

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.

Introduction

In March 1965, the then assistant secretary of labor and director of the Office of Policy Planning and Research, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, authored "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", now popularly known as the Moynihan Report. "Today," according to journalist

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and academic Nicholas Lemann's judgement, that report "stands as probably the most refuted document in American history" (2). Though officially classified "For Official Use Only," the Moynihan Report became public when it became the centerpiece of a speech by President Lyndon B. Johnson, delivered at a Howard University commencement in June 1965. Johnson's speech is now seen as a watershed moment in the history of federal involvement in African American civil rights, placing, for the first time, emphasis on the fabric and structures of African American social life that inhibit black progress, rather than on the mere removal of Jim Crow laws that systematically and deliberately made black progress impossible. America, according to Johnson, was entering the "next and more profound stage of the battle for civil rights," in which the objective would be that "all our citizens must have the ability" to seize fully realized American freedom. This change of emphasis from "opportunity" to "ability" signaled a crucial break with tradition for the US Government. The "next and more profound stage" of the civil rights struggle would not be about "rights" at all, it would, in fact be an effort to re-engineer the very construction of the social life of African Americans; jobs, housing, education, and community would all be *reconstructed*—and family would be the modality through which this reconstruction was to be executed. After all, as the Moynihan Report asserts, "the family is the basic social unit of American life." The report eventually caused a firestorm of indignation amongst liberals and civil rights activists; the change of emphasis from "opportunity" to "ability," according to one memorable rebuttal, was tantamount to "blaming the victim" (Ryan), and the use of the age-old thesis of "black family pathology" as some sort of proof of inability, bore echoes of some of the worst reactionary rhetoric produced by the post-Reconstruction South nearly a century earlier.

Looking back at Moynihan's interpretation of African American family, one is struck not by the extremity of the thesis put forward, but by its conventionality. To be sure, his choice of

phrase, at times, is unhelpfully hyperbolic—the black family is described in turns, as “crumbling” (43, 65), “battered” (50), and “approaching complete breakdown” (51), and the conclusion of a situation of pathology approaching a level of crisis is delivered with almost hysterical overstatement. Moreover, the Report's emphasis on the extent to which slavery had damaged the black psyche and produced an obedient black male with a low need for achievement was based on scholarship that, by 1965, would have seemed quite outdated (Graebner 172), and the language used to present this idea must have been a regret to Moynihan in the debates which followed, “Unquestionably, [the Jim Crow Laws] worked against the emergence of a strong father figure. The very essence of the male animal, from the bantam rooster to the four-star general, is to strut. Indeed, in 19th century America [sic] a particular type of exaggerated male boastfulness became almost a national style. Not for the Negro male” (62). Despite these misjudgments of presentation, however, there is little in the Report, or in Johnson's Howard speech, that could reasonably have been expected to have inspired national outrage. As Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey put it at the time, “the social scientist could see [in Johnson's speech] a distillation of over three decades of economic, sociological, and psychological research on the ‘Negro Problem’” (3). Indeed, Moynihan refers back to research produced as early as 1932 and, moreover, a large portion of his research refers back to ideas about slavery, Reconstruction, and post-Reconstruction that would very definitely have been accepted in American academies in the mid-nineteen sixties. The document is essentially a backward glance at what was then an established and largely accepted history of African American family life, especially since emancipation, and it contains, as Hortense Spillers, amongst others, has pointed out, nothing “unprecedented” in its assessment of the subject (456). The only radical gesture in Moynihan is the effort to make these academic commonplaces the basis for a forward-looking program of social reform. The instant question, therefore, is why

this retrospective and academically conservative piece of social scholarship became one of the most divisive and contested political subjects of the Second Reconstruction.

In order to answer this question, it is necessary to turn analysis towards a multivalent consideration of the functioning of “reconstruction” as a conceptual framework. Reconstruction, as a concept, as an event, as a periodizing marker, has enjoyed a strange half-life in American history. Or rather, it has enjoyed a strange series of afterlives from Reconstruction, to post-Reconstruction, to “Second Reconstruction,” the term has been loaded with incongruities, as David Blight has remarked, and between warring impulses of reconciliation, emancipation, and white supremacy (Blight 46).

