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“NOBODY ASKS ME THE QUESTIONS” *Beulah* and the Moynihan Report

The disclosure of the Moynihan Report in March 1965 was a momentous turning point in the modern socio-historical interpretation of the African American family. Assistant Secretary of Labor Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action" argued, "At the heart of the deterioration of the failure of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family."¹ While this report, as prepared by the Office of Policy, Planning and Research, relied heavily on statistical data which documented changing demographic conditions, it appeared as the "Establishment's" official acceptance of age-old stereotypes regarding the African American family and racialized gender roles. Moynihan placed the "disorganized black family" in the center of the "tangle of pathology" which he claimed dominated African American life.² His "pathology-disorganization" perspective mirrored that of previous mid-century academics such as E. Franklin Frazier and Gunnar Myrdal.³

From extensive governmental data and research, Moynihan and his team concluded that "the principal weakness of the Negro family are its instability, its proclivity for producing illegitimate children, and its matriarchal structure."⁴ Moynihan argued that these conditions, coupled with racial

1. United States, Department of Labor, Office of Policy, Planning and Research, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (1965), 5.

2. Herbert Gutman, *The Black Family in Slavery and Freedom, 1750-1925* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1977), xviii.

3. Elmer P. Martin and Joanne Mitchell Martin, *The Black Extended Family* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 103.

4. Herbert Gans, "The Negro Family," *Commonweal* (17 September 1965): 47.

discrimination, created poverty, low educational achievement and unemployment in African American society.

Moynihan's interpretation of the data was dependent upon the premise that the white male patriarchal structure was the standard for American familial life. Jualynne Elizabeth Dodson argues that

African American family life, from its beginning up to the present, has not adhered to the norm. Research based on this perspective [most notably the Moynihan Report] has labeled black families as pathological and dysfunctional because of their variation from the expected norm.⁵

The Moynihan Report did not originate out of early 1960's sociological data without outside societal influence; Moynihan simply reported what Herbert Gutman described as "conventional academic wisdom" [Gutman xviii]. An example of this comes from the January 1965 *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*. The editors wrote, "[The African American] has difficulty weighing the short-run setbacks among the long-term gains. [...] The Negro also has the handicaps of past discriminations—poverty, lack of a tradition of skill and ambition and low job seniority."⁶

A critical transitional element paved the way from traditional racist stereotypes of African Americans in the early twentieth century to the release of the Moynihan's widely controversial conclusions. This factor was the purveyance of African American family and gender stereotypes within American popular culture, particularly in motion pictures and the exploding new medium of television. This article will examine racialized gender and familial roles within the television sitcom *Beulah* (1950-1953), the first nationally broadcast weekly television series starring an African American in the title role.

In *Racial Formation in the United States*, Michael Omi and Howard Winant argue that racial formations operate on both macro and micro levels in society. An examination of the character portrayals, dialogue and thematics of *Beulah* demonstrate the continuity and reciprocity of racial conceptualizations on the micro level (a singular television program) and the macro level (the Moynihan Report, an interpretive, bureaucratic examination of African Americans).⁷

5. Jualynne Elizabeth Dodson, "Conceptualizations of African American Families," in *Black Families at the Crossroads*, edited by Robert Staples and Leonor Boulton Johnson (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1993), 68.

6. Arnold Rose, "Foreward," *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* (January 1965): ix-x.

7. Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States* (New York & London: Routledge, 1989), 67.

The origins of *Beulah*, the television sitcom, are similar to those of other situation comedies of the popular new medium of television. The role began on the Fibber McGee and Molly radio program. *Beulah* was originally “played” by white male actor Marlin Hurt.⁸ The character spun off “her” own series in 1945. After Hurt’s death in 1946, celebrated African American actress Hattie McDaniel continued the radio role until her own death in 1952.

