

The Pennsylvania State University

The Graduate School

College of the Liberal Arts

WOMEN OF WATTS:

PICTURING THE STRONGBLACKWOMAN IN THE 1965 WATTS UPRISING

A Thesis in

Communication Arts and Sciences and Women's Studies

by

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Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

August 2007

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ABSTRACT

Women of Watts:

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Sarah E. Stone Watt

In 1965 The Watts section of Los Angeles erupted in what many believed was the worst race riot in the history of the United States. This event, which occurred at a turning point in the Civil Rights era, has served to shape scholarly and public understanding of race riots specifically and the development of American race relations generally.

Although the Watts uprising is one of the most studied riots in U.S. history there is more scholarly work to be done. The purpose of this study is to employ feminist rhetorical criticism to understand one piece of the Watts puzzle that scholars have ignored: press portrayals of African American women in the uprising.

The study traces portrayals of African American women during and after the riot in *Life* and *Ebony* magazines, as well as the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* newspapers and addresses three major roles that these publications made rhetorically available to the women of Watts. As cultural authorities, each publication relied on stereotypical and contradictory images of African American women as overly strong and uncontrollable, the moral compass of their community, welfare dependents, and overbearing matriarchs. This study suggests that looking at the portrayals together we see a crucial step in the development of the public image of African American women from strong black women, to “superwomen,” to

STRONGBLACKWOMEN. It further suggest that race riot rhetoric is an understudied yet potentially fruitful terrain within which rhetoricians and women's studies scholars might further develop an understanding of the intersecting nature of oppression and work to disarm its power.

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank God. Without my faith in God and the support I received from so many of the amazing people in my life this dissertation would not have been possible. I am also exceedingly grateful to my husband. Erik is a loving husband, an amazing partner, and my best friend. I am blessed to have his unwavering love and support.

I was fortunate to have an outstanding dissertation committee. I wish to thank my advisor Stephen Browne for his guidance. His patience and pointed questions made this task meaningful and enjoyable. Honest support, criticism, and enthusiasm from my committee members: Deborah Atwater, Thomas Benson, and Cheryl Glenn, made this project more manageable. I thank them for reigning me in and helping me set more reasonable goals.

I am grateful to the Institute for Arts and Humanities at The Pennsylvania State University for their generous support of this dissertation. They provided the time, space, and funding I needed in order to concentrate on my work. They also offered valuable opportunities for me to discuss my ideas with other young scholars from different disciplines.

Several colleagues and friends helped me maintain focus throughout the completion of my dissertation. I want to thank Melissa Marshall, Nicholas Thomas, Una Kimokeo-Goes, Sara Mehlretter, Brett Lunceford, and Jimbo Maritato for their support and willingness to listen to my ideas. I am particularly grateful to Jill Weber for her insightful comments on my ideas and early drafts. I am also thankful to my community

group: Janet, Andy, Sam, Denise, Jenny, Todd, Laura, Ryan, Karen, Robert, Corri, Bob, and Dana who offered prayers and encouragement during each part of the process.

I am grateful to my family. I thank all of them for their positive words and faith that I could do this when I was unsure. In particular I thank my mothers whose strength inspires me. I appreciate their ability to be entirely supportive yet never fail to voice a dissenting opinion that encourages me to consider different perspectives. Finally, I thank my Dad—to whom this dissertation is dedicated. He worked in Watts in 1965 and I remember watching him leave for work in Los Angeles each day during the riot in 1992. He commuted many hours only to open a store and close it down again as the riot continued to rage. My memories of that time and the way riots seemed to shape his perceptions of race were a major part of the inspiration for this project. I adore my father and am grateful for his love, care, and support.

Chapter 1

WOMEN AND RIOT RHETORIC

In attempting to analyze the situation of the black woman in America, one crashes abruptly into a solid wall of grave misconceptions, outright distortions of fact, and defensive attitudes on the part of many.
Francis Beale¹

On the evening of August 11, 1965, a highway patrol officer in Los Angeles, California made what he thought would be a routine traffic stop in order to determine the sobriety of motorist Marquette Frye. The stop turned out to be anything but routine and ultimately sparked what some would later call “the worst race riot in the history of this country.”² The Watts uprising was not the first, nor would it be the last, of the major riots in the United States, but it came as a shock to many American citizens and left them searching for answers. Watts became one of the most studied riots in the U.S. as researchers sought to uncover who rioted and why.³ Sociologists, historians, government

¹ Francis Beale, “Double Jeopardy: To Be Black and Female,” *Words of Fire: An Anthology of African American Feminist Thought*, ed. Beverly Guy-Sheftal (New York: The New Press 1995), 146.

² Robert Kirsch, “Introduction,” *Burn Baby Burn: The Los Angeles Race Riot August, 1965*, by Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., 1966).

³ J. Eugene Grigsby. “An Interpretive Analysis of Recent Work,” *Race, Change, and Urban Society*, Edited by Peter Orleans and William Russell Ellis Jr. (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications, 1971), 596.

commissions, activists, and newspaper reporters have explained in great detail the ways that age, race, and class, were each a dominant factor in the uprising.⁴ One feature of the Watts riot that has not been explored, yet seems to play an underlying role in the rhetoric of this and other riots in our nation's history, is gender. Therefore, this study asks the question: how did the media use stories and images to represent African American women in the Watts uprising? Analyzing newspaper and magazine photographs together with the prose that accompanied them, I explore the discourses that were brought to bear on the African American women of Watts in August of 1965 and argue that those discourses remain at the heart of the stereotypical image of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN today.⁵

This study avails itself of the photographs of women in the Watts riot, their accompanying captions, and news stories in order to unpack conflicting stereotypes of African American women as crazed, selfish, looters; the moral compass of the community; and the beggar, or welfare cheat. Throughout this study I focus on the

⁴ Sociologists include: Robert M. Fogelson, *Mass Violence in America: The Los Angeles Riots* (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969); David O. Sears and John B. McConahay, *The Politics of Violence: The New Urban Blacks and the Watts Riot* (Washington DC: University Press of America, 1973); and Paul Bullock (ed.) *Watts: The Aftermath, An Inside View of the Ghetto by The People of Watts* (New York: Grove Press, 1969); Historian: Gerald Horne, *Fire This Time: The Watts Uprising and the 1960s* (Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1995); Commission: John A. McCone, Warren M. Christopher, et. al. *Violence in the City: An End or a Beginning?* A Report by the Governor's Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, December 2, 1965; Otto Kerner, John V. Lindsey, et. al. *Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders*, New York Times Edition (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc.); Activist: Della Rossa, *Why Watts Exploded: How the Ghetto Fought Back* (Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Local, Socialist Workers Party, May 1996).

⁵ STRONGBLACKWOMAN refers to the way that many women are caught in a bind where their strength is inseparable from their race and gender. These women are often held to unreasonably high standards because of their strength, creating a double bind in which they are eventually vilified for not fulfilling impossible expectations. For more information see Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999).

rhetoric of depiction by unpacking images from *Life*, *Ebony*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*; examining the discourse that surrounded them, and attempting to disarm the harmful narrative of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN by offering a reading of the historical assumptions behind the photographs and, where they are available, potential counter histories.

Rioting in the United States

In 1965 the Watts uprising seemed, to many, to be the largest riot in U.S. history. Looking back on the previous year, people recalled rioting in places like Harlem, Chicago, and Philadelphia, in the summer of 1964. Although citizens in each of these cities saw stores damaged, people injured, and rioters arrested, only two of those riots resulted in deaths. Until the Watts uprising happened, the highest death toll for rioting in that era was four.⁶ After Los Angeles calmed down in August, 1965, “thirty-four persons were dead, and the wounded and hurt numbered 1,032 more.”⁷ It is easy to see how some may perceive the violence in Los Angeles to have been the worst in the nation’s history up to that point.⁸ However, perpetuating that assumption is problematic because it seems to deny (or at least gloss over) a long history of rioting in the United States.

⁶ I say “in that era” because there were brutal riots earlier in U.S. history, particularly between 1917 and 1921 in which white mobs attacked black citizens. Those earlier riots resulted in far more death and destruction but they were largely forgotten or ignored by the 1960s.

⁷ McCone, *Violence in the City*, 1.

⁸ Rioting in later years became much worse, the number of deaths and injuries in places like Newark, Detroit, and again in L.A. in 1992, was much higher.

The history of the U.S. is intimately tied to rioting. In the 1760s and 1770s crowds rioted both in times of celebration, on holidays such as New Year's, and in times of discontent, when jobs were scarce or people were unhappy with imperial rule.⁹ Throughout U.S. history riots have been part of a repertoire for collective action used to alter the political landscape, impact economic arrangements, disrupt power dynamics, and express the sentiment of the people for good or ill.¹⁰ After independence, riots became a tool for regulating communal morality and were often used in inter-ethnic conflict.

Most riots were the result of a variety of factors creating discontent among groups of people.¹¹ However, starting in the 1800s, animosity created between members of different races and ethnicities in the U.S. made race the focus of many riots. This remained true to varying degrees throughout the 1800s and into the 1900s as Americans negotiated the dynamics of slavery, abolition, lynching, urban settlement, civil rights, racial profiling, and other issues that defined the racial landscape of the United States. Although we do not have accurate statistics for all of the riots that occurred, we cannot forget the tremendous violence that transpired particularly during those riots in which

⁹ Paul A. Gilje. *Rioting in America* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

¹⁰ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 1996; Sidney Tarrow. *Power in Movement: Social Movements and Contentious Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998); Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1978).

¹¹ Allen D. Grimshaw, "Three Views of Urban Violence: Civil Disturbance, Racial Revolt, Class Assault," *Riots and Rebellion: Civil Violence in the Urban Community*, Edited by Louis H. Massotti and Don R. Bowen (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1968); Louis H. Massotti and Don R. Bowen ed. *Riots and Rebellion: Civil Violence in the Urban Community* (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1968).

lynch mobs destroyed Southern cities and murdered innocent African Americans.¹²

Jacquelyn Dowd Hall reminds us that “the modern nation-state *depends* on oscillation between remembering and forgetting.”¹³ She claims that atrocities that do not appear in official memory are not forgotten but instead those memories we are supposed to forget are buried very near the surface. Remembering is important not only so that we understand our nation’s past but also because those memories that are buried very near the surface help to shape our current conceptions of racial violence.

Race Riot

The McCone Commission, the official government entity assigned to determine the cause of the mass violence in Watts, as well as other influential researchers, consistently used the term “riot” and often the more specific phrase “race riot” to describe the event. Paul Bullock explains that “much depends, of course, on one’s interpretation of the term ‘riot.’”¹⁴ He observes that when researchers attempt to discuss this particular area of life, “questions of terminology and semantics are among the most vexing. One’s choice of words can, unconsciously perhaps, distort the image of an event or a

¹² For a particularly detailed account of the New Orleans riot in 1900 see Ida B. Wells “Mob Rule in New Orleans,” *On Lynchings*, Ed. Patricia Hill Collins (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2002).

¹³ Jacqueline Dowd Hall, “A Later Comment,” *The Journal of American History* 83, 4 (March 1997), 1268.

¹⁴ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 4

community, or raise extraneous issues which cloud the main point.”¹⁵ Lang and Engel Lang argue that a researcher’s definition of a riot is important because “to overlook the purposive meaning of acts which comprise a collective disturbance implies an acceptance of the official perspective of the law enforcement agency, whose judgment of what is or is not a riot is simply a matter of the degree to which it is felt to be a menace to public order, a judgment apt to depend on the time and place it occurs.”¹⁶ This default position means that the term riot may be randomly applied to very different events evoking similar official responses.

Part of the challenge in defining what is and is not a riot stems from the development of theories of collective action. The accepted understanding of what occurs in a riot and how people behave has changed and developed with significant theoretical shifts occurring in the 1960s and 1970s as scholars attempted to explain widespread race rioting in the United States. Because this debate occurred at the same time that scholars took a heightened interest in explaining riots across a variety of times and places, the basis for deciding what was and was not a riot became blurred. One example of this problem appeared in Charles Tilly’s 1978 investigation into collective violence in eighteenth-century Britain and the U.S. In his discussion of one event he wrote, “Was that a riot? In the technical legal sense, it was: twelve or more people had, indeed assembled with an apparent intent which local officials could reasonably regard as illegal;

¹⁵ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 4

¹⁶ Kurt Lang and Gladys Engel Lang, “Racial Disturbances as Collective Protest,” *Riots and Rebellion: Civil Violence in the Urban Community*, Edited by Louis H. Massotti and Don R. Bowen (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1968), 121.

they had not dispersed within the hour the law allotted them from the time that the authorities had read the riot act. In the looser sense of frenzy, confusion, or wanton destruction, however, the event does not qualify as a riot.”¹⁷ This is a fitting demonstration of the difficulty in defining a riot because it displays a number of theoretical sticking points for riot scholars. First there is the legal definition which can be useful and problematic, useful in the sense that it provides concrete parameters but problematic because it excludes a number of events that are termed riots by witnesses and participants and in that it is not uniformly applied by authorities, as Lang and Engel Lang have explained. Second, this definition centers on there being twelve people present who intend to act illegally. This is problematic because participants are not always caught or counted. Additionally, when examining riot behavior, there is rarely a mechanism for proving the intent of any of the participants. The final sentence in this passage speaks to the confusion about what rioters do as it implies that a riot must consist of some aspect of “frenzy, confusion, or wanton destruction.” This not only contradicts the earlier sentence attributing intent to rioters, which implies rationality, but also demonstrates the reliance on a LeBonbian definition of rioters as a madding crowd, a definition which assumes that those who participate in riots have no control over their actions. What follows logically from such a definition is that riotous acts cannot be purposeful.