Moynihan and Watts

The transition of the Moynihan Report from classified document to controversial public issue is a well-documented passage characterized by error, coincidence, and unfortunate timing. Early press coverage of Johnson's Howard speech was cautiously positive; all commentators seeming to agree that the President was taking a “courageous” new step in his treatment of civil rights. Though Johnson's record in this area was already impressive, a *New York Times* piece the day after his Howard speech described the first phase of civil rights legislation as comparatively “puny,” and heralded the arrival of a “much more massive action” to remedy social problems in the inner cities. “The development of an action program,” the piece concluded, “will be as crucial for the country as it is for the Negro” (qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey 134-5). Mary McGory, in the following day's *Washington Star*, commends the bravery of the new initiative, which would take responsibility for black uplift away from the federal government and place it back on the shoulders

of the African American communities themselves, emphasizing the need for “self-improvement.” Johnson's speech had tentatively planned for a White House conference to suggest ways of implementing the findings of Moynihan, and this conference, according to McGory, would inevitably “challenge Negroes to come to grips with their own worst problem—‘the breakdown of family life’” (qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey 135). Both pieces contain serious inaccuracies which would dog most of the subsequent debate on this issue, and in both pieces we can see the dangers of interpretation that the White House was risking by publicizing Moynihan. The *New York Times*' decisive distinction between the interests of “the country” and those of “the negro,” while certainly unremarkable for the time, posits an exclusionary logic that is certainly consistent with Daniel Patrick Moynihan's thinking; and what the *Star* interprets as the “pull up your socks” (qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey 135) rhetoric of the Report was bitterly received by most civil rights leaders.

Nonetheless, the Moynihan Report, at this stage was not provoking national outrage. Press coverage continued to be steady and moderate. By the end of July 1965, the White House was sufficiently encouraged by this coverage to leak the document in its entirety to the national press. On the ninth of August, *Newsweek* decided to present a summarized version of the Report in a two-page feature. Again, comment was moderate—the document, described as a “quiet revolution” in White House dealings with race, was, on the whole, praised for articulating a problem that “though widely acknowledged, reached too deep into [...] negro sensitivities” to have been publicly acknowledged before now. Two days after the Report was leaked to *Newsweek*, however, the Watts Riots started in Los Angeles, and the atmosphere into which the thesis was destined to be received had changed utterly. By the time Johnson's planned conference on the Moynihan Report took place, in December of 1965, racial tensions had reached a new level of

national crisis. One of the invited black “community leaders,” Dr. Benjamin Payton, demanded that “family stability” be removed from the agenda, and voiced the considerable exasperation felt by black leaders post-Watts. Somehow, the Moynihan controversy seemed to have become attached to the acceleration of politically motivated black violence. Johnson, increasingly impatient with the angry reaction that his new initiative for civil rights was provoking, became bitter with the new radical turn in black leadership. “Negroes,” he told his aide Joseph Califano in exasperation, “will end up pissing in the aisles of the Senate” (qtd. in Kotz 341) and disgracing themselves as they had during Reconstruction. Johnson’s *unreconstructed* acceptance of the White Southern myth of post-Civil War history is alarming, and its connection to a document that attempts to chart the post-emancipation history of African American social life, potentially, very revealing. Why, at this crucial juncture in American history—in the late summer of 1965, with America’s Second Reconstruction seemingly in danger of becoming a second failure—does a controversy over the perception of black family life momentarily dominate civil rights coverage in America’s national media? Why does this particular academic document of public policy have the power, even now, to excite such extreme and divisive reaction?

“We Know All About These Things”—Making Sense of Watts

On August 11 1965, a white California highway patrolman pulled over a twenty-one-year-old African American, Marquette Frye, on suspicion of drunk driving. In the disagreement that followed, Frye, his younger brother Markus, his mother Rena, and a growing number of the Watts community became increasingly public and vocal in challenging police authority. All three members of the Frye family were ultimately arrested, and, while the details of these arrests are still

disputed, what is known is that tensions escalated as the crowd grew to some 250-300 people, more police arrived and more arrests were made. As the final squad car drove away, stones were thrown from the crowd, beginning a period of rioting that continued for five days. At the end of this violence, there were thirty-four deaths, over a thousand injuries, over four thousand arrests, and at least forty million dollars' worth of damage had been done to public and private property (Fogelson 111-121). When the Watts uprising began, the Moynihan Report was still an anonymous Labor Department document. Daniel Patrick Moynihan, however, had eagerly distributed copies to friends and reporters, one of whom, Robert Novak, revealed the author's name in a nationally syndicated column written during the last days of violence in Los Angeles. This column, titled simply "The Moynihan Report", described Moynihan's ideas as a "political atomic bomb" that "exposes the ugly truth of the big city Negro's plight" (qtd. in Branch 370). Novak interpreted Moynihan in terms that emphasized the interrelationship between family pathology and the disorder in Watts, and highlighted a perceived "sensitivity" amongst black leaders towards this "ugly truth." Furthermore, he presented the Negro family as a problem that was divorced from other socioeconomic issues. The article has been described as being more damaging than any other to the reception received by Lyndon Johnson's new policy initiative, but Robert Novak was not alone in perceiving a link between Moynihan and Watts. In media coverage during the riots, at least eleven articles were published directly relating the Moynihan Report or the "breakdown of the black family" to events in Los Angeles. It is as if the very act of naming Moynihan somehow became welded to the difficulties of interpreting Watts. "Because of newspaper coverage," Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey's 1967 study of the Moynihan controversy concludes, "the Moynihan Report was taken as the government's explanation of the riots" (192).

Interpreting Watts was already proving to be a treacherous business. Martin Luther King,

struggling to understand the anger of black youth in the wake of such recent civil rights gains, insisted on travelling to the scenes of the violence as soon as he could. He delivered an impassioned appeal for clemency and reconciliation to a large crowd of local African Americans, predominantly youths, some of whom heckled him. King also offered to act as mediator between the authorities and the rioters, but was summarily insulted by Mayor of Los Angeles, Sam Yorty. Yorty had recently testified to the US Civil Rights Commission that “we have the best race relations in our city of any city in the United States” (qtd. in Sides 169). Even during the Watts riots, he was inclined to agree with Governor Brown's famous declaration that California was a state with “no racial discrimination” (qtd. in May 160). The state's authorities had already framed Watts in terms of civil disorder that had unjustly attacked the institutions of property, law, and government. Martin Luther King concluded wearily that there was no chance for mediation in Los Angeles, that he could not find “any statesmanship or creative leadership” there. He reported these findings to Lyndon Johnson personally, but the president seemed curiously disinterested in King's observations. The White House, it seems, had already decided what the meaning of Watts, in fact, was: namely, that a minority of the black population—significantly, the most urbanized element of that population—was now beyond the reach of consensus politics. The urbanized African American was now potentially beyond (or beneath) democracy.

Moreover, in his conversation with Johnson, King was peculiarly and uncharacteristically incapable of articulating his own feelings about the new violent turn in black politics. Two years later, in a volume called *Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?*, King had found that articulation: “a riot”, he concluded, “is at bottom the language of the unheard” (112). This apt phrase makes doubly ironic the refusal, or failure, of either the federal or local authorities to hear his assessment of the riots, and the refusal of the rioters themselves to hear his pleas for clemency.

“We won,” one young Watts resident declared to him at the time, “because we made them pay attention to us” (qtd. in King 112). Beyond these particular ironies, however, a series of broader questions is suggested by King's model: if riot is the “language of the unheard,” what do efforts by others to translate and codify this language into more comprehensible forms say about the relationship that those others have with the unheard? Can codification operate as a second act of silencing?

When the scale of rioting in Watts was first revealed, the most common response was to register shock and incomprehension. California Governor Pat Brown led this reaction by simply refusing to believe that there had been an “explosive situation” that produced the riots (qtd. in Strain 124), and a series of front page editorials in the *Los Angeles Times* followed his lead. One example, printed on August 15, begins as follows, “There are no words to express the shock, the sick horror that a civilized society feels at a moment like this. It could not happen in Los Angeles. But it did. And the shameful, senseless, bloody rioting continues unabated after four of the ugliest days in our history” (qtd. in Jacobs 58). The rhetorical strategy is not difficult to discern. Shock is registered as the only possible reaction of “civilized society” when encountered by “senseless, bloody rioters.” According to this model, the stated grievances of Watts's residents are necessarily dismissed. Mayor Yorty described accusations of police brutality as “part of a big lie technique shouted all over the world by Communists, dupes, and demagogues” (qtd. in Jacobs 63) precisely because that initial incident of alleged police brutality against the Frye family *needed* to be interpreted as simple misunderstanding. Similarly, the riot that followed had to be viewed as something that, fueled by apocryphal rumor, moved atavistically and illogically towards increasingly wanton destruction of life and property. This was a form of violence beyond the bounds of any definition of even the most extreme form of politicized insurrection. Police Chief