The popular situation comedy was transferred to television in October 1950 and ran for three seasons on ABC. The title role was portrayed by three of the most prominent African American actresses of the era—Ethel Waters, Hattie McDaniel and Louise Beavers. Ethel Waters was a well known jazz singer who had a successful stint in films later in her career. She was nominated for an Academy Award for her performance in *The Member of the Wedding* (1953). Waters originated the role on television and portrayed *Beulah* for two seasons (1950-1952). Hattie McDaniel made her film debut in *The Golden West* (1932) and portrayed a number of mammy-maids, many of them assertive and outspoken. In 1939 she became the first African American to win an Academy Award for her portrayal of Mammy in *Gone With the Wind*. McDaniel was scheduled to permanently replace Waters in the *Beulah* show in 1952, appearing in a few episodes, but she was forced to resign due to illness.

Louise Beavers also made a career of playing mammies and servants. She was in the first *Imitation of Life* (1934), *Mr. Blandings Builds His Dream House* (1948) and *The Jackie Robinson Story* (1950). Beavers took over for McDaniel after her departure from the series and starred as *Beulah* in the final season of the series’ run (1952-1953).⁹ *Beulah*, the “Queen of the Kitchen,” was the middleaged domestic of the Henderson family. The Hendersons were a virtual caricature of the post-war white nuclear family. The family had three members—Harry, an attorney; Alice, his stay-at-home wife; and Donnie, their school-aged son. The bulk of the storylines of the sitcom involved *Beulah* attempting to solve a household crisis in the Henderson household or trying to clean up a disaster caused by her own meddling.

The program included two other African American actors who were pivotal to the plots. Oreole, *Beulah*’s ditsy friend, was portrayed by veteran actress Butterfly McQueen in the show’s first two seasons and by Ruby Dandridge (actress Dorothy Dandridge’s mother) in the final season. *Beulah*’s lazy boyfriend Bill Jackson was also portrayed by three actors over the course

8. Donald Bogle, *Blacks in American Film and Television: An Encyclopedia* (New York: Garland Press, 1988), 258.

9. Tim Brooks and Early Marsh, *The Complete Directory to Primetime Network TV Shows, 1946-Present* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1991), 77.

of the show's run—Percy (Bud) Harris, Dooley Wilson (of *Casablanca* fame) and Ernie Whitman.

A binary/oppositional schemata was integral to the thematics of the program. As in other forms of popular culture of the era that depicted African American women, Beulah's primary familial responsibilities were to the Henderson household. This fit the cinematic stereotype of the Mammy. This symbol of black femininity, as perceived by whites, was the caretaker of the white's homes and children. She always placed her white employer's needs above those of her own family.¹⁰ This sentiment was crystallized in the television program because Beulah had neither nuclear nor extended family members of her own. Oreole and Bill were the only representatives of African American community that existed. The Hendersons had both mother-in-laws as semi-regular cast members and uncles, cousins, and other family members appeared periodically on the program. Beulah, meanwhile, had no blood family and a limited racial clan on which to draw strength. Therefore, she considered the white family as her own despite the fact that she did not eat with or live with the Hendersons. Dialogue in the scripts demonstrated Beulah's loyalty. In one episode, when the Hendersons attempted to cut their domestic budget, Beulah informs the clan "I am not going to have my family eat cold cuts on Saturday night." Earlier in the same episode Beulah informed Harry Henderson, "We all study you Mr. Harry because in our own way we each loves you. And you bring home the money to keep the family going." During the run of the series, Beulah always considered herself part of this white family, despite the fact that she was merely an employee, willing to pack her bags at the slightest discomfort she caused the Hendersons. It was primarily through the Henderson family that Beulah obtained her sense of identity as caretaker and "Queen of the Kitchen."

The *Beulah* program contrasted the nuclear and extended family structure of the white Henderson household with the complete lack of family within the African American community. This comparison was integral to the Euro-American comprehension of the African American family. The majority of Hollywood films with African American portrayals during the 1950s and early 1960s demonstrated a lack of cohesive black families, primarily in comparison with the model of the postwar white nuclear family. *Carmen Jones* (1954), *The Defiant Ones* (1957), *Imitation of Life* (1959) and *Lillies of the Field* (1963) are all examples in which the black extended (or even nuclear) family is nonexistent. The virtual exclusion of African Americans from television in this period added to the Euro-American lack of knowledge of the black family

10. Lisa M. Anderson, *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of Black Women on Stage and Screen* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 1997), 10.

