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University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

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A Family Affair: Looking Through Another Lens

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Stunning is how I would describe Family Pictures, a current exhibit at the Milwaukee Art Museum scheduled to run until January 20, 2019. Even though I was interested in the exhibit, which according to the website “explores the ways in which black photographers and artists have portrayed a range of familial relationships, from blood relatives to close-knit neighborhoods to queer communities,” I was dragging my feet on a cold, inhospitable day to the exhibit. Fittingly, when I entered the museum, I discovered it was Family Sunday and the museum was bustling with the energy of families making the best of a cold Wisconsin day.

Even though I knew the subject of the exhibit, in some ways I was unprepared for its impact. After descending a staircase, I was greeted by the stark title included in the image above. Then, I turned left. Lyle Ashton Harris’ photo “Mothers and Sons II” in its full-color glory depicted a black woman sitting on a throne while flanked by her two adult sons. Beside it were similar pictures displaying not only powerful familial bonds between parents and children but also the dignity of the subjects within the compositions, something often denied in the photographic images populating the internet. According to the placard accompanying his work, other images by Harris offer “an intimate look at the artist’s given and chosen families and subverts various notions of familial, sexual, and racial identities.”

Harris’ work coupled with a series of photographs by Deana Lawson chronicling men with their

families at Mowhawk Correctional Facility offered a diverse, fuller perspective of black males. For me, it evoked some of Vershawn Ashanti Young's observations in his book *Not Your Average Nigga: Performing Race Literacy and Masculinity*. Young laments the restrictiveness "performing race" in his text, suggesting the polarization and exhaustion of conforming to an identity that cannot fully encapsulate his full self. The photographic images suggest a fuller self, a self that is rarely seen in media images of black males depicted as criminals or threatening stereotypes. All around me were images of tenderness and love, of proud sexuality and black masculinity.

Another area of the exhibit featured the work of Carrie Mae Weems, a photographer who captured the lives of her own middle class black family in response to 1965 Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's callous assertion about black communities and families. Moynihan argued, "the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society" is a result of a weak family structure. Weems counters by presenting issues such as poverty in a broader context, revealing the lives of people affected by challenges as more than simply statistics. Her photos, like those of many other artists, reinforce the strength of familial bonds. For me, her work evoked empathy and admiration, qualities not apparent in Moynihan's somewhat dismissive statement. Just as Steven Alvarez's research on Mexican immigrant families revealed in *Brokering Tareas: Mexican Immigrant Families Translanguaging Homework Literacies*, the families of so called minoritized populations are often sources of strength instead of impediments to happiness or success.

I couldn't help but reflect upon the culminating effect of the exhibit. I am white and the images reflected back at me are often those that resemble me, which is something I am largely immune to. Standing among so many beautiful and diverse pictures of a population other than my own, a population often distorted by others, was moving and engrossing. Then, I thought of how much more powerful this experience might be for those that do not have the benefit of seeing their reflection everywhere they look. It made me think of the little girl standing, mouth agape, in front of former first lady Michelle Obama's portrait and of the importance of expanding the context in which we present and perceive people.

Expand your own perspective by checking out this exhibit between now and January 20, 2019.

While there, you may want to capture a family photo of your own in the exhibit's designated space (pictured below).