William Parker, for example, likened the rioters to “monkeys in a zoo” (qtd. in Jacobs 63). In a 2013 reappraisal of the Black Power movement, Jeanne Theoharis has termed these early framings of Watts the “surprise of intransigence—a willful shock” (50). “Surprise,” according to her, “became a way to deny the longstanding nature and significance of grievances—to erase a pattern of racial struggle within the city” (50).

Moreover, when attention *was* eventually turned to finding some underlying causes of unrest in Los Angeles, that attention followed Moynihan's lead in directing awareness primarily towards failings within the black community, rather than grievances against it. The December 1965 McCone commission, established by Governor Brown, echoes the Moynihan Report by foregrounding black pathology that had developed from the history of slavery and the “dull devastating spiral of failure that awaits the average disadvantaged child” (California Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots). This average child is a victim not necessarily of discrimination, but of his/her own “unpreparedness” and “unreadiness” for adult life. Again, governmental focus on social and familial pathology was not unique or new. In the immediate aftermath of the riots, dozens of scholars and journalists had travelled to the ghettos of Watts in search of “causes”. Maya Angelou, who was then a resident of LA, recalled meeting a French journalist who had come to uncover the “true story” behind Watts,

If he had visited the area one day before it exploded, if he had gone to the right bar or pool hall or community center, he could have met someone who heard his accent and, realizing he was a stranger, might have invited him home.

He could have been sitting in a well-furnished house dining on great chicken and greens, receiving all kindnesses. Then he really would have been befuddled if, on the

following day, he heard of the conflagration and had seen his host of the day before struggling with the heavily armed police. [This journalist] wrote an account of the Watts riot allowing his readers to hold on to the stereotypes that made them comfortable while congratulating themselves on being in possession of some news. (*A Song Flung Up to Heaven* 82-3)

Angelou's speculation eludes the dichotomy between "civilized city" and "senseless rioters" that had been perpetuated in early accounts of events in Watts. The desire of the French journalist to witness pathology, to "possess news," is reframed as an impulse towards comfortable definitions and explanations.

In the clamor for these comforting definitions, the image of the black home was becoming something of an *idée fixe*. Not, of course, the "well-furnished house" with good food and kind company that Angelou envisions, but the broken black home highlighted in the Moynihan Report. In an interview given not long before his death in 2003, Moynihan himself recalled the atmosphere of the time,

[...] without any notice or warning or heads-up, the rioting broke out in Watts, in Los Angeles. And it was fierce. And nothing that intense had ever occurred in our modern time. And the reporters in the White House were saying to Bill Moyers, the press secretary, saying, "Mr. Moyers, Bill, what's going on? What happened? We thought we had all these things being taken care of, and now this? What's going on?"

And he said, "Oh, you know, we know all about these things. Let me just show you." And he handed out this report, saying, "Pat Moynihan did this for the President last

June, and we're on to these things.”

Next morning Bob Novak and Rowland Evans, in their wonderful column, their headline was “The Moynihan Report.” And it linked up, in effect, the behavior at Watts with [my report on illegitimacy ratios], as if [there was] somehow [a] causal relationship between [the two]. (Wattenberg)

Looking back some thirty-five years, then, Moynihan appeared to be somewhat ambivalent about the linkage between family breakdown and Watts, though he certainly never refuted that thesis.