Further complicating the definitional issue, some researchers who investigate riots toggle between various terms when referring to the same event. It is not uncommon for one event to be referred to as a riot, a civil disturbance, civil violence, urban unrest, racial

¹⁷ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 2.

violence, or urban violence, all in the same work.¹⁸ Therefore, it is necessary to understand some of the ways intersecting terms might further clarify what occurs in a particular riot. Taking the riots of the 1960s in the United States as his major area of investigation, Grimshaw claims that “the period of ‘classic’ race rioting in the United States . . . which dates from about the time of the First World War, was one in which whites responded to Negro ‘insubordination’ and ‘pushiness’ by direct assault upon the minority.”¹⁹ This definition is useful in understanding race riots specifically because it underscores the importance of race and the dynamics of domination and subordination in race relations that contribute to violence.

Masotti and Bowen further clarify the distinction between riots and other forms of civil violence by making two important observations. First, they claim, “riots do not present themselves as an attempt to seize state power or to throw it off,” they concede that riots may lead to movements or even a revolution but a riot in and of itself does not aim to overthrow the state.²⁰ Second, they argue that “riots appear to be more spontaneous, unplanned, and disorganized.”²¹ Again they concede that riots may be planned but argue that, to the observer, that fact is not evident. Following these principles

¹⁸ See Grimshaw, “Three Views of Urban Violence”; Lang and Engel Lang, “Racial Disturbances as Collective Protest”; Massotti and Bowen, *Riots and Rebellion*; Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*; William M. Tuttle, *Race Riot: Chicago in the Red Summer of 1919* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1996).

¹⁹ Grimshaw, “Three Views of Urban Violence,” 104. Although I will not use the term “Negro” in my own prose, it was the accepted term for African American people during the period which I am writing about and, therefore, will often be present in the quotations I use.

²⁰ Massotti and Bowen, *Riots and Rebellion*, 14.

²¹ Massotti and Bowen, *Riots and Rebellion*, 14-15.

for definition, one can see how other terms such as “uprising” may be interchangeable with “riot” when referring to certain events.

In his book, *Rioting in America*, Paul Gilje crafts a working definition of the term riot by integrating dictionary definitions, legal precedent, and understanding of events previously referred to as riots. In doing so he highlights the shortcomings of each definition and, at the same time, finds those areas in which they have explanatory force. Unable to create one concise concrete definition of a riot, Gilje instead offers multiple components that are useful in determining which events he will investigate as a riot. He defends the legal precedent of including events with twelve participants not because twelve is a particularly important number but rather because it is larger than the “three or more” standard present in most dictionaries. He also concedes that a riot does occur outside the bounds of what is accepted as the law²² and involves some use of force but argues that force is “not simply a matter of violence. It implies coercion that sometimes includes physical violence and sometimes does not.”²³ This observation is crucial because riot researchers rarely distinguish between physical and material violence and this observation allows Gilje to include in his study threats and other “ritual habits of mob action.”²⁴ Gilje accounts for the issue of spontaneity by reasoning that many events, including the Boston Tea Party, were planned actions by a particular group that were later

²² Here he makes the recognition that at times such as the American Revolution (and I would add during Reconstruction) it has not always been clear who is in charge and whose law is to be followed so the best standard in those times is to use what can reasonably be understood as legal or illegal in a particular time and place.

²³ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 4.

²⁴ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 4.

joined by many participants each with their own interests at stake. Therefore, the issue of spontaneity cannot be a determining factor in identifying what is or is not a riot. He recognizes that by these standards organized crime and gang activity, when they involve twelve or more participants, could be defined as a riot. In order to prevent such a miscategorization he excludes “criminals who routinely break the law as a group.”²⁵

In this study I will use the terms “uprising” and “riot” when describing the events that occurred in Watts. I use the term uprising because, in many senses, that is what it was. People who participated in the violence destroyed stores where they were charged exorbitant prices for goods they needed to survive and they attacked individuals whom they perceived to be participants in a structure of power that oppressed them. Additionally, uprising is the term that activists chose to use after the event.²⁶ The term riot, however, is also important. Bullock argues, “If [a riot] is regarded as only an aimless or selfish act of disorder and violence, clearly the 1965 event in Los Angeles was considerably more than that. If, however, it is viewed more broadly as any mass defiance of law and constituted authority, whatever its motivation, the term ‘riot’ unquestionably is meaningful.”²⁷ Since I agree with Bullock “that the violence of August, 1965, had both conventional *and* ideological significance,” I will use this term in a broader way than the McCone Commission and other officials have applied it. Additionally, I believe that using the term riot acknowledges that this event is part of that long history of mass

²⁵ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 5.

²⁶ Della Rossa, *Why Watts Exploded*.

²⁷ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 4.

violence in the United States wherein groups have attacked or been perceived to have committed an attack on the power structure.²⁸

Many scholars use the term “race riot” when discussing riot events in which race relations were clearly a factor. When applying the label “race riot” to an event their tendency is to avoid defining either term or define the term riot and make clear throughout the piece that race was a primary component in the reasons for rioting.²⁹ Although race was a primary component in the Watts riot, I will avoid the term “race riot” in this analysis except when I am quoting someone else’s research. When examining the reasons for rioting in Watts, the term “race riot” seems to be overly reductionist. Researchers have demonstrated that, although African American people were the rioters and they primarily attacked businesses and people of other racial groups, particularly Caucasians, the reasons for rioting were much more complex. The Watts uprising dealt not only with issues of race but, police brutality, age, class, and, I hope to demonstrate, gender. Therefore, to refer to the event as a “race riot” denies the other factors that were prevalent in the reasons for the uprising and I want to avoid the claim that any of these reasons was significantly more important than another. In the next section we will see how, from the beginning, gender was a factor in the Watts riot as people were angered by what they perceived as police violence toward women, particularly mothers.

²⁸ Grimshaw, “Three Views of Urban Violence.”

²⁹ Cheryl Greenberg. “The Politics of Disorder: Reexamining Harlem’s Riots of 1935 and 1943,” *Journal of Urban History* 18, 4 (1992). Marilynn S. Johnson, “Gender, Race, and Rumors: Reexamining the 1943 Race Riot,” *Gender & History* 10, 2 (1998).

Gender and the Watts Riot

On August 19, 1965, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* offered this account from an off duty police officer to explain how the riot began:

Wednesday was my day off but I was called back to duty along with two other employees. I picked them up at the vicinity of 116th and Avalon Blvd. A drunk driving citation had been given a youth by a California Highway Patrol officer. A woman was arguing hysterically with the officer. He told her to shut up and slapped her when she refused. By this time a crowd of about 300 to 400 persons had congregated from as far back as 120th street. The angry crowd began to beat the officer. His partner radioed for assistance. A colored and a white officer arrived and the colored officer attempted to restrain a hysterical pregnant woman and handcuffed her for her own protection. Several fights with officers started when officers ordered spectators (many of whom were in front of their homes) to move on. Other police cars were attacked with rocks and bottles as the two officers fled the scene. The weather was hot and throngs of men and women and youths seemed to pour out of multiple apartment dwellings and were immediately smote with the fever of violence.³⁰

The *Sentinel* boasted on the front of every issue that it was “the largest Negro weekly circulation in the west.” Yet it only began to examine the causes of violence in one of the largest African American communities in the West over a week after it began. This “first hand account” that appeared on the second page of the August 19 issue is not entirely accurate or detailed but it does raise many of the concerns at work in the reporting of this event.

The first concern that should arise regarding this story is the date on which it appeared. Although the riot began on August 11 and the *Sentinel* ran an issue the following day, there was no mention of the violence in South Central Los Angeles in the

³⁰ “Looting, Violence, Cool off with Weather,” *Los Angeles Sentinel* 19 August 1965, A2. Please note that the term “colored” here is reflective of the Jim Crow era and reflects the racist attitudes of many people at the time.

August 12 issue.³¹ Not only was the violence that erupted that night insignificant to reporters for the *Sentinel* but the major daily paper in that area at the time, *Los Angeles Times*, also failed to report on the violence. It was not until two days later, on August 13, 1965, that the *LA Times* began to see the magnitude of this event. By Friday the 13th rioting in the South Central area of Los Angeles had become so violent that the National Guard was ordered to the area and local and national news began to pay attention.

Another issue that the *Sentinel* coverage raised was how and when, exactly, rioting began. As with most protest events, the answers to these and similar questions differ, mostly between the press, activists, scholarly research, and official government accounts.³² Some, like the officer who claimed to be an “eyewitness,” argued that the rioting began immediately. Others, including the McCone Commission, claimed that the riot broke out later after rumors about the arrest spread to the surrounding area.³³ The exact timeline is not important to this study but, to examine the discourses that arose out of the event, it is important to have some idea of what happened. Certain elements of the story appear in most accounts. First, that on the evening of August 11, California Highway Patrol (CHP) officers stopped Marquette Frye and his brother after someone called the CHP to report that the driver of the vehicle appeared to be intoxicated. The stop was made a short distance from the Frye home and one of the observers went and

³¹ Although the event has become well known as “the Watts riot” it actually spanned a much larger section of South Central Los Angeles.

³² Thomas W. Benson and Bonnie Johnson, “The Rhetoric of Resistance: Confrontation with the Warmakers, Washington, D.C., October, 1967,” *Today’s Speech* 16, 3 (1968), 35-42.

³³ McCone, *Violence in the City*, 12.

told the young men's mother, Rena Frye, what was happening. When Ms. Frye arrived on the scene Marquette was being arrested. She yelled at her son and inflamed the situation. Marquette began to resist arrest and a large crowd gathered. The police ultimately arrested all three Fryes. In the process they angered many of the observers who were accustomed to seeing the police abuse African American citizens.³⁴ During the incident, one of the observers, a woman wearing a barber's smock, apparently spit on one of the officers, he then restrained her as well. The barber's smock she was wearing made the woman appear to be pregnant and the crowd became infuriated that police had not only been harassing the Fryes, but were now abusing a pregnant woman. The crowd began throwing stones and bottles at the police cars and the police took the arrestees and left the scene. Anger and rumors about the incident spread and throughout the night many citizens of Watts and surrounding areas "stoned passing automobiles, assaulted white motorists, and threatened a police command post."³⁵ The next day African American leaders and government officials in the area attempted to convince the rioters to stop. Although the violence died down that day, it flared up again that night and continued for days afterward with the height of the violence occurring on the night of Friday, August 13. By Sunday, 34 people were dead, over 1,000 were injured, nearly 4,000 were

³⁴ In the months leading up to the incident the *Sentinel* regularly carried front page stories describing discriminatory and violent incidents between police and African Americans in Los Angeles.

³⁵ Fogelson, *Mass Violence in America*, 113

arrested, up to \$40 million of damage was done to property, and the area was quiet.³⁶ The story of the “Watts riot” quickly gained national attention.

The McCone Commission later offered another interpretation of the incident. Claiming that the rioters were unrepresentative of the larger South Central population the Commission identified participants as mostly “unemployed, ill educated, juvenile, delinquent[s].” Critics argued otherwise.³⁷ In order to prevent such events from reoccurring, the commission suggested, Los Angeles should improve police-civilian relations, decrease unemployment, improve public education, and better suppress future civil rights protests.³⁸ Many, including civil rights activist Bayard Rustin, openly criticized the report for making hasty generalizations and attempting to improve the image of police and government in the area. Rustin argued that, “Just as the violent confrontation on the burning streets of Watts told us much about the underlying realities of race and class in America . . . so does the McCone report . . . tell us much about the response of our political and economic institutions to the Watts ‘manifesto.’”³⁹

Like the *Sentinel* coverage, the highly criticized McCone report was not entirely accurate nor did it fully explain the nuanced reasons for rioting. The commission was right: unemployment was high, schools were substandard, the police had a terrible

³⁶ See: Fogelson, *Mass Violence in America*, 113-114; McCone, *Violence in the City*, 10-25; Jerry Cohen and William S. Murphy, *Burn, Baby, Burn!* (New York: E.P. Dutton & Co., Inc. 1966).

³⁷ Fogelson, *Mass Violence in America*, 114.

³⁸ See McCone, *Violence in the City* and Fogelson, *Mass Violence in America*.

³⁹ Bayard Rustin, “The Watts ‘Manifesto’ & The McCone Report,” *Mass Violence in America: The Los Angeles Riots*, Edited by Robert M. Fogelson (New York: Arno Press & The New York Times, 1969), 148.

reputation among the people of Los Angeles, and the police had retreated when the protest became violent. However, these issues do not simply pertain to those we might consider juvenile delinquents. The issues identified by the commission were only some of the problems that residents of South Central Los Angeles faced on a daily basis.

Researchers have shown that, in addition to problems such as unemployment and poor schooling, residents faced daily struggles such as a lack of adequate transportation and a regular practice among business owners of overcharging local customers. As I mentioned earlier, the Watts riot quickly became one of the most studied riots in American history. Yet, in all of the reports on this crucial event in the struggle for civil rights, there remains one glaring omission: gender.

Looking only at the two accounts here of the way the riot began it should seem obvious that African American women were not only present, but also played a major role in the event. Both the “eyewitness” account and my compiled description of the arrest scene include at least two women as major players. Rena Frye, Marquette’s mother, seems in both accounts to be the spark that got the crowd’s attention and made them think something was wrong. Whether she was slapped by police or simply caused a scene when she yelled at her son as he was being arrested, by all accounts Rena Frye played a pivotal role in shifting this situation from peaceful to violent. In both accounts, the situation went from bad to worse as another woman entered the scene. The woman in the barber’s smock, who some say spit on police, was mistaken for a pregnant woman and the story of her arrest spread as testimony to the worst kind of police violence. Despite their prominent role in the initial event of the Watts riot, most seem to ignore the significance

of these two “mothers” and other women in the week-long uprising.⁴⁰ Although African American women were rarely the subjects of reports or research regarding the riot, they regularly appeared as objects in news photographs that helped the nation perceive the events that unfolded in Watts.⁴¹ Those photographs, and the various captions and stories that accompanied them, will serve as the basis for this analysis.

Picturing Watts

Media coverage of African American life in Los Angeles was sparse prior to the Watts riot in 1965. Most stories about African Americans appeared in reporting on Civil Rights struggles in the South or federal legislation such as the recently approved Voting Rights Act.⁴² However, during the 1965 uprising, reporters began to look at the African American community of South Central Los Angeles and analyze their condition in greater detail than they ever had before.⁴³ The spike in coverage was temporary but it left an indelible mark on the discourse about African Americans in Los Angeles and across

⁴⁰ While I recognize that one woman may not have been a “mother” the perception that she was an expectant mother drove the rumors and contributed greatly to the underlying gendered narrative of this event.

⁴¹ Bullock’s study includes women from Watts who tell their own stories about some of the issues they believe caused the riot. In his study they do appear as subjects but the goal of the book is to share those stories rather than analyze the gendered subtext present within them.

⁴² I am referring here to the *Los Angeles Times* coverage of incidents in places like Americus, GA, in addition to their coverage of the recently passed Voting Rights Act. Prior to the riot the *LA Times* also ran regular stories about the war on poverty and controversy over local meetings that were supposed to allow citizens to weigh in on potential antipoverty programs. Not until after the riot did these poverty stories gain a racial undertone.

⁴³ Paula B. Johnson, David O. Sears, and John B. McConahay, “Black Invisibility, the Press, and the Los Angeles Riot,” *The American Journal of Sociology* 76, 4 (Jan. 1971), 698-721.

the nation. Together, the photographs of Watts in 1965 contribute to an underlying narrative within the discourse on race riots in the 1960s. That narrative, I contend, continues to shape perceptions of African American women today.

This study focuses on printed pictures rather than television coverage because, as Susan Sontag argues, “Photographs may be more memorable than moving images, because they are a neat slice of time, not a flow. Television is a stream of underselected images, each of which cancels its predecessor. Each still photograph is a privileged moment, turned into a slim object one can keep and look at again.”⁴⁴ In the summer of 1965 national publications such as *Life* and *Ebony* magazines as well as local publications such as the *Los Angeles Times* offered viewers distant (physically and mentally) from the flames a way of seeing for themselves what transpired. Harriman and Lucaites explain that “The widely disseminated visual image provides the public audience with a sense of shared experience that anchors the necessarily impersonal character of public discourse in the motivational ground of social life.”⁴⁵ To say that the photographs offered only a partial view of what happened seems obvious. At the same time, it is important that we understand how the use of certain images in the popular press made some discourses about African American women’s roles more “rhetorically available than others.”⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 1977), 17-18.

⁴⁵ Robert Harriman and John Louis Lucaites, “Performing Civic Identity: The Iconic Photograph of the Flag Raising on Iwo Jima,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 88, 4 (Nov. 2002), 365.

⁴⁶ Cara Finnegan, *Picturing Poverty: Print Culture and FSA Photographs* (Washington: Smithsonian Books, 2003), xi. Finnegan uses this phrase to explain the results of the circulation of FSA photographs during the Depression.

Taken together, the photographs in both national and local publications construct a narrative about African Americans living in Watts, those that rioted and those that did not. Harriman and Lucaites claim that, although images serve as a supplement to news reporting, they “define the public through an act of common spectatorship. All viewers *seem* to see the same thing At this point, the visual image is a direct and specific social inflection of the impersonal schema of public concepts.”⁴⁷ Therefore, the images offer viewers a way of making sense of themselves and others in society. Gallagher and Zagacki note that news photographs played an integral role in shaping the successes and failures of the Civil Rights era. They indicate that photographs which appeared in “various media outlets such as the national magazine *Life* during the crucial years of 1958-1968” were particularly important for making African American life visible.⁴⁸ They also contend that images such as the *Life* magazine photos of Civil Rights marches from Selma to Montgomery in March, 1965 are rhetorically significant partially because they appeared “at a time when much white-authored rhetoric (including Congressional debates over civil rights-related legislation) depicted black people either as a faceless, abstract concept (“the Negro”) or as interlopers into the territory of rights existing outside the flow of democratic conduct.”⁴⁹

⁴⁷ Harriman and Lucaites, “Performing Civic Identity,” 365.

⁴⁸ Victoria J. Gallagher and Kenneth Zagacki, “Visibility and Rhetoric: Epiphanies and Transformations in the *Life* Photographs of the Selma Marches of 1965,” *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 37, 2 (Spring 2007), 114.

⁴⁹ Gallagher and Zagacki, “Visibility and Rhetoric,” 115.

While Gallagher and Zagacki point to the Selma photographs as evidence of news media bringing black and white citizens together by evoking a common humanity, I contend that the Watts photos, which appeared only five months later, had the opposite effect. Only three years after Watts, and on the heels of more rioting across the U.S., the Kerner Commission (formed by the president to assess the causes for rioting) came to the basic conclusion that “Our nation is moving toward two societies, one black, one white—separate and unequal.”⁵⁰ I will not assert a direct cause and effect relationship between the Watts photos and the rift that the Kerner Commission described. Instead, I will conduct a detailed rhetorical analysis of the photos and the text that accompanied them. I hope to demonstrate that, although photographs and stories about African American women were particularly sparse, those that did appear alongside captions and documentary reporting served as touchstones for discourses that would eventually become part of the image of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN (SBW) in both black and white consciousness.⁵¹

Specifically, I will examine photographs as they appeared in *Ebony*, *Life*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, and *Los Angeles Sentinel*, to see how the images and discourses that circulated around African American women contributed to and further defined the stereotype of the SBW. I have chosen these texts because they are

⁵⁰ Kerner, *Report*, 1.

⁵¹ Morgan combines the terms strong, black, and woman to demonstrate that the three terms have become inseparable and created a condition that she perceives to be plaguing African American women.

major publications that carried photographs of women in Watts at the time.⁵² Each of these publications was important in a different way.

Ebony, Pratt and Pratt explain, is “the world’s largest African American-oriented, general picture magazine.”⁵³ On the magazine’s twentieth anniversary in 1965 Langston Hughes wrote, “Today Negro America finds EBONY an increasingly well-rounded picture of itself in a handsome frame.” He further exclaimed, “If we had had no EBONY we would not have such photographs in dramatic color piled on thousands of newsstands throughout the country for our white fellow citizens to see at a glance the new roles Negroes play in today’s world. Sometimes a picture is worth a million words, and much easier to take in quickly.”⁵⁴ Hughes’ comments reflect the influential role *Ebony* photographs played in American society at the time. Not only did the monthly photographs offer African Americans a way of seeing themselves as they were, or could be, but they also offered white Americans a way of perceiving the roles African Americans played in contemporary society.⁵⁵

In the 1950s and 60s David Lubin notes that *Life* was “the most influential American middle class family magazine of the time, if not also the one with the largest

⁵² I also examined publications such as *Time* and *Newsweek* but none of these carried photos containing women.

⁵³ Charlotte A. Pratt and Cornelius B. Pratt, “Nutrition Advertisements in Consumer Magazines: Health Implications of African Americans,” *Journal of Black Studies* 26, 4 (Mar. 1996), 507.

⁵⁴ Langston Hughes, “55 *Ebony*’s Nativity-Magazine’s History,” Reprinted in *Ebony* (Nov. 2000). Available: http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m1077/is_1_56/ai_66455747

⁵⁵ Hughes recognizes that some people claim *Ebony* “presents only successful Negroes.” He argues that such charges are false and, even if they were true, there is a need for people to see such images rather than constantly being bombarded with images of “slums.”

readership.”⁵⁶ At the time *Life* was a weekly magazine that offered the best in photojournalism. Although its popularity has waned in recent years, Mark Rice explains, “For more than thirty years, from the 1930s to the 1970s, *Life* magazine was one of the most important magazines published in the United States.”⁵⁷ He continues, “*Life* maintains its grips on the minds and memories of many Americans. Still stored in countless basement and attic collections, *Life* has the power to evoke both nostalgic longings for a supposedly ‘simpler’ time in the nation’s past and condescending sneers from more ‘enlightened’ folk who recognize the magazine’s limited perspective.”⁵⁸ Certainly, if any major news publication had an influence on the perceptions of those who appeared in its pages, it was *Life*. More than that, Rice’s comments indicate, those images persist in our memory even today and have had a lasting impact on the way that *Life* readers see the world.

The *Los Angeles Times* is Los Angeles County’s oldest and highest circulation newspaper. According to *Los Angeles Almanac*, “By the mid-1940s, the *LA Times* had become the leading daily newspaper in Los Angeles. The paper is now the largest metropolitan daily newspaper in the United States. . . . It has the largest editorial staff of

⁵⁶ David Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003), 67.

⁵⁷ Mark Rice, “Review of Erika Doss, ed., *Looking at Life Magazine*,” H-Amstdy, H-Net Reviews (Jan. 2003). Available: <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showpdf.cgi?path=77671046049997>

⁵⁸ Rice, “Review of Erika Doss,” h-net.

any newspaper in the nation.”⁵⁹ The *L.A. Times* has won twenty-three Pulitzer prizes for its reporting on local issues, including one for its reporting on the Watts riot.⁶⁰ The *L.A. Times* was the first major publication to examine the Watts riot and the newspaper followed the events daily on its front page from August 13 through the withdrawal of National Guard troops and the creation of the McCone Commission on August 21. This paper offered readers a local perspective on the events.

In 1965, the *Los Angeles Sentinel* was the largest African American owned and operated weekly in the West. At the time it boasted a wide African American readership and today it remains “the largest paid African American owned newspaper in the West.”⁶¹ The paper was established in the 1930s and is known for prioritizing the concerns of Los Angeles’ black citizens. In over 70 years of circulation the paper has earned numerous awards in publishing and community service. Throughout its existence the *Sentinel* has taken pride in the fact that it is a “highly regarded paper that significantly influences the perceptions, attitudes, and buying decisions of its readership.”⁶²

The local paper with the most detailed and spectacular coverage of the Watts uprising was the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*. The *Herald-Examiner*, owned by the

⁵⁹ “The Los Angeles Times: Los Angeles County’s Oldest High Circulation Newspaper,” *Los Angeles Almanac* (Montebello, CA: Given Place Publishing Co.), Available: <http://www.laalmanac.com/media/me02lat.htm>

⁶⁰ See: *Los Angeles Almanac* and George P. Hunt, “Editor’s Note: A Double Story about Watts,” *Life* (July 15, 1966), 3.

⁶¹ “About the Los Angeles Sentinel,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, Los Angeles, CA. Available: <http://www.losangelessentinel.com/about.php>

⁶² “The Los Angeles Sentinel” <http://www.losangelessentinel.com/about.php>

Hearst Corporation, was a daily paper that ran in the afternoons Monday through Saturday. Times reporter Gordon Dillow explains that “press baron William Randolph Hearst blew into town” in 1903 and “created what he called ‘an American paper for the American home.’” Three years before the Watts riot the morning *Examiner* and evening *Herald Express* combined their efforts to become the *Herald-Examiner* and take over Los Angeles’ afternoon market. The *Herald-Examiner* became the largest afternoon paper in the country and was known for being “relentlessly local.” Story by story the paper gave every detail of life in Los Angeles. Dillow called it “a newspaper feared beyond its circulation numbers by a generation of L.A. politicians and officials.”⁶³ Those citizens looking for brave and pointed local coverage of the riot would have looked to the *Herald-Examiner*.

In her book, *Talking to Strangers*, Danielle Allen argues, “The inhabitants of a polity have a shared life in which each citizen and noncitizen has an individual perspective on a set of phenomena relevant to all. Some live behind one veil, and others behind another, but the air that we all breathe carries the same gasses and pollens through those veils.”⁶⁴ In this case, the coverage of the riots by each these sources has served as a veil through which we see and attempt to understand the women of Watts. I will study the photographs that appeared in these publications in order to understand when and how women appeared and were represented in the West and across the nation. Juxtaposing

⁶³ Gordon Dillow, “The Herald is 5 Years Gone, Yet the Stories Live On,” *Los Angeles Times*, 6 November 1994, B1. Available: http://www.gulker.com/herex/morgue/herex_5_dillow.html

⁶⁴ Danielle S. Allen, *Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship Since Brown v. Board of Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), xxii.

visual rhetoric with the written words that accompanied it, *Women of Watts* is ultimately interested in how media images of the Watts riot framed African American women for black and white audiences alike. I will argue that the rhetorical force of the press coverage is most evident in the way that reports and photographs in each of the publications contribute to an ongoing stereotype of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN.

Understanding STRONGBLACKWOMEN

In her book, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, Joan Morgan offers a description of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. She explains that the term is derived from what Michele Wallace identified as the black “Superwoman.” Morgan explains that the mentality engrained in her as a black woman was that, “by the sole virtues of [her] race and gender [she] was supposed to be the consummate professional, handle any life crisis, be the dependable rock for any soul who needed [her] and, yes, the classic—require less from [her] lovers than they did from [her] because after all, [she] was a STRONGBLACKWOMAN and they were just ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN.”⁶⁵ Morgan offers a contemporary interpretation of the concept, but she also demonstrates that these perceptions are historically grounded and play a role not only in how she sees herself but also in how others believe she is or should be. The SBW, Morgan explains, is

⁶⁵ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 87.

not emotionally vulnerable, her credo is: “No matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, with dignity.”⁶⁶

Morgan traces the myth of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN to the antebellum South explaining that the image of the black woman as “strong” was necessary in order to justify her abuse and maintain the perception that white women, or SOUTHERNBELLES, were chaste and fragile while slave women could take what was done to them. “With both racism and sexism pushing it along,” Morgan explains, “the myth that black women were stronger than white women, and nastier to boot, permeated the social climate.”⁶⁷ This myth, which was initially a way of making white men and women feel justified in their actions, eventually became a way for black women to describe themselves. Although Morgan doesn’t explain how this shift occurred, or if it was really a shift at all, she does explain that despite a wealth of Women’s Studies courses and the knowledge imparted to her by various “foremothers—Michelle Wallace, bell hooks, and Paula Giddings to name a few,”⁶⁸ she could not get past the belief that “the only appropriate response to adversity [was] to flex like Harriet Tubman.”⁶⁹ Kimberly Springer argues that Morgan’s linguistic move toward the combination of strong, black, and woman, into one term solidifies these “as nonseperable parts of a

⁶⁶ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 90.

⁶⁷ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 97.

⁶⁸ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 93.

⁶⁹ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 93-94.

seemingly cohesive identity.”⁷⁰ Such a move, she claims, means that no black woman can be just one of these: “there is an expectation in the Black community that Black women will be all three, *at all times*.”⁷¹

Springer associates the STRONGBLACKWOMAN image not only with “external messages from white society . . . and how these messages wreak havoc with Black women’s self esteem,”⁷² but also with the rhetoric of African American women reformers. Linking this image to well-known phrases such as “lifting as we climb,” Springer connects the image of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN not only to white discourse during slavery, but also to the rhetoric of prominent reformers such as Mary Church Terrell. Terrell used this phrase in her address to the National Women’s Suffrage Association in 1898 concluding her speech with these memorable words:

And so, lifting as we climb, onward and upward we go, struggling and striving, hoping that the buds and blossoms of our desires will burst into a glorious fruition ere long. With courage, borne of success achieved in the past, with a keen sense of responsibility, which we shall continue to assume, we look forward to a future large with promise and hope. Seeking no favors because of our color, nor patronage because of our needs, we knock at the bar of justice asking an equal chance.⁷³

Perhaps these words and those of later contributors to the women’s club movement represent another phase in the development of the image of the

⁷⁰ Kimberly Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27, 4 (2002), 1069.

⁷¹ Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” 1070.

⁷² Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” 1069.

⁷³ Mary Church Terrell “The Progress of Colored Women,” Address Before The National American Women's Suffrage Association - February 18, 1898. Available: <http://gos.sbc.edu/t/terrellmary.html>

STRONGBLACKWOMAN. However, between this speech and the 1978 publication of Wallace's *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, what Morgan refers to as "the ultimate SBW manifesto," something changed.

By 1978 Wallace was explaining what seemed like a more complex phenomenon. Her book looked at divisions within the Black Power movement and the larger black community and identified a deep divide, even hate, between black men and women. She argued that the black woman was "the workhorse that keeps his house functioning, she is the foundation of his community, she raises his children, and faithfully votes for him in elections . . ." Women did not attempt to change this structure because, Wallace argued,

The American black woman is haunted by the mythology that surrounds the American black man. It is a mythology based upon the real persecution of black men: castrated black men hanging by their necks from trees . . . floating face down in the Mississippi . . . black men being turned down for jobs time and time again; black men watching helplessly as their women go to work to support the family⁷⁴

Wallace's list of injustices against the black man which haunt black women was long. She moved in great detail from the days of lynching through the Civil Rights era describing the ways in which these "ghosts talk to her." They remind her of how she "crippled the black man . . . worked against him . . . betrayed him . . . laughed at him . . . scorned him," alongside "the white man."⁷⁵

Looking back on her book in 1990 Wallace explained that she would not write such harsh words today. However, at the time, "you weren't supposed to talk about both

⁷⁴ Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verso, 1990), 15-16.

⁷⁵ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 16.

racial oppression and women's oppression at the same time."⁷⁶ Now, with the success of many feminist multicultural inquiries, we appear to have less of that problem. However, she explains, "the mainstream media still make this basic error on a daily basis." Wallace argues that myths such as "anyone who tries can become happy and rich in the U.S."⁷⁷ are perpetuated in the media and they mask the fact that a combination of racial and sexual oppression creates a different set of problems for black women. Seeing racism as a separate from sexism serves to make the oppression black women face invisible. Wallace sees this "invisibility" as both "a problem of ideology," and "the final, and most difficult to combat stage of racism." She believes that understanding racism in conjunction with sexism, capitalist exploitation, and compulsory heterosexuality, "makes it even more difficult to diagnose." And she confesses, "I suspect that such conjunctions cannot be resolved at all. Rather they must be unpacked, examined, and disarmed." Adding further, "Today I understand the problem as one of representation."⁷⁸

Outline of Dissertation

This rhetorical analysis is an attempt to unpack, examine, and disarm some of the representations that may have contributed to Wallace's original image of the problem that exists for "the Superwoman." My goal in this chapter is to situate my study within the

⁷⁶ Wallace, *Black Macho*, xvii.

⁷⁷ Wallace, *Black Macho*, xviii.

⁷⁸ Wallace, *Black Macho*, xix.

literature on riots, rhetoric, and African American women's history. The photographs and stories I analyze in later chapters should demonstrate the importance of understanding the intersections between these areas of inquiry. Rhetoricians have largely failed to notice the rich texture of riot rhetoric. Analyzing the stories and photographs of women, riot participants that are regularly neglected even by riot scholars, we will see how various contradictory discourses were brought to bear on the women of Watts and how those discourses were shaped by (and continue to mold) our nation's tumultuous history with regard to race, class, gender, and sexuality.

Chapter two provides a historical framework for an examination of looting in the 1965 uprising by explicating key moments in U.S. history when women looted in protest. I chronicle an often overlooked tradition of looting behavior as a protest strategy that is potentially derived from (but not identical to) a uniquely female repertoire for collective action arising out of bread riots beginning in the 1700s. Here I blend rhetorical analysis with historical and sociological surveys of riot behavior to examine photos of women looting alongside captions that describe their behavior as useless, wanton, and destructive.

The images in chapter three will appear to contradict those in chapter two. The images will show African American women acting as the moral compass of their communities by attending church and participating in a prominent sorority. Although these images may seem contradictory, I argue that contradiction lies at the heart of the SBW image in the minds of Americans in general making the image one that no one could live up to. In this chapter I explore the historical antecedents to this image of

African American woman as moral compass in uplift rhetoric by looking back to figures such as Maria Stewart and Mary Church Terrell.

I consider photographs of African American women waiting in line for food and attendant stories about welfare and the Moynihan report in chapter four. Although no report actually blames women for being on welfare or causing the breakdown of the family, my analysis here demonstrates that such messages are clearly implied by the placement of the photos. The photographs in this chapter appeared alongside stories about the failing war on poverty and the welfare system as well as the results of the Moynihan report on the disintegration of the black family. This chapter explores the development of welfare discourse and popular press portrayals of African American women as welfare recipients, deviant parents, and overbearing matriarchs during the riot. It also highlights the ways that such rhetoric persisted into the 1980s and remains in our collective imagination today.

The concluding chapter will tie the contradictory roles of African American women in the riot together and argue that they combine to form the myth of the **STRONGBLACKWOMAN** that endures. However, the main objective of the chapter will be to summarize the study as a whole and discuss the importance of this investigation to scholarship in rhetoric and women's studies. I will emphasize the importance of riot rhetoric in general and women in riots specifically and suggest ways that these could be fruitful areas of inquiry for scholars interested in further understanding race, class, gender and sexuality. Finally, I suggest that representation is a productive site of investigation as we seek to better understand each of these issues and the ways that they influence our communication with one another as citizens.

Chapter 2

STRATEGIC OR SELFISH? LOOTING IN WATTS

Black women were “morally obtuse” and “openly licentious,” he wrote. But because they were women, their regression was seen as much worse than that of men. . . . Black women who saw no “immorality in doing what nature prompts,” who did not “foster charity” among their own daughters were not only responsible for their own denigration but that of the *entire race*.

Joan Morgan referring to an 1889 Harvard thesis.⁷⁹

Press portrayals of women in Watts clearly demonstrate the complex intersecting nature of oppression. Although African American men appeared in a variety of roles—protester, violent aggressor, arrestee, arsonist, looter—African American women participants in the uprising appeared exclusively as looters.⁸⁰ Arguably, every role in an uprising such as that which occurred in Watts demonstrates a complex intersection of oppression. However, the coverage of looting (rather than other riot events) tends to most readily evoke discourses about sex, gender, race, and class. This chapter examines the polysemous nature of looting representations in order to understand how such representations both contribute to and complicate our historic understanding of African American women as looters. Before examining the press portrayals of women as looters, it is vital to understand how looting, as a protest tactic, developed throughout American history. After a brief historical survey of looting in the U.S., we will turn to the portrayals

⁷⁹ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 97-8.

⁸⁰ I want to be clear here about the distinction between coverage of riot participants and coverage of the riot in general. As I will discuss later chapters, women appeared in other roles during riot coverage but none of these roles, except looter, were as participants in the uprising.

of women looters in *Life*, the *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, and *Ebony* to see how some reporters portrayed women as crazy and selfish while others held tightly to a false dichotomy between weak men and strong women.

Repertoires for Collective Action

As we will see, one could (and likely did) read the actions of looters in Watts as crazed, selfish, violent, opportunist, or as evidence of inherent differences between African American men and women. Conversely, looking at the history of looting in the United States, it becomes possible to see the looting as a protest tactic arising out of longstanding American repertoires for collective action. A repertoire for collective action is a set of strategies that exists to some extent or another in the collective memory of a particular group of people. Charles Tilly, originator of the concept, sees “the repertoire as a whole set of means that a group has for making claims of different kinds on different individuals or groups.”⁸¹ However, the repertoires that are available at any given time can be severely limited. This is so partially because they are dependent on the group’s knowledge and ability to employ a particular repertoire, and they are partially based on the circumstances in any place at any given moment. So, despite the numerous ways that people may remember others deploying similar resources for common desired ends, when they act, there may be very few strategies from which they can choose.

⁸¹ Sidney Tarrow, “Cycles of Collective Action: Between Madness and the Repertoire of Contention,” *Social Science History*, 17, 2 (Summer 1993), 282.

Tilly lists “hijacking, mutiny, machine breaking, charivaris, village fights, tax rebellions, food riots, collective self immolation, lynching, [and] vendetta,” as only some of the tactics which people have, at various times used as part of their “standard collective-action repertoire.”⁸² He points out that throughout history people have had the knowledge and means to carry out all of these tactics and have recognized each one to be a “legitimate, feasible way of acting on an unsatisfied grievance or aspiration.”⁸³ He further explains that most of these are currently and technically feasible in the United States but they occur rarely, if at all, because Americans, at least in 1978 when he was writing, did not see them as preferable to actions such as “demonstrating, striking, petitioning, or forming a pressure group.” Therefore, he claims, “they do not belong to the *contemporary* American repertoire of collective action.”⁸⁴

Whether they have participated in them or not, most U.S. citizens are familiar enough with the “American repertoire” of protest actions that Tilly lists. Citizens may be more willing to organize or participate in certain actions because they have seen them in the media or heard about them from others. Although other tactics have been used, such as machine breaking or civilian mutiny, Tilly argues, they tend to drop out of the repertoire and are thus no longer used. However, that does not mean that they are forgotten forever. Instead, at any time, a particular repertoire may be chosen for its

⁸² Charles Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1978), 153.

⁸³ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 153

⁸⁴ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 153. Emphasis added.

availability, relative appropriateness to the situation or group, efficiency, and comparison to the other means available.⁸⁵

In Watts, what Tilly refers to as “the contemporary American repertoire of collective action” evidently failed. The strategies that Tilly identifies as belonging to the American repertoire—demonstrating, striking, petitioning, and forming a pressure group—each require at least some form of political power. People who employ these strategies are those who can reasonably assume that, by forming a large enough groups, they can force the government to listen to their peaceful demands. When Watts’ residents tried peaceful protests, they “found themselves kicking against a locked door of political unresponsiveness and media apathy or denigration.”⁸⁶ David Waddington has shown that the contemporary American repertoire could not succeed in Watts because the people were “politically disadvantaged and unable to register their grievances.”⁸⁷ If this was the case, it is possible to view the Watts riot as people reviving tactics that had not been used often during that century—once disempowered people were reminded of the tactics such as rioting, looting, and arson, they became part of the late 1960s American repertoire for collective action. We can see evidence of this in the massive outbreak of race riots and looting in the years following Watts.⁸⁸ The question then arises, where did these tactics

⁸⁵ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 151-153.

⁸⁶ David Waddington, *Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder: A Comparative Historical Approach* (London: Routledge, 1992), 62.

⁸⁷ Waddington, *Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder*, 62.

⁸⁸ It is also possible that the reminder came not from Watts, but from the Harlem riot in the previous year. However, those who write about riots in the late 1960s tend to use Watts as the starting point of major race rioting across the United States.

come from? I argue that, looking at the press coverage from Watts that will appear later in this chapter, it is possible to draw parallels to the deployment of two similar repertoires in U.S. history, colonial and Civil War era bread riots, and looting by slaves near the end of the Civil War.

Bread Riots

American bread riots are part of a repertoire that can be traced back much further in history to European food riots. Like the Watts riot, food riots were a particular form of collective action that arose out of the communal need to uphold certain standards for rights and justice. Tilly explains that the communal assumptions behind the food riot are that the people who work to produce a particular object or provide a service have priority when it comes to the consumption of those goods and services. When this right is taken away, the community “is likely to condone some kinds of forcible resistance to expropriation of objects and services.”⁸⁹ In the classic European food riot, and later in the colonies, this often occurred when grain was shipped out of a producing locale before the people had enough to eat. Thus, it was aimed at state agents who were responsible for the distribution of grain.

However, Tilly explains, in most Western European countries “the most frequent form of violence-producing movement aimed at the market more directly than the

⁸⁹ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 156.

state.”⁹⁰ The name “food riot” is perhaps more appropriate to what happened in Watts than it was in Europe since actions in Europe were usually more about raw grain that actual food and usually did not reach the point of physical violence. However, early European food rioters utilized three different tactics as part of their repertoire: retributive action, the blockage, and the price riot. Two of these tactics, retributive action and price riot, seem evident in Watts.

We can see evidence of the food riot as an American repertoire early in the 1700s. Although Gilje explains that “the marketplace was relatively immune to rioting in the colonies,” he does describe at least six riots that took place regarding food in the colonies.⁹¹ The three most prominent bread riots took place in Boston in 1710, 1713, and 1729. Twice the riots were aimed at stopping the exportation of goods to higher priced markets but in the third, like the looters in Watts, “the mob broke into the storehouse and distributed its contents, thereby convincing officials to provide more relief for the poor.”⁹²

The riots in Boston were only the beginning of the development of bread riots as an American repertoire for collective action. Gilje claims that “older impulses took greater shape and meaning with every crowd action as the special repertoire of the colonial American crowd developed.”⁹³ Mobs combined old strategies with new ones as

⁹⁰ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 185.

⁹¹ Paul A. Gilje, *Rioting in America* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1996), 28.

⁹² Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 28.

⁹³ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 33.

they began to limit their destruction of property to only those items that “symbolically represented very specific grievances.”⁹⁴ Just as early American rioters were selective about the targets of their aggression, so too were the Watts rioters, aiming their actions mainly at those stores where they were charged excessive prices for goods that they could not travel to obtain elsewhere.⁹⁵

The bread riot continued to develop in the American repertoire through the Civil War period. Gilje offers one example of a riot in Richmond, Virginia, where the women of the city began by trying a peaceful tactic. They marched on the governor’s mansion to petition for relief. However, when they were denied, “women stormed the markets, pilfering a variety of items that had become too expensive during wartime profiteering. Officials ordered the militia to break up the riot, arresting several people.”⁹⁶ Similar actions took place in other states such as Texas, Alabama, and North Carolina.

Gilje places the Watts riot in a different category than the previous U.S. bread riots. In his study, *Rioting in America*, he shows bread riots ending during the Civil War and categorizes the events in Watts as “racial and urban rioting.” In the later category he describes in detail the way that looting was ritualized in urban rioting but claims that this type of looting was different from earlier actions. Comparing the era of rioting that spanned from 1935 in Harlem to “the tumult of the 1960s,” Gilje claims, “Previously mobs might gut the home of a political enemy, or whites might sack houses of a black

⁹⁴ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 33.

⁹⁵ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 49.

⁹⁶ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 84.

neighborhood. Now rioters looted stores. Rioters grabbed the chance to play at some supermarket game show to fill their shopping carts before the clock—the restoration of civil order—ran out.”⁹⁷ Here, as in the Watts coverage, we see a fundamental denial of the moral and strategic values at play in the actions of looters.

Rather than reading Watts as Gilje and the popular press at the time did, I propose that we see it as a development of an earlier repertoire of collective action. Like the rioters in Boston who redistributed goods from the market to call for relief for the poor, or women in Richmond who pilfered items that had become too expensive, looters in Watts (male and female) stormed stores and took items that they felt they had worked for. They repossessed goods that were withheld from them by store owners charging artificially inflated prices. Their actions sent a message that store owners exploitation of local residents based on the knowledge they did not have the means to shop elsewhere would not be tolerated. Bullock explains that, in Watts, white merchants were viewed by local citizens as “exploiters and parasites.” He claims that “if stores are burned and goods are looted, this must be measured against the *systematic* exploitation of blacks by whites throughout a long and painful history.”⁹⁸ Whether accepting this view means that looters’ actions were justifiable or not is debatable. However, it does offer an alternative, historically grounded understanding of looting as protest and allows us to shift focus from whether the people themselves were inherently immoral and violent to a question of whether or not they employed an appropriate protest tactic given the political and

⁹⁷ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 159.

⁹⁸ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 36.

economic situation they faced. Perhaps examining another form of looting in American history, after slavery, will further clarify my argument.

Looting the Master's House

Another early American repertoire that parallels looting in Watts is absent from Gilje's detailed genealogy. Near the end of the Civil War in South Carolina, Leslie Schwalm documents the actions of slave women who, she claims, were integral to hastening the transition from slavery to freedom on lowcountry rice plantations.⁹⁹ Like the women in Watts, slave women in South Carolina tore down the main symbol of oppression in their lives by looting and destroying their master's homes. In the time between slavery and freedom as Union troops began to move into the area, Schwalm describes residents' sense that the dominant way of life was on the brink of collapse. In response, slave women on the plantations "responded by accelerating their efforts to make a permanent change in the relations of lowcountry plantation life, through dramatic, destructive, and wholesale attacks on planter residences, through the redistribution of plantation property, and by driving planters and overseers off the plantations."¹⁰⁰

Although Schwalm describes slave women as the primary looters, she does explain that all slaves took action to upset the power dynamic on the plantation. They did

⁹⁹ I recognize that there is a strong movement among scholars, particularly in Africana Studies and History, to use the term "enslaved Africans" in place of "slave" but here I have chosen to use the language that is most prevalent in the sources that I consulted while working on this project.

¹⁰⁰ Leslie Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We: Women's Transition from Slavery to Freedom in South Carolina* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press 1997), 127.

so by “by vandalizing every symbol within reach of the planter’s authority, status, and power” on various plantations.¹⁰¹ Similar to the actions of rioters in Watts, in the larger plantation uprisings overseers reported seeing slaves burn and destroy everything that represented those in power. Unlike the Watts uprising, women seemed to take great care in destroying crafted interiors, rugs, and paneling, but this is logical because, at the time, those interiors functioned as a form of oppression unique to women, particularly the grueling task of housekeeping in mansions and maintaining their detailed interiors.

Another possible parallel between slave women’s and Watts women’s actions may be their motivations. Despite certain portrayals of women looters as “housewives,” as in the *Ebony* coverage, most Watts looters were gainfully employed in low income professions that kept family incomes far below the poverty line.¹⁰² Like the women on lowcountry plantations, the women of Watts may have looted because they perceived their actions as “public redemption against the public humiliations and loss of dignity and status that [they] had endured under the domination of” those in power.¹⁰³ Looting served as both protest against unfair power relations and reclamation of goods women had labored for.

Former slaves in South Carolina publicly redistributed the goods they gathered from planter homes and store houses just as looters publicly redistributed goods they had

¹⁰¹ Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 178.

¹⁰² Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 23.

¹⁰³ Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 129. Her line ends with “domination of planter, overseer, and driver.”

taken from white owned businesses.¹⁰⁴ Additionally, like women who carried a “soft sofa” to their home in Watts, Schwalm explains that slave women “confiscated” beds, sheets, tables, chairs, dishes and anything else they could find. In most cases this was a symbolic act but, Schwalm concedes, “the redistribution of plantation property by former slaves was not always a political statement or for the commonweal, but it included the endeavors of individuals to gain possession of some particularly desired or valued item.”¹⁰⁵ This may signal a slight shift from the bread riot toward Gilje’s description of the “supermarket game show.” Here, I think, it becomes obvious that the looting evident in South Carolina and much later in Watts were not departures from, but rather new developments in, the American bread riot as a repertoire for collective action. Next I will examine the living conditions in Watts prior to and during the riot in order to demonstrate the link between conditions in Watts and women’s looting behavior as it was represented in the popular press.

Class and Race in Watts

In 1962, Michael Harrington’s *The Other America* turned the nation’s attention to the widespread nature of poverty across the United States. He explained that “the millions who are poor in the United States tend to become increasingly invisible.” The reason for their invisibility, he claimed, was that middle and upper class people had to make an

¹⁰⁴ Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 129.

¹⁰⁵ Schwalm, *A Hard Fight for We*, 130.

effort “of the intellect and will to even see them.”¹⁰⁶ Two years later, President Lyndon B. Johnson proposed a “War on Poverty” to help eradicate this invisible problem. In doing so, he explained that poverty “was not really just a lack of money but a whole culture and a way of life.”¹⁰⁷ The president’s “war” rhetorically characterized poverty as a cycle of low income leading to slum and ghetto living which, in turn, led to a lower-class lifestyle passed on to subsequent generations. People in this cycle, the Senate Committee on Labor and Public Welfare claimed, “[are] a world apart . . . people isolated from the mainstream of American life, unfamiliar with its values and unprepared for its opportunities.”¹⁰⁸

To many Americans Watts did not appear impoverished. The homes in and around Watts were not the familiar “dark, rat-infested tenements of the Eastern cities,” nor did they look like the shacks that were a sign of poverty in the South.¹⁰⁹ To the outside observer, Watts was a nice area filled with single family homes on streets “lined with palms or shade trees.”¹¹⁰ Della Rossa argues that “there is a deceptive look about the southeast Los Angeles ghetto area, in Watts and along the side streets that go off

¹⁰⁶ Michael Harrington, *The Other America: Poverty in the United States* (New York: Touchstone, 1962), 2.

¹⁰⁷ David Zarefsky, *President Johnson’s War on Poverty: Rhetoric and History* (Tuscaloosa, AL: University of Alabama Press, 1986), 9.

¹⁰⁸ Quoted in Zarefsky, *President Johnson’s War on Poverty*, 41.

¹⁰⁹ Della Rossa, *Why Watts Exploded: How the Ghetto Fought Back* (New York: Merit Publishers, 1969), 3.

¹¹⁰ Della Rossa, *Why Watts Exploded*, 3.

Broadway and Central Avenue.”¹¹¹ Watts did not seem to be “a world apart” from middle class values or to embody the image of urban slums or rural despair prevalent in the president’s representations of poverty across the country.¹¹²

The riot forced America to see that looks can be deceiving. Only after Watts exploded in August of 1965 did many people begin to pay attention to the impoverished conditions in southeast Los Angeles. Once researchers began to examine the causes for the uprising, they saw that “living conditions within the Watts ghetto were lamentable.”¹¹³ Less than 17 percent of the people in the area could afford to own a home. Abundant single family homes that may have looked decent on the outside were falling apart on the inside. Many of the homes designed for single families were actually divided up and rented to multiple families at one time. Landlords did not take care of the properties and Los Angeles County Community Services found that approximately 25 percent of the homes in and around the Watts area were dilapidated. Several of the citizens of southeast Los Angeles could not even afford to buy food. The problem of malnutrition was evident in the fact that “at least 13 of the elementary schools in south Los Angeles [did] not have cafeterias because pupils [could] not afford to eat in such places even though they operated at cost.”¹¹⁴ When information such as this became publicly available many Americans began to see looting, and the larger riot in Watts, as a

¹¹¹ Della Rossa, *Why Watts Exploded*, 3.

¹¹² Zarefsky, *President Johnson’s War on Poverty*, 41.

¹¹³ Waddington, David, *Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder: A Comparative Historical Approach* (London: Routledge, 1992), 62.

¹¹⁴ Della Rossa, *Why Watts Exploded*, 3-4.

sign less of a race riot and more of a class revolt. A close reading of the media coverage demonstrates that it was both of these and more.

At the beginning of his story about the Watts riot in *Ebony*, Louie Robinson described the Los Angeles area saying, “Los Angeles sprawls like a glittering jewel chest over 452 square miles of America’s West Coast. Year round the sun warms it by day and gentle Pacific Ocean breezes cool it by night. It has palm trees and snow-tipped mountains, Hollywood and Disneyland. The city has the most affluent Negro population in the country.” Robinson painted an idealistic picture in which African American citizens comprised a large amount of the population and, “race relations, measured by the national yardstick, [had] been among the best.”¹¹⁵ This description was not new, in fact, it was part of the reason so many African American families had moved from other areas of the country to Southern California in recent years. Unfortunately, when they arrived, many learned that conditions for African Americans, particularly in Watts and surrounding areas, were less than ideal. Robinson recognized this much later in the story. Buried on the third page of the article was Robinson’s recognition that “for many of the 1,700 Negroes who come into Southern California every month, principally from five Southern states, Watts and the surrounding area becomes home. Sixty percent wind up on welfare and a lot of others land in jail.”¹¹⁶ Robinson ended his description of poverty in Watts claiming that “The dreary statistics of the sector were perhaps best put into words by California’s Gov. Edmund G. (Pat) Brown,” whom he quoted as saying, “The riot took

¹¹⁵ Louie Robinson, “Police Action Ignites Fiery L.A. Riot,” *Ebony*, October 1965, 114.

¹¹⁶ Robinson, “Police Action Ignites Fiery L.A. Riot,” 118.

place in a scene of broken families and broken hearts; lonely children and aimless adults; of frustration and poverty”¹¹⁷

Although it took a deeper investigation to understand the class issues at work in the uprising, the racial aspects of the violence were easy to see. The spark for the violence was white police brutality aimed, as it often was, at a black citizen and his family. Once looting and burning began, signs in store windows also pointed to the perception that race was a contributing factor in the violence. To prevent destruction of their stores, many owners displayed signs that read “Blood Brother,” “Negro owned, please, thank you,” and “Negro owned and operated—we shall overcome.”¹¹⁸ Because of the obvious racial overtones of the violence, much of the news coverage did not examine other possible factors. Leaving class and sex, for the most part, out of their reports, the press implied that actions such as looting were done out of the hate that black citizens felt for white citizens. Such coverage made looting appear only as a frantic and selfish act. Stories about the looting in various sources described looters as young black men, many of them part of deviant youth gangs, but the pictures told a different story. Next we will see how prominent sources such as *Life* magazine portrayed women who looted in the riot and notice the underlying themes of savagery and strength.

¹¹⁷ Robinson, “Police Action Ignites Fiery L.A. Riot,” 119.

¹¹⁸ “In a Roaring Inferno ‘Burn. Baby, Burn,’” *Life*, 27 August 1965, 27.

“Frantic Pillagers”

Coverage of women as looters is most obvious in the August 27, 1965, issue of *Life*. *Life* featured Watts on the cover that day, picturing a man carrying chairs away from his home. The caption reads: “Los Angeles resident flees his home set afire in riot.” Inside the magazine a full page editorial explains the useless and destructive nature of the riot. Fourteen pages later, another full page article discusses the riot. Neither article specifically examines the tactics rioters used. Both articles, however, reveal the authors’ distinctions between good and bad “Negroes” and explain that most of the people of Watts did not support the violence.

The cover story follows the second article. The story begins with a large (two full pages) color photo of fire and smoke with fire fighters and blurry looters in the background. The title reads “Out of a Cauldron of Hate—Arson and Death.” The next page offers descriptions of the hatred that spawned terror in Watts. One image of an African American man staring down a white man is accompanied by large lettering that reads “Get Whitey!” as well as stories and captions that explain how “Swarms of Negroes grew into roaming mobs, looting, burning, beating, to the war cry of Get Whitey.”¹¹⁹ A caption explains that the man in the first photograph is “a young mechanic” who takes “grim joy” in violence “as he pours out hatred of whites, especially white cops.”¹²⁰ Three pages feature large photos of the National Guard with their weapons drawn; bloody

¹¹⁹ ‘Get Whitey!’ The war cry that terrorized Los Angeles, *Life*, 27 August 1965, 22

¹²⁰ *Life*, 23.

victims of the violence; alongside police, firefighters, and mobs “in action.” The police, the firefighters, and the Guard are white, the angry mobs are black, and the victim is labeled “Mexican,” but all of those pictured are male.

Twenty-eight pages into the issue, the women appear, and they are everywhere randomly grabbing all that they can under the title “Wild Plundering—Grab it and run.” This section, focused on the looting aspect of the uprising, does not contain a story but it does display five full color photographs all of them, unlike any of the other *Life* photographs of Watts, contain women. In the first photograph women grab medicine off of a drug store shelf (Figure 2.1). The accompanying caption reads “Frantic Pillagers. In a frenzy of looting, usually law abiding citizens, even women and children, ransacked more than 700 stores. Above they strip drug shelves in a Watts shop.”¹²¹ In the largest photo women, in the foreground with men trailing behind, are seen running through the street carrying various groceries (Figure 2.2) while a smaller photo in the lower left corner of the page depicts two women with curlers in their hair pushing a cart overflowing with groceries (Figure 2.3). In the third photo the caption explains that a man helped the women pull their “cart of booty” over the fire hoses being used to put out “two blazes in the neighborhood.” The final two looting pictures on this page demonstrate a sequence in which young men enter a store in one photo (Figure 2.4) and emerge with a rifle in the next (Figure 2.5). Although we do not see women looting in these photos we do see three young women watching. Two young women appear supportive as they are reaching toward the men exiting the store. This photo spread is followed by five more

¹²¹ *Life*. 28

pages of riot coverage including two boys, ages nine and twelve being arrested, a picture of Los Angeles Police Chief Parker, white policemen surveying the damage, African American men pictured and quoted speculating about the causes, and two custodians tagging an arsenal of guns confiscated during the uprising—women are no longer pictured or discussed.

The *Life* coverage was symptomatic of the broader looting coverage in Watts.¹²² Men were portrayed as acting out of hate and targeting “whitey” but women were described as “frantic pillagers.”¹²³ Across the board women appeared as crazed selfish looters without rhyme or reason to their actions. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* furthered the crazed image with a caption under one looting photo that described “people, just anxious to take,” and quoted one woman who said, “I don’t know what I’ve got, but I sure got it.”¹²⁴ None of the news stories acknowledged the fact that rioters observed particular boundaries, “that they directed their aggression at *specific* targets, and that they selected *appropriate means* for the ends they needed to obtain.”¹²⁵

¹²² The most important difference between the coverage in *Life* and in the other sources is formatting. *Life*, unlike the other sources covered in this dissertation, was known for its photographic coverage of world events. Therefore, the pictures in this magazine were large and full color whereas the coverage in the other sources tended to be much smaller and photos appeared in black and white.

¹²³ *Life*, 28

¹²⁴ “Manna From Heaven,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 August 1965, 4.

¹²⁵ Waddington, *Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder*, 67. Referencing research conducted by Anthony Oberschall, “The Los Angeles Riot of 1965,” *Cities Under Siege: An Anatomy of Ghetto Riots 1964-1968*. Edited by David Boesel and Peter H. Rossi (New York: Basic Books 1971). Emphasis in original.

Figure 2.1

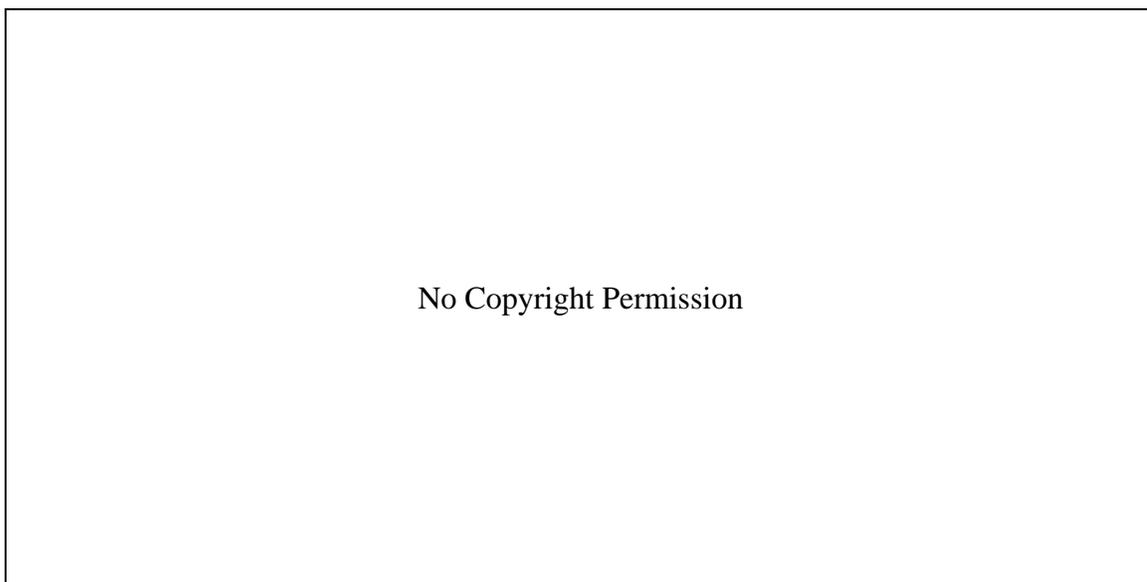


Figure 2.1: Frantic Pillagers. *Life*, 27 August 1965, 28.

Figure 2.2

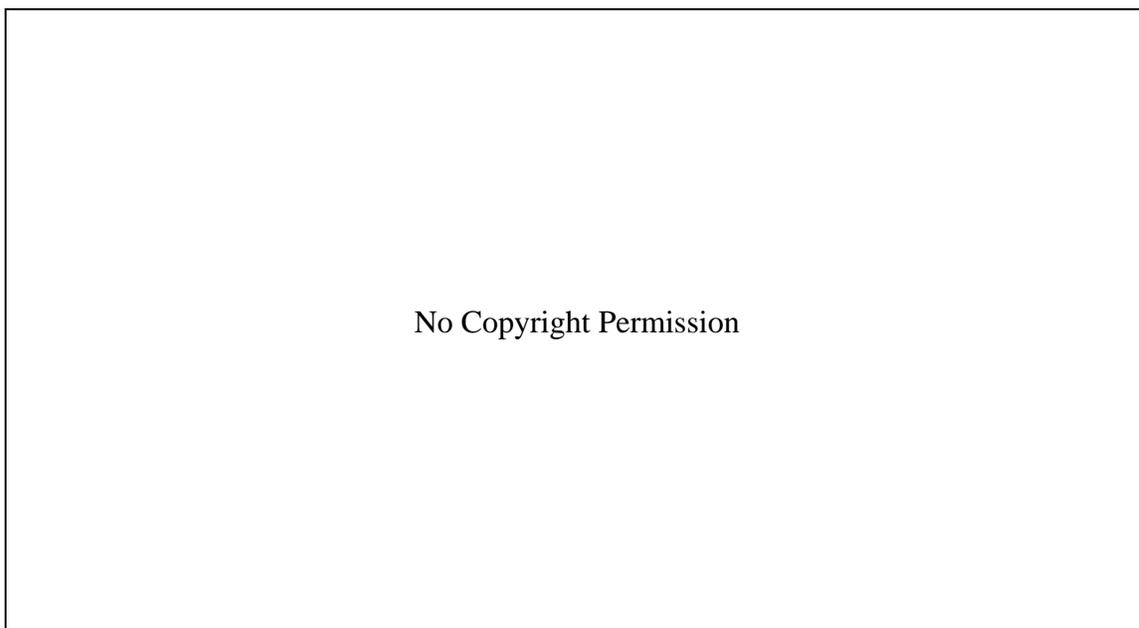


Figure 2.2: Almost Caught. *Life*, 27 August 1965, 28.

Figure 2.3

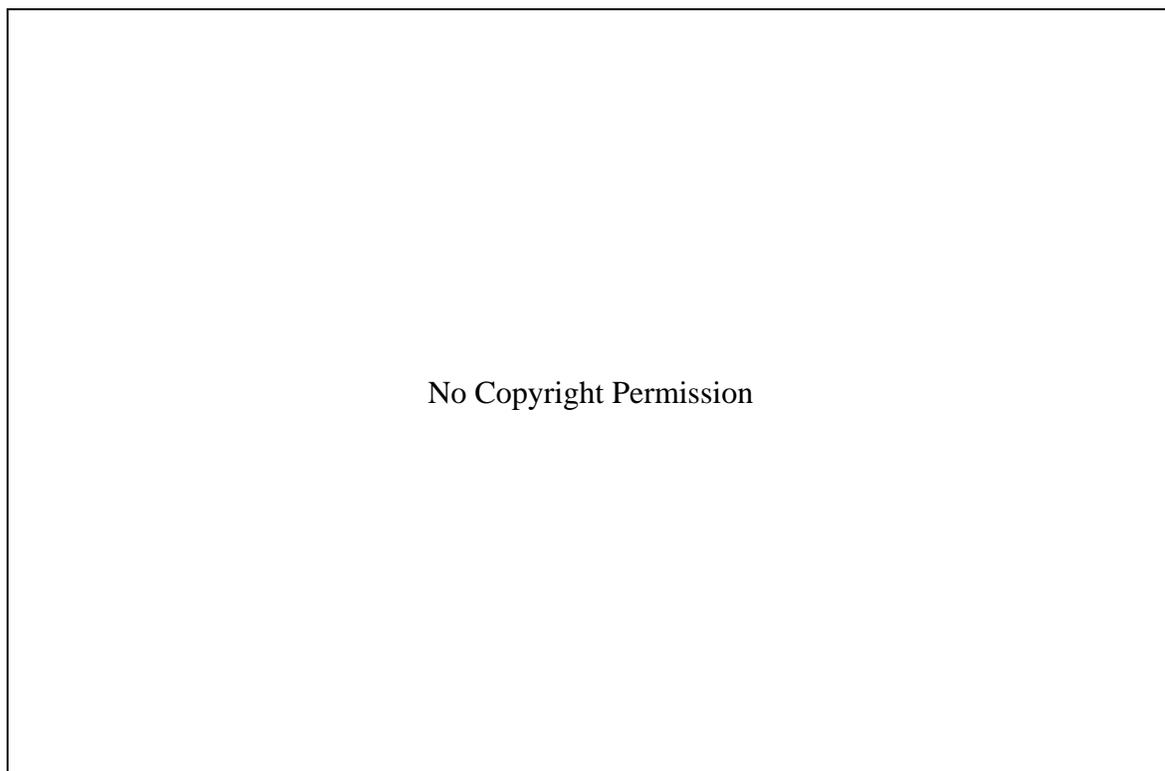


Figure 2.3: Cart of Booty. *Life*, 27 August 1965, 28.

Figure 2.4

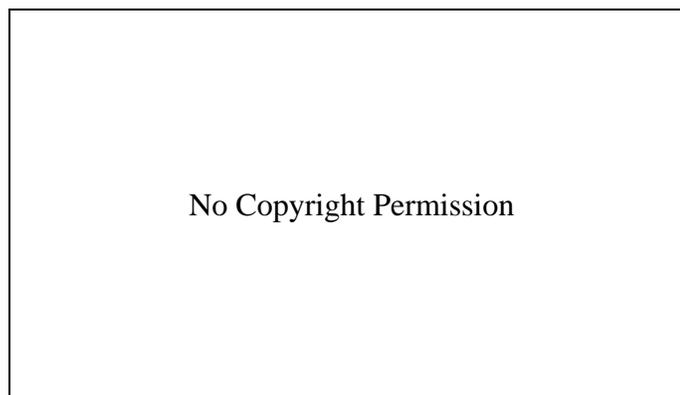
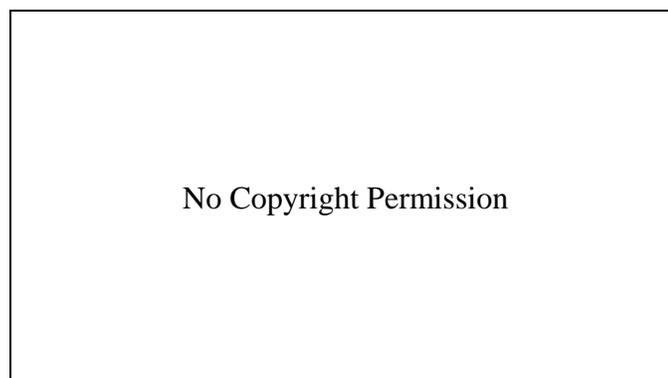
Figure 2.4: Lethal Prize (a). *Life* 27 , August 1965, 28.

Figure 2.5

Figure 2.5: Lethal Prize (b). *Life*, 27 August 1965, 28.

These images perpetuated a long-held stereotype of African American women “as primitive . . . and savage.”¹²⁶ This image denies their femininity and sets African American women apart from more “lady-like” qualities typically ascribed to white women and prized by those with middle and upper class status. A sympathetic audience, one that had some understanding of race and class based oppression in Watts at the time, might also see in these captions and photographs an aspect of empowerment. Given the very real of poverty in the Watts area of Los Angeles, for some these images may simply be evidence of women standing up for their families and taking what they needed to provide for them. Such an image would have been bolstered by later reports that many of the looters were employed adults who still could not afford to pay for goods in Watts due to artificially high prices.¹²⁷ It would also have been supported by the realization that “property was selectively targeted: private houses and civic buildings (post offices, churches, schools and libraries) were spared, though white business establishments were systematically destroyed.”¹²⁸

The possible interpretations of the *Life* photographs demonstrate what Bakhtin calls a “double-voiced discourse—serving the voice of black oppression and the voice of black liberation.”¹²⁹ When this double-voiced discourse is imbued with aspects of class

¹²⁶ Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race.” *Signs*, 17, 2 (Winter 1992): 263.

¹²⁷ For more information on those who participated in the riot see David O. Sears and John B. McConahay, Participation in the Los Angeles Riot, *Social Problems*, 17, 1 (Summer 1969) 3-20, and Paul Bullock (ed) *Watts: The Aftermath* (New York: Grove Press, 1969).

¹²⁸ Waddington, *Contemporary Issues in Public Disorder*, 67

¹²⁹ Higginbotham, “African American Women’s History and the Metalanguage of Race,” 267.

and sex as well as race, we begin to see how reminiscent it is of Morgan's description of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN or Wallace's depiction of the superwoman. Wallace explains,

From the intricate web of mythology which surrounds the black woman, a fundamental image emerges. It is of a woman of inordinate strength, with an ability for tolerating an unusual amount of misery and heavy, distasteful work. This woman does not have the same fears, weaknesses, and insecurities as other women, but believes herself to be and is, in fact, stronger emotionally than most men. Less of a woman in that she is less "feminine" and helpless, she is really *more* of a woman in that she is the embodiment of Mother Earth, the quintessential mother with infinite sexual, life giving, and nurturing reserves. In other words, she is a superwoman.¹³⁰

Although *Life* did not exactly present a "Mother Earth" figure, they did seem to portray African American women as looting out of some fearless strength that they possess. These women have a strength which, presumably, drives them to defy feminine norms and middle class values to meet their family's needs by ransacking drug stores for medicine and taking as much food as she can from the local grocery store.

Portrayals of African American women looters as defiant and abnormally strong supplement the voice of black oppression. On the other hand, these women, stealing from their oppressors, appear to be liberating themselves and their families from the grip of overwhelming deprivation. Like slave women in the antebellum south, the actions women in Watts took to ensure their survival were the same ones that justified their oppression. The female looter is strong, "*Of course she is . . . Look what she's been*

¹³⁰ Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (London: Verso, 1991), 107.

through. She would have to be. Of course she's not like other women."¹³¹ But when strength manifests itself in apparently crazy and selfish acts that defy middle class values and norms regarding property rights, such as looting, that strength becomes a justification for punishment. The *Life* photographs and articles fail to offer any other way of interpreting looters' actions.

In his rhetorical analysis of the 1992 Los Angeles riot, Fiske argues that property rights are just as "deeply ingrained in capitalism's discursive system as in its legal and economic ones, so that the only words available that refer to the transfer of property from the strong to the weak without payment are the ones that put this transaction into the discourse of crime," such as the term "looting" which was used to describe actions in 1992 just as it was in 1965.¹³² Looting, Fiske reminds us, is multidimensional. In 1992, he explains, it was "both a form of public speech and a statement of self assertion. 'Looting' enabled the silenced to be heard and the overlooked to be seen. For those who are normally denied an identity and refused a social presence, 'looting' could bring self-satisfaction and could give them an opportunity to remind the nation of Frederick Douglass' words, 'We are here. We are here.'¹³³ In 1965, looting helped African American women to push past their invisible status in the media only to become visible in a highly stereotypical and contradictory way. Turning next to the looting coverage in the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* and *Ebony*, we will see how reports drew on

¹³¹ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 107. Emphasis original.

¹³² John Fiske, "Radical Shopping in Los Angeles: Race, Media, and the Sphere of Consumption," *Media, Culture, & Society* 16 (1994), 472.

¹³³ Fiske, "Radical Shopping in Los Angeles," 472-3.

stereotypes of STRONGBLACKWOMEN and ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN to compose a cohesive narrative about looting in Watts.

STRONGBLACKWOMEN and ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN

The *Herald-Examiner* contained perhaps the most spectacular and detailed coverage of the riot. Like *Life*, they too offered photographs of looters. Their looting photographs, however, were less pronounced than the ones depicting gunshot victims and raging infernos. The *Herald-Examiner* tended to cover violence and looting in more detail through stories rather than photographs. Reporters described the violence they experienced at the hands of angry mobs that threw rocks and set cars on fire. When reporters did not have first hand experience, they offered information from government officials such as Mayor Samuel Yorty. As a result, the *Herald-Examiner* initially reinforced government officials' insistence that the violence was committed by rowdy youths.

On the front page of the August 13 issue (the day that rioters were most destructive) the *Herald-Examiner* explained, "Mayor Samuel W. Yorty stressed that a majority of the rioters were young people. He asked all parents in the area and other sections of the city to exercise their authority." The paper also quoted Mayor Yorty as saying, "Know and supervise the whereabouts of young members of the family."¹³⁴ The *Herald-Examiner* supported Yorty's claim with quotes from citizens including an

¹³⁴ "Residents Deplore Violence," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, A1.

unnamed “housewife” who said, “Decent people dislike any kind of violence and generally try to shy away from trouble. It’s the rowdy teenagers all gassed up on airplane glue and wine who provoke trouble.”¹³⁵ Later in the issue an editorial further explained that this was not a race riot but an instance of young people “heeding too much false advice from people who urge them to disobey and show disrespect for the law.” It further clarified the point arguing that most of the people in the area “abhor such violence and they actually feared for their own safety.”¹³⁶ In later pages the *Herald-Examiner* even covered something that was left out of most research on looting in the riot but demonstrated a certain element of wanton destruction that supported the mayor’s claim. At the beginning of the riot, on the evening of the twelfth and again on the morning of the thirteenth, the post office was looted. The story described a scene in which “over 100 rioters were on a rampage.”¹³⁷ However, the *Herald-Examiner* did not offer photographs of looters on that day.

The following day, the *Herald-Examiner* began printing pictures of the looters alongside brief articles and captions. What we see in those photos are not wild youths but adult men and women. Stories described cars rolling through police roadblocks saying, “every other car contained what appeared to be loot from the stores in the riot. . . . There would be cases of wine with broken glass on top, a pack of a dozen sweaters, all

¹³⁵ “Ask Parents Crack Down on Rioters,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, A4.

¹³⁶ “Defiance,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, C1.

¹³⁷ “900 Police Battle 70000 Rioters,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, A4.

the same size and color, or new vacuum cleaners in unopened containers.”¹³⁸ The perceived shift in looting tactics from wanton destruction by youths to deliberate taking of goods by adults may indicate what Quarantelli and Dynes describe as the three phases of looting. The first phase they call symbolic looting, this is where we mainly see destruction, as in the case of the post office. Next there is a phase of conscious or deliberate looting, and finally, there tends to be a widespread nonsystematic taking of goods. The coverage on the fourteenth seems to be reflective of the second phase as the story goes on explain that, “some of the looters were only too anxious to tell where they had picked up the stuff.”¹³⁹

What is more important to this study than the phase of looting is the way the looters were represented in the *Herald-Examiner's* photographs. Although the stories indistinguishably labeled all female and male looters as “suspects,” the photographs clearly portrayed men and women looting different goods. What is more, these photographs demonstrate the distinction between STRONGBLACKWOMEN and ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN by portraying women looters as supplying goods for the home and men as perpetuating their self destructive tendencies. We can see this most clearly in the contrast between a photograph of women looting furniture and one of men attempting to loot liquor (Figures 2.6 and 2.7).

¹³⁸ Nelson S. Himmel, “Roadblocks Snare Looters,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 14 August 1965, A4.

¹³⁹ Himmel, “Roadblocks Snare Looters,” A4.

The “Soft Sofa” and the “Late Looter”

The *Herald-Examiner* ran three looting photos on August 14 and one photo of suspected looters being arrested. The first two pictures ran on consecutive pages. In the first photo we can see two women carrying a couch (Figure 2.6). The women not only appear to be physically strong but, in contrast with the man on the next page, they seem to have their priorities in order. The paper did not need to point out the details of this incident, they were obvious. The caption simply read, “A Soft Sofa on the Move. This was one scene of looting on 103rd Street as the violence continued in southeast Los Angeles. Many stores in this area were hit.”¹⁴⁰ To some readers, the action may have appeared only as blatant stealing. To other readers, aware of impoverished conditions and the regular repossession of property from low income Watts residents, the action may have appeared as something else. Arguably in either reading of the women’s action they emerge, like Wallace’s superwoman, as the “*Workhorse . . . provid[ing] the main support for the family . . . Very strong. . . Tough, unfeminine.*”¹⁴¹ The caption helps us understand that the women were taking a soft sofa but the “violence” the caption describes is not evident in the photograph. Instead all that we see are two women walking down the street with a couch, and another woman in the background with a shopping bag.

¹⁴⁰ “A Soft Sofa on the Move.” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 14 August 1965, A4.

¹⁴¹ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 107. Emphasis original.

Figure 2.6

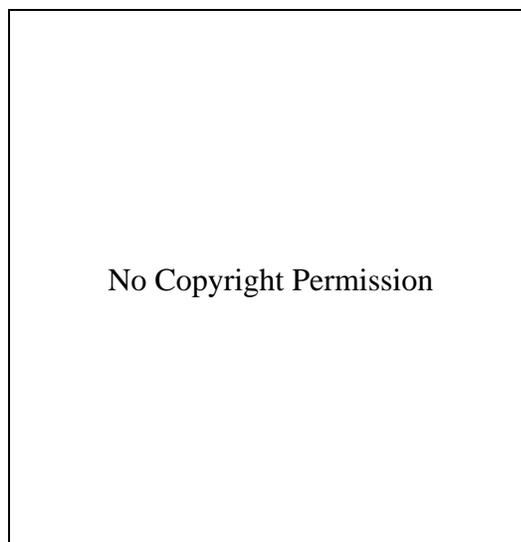


Figure 2.6: A Soft Sofa on the Move. *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 14 August 1965, A4.

Figure 2.7

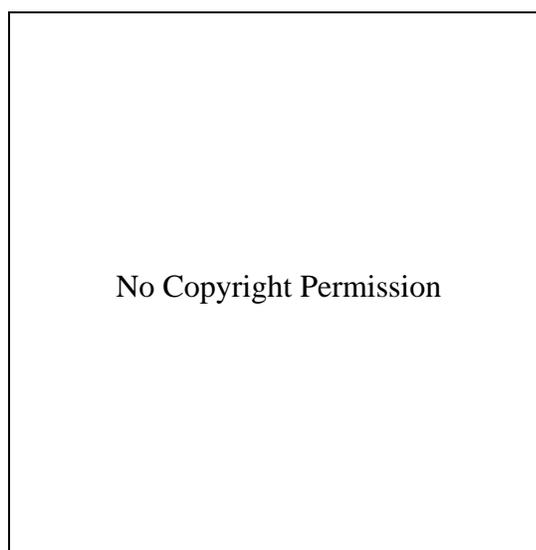


Figure 2.7: Late Looter. *Los Angeles Herald- Examiner* 14 August 1965, A4.

The sofa picture is contrasted on the following page by a “late looter” (Figure 2.7). At first glance, the photo of the man does not tell us much. The title of the caption reads “Late Looter Finds Shelves Nearly Bare.” Only upon closer inspection and reading details within the caption do we learn where the man is. The caption explains, “Sign says this *liquor store* in the riot area is closed, but show window has been smashed. Looters have left the shelves almost bare. One man above has entered store and looks around to see what’s there.”¹⁴² Not only do we rarely see images of men looting but, in the moment where do see one, we learn that men loot liquor. This image stands in strong contrast to the women on the prior page and those represented in *Life* looting groceries and medicine. This photo alone helps us to see the gendered nature of looting photographs. In *Life* we learned that African American men’s violence could be attributed to hatred. In the *Herald-Examiner* we learn that their looting can be an act of self destruction.

Rather than looting to help the family, as visual depictions of women suggest, men loot liquor, perhaps to help them numb the pain of poverty, perhaps for recreation. In this photo we see the precursor to a description of the endangered black man that would rise out of the ashes of the Watts riot. In chapter four we will examine the manner in which reporting on the Moynihan report, which was leaked to the press near the end of the riot, “proffered an ideology of Black male extinction” that was later picked up by the Black Panther Party for Self Defense and, by the 1980s, had transformed into the

¹⁴² “Late Looter Finds Shelves Nearly Bare,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 14 August 1965, A3.

prominent understanding of “the black male endangered species.”¹⁴³ But before the Moynihan report emerged we have this photo which, when juxtaposed with the one on the preceding page, demonstrates the contrast between the self destructive alcoholic black man, and the SBW.

If there was any confusion as to how one might read the “soft sofa” image it may have been cleared up later, in October, 1965, by *Ebony* magazine which ran the same image with a slightly wider angle and a different caption. Rather than allowing readers to interpret the event for themselves, *Ebony* explained in their caption of the photo, “Almost nonchalantly, housewives in area helped themselves to furniture, clothing, appliances and other goods in smashed stores. One rationalized: ‘It doesn’t much matter—it would’ve been burned anyway.’ Police spent weeks recovering the loot.”¹⁴⁴ Now we might better understand what was going on. Our original suspicion is confirmed: these are housewives, simply *helping themselves*. Unlike the men in *Life* or the ones who appear later in the *Herald-Examiner*, these women are not criminals. They are simply gathering materials they need, “furniture, clothing, appliances and other goods,” from stores that were already smashed.

We can see how the “need” hypothesis is plausible if we return to our description of the conditions in Watts at the time. Many of the women in Watts were the head of their households, getting by on low paying jobs and often an even lower paying welfare

¹⁴³ Marlon B. Ross. “In Search of Black Men’s Masculinities,” *Feminist Studies*, 24, 3 (Fall 1998): 604.

¹⁴⁴ “Los Angeles Riot Continued,” *Ebony*, October 1965, 117.

system. Although welfare was designed to help poor citizens obtain necessities it rarely, if ever, lived up to anyone's basest expectations. Residents of Watts testified after the riot that any and all expenditures beyond food and rent, including: a bed, bedding, a washing machine, or a stove, were rarely permitted and case workers often lost requests for items such as these within the bureaucratic system.¹⁴⁵ Those who could afford items such as a "soft sofa" on their own knew the very real possibility of having it repossessed when they could no longer make payments. Further, these women are able to rationalize their actions because, really, they are saving the goods from being burned (presumably by the male arsonists in *Life*). *Ebony* did not run their photo next to one of men looting a liquor store but the juxtaposition of these STRONGBLACKWOMEN and the ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN is still obvious in their coverage.

Rather than adding another photo, the *Ebony* coverage offers a mental picture of the ENDANGEREDBLACKMAN below the sofa photograph. The story is a continuation of the original Robinson article in which he claimed the riot never would have happened if the white officers had not kicked "that man."¹⁴⁶ The man in question was African American motorist Marquette Frye. Below the photograph of the "housewives" carrying their couch Robinson offered a description of the violent incident between Frye and police in greater detail than any other source. Immediately below the "housewives" caption Robinson's story continues, "[the] officer 'hit me on the knees with a blackjack and slapped me across the face with his hands.' Marquette recalls being

¹⁴⁵ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 263.

¹⁴⁶ *Ebony*, 117.

kicked as he was shoved into the car and later, at the station, being knocked cold.”¹⁴⁷ In the next paragraph Robinson goes on to explain how Frye’s arrest “touched off a holocaust.”¹⁴⁸ Again, a preview of the discourse that would later develop out of the riot, we can see the early signs of “matriarchal overkill latched on to the idea of Black male genocide.”¹⁴⁹ The *Herald-Examiner* furthered the image by juxtaposing photographs of women searching for food with men being arrested for looting liquor.

Liquor vs. Groceries

Returning to the *Herald-Examiner* we can see the contrast developing further in a photo spread that appeared after the couch picture. On the first page of the second section of the August 14 issue we see a collection of photographs. Two of the pictures on the bottom half of the page contain looters. The first is of three men (two in the foreground, one further back) with their hands up on a wall being searched by police officers (Figure 2.8). The other is of two women gathering groceries (Figure 2.9). In the first photo, like the other male looting photo in the paper that day, it is not entirely clear what transpired. But, again, the caption explains, “Officers search Negro suspects allegedly caught leaving a *liquor store* on Manchester Avenue near Central Avenue last night. Officer at right asks

¹⁴⁷ *Ebony*, 117.

¹⁴⁸ *Ebony*, 117.

¹⁴⁹ Ross, “In Search of Black Men’s Masculinities,” 604.

for help in handling unruly suspect.”¹⁵⁰ Not surprisingly, these men, like the first, were looting a liquor store. Additionally, we learn from the caption that one of them, like the hateful men described in *Life*, proved to be an unruly suspect. These men are not only endangered, they are seen here as criminals.

The women, on the other hand, are again in the right place at the right time to provide for their families. Strong and silent, these women did not break the window (just as the women with the couch did not smash the stores in the *Ebony* caption) but they gathered food, arguably a necessity they could not buy because stores were closed due to the violence. The caption for this photo explains, “Two Negro women looters are shown filling shopping bags at market at 4301 S. Vermont Ave. The market’s windows have been smashed. All looters have to do is reach through open windows.”¹⁵¹ Similar to the *Ebony* caption, we learn here that the windows were already smashed. These women were not unruly, like the men, but simply gathering food because all they had to do was “reach through open windows.” Like Morgan’s SBW, and unlike those in *Life*, these women are portrayed as figures who know “the SBW credo: no matter how bad shit gets, handle it alone, quietly, and with dignity.”¹⁵²

¹⁵⁰ *Los Angeles Herald*, 14 August 1965, B1. Emphasis added.

¹⁵¹ *Los Angeles Herald*, 14 August 1965, B1.

¹⁵² Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 90.

Figure 2.8

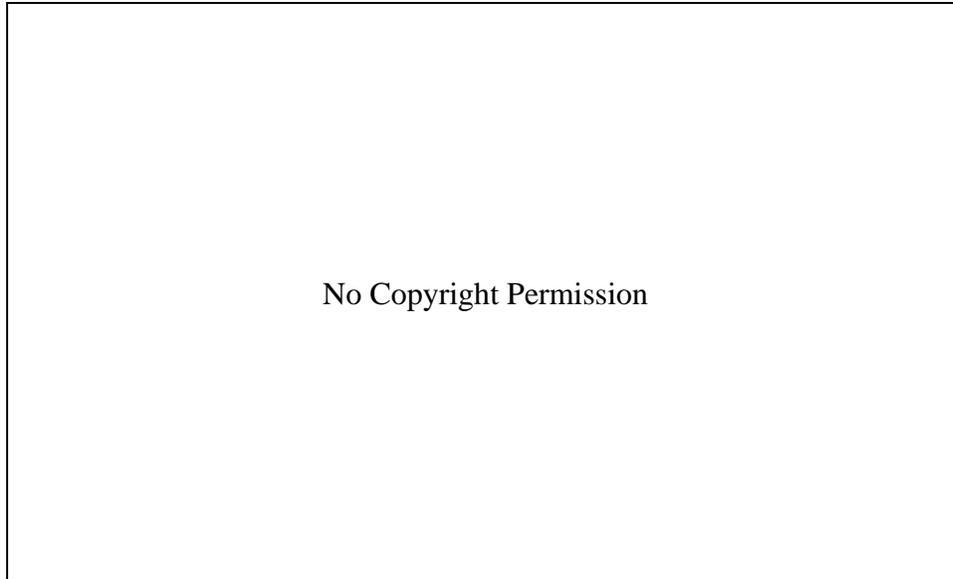
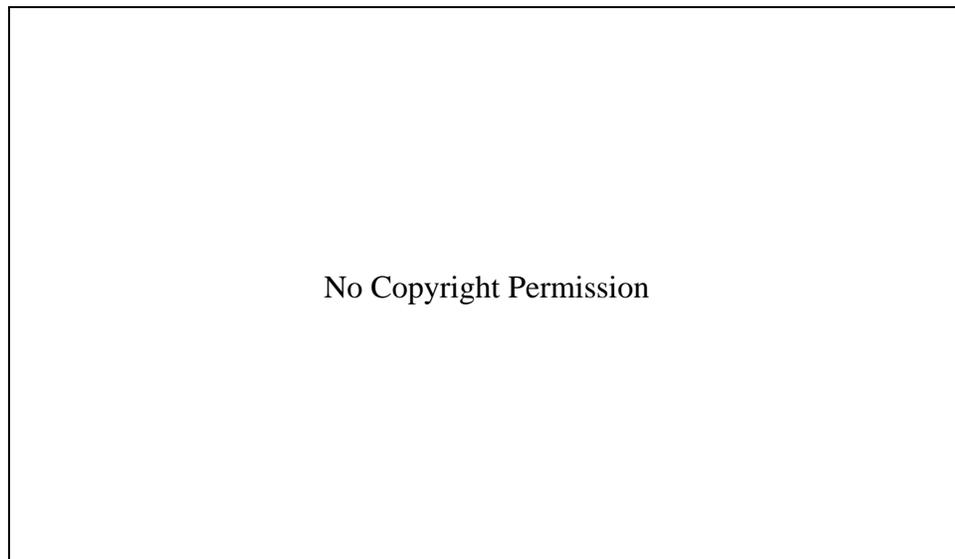
Figure 2.8: *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 14 August 1965, B1.

Figure 2.9

Figure 2.9: *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 14 August 1965, B1.

In the coverage of the Watts riot, race, class, sex, and gender intersect in portrayals of women as looters. In some photographs they are crazy and selfish. Like those appearing in *Life*, these women are truly uncontrollable criminals that deserve to be punished. On the other hand, like those who appeared in *Ebony* and the *Herald-Examiner*, they may be entirely rational, quiet, and strong, simply doing what they always do, stoically supporting their family and holding everything together “no matter how bad shit gets.” In the latter portrayal, female strength is juxtaposed with the unruly male who is truly criminal as his looting actions are confined to running around breaking windows and attempting, unsuccessfully, to rob liquor stores.

These women are either animals or they are opportunists; either way they are to be condemned. It is possible to argue that these are the only ways to portray what happened in Watts; after all, a picture is worth a thousand words. These pictures seem to offer undeniable evidence that women were, in fact, taking goods that did not belong to them either by grabbing them and running in the *Life* images or by quietly rescuing those necessities that did not belong to them but might otherwise be burned, as in *Ebony* and the *Herald-Examiner*. But, looking further back in American history we have seen that there are at least two other ways of reading these photos, neither of which was evident in these portions of Watts coverage if they were evident at all.

Conclusion

Just as Tilly explains that, over time we forget how to employ particular repertoires if they are not used, it seems too we also forget how to read them rhetorically.

When a group does remember and refine a particular repertoire we cannot begin the interpretive process of their protest action as if it were something we had never seen before. Instead, we need to understand the action in the context of tactics that we have seen before. Just as Americans are quite familiar with the petition and the strike, so too have we seen enough riots and looting that we should not believe they are completely different from what has happened in the past. Although contemporary riots may be different in some ways from those that occurred in colonial times or after the Civil War, I believe it is a mistake to see them as a complete departure from earlier traditions.

My argument is not that bread riots or the South Carolina slave uprisings are identical to what happened in Watts. However, I do believe that they offer us a way of seeing how such tactics develop over time and provide a way of escaping the idea that looters in Watts were animals or that they were early evidence of the distinction between STRONGBLACKWOMEN and ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN. Additionally, by examining the prior development of looting as a repertoire for collection action we can see that, contrary to the impression we get from the Watts coverