her father more, but she began to understand herself. She recognized the similarities that exist between herself and her father. Her revelations opened up new understandings about both of their identities.

What was most striking about Vivian's interview was how much she immersed her understanding of her heirloom in both its monetary value and its personal value. In complete descriptions, she discussed how her father's photos meant something to the community of Black photographers living in Chicago at the time (something that gave Vivian pride) and the monetary value that the images could generate.

Vivian: My dad had the first Black-owned photography studio in Chicago. He did a lot of advertising photography for Burrell Communications, which was one of the top Black advertising agencies in Chicago at that time. So my dad was there and the brains of a lot of change in the late 60s, early 70s [in regard to] advertising to people of color. And that's essentially kind of what he did in Sweden too. He did a lot of advertising photography. There was a lot of fashion and a lot of models. So when he was living in Sweden for instance, he took pictures of Diana Ross and the Supremes, Aretha Franklin, there's some Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin.

This type of reconceptualization of an heirloom, one that does not solely rely on monetary value, was evident in each interview. Heirlooms were consistently seen as means to understand the people or the family in which it belonged. Yvette's tangible heirloom was a turtle shell that had belonged to her grandfather.

Yvette: Until you posed that question [what does an heirloom mean to you?], I did not think of it as an heirloom, but I do. I grew up with this turtle shell in my house. As a kid, I would play with it and stick my hand through it. It was just always around in the living room. I love turtles. I had a turtle as a kid. When my dad passed, I asked my mom, what's gonna happen to his turtle shell? Does it belong to my dad? And she was like; you can have it if you want to. I come from a very southern family. Things like turtles were eaten. My dad said that it was not eaten. He said that it was rescued and then it died. But my aunt tells me that they did eat that turtle and the shell was just so nice that my grandfather kept it. There's two sides of the story.

Yvette's turtle shell is a representation of her family's cultural roots. It is a repurposed item (one that was possibly eaten). This sense of functionality and obligation continuously came up in her interview. It was present in her description of her family reunions, and it continued in her portrait of her father.

Reflections

One of the most rewarding parts of this work has been witnessing others discuss the nuance in Black families and providing an opportunity for them to demonstrate their views and understanding of how they conceive of their families. Each interview reminded me that contextualization is particularly fundamental to the study of families of color. Conceptions of Black families are broader than what is presented in social science literature. Like in the case of kinships, Black families are often made up of distant relatives and non-blood relatives. Instead of thinking about Black families symbolically as layering concentric circles, interviews presented in this essay remind us that it may be more accurate to think of them as a series of conjoined circles.

As interview excerpts expanded definitions of the black family, they also proffered a multilayered conception of heirlooms. Interviewees provided examples of intangible ideas, ethos, and traditions and then placed tangible items to buoy their immaterial heirlooms. However, not one person solely named an intangible heirloom in their descriptions. Interviewees may have been reluctant to utilize immaterial heirlooms because they may have already had conventional concretized definitions of heirlooms. I wonder if aphorisms, family traditions and gatherings, and rituals might have been highlighted more if interviewees felt more agency in naming heirlooms. Even so, turtle shells, jewelry, Christmas mornings, and shoes may not be what people initially think about when they think of heirlooms. However, expanding our definition of the term allows those who are often left out to be included.

While my initial goal was to understand heirlooms and family identity, my time with interviewees seemed to reveal more about the transmitter of the heirloom. Heirlooms were used to construct understandings of transmitter's history, values, and identity. I found that the construction of family identities was less pronounced. It could be that interviewees did not feel that the heirloom could adequately address such a significant notion. Also, interviewees did not have a lot of experience thinking about heirlooms in such expansive ways. It is possible that more pointed questions about family identity could have aided their understanding of their heirloom as a means to understand their family. It is evident that they thought about their families as having cohesive identities, as there were consistent themes that seem to surface in each participant's interview.

In all, this project has exposed the need for more analysis on Black families and their heirlooms. More inquiry will permit analysis into family dynamics and uncover the ways in which heirlooms may strengthen one's understanding of identities. Identity is large and dynamic. It is important to state, that in this acknowledgement we must realize that how we understand identity (even within a particular family) is open to interpretation. Additional scrutiny might also help to give voice and agency to others as they begin to look at their families and the tangible and intangibles that make them unique. With this we may begin to see value in what our families

posses, even when outsiders fail to appreciate the histories, value, and identities of the transmitter as understood through the lens of their family members.

Appendix
Interview Questions

1. What does the word family mean to you?
2. Who is your family?
3. Is there a story that you can tell me about your family that helps to describe them?
4. What does the term heirloom mean to you?
5. Do you have an heirloom?
6. Can you describe your heirloom?
7. Why do you consider the possession an heirloom?
8. What relationship does this heirloom have to your family?
9. Has this heirloom changed the way you understand your family? Why or why not?
10. How has the heirloom impacted different members of your family?
11. Can you tell me about the person who passed the possession (heirloom) to you?
12. Why do you believe this person chose to pass down the heirloom?