Indeed, in the weeks and months that followed the violence in South LA, few people did. Press coverage, in fact, greatly exaggerated Moynihan's thesis, making family pathology the root cause of all black violence. One article in *The Wall Street Journal* was alarmingly and lengthily headlined “Family Life Breakdown in Negro Slums Sows Seeds of Race Violence—Husbandless Homes Spawn Young Hoodlums, Impede Reforms, Sociologists Say” (qtd. in Rainwater and Yancey 140). Another in *The Washington Post* quoted “White House sources” claiming that the “Los Angeles riots reinforce the President's feeling of the urgent need to help restore Negro families' stability” (144). The press clearly believed that they were, in Maya Angelou's words, “in possession of some news,” and the news was all about the black family. Naming Moynihan had helped to define Watts for a national audience. Suddenly, he was a celebrity—the prophet and predictor of the riots.

It was not until October that the national press fully realized the level of animosity that the Watts/Moynihan connection had generated in black America. Because it brought to mind some of the pseudoscientific white Southern mythology that had produced and justified Jim Crow legislation, because Moynihan had not offered a solution to his “tangle of pathology” model, and

because the press had concentrated on the parts of the report that dealt with out-of-wedlock childbearing and ignored the parts about unemployment, the report was picked up as presenting a fatalistic version of African American decline that operated through family socialization, and not through racist social structures. Rather than a “case for national action,” the Report was seen as a case for “benign neglect”—another unfortunate phrase coined, years later, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan (Wallace and Wallace 21-46). “People got very upset,” Moynihan later reflected on the backlash he received. “And it was rejected. And so that subject was put aside. In the popular press it was regarded as something that was anti-black or whatever” (Wattenberg).

William Julius Wilson and others have claimed that “discussion of ghetto pathologies has been taboo ever since Moynihan was clobbered for reporting some unpleasant statistics on black families” (qtd. in Steinberg 48), but this is not strictly true. Moynihan has had as many defenders as detractors in the last forty years of academic discussion of the black family. The purpose of the present study is not to adopt a position of advocacy or opposition to what has already been described as the “most refuted document in American history,” but to focus instead on the underlying logic of the Moynihan thesis. The object is, of course, not to dispute what Wilson seemingly views as neutrally “reported” if “unpleasant statistics,” but rather to analyze the rhetorical and theoretical frame that the Moynihan Report hangs around those statistics. What is revealed is an unexceptional document—Hortense Spillers is certainly correct in terming it “by no means unprecedented in its conclusions,” belonging rather to a “class of symbolic paradigms” that were alive long before and long after the eruption of the Moynihan controversy—but a document that, for all that, is significant for its ability to encapsulate *all* of the cultural assumptions about black family life that are repeatedly established and reinforced in moments of American reconstruction.

“The Roots of the Problem” / the “Symptom” of American Family

The Moynihan Report stands as the first major treatment of civil rights to follow the landmark Voting Rights Act of 1965. It was the first of a series of White House documents in line with new federal policy that believed the “rights” issue had been wound up, that future federal interventions should be directed towards helping “everybody,” without any specific racial focus. Eliminate poverty, the logic went, and blacks, who count disproportionately among the poor, would inevitably benefit most. The primary effect of this policy rethink was that, as Johnson put it in his Howard University speech, the “first phase” of the Second Reconstruction had been neatly marked off—a demarcation that has been a regular conceptual feature of many historical framings of the Second Reconstruction ever since.

Moynihan's Report is, for many reasons, particularly open to the methodologies of postcolonial analysis not simply because of its historical moment, but because of its internal strategic logic. The essential question that any contemporary reader must ask when encountering the text is, what are Moynihan's rhetorical moves that enable the document to become such a tractable and useful explicator of a jarring and unexpected event like the Watts riots? In effect, what is there in the Moynihan Report that helps the nation re-order chaos through family? To unravel this strategy, it is helpful to reread the treatment of the effects of slavery, Reconstruction and urbanization on the black family, presented in Moynihan's third chapter, “The Roots of the Problem,” in the light of contemporary postcolonial discourse.

The first thing to note here is, again, the striking and strident positionality of Daniel

Moynihan's thesis, and of the Lyndon Johnson speech that grew from it. When Johnson in his Howard address—aptly titled “To Fulfil These Rights”—polemically declares that “freedom is not enough” the assumption is that “freedom” has been achieved—that the civil rights bills had secured equal rights under law. What we are moving into, therefore, is a new discourse. The crucial point of the Howard address is, however, that though the government had moved its focus from “rights” to “employment,” it had not turned from race. Again, the distinction between “opportunity” and “ability” is instructive here,

Men and women of all races are born with the same abilities. But ability is not just the product of birth. Ability is stretched or stunted by the family you live with, and the neighborhood you live in, by the school you go to and the poverty or richness of your surroundings. It is the product of a hundred unforeseen forces playing on the infant, the child, and the man. (126-27)

The complexity suggested by the invocation of these “hundred unforeseen forces,” however, is not played out in the remainder of the speech. Johnson concludes with a broad rhetorical sweep. “Unless we work to strengthen the family,” he argues, “all the rest: schools and playgrounds, public assistance and private concern, will never be enough to cut completely the cycle of despair and deprivation” (130). In his reading of the Howard speech, Stephen Steinberg sees this comment laying the “conceptual groundwork” for “policies that would change ‘them,’ not ‘us’” (42). The larger significance of Johnson's conclusion, however, lies not in turning focus from “us” to “them,” but in establishing clear demarcation between the two in what is, in policy terms, a post-racial atmosphere. Johnson makes repeated reference to the “widening gulf” between white and black

America. In collapsing all of the “hundred unforeseen forces” that produce this “gulf” into a single monomaniacal focus on family, the speech ends in the all-too-familiar mode, articulated repeatedly throughout the post-Reconstruction South, of invoking the family metaphor to establish a system of value coding.

The Moynihan Report presents black family as, in Lacanian terms, a “symptom” of “American” family. Slavoj Žižek defines this sense of “symptom” as follows,

If [...] we conceive of the symptom as Lacan did in his last writings and seminars, namely as a particular signifying formation which confers on the subject its very ontological consistency, enabling it to structure its basic, constitutive relationship towards enjoyment (*jouissance*), then the entire relationship [between subject and symptom] is reversed, for if the symptom is dissolved, the subject itself disintegrates. In this sense, “Woman is the symptom of man” means that man himself exists only through woman qua his symptom: his very ontological consistency depends on, is “externalized” in, his symptom. (155)

The symptom, therefore, becomes that which has the potential to collapse the entire definition of the subject. Consider the following statement from Moynihan, “There is one truly great discontinuity in family structure in the United States at the present time: that between the white world in general and that of the Negro American” (51). In this sentence, we can see quite clearly the double dependency of subject and symptom. Moynihan's overarching concern is, of course, to assess the various problems of black family life amongst the urban poor, which he characterizes as pathological; but to achieve this end, he must establish the antithesis to pathology, here phrased simply as the “family structure in the United States” of the “white world in general.” In this

formation, black family becomes the variation to normative standard, and that normative standard needs no further definition—its only definition being its oppositeness to the non-standard. In Lacanian/Žižekian terms, the “ontological consistency” of the white family model is “externalized in” the identifying and naming of black family pathology.

Returning to the peculiar grammar of Moynihan's formation—the “family structure in the United States at the present time [of] the white world in general”—we see that the white family's achievement of ontological consistency is suggestive of broad and universalist definitions that go beyond family. “The white world in general” is inscribed here as an American subject; indeed, as *the* American subject. Again, it cannot become subject simply in and of itself, but must form a “constitutive relationship” with that which it necessarily objectifies. The “one truly great discontinuity” in American family life is black difference from the “white world in general.” The construction of the universal (the “white world in general”), therefore, is established through the identification of the particularities of its antithesis (the “Negro American”). This logic is framed by Roland Barthes as a form of “ideological abuse”—the universal white world becomes that which “*goes without saying*” (Barthes 11), precisely because it does not *need* to be enunciated. Allowing black family to stand as “symptom” to white family's “subject” achieves unspoken universality for the latter by significantly withholding universality from the former.

In order to examine how this “particular signifying formation” operates upon the black family, it is necessary to analyze the factors that Moynihan provides as “the roots of the problem.” The Report foregrounds three key factors—slavery, Reconstruction, and urbanization—as explicators of pathology: each is treated in a manner that echoes back through previous generations of cultural assumption about nation and family in the United States. Moynihan's treatment of the slave family, for example, feels summary and insufficient. He draws heavily on the work of earlier

scholarship in the field to present a version of black family life that is out of step with that presented by many of his contemporaries. From the mid to late nineteen sixties, Herbert Gutman, John Blassingame and Eugene Genovese had begun to question the previous generation's belief that slavery had effectively obliterated any form of familial stability (Tadman 133). These historians were convinced that “slaves [had] created impressive norms of family life” (Tadman 133; Genovese 451). Not so, argues Moynihan. He quotes a 1963 introduction to American slavery written by his colleague Nathan Glazer to highlight the plight of the slave father, “His children could be sold, his marriage was not recognized, his wife could be violated or sold (there was something comic about calling the woman with whom the master permitted him live a ‘wife’) ...” (61). In such a situation, family life becomes impossible, and what structures do emerge can only be understood as pale parody.

Indeed, according to Moynihan, it was not until emancipation that the “Negro family began to form in the United States on a widespread scale,” though, he is quick to caution, “it did so in an atmosphere markedly different from that which produced the white American family” (62). We may be tempted to wonder at this point whether the “white American family” had been produced in a broadly similar atmosphere in all ages and by all “white” ethnologies, but such speculations are certainly beyond the scope of the Moynihan's analysis. Instead, the Report turns to an evaluation of the post-Reconstruction era that follows broadly the same pattern as the preceding treatment of slavery—that is to say, a figuration of the era as a complete and successful negation of the efficacy of black fatherhood. It is in this section that the Report hits upon the figurative description of the “essence of the male animal” as “to strut,” and of nineteenth-century American masculinity as quintessentially “exaggerated” and “boastful” (62). Again, though his language has moved from the strictly analytical to the flamboyant, Moynihan is being retrospective rather than

revolutionary here. His depiction of exaggerated male performance in the nineteenth century obviously requires further nuance and definition, but the model is not new—it is a cultural paradigm that would be familiar to most.

The point of genuine interest lies not in the historical concept, but in its strategic function. In the very next paragraph, the text moves from the statement that “[in this situation the Negro family made but little progress towards the middle-class pattern of the present time,” to a discussion of what anthropologist Margaret Meade describes as the function of family in “every known human society everywhere in the world” (62). The rapid movement from “national style” to the current “middle-class pattern” to “every known human society” operates through a sort of epitrochasmus, creating a metonymic effect. The sheer proximity of the items in Moynihan's rapid survey connects them on the level of rhetoric, establishing a national and natural base for an otherwise undefined category—contemporary middle-class coupling in the United States—thus presenting from these three disparate elements a single assumed standard. Crucially, the statement that African Americans make “but little progress” towards this standard in the post-emancipation South underlines the validity of the standard through the simultaneous establishment of a model of exclusion. The “middle-class model” gains “ontological consistency,” to again paraphrase Žižek, through its dependency upon, its externalization in, its symptom. The symptom is, again, characteristically “matrifocal,” a “weak family structure” that produces “aberrant, inadequate, or antisocial behavior” (76). The model of black familial “aberration,” relies on what Maxine Baca Zinn describes as a “cultural deficiency model” (72), and Moynihan's clear presentation of that aberration as stemming from matrifocal family has been the subject of near constant critical comment since the controversy first emerged, and will not be dwelt on here. “The ‘cultural deficiency model,’” according to Janice Doane and Devon Hodges, “insists that the forms of

patriarchal dominance historically employed by white men (described by feminists as a *cause* of abuse) would, when claimed by black fathers, cure aberrant, *because female-headed*, African American families” (32, emphasis mine). There is a striking model here of black patriarchy emerging as a “cure” for matriarchal (and thus pathological) black family. Perhaps more pertinent to my argument here, however, is the process by which an easy definition of “cultural deficiency” can allow the national standard to remain undefined outside of its symptom.

The Report traces the historic progress of this weak family structure from slavery, through the “decades of rural life that followed”, and into the great urban migration of the early twentieth century. Leaning heavily on E. Franklin Frazier’s 1939 study of the post-migration African American family, “The City of Destruction,” Moynihan presents the black urban experience at the start of the twentieth century, which, for example, many of the writers of the Harlem Renaissance had viewed with such invigorating exuberance, as one that greatly accelerates the “decline” of the African American family. The assumption is that rural black families—though in most cases (and this is not explained or qualified) already on the verge of collapse before moving North—find the city incapable of sustaining stability. “Freed from the controlling force of public opinion and communal institutions” (64), family desertion becomes the “inevitable consequence of the impact of urban life on the simple family organization and folk culture which the Negro has evolved in the rural South” (64).

There may seem to be an obvious contradiction here between the assumption that the “simple family” was “already crumbling” and that there was an inherent danger in “freeing” the family head from the “controlling force” that bound him to family in the rural black South, but this can be explained when we account for the insufficiency of the data Moynihan is able to produce in his treatment of post-Emancipation South. The Report moves jarringly from specific discussion

of the slave family (the “peculiar nature of American slavery” [60]), to broad and generalistic statements of post-slavery society (“it may be speculated that it was the Negro male who was most humiliated” by segregation [62]), and back to specific, data-filled treatment of urbanization (63-65).

The effect of these jumps is to render the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction era (1865-c1900) strangely passive or even absent in analysis. This again creates an aura of fatalism over the singularly destructive consequence of slavery in the history of black family life in America. It is as if the African American family effectively moves directly from the scar of slavery to the rupture of transplantation into “the city of destruction,” leaving the near half-century between emancipation and Northern migration as telling lacuna. This progression is deeply problematic. The free rural black family is a simple structure, already “dissolving,” having never recovered from the restrictions of slavery. It is, according to Moynihan, “clear” that the “matrifocal” family model “persisted in the decades of rural life that followed” emancipation. It may be useful here to recall Eric Sundquist’s depiction of the ways in which this simple family structure was depicted during reconstruction,

No fact was more often or more scurrilously claimed by racist commentators than that the “failure” of the black family was a sign of racial degeneration. Whether or not the fault was said to lie in the history of slavery, the archetype of the black rapist, the assertion that black women were licentious, and the charge that black families were “naturally” at home in squalor and filth were all common pronouncements in the post-Reconstruction interpretation of so-called black family pathology. (394)

Clearly, the Moynihan Report does not make overt pronouncements of racial inferiority. However, in leaving the history of family life in the Reconstruction and post-Reconstruction South largely unexamined, Moynihan does nothing to check the narrative of the “failure” of black family structure during the era.

The Moynihan Report makes two significant rhetorical moves in its presentation or non-presentation of Reconstruction. First, Moynihan creates a deficit of causation. Because the Report presents African American family as a “problem” and locates the “roots” of that problem somehow within the (Post)Reconstructive moment, the expectation is that historical analysis of Reconstruction-era black family life will somehow untangle the “pathology” that it has supposedly identified. This in turn marks black family pathology as historically determined to the point of seeming inevitable, and Reconstruction itself as an inevitable failure. Moynihan’s second rhetorical move is to present black family difference as symptomatic, not only of its own perceived “deficiencies,” but of white family stability. Thus, the very definition of the white family model is “externalized in” the identifying and naming of black family pathology.

With these two conceptual frames of “Roots” and “Symptoms,” Moynihan's 1965 Report attempted 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. Family and reconstruction had existed as uneasy bedfellows in the racial politics of the nation at least since emancipation. Indeed, family, as rhetorical symbol or public metaphor, has frequently and corrosively been used in the service of reactionary and conservative positionalities. Both of America's historical Reconstructions engage with this self-contained, exclusive, and conservative version of national family, from white and black perspectives alike. The Moynihan Report was received into American public life at a unique and intense moment in the Civil Rights Era (or

Second Reconstruction). There is no doubt that the linkage, highlighted above, of the Report's reception with public interpretation of the Watts Riots colored the history of The Moynihan Report from that moment forth. However, it should also be remembered that that the radical turn indicated by Watts was an anathema to the Moynihan Report. Hortense Spillers, was of course correct in pointing out that the document contained nothing new (456). In examining Moynihan's efforts to frame the hundred-year history of the free black family, one encounters a proliferation of a system of signs and arguments that had been in circulation even before the emancipation of the African American family. The myths of Reconstruction had shown a remarkable durability, and debate had moved but little beyond earlier moments of American Reconstruction.

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