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The Moynihan Report, the Watts Riots, and the Tropes of Reconstruction

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Abstract: This article describes Daniel Patrick Moynihan's "The Negro Family: The Case For National Action" (known as the Moynihan Report, 1965) as an example of a Reconstructivist impulse in American cultural history. Sandwiched, as it was, between the signing of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Watts Riot (or Rebellion) of 1965, the Moynihan Report and its ensuing controversy are frequently associated with the increased militarism and entrenchment of racial discourse of the late civil rights era. Though the Moynihan controversy has frequently and resonantly been discussed in scholarship, much of this analysis has focused on Moynihan's construction of black family pathology. The current paper shifts focus in the debate slightly by examining how the trope of cultural reconstruction undergirds both Moynihan's thesis and its subsequent reception. Moynihan's Report attempts to tie together America's first and second Reconstructions with the trope of family—a rhetorical move that had a rich and varied history in American and African American literatures. By reading Moynihan's efforts to draw a thread between the Reconstruction era history of black family life and the Civil-Rights era urban black family, the article traces a profusion of tropes and signs and arguments about black family life that are repeatedly established and reinforced in moments of American reconstruction.