unit. This structuralizing absence meant that the majority of Euro-Americans had little experience with any African American family, either real or fictitious. Therefore, when a Johnson administration expert argued that “Negro social structure, in particular the Negro family [...] is in the deepest trouble” and that the breakdown of the black family was “the fundamental source of the weakness of the Negro community at the present time,” the majority of Euro-Americans accepted his supposedly expert opinion.¹¹ Americans had been conditioned by years of film and television viewing to believe that the black family was fragmented, incomplete, unstable or virtually non-existent. Early television shows like *Beulah* or *Amos n’ Andy* contributed to this credulity. One of the primary criticisms that African American opponents of the Moynihan report expressed was that black familial patterns did not correspond to middle-class (meaning white) values. Cultural theorist Richard Dyer argues that “in Western representation whites are overwhelmingly and disproportionately predominant . . . and are placed as the norm, the ordinary, the standard.”¹² Critics of the Moynihan Report recognized this. Civil rights leader Bayard Rustin claimed, “What may seem to be a disease to the white middle class may be a healthy adaptation to the Negro lower class.”¹³ Floyd McKissick, director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) claimed, “My major criticism of the report is that it assumes that middle-class American values are the correct ones for everyone in America” [*ibid.*].

The comparison of white and black family models may not have been so obvious if *Beulah* was not constantly (in almost every episode) commenting on her desire to marry Bill and have a family of her own. Every episode began with *Beulah* speaking directly to the television audience for approximately fifteen seconds. Her comments were often self-deprecating. In one introduction, *Beulah* (Hattie McDaniel) says, “Don’t let anybody tell you I’m in a market for a husband. Of course, I would be but they don’t sell husbands in the market.” In another episode, *Beulah* (Louise Beavers) claims, “If marriages are made in heaven, my guardian angel has been loafing on the job.”

What is essential about *Beulah*’s lack of a black family structure is the fact that the black family has always been a valuable weapon in the African American struggle for survival. By denying a black family, you deny the struggle. Sitcoms of the 1950s and 1960s rarely portrayed African American characters and absolutely did not depict the racism, discrimination and disenfranchisement that was a basic fact of African American life. There was no

11. United States, Department of Labor, 1531.

12. Richard Dyer, *White* (New York & London: Routledge, 1997), 3.

13. William Bennett, “Reflections on the Moynihan Report,” *American Enterprise* (January 1995): 2.

need for black families in a world in which these conditions did not exist. In order for African Americans to participate in the white television world, blacks had to make concessions to white America's fantasy images of them and the world in which they lived.

A common comedic device which ran throughout the series involved Bill testifying to his love for Beulah but always finding reasons why they should postpone marrying. This conversation often took place at the conclusion of an episode, accentuating the audience's knowledge that this marriage would never take place. In one episode, Beulah compares Bill to a salmon. When he asks, "How come you think of me as a fish?", she responds, "Because some day I'm going to hook you." At the conclusion of another program, Beulah asks Bill, "Don't you think its time we get married?" He responds by claiming he knows who the best preacher would be—the Henderson's son Donnie." When Beulah argues that "he's not old enough to make it legal, Bill," her boyfriend explained, "Couple years present schooling, four years in high school, four years college, and if he is a leaning, then more years in school—it's worth waiting for baby." Beulah is always seen as the aggressor in the question of marriage. At one point Bill tells her, "You known cupcake it's not legitimate to propose to a man before lunch. "

Despite her lack of an African American family, Beulah confirmed the supposed matriarchal nature of the African American society, a cornerstone of the Moynihan Report. Moynihan claimed, "It is clearly a disadvantage for the minority group to be operating on one principle while the great majority of the population [...] is operating on another." He continued, "Ours is a society which presumes male leadership in private and public affairs [...] a subculture such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage."¹⁴

Throughout the series, Beulah consistently directs Bill. While he often addressed her in terms of endearment, calling her "my little pot pie" or "passion pigeon" it is usually to get something to eat or to get out of work. Bill ran a fix-it shop on the program but tended to spend more time in the Henderson's kitchen where Beulah was always cooking. She admonished him, "You are the fastest answering man at meal time I ever did know." While the actors portraying Bill were often able to rise above the material, the dialogue confirmed the worst racial suspicions about black men – they were lazy, ate all the time and were generally shiftless. In one episode, Beulah enters Bill's shop to find him asleep in a chair with his feet on the desk. She looks annoyed and pleads with him to get to work. The scene continues,

14. "Letter From Washington," *New Yorker* (11 September 1965): 120.

Bill: "I'm workin Baby"
Beulah: "Working?"
Bill: "I'm inventin. "
Beulah: "Inventing what?"
Bill: "Perpetual motion. "
Beulah: "So what's this—reverse research?"

She eventually gets angry and grabs the desk so his feet fall to the floor. Beulah consistently obtained part-time work for Bill at the Henderson household. Apparently, without her aid, he would have been content sleeping at his shop.

The characters of Beulah and Bill do not conform to the gender-appropriate behavior of the era which emphasized the delicate nature of women. One of the most striking demonstrations of this is in an episode in which Beulah totes a heavy wheelbarrow while Bill simply watches her carry out the labor without offering assistance. The implication is that Beulah is not a "real" woman and that African American men do not treat their women in civilized ways.

Throughout the Moynihan Report, the author acknowledged the lack of economic opportunity and high unemployment rates among African American men. He attributed this to a pattern of discrimination. Yet situation comedies like *Beulah* and *Amos n' Andy* emphasized the supposed laziness of black men and their unwillingness to take advantage of economic opportunities. It is questionable whether Moynihan's message of discrimination was muted by countless years of popular culture that emphasized the economic irresponsibility and lack of initiative of black men. The norm of the text argued that the African American man was deficient according to contemporary standards of masculinity because he was unable to provide for his family. Bill could be an example of what Moynihan considered, "the failure of the Negro male" [*Ibid*]. As Beulah warned Mr. Harry, "Telling Bill one thing at a time is the best method—too much stuff confuses him." Bud Harris, the original actor contracted to play the role of Bill, quit the series several months into its run, complaining that he was forced to play the character as an Uncle Tom. Harris found the role derogatory to his race and therefore, bowed out.

The African American women on the show were also depicted as "lacking." Beulah, as previously demonstrated, was unable to obtain a husband. But the character of Oreole reiterated the supposed deficiencies of African American women. Through the use of visual imagery, the director purposefully compares the physicality of black and white womanhood. In one episode, Oreole (Ruby Dandridge) reads a story from *True Tales of Passion and Purity* magazine. The cover, held near her face, depicted a Kim Novak-

type, smiling (at the audience). Later in the episode as Alice reads a story to Beulah at the kitchen table, one can not help from comparing the rotund Beulah to the petite Alice.

Beulah was not allowed to operate by contemporary standards of “white” femininity. She completed many jobs that were considered male responsibilities. When she was not toting a wheelbarrow, she was pushing a lawn mower. The lack of intelligence of African American women was a primary motif. Oreole’s stupidity was a running joke throughout the series. When she swears that she will not reveal a secret and will be “as dumb as an oyster,” Bill explains, “Oh, you got that already.” In another episode, Beulah tells Oreole, “I tell people you aren’t as simple as you act.”

One of the most striking conclusions of the Moynihan Report was the marked increase in the number of African American illegitimate births. Moynihan’s conclusion, that one of the “principal weaknesses of the Negro family [was its] proclivity for producing illegitimate children,” was a humorous element in the context of the *Beulah* program [Gans 47]. When a baby buggy is delivered to Beulah’s kitchen, Oreole exclaims, “Oh Beulah, you and Bill really ain’t going to get married?” Beulah blankly explains, “This ain’t part of the trousseau, Oreole.” After Bill makes a crib for the expected Henderson baby (which is simply a figment of the black character’s imagination), Beulah smiles at her boyfriend and coquettishly explains, “Put it away Bill—one day it may come in handy.” Always startled with the thought of getting tied down in marriage, he exclaims, “Just a minute, passion pigeon. Don’t drop the apple cart before the horse is loose.”

Stuart Hall claims that the “old racism” of the pre-Civil Rights era constructed blacks as the objects rather than the subjects of representation. Since such racism constructed a binary system of racial representation with whiteness as the norm, blackness clearly belonged to the Other.¹⁵ Within the *Beulah* program, familial and gender norms were white norms. There was a mutually dependent relationship between the white and black characters. The Hendersons depended upon the cheap labor of African Americans to maintain a comfortable middle-class lifestyle, while the African American characters, particularly Beulah, depended upon the Hendersons for employment and a sense of familial identity. In one episode where Beulah packs her bags to leave because her meddling has disrupted the Henderson’s marriage, Alice is clearly shocked. She is about to lose the labor that has given her a life of comfort and leisure. But Beulah is the more distraught character; she is about

15. Stuart Hall, “Gramsci’s Relevance for the Study of Race and Ethnicity,” *Journal of Communication Inquiry* 10: 5-27.

to lose her gainful employment and the family to which she “belongs” (implying both emotion and possession).

The Moynihan Report also objectified the African American family by clearly constructing the race as “Other.” Television’s blacks existed primarily for white spectators whose comfort and understanding the program spoke to. The symbolic absence of African Americans from the overwhelming majority of television programs meant that those African Americans who did appear on the screen took upon significant symbolic importance. Television sitcoms like *Beulah* served the function of placing African Americans into white space and white power, keeping the real contours of the black community off the television screens of white America.

The African American community responded negatively to the *Beulah* television program. The Johnson Publishing Group, publishers of *Ebony* and *Jet* magazines, the two largest circulating black magazines of the early 1950s, reflected this sentiment. In a January 1951 feature on Ethel Waters, who was currently starring as *Beulah* on television, the role was conveniently forgotten. The fact that Ethel Waters would have been the most visible African American women on television in this era was a fact which could not be dismissed by the publishers unless it was considered diplomatic simply not to broach the subject with the actress. *Jet Magazine*, published weekly, provided African American audiences with a list of television programs with black performers that they could tune into each week. The *Beulah* show was not mentioned once in the column during the program’s run, a deliberate snub.

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (N.A.A.C.P.) was the most active voice against the exhibition of the *Beulah* television program. *Beulah* was so controversial among African American activists that it became a widely discussed issue at the N. A. A. C. P. national convention in June, 1951. The Civil Rights organization took the unprecedented step of condemning the television program in its official resolutions of the convention. The N.A.A.C.P. resolved:

WHEREAS, radio and television programs, such as the “Amos n’Andy and “Beulah” shows, which depict the Negro and other minority groups in a stereotyped and derogatory manner definitely tend to strengthen the conclusion among the uninformed or prejudiced peoples that Negroes and other minorities are inferior, lazy, dumb and dishonest; and

WHEREAS, the false impression created by programs and shows over the radio and television such as the “Amos n’Andy” and “Beulah” shows seriously hamper and retard the development of the work of this Association and other interested groups and associations to promote intelligent appraisal of all human beings as individuals.

THEREFORE, BE IT RESOLVED that the National Association for the Advance-

ment of Colored People [...] condemns the practice, manufacturers, distributors [...] persons, or firms sponsoring or promoting radio and television programs and shows which portray stereotypical characterizations of Negroes.¹⁶

The N. A. A. C. P. then proceeded to ask the state and local branches to boycott sponsors or stations that carried the television program. The effectiveness of these boycotts is questionable; Louise Beaver's decision to leave the program at the end of the 1952-1953 season was the final departure that the producers could handle. They, therefore, decided to end the series.

The *Beulah* television program was one of the last acting jobs that veteran actress Hattie McDaniel held before her death in 1952. In one of the most unintentionally sad moments in television history, an obviously tired Hattie McDaniel (*Beulah*) tells the audience in the show's prologue, "Everybody says I'm the girl with all the answers. The problem is nobody asks me the questions." This serious, dispassionate proclamation by McDaniel could apply to the lack of African American participation in and control over black self-representation in early television and involvement in the construction of the Moynihan Report.

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16. "Resolutions from the 1951 National Convention of the N.A.A.C.P." *The Crisis* (August/September 1951): 478-479.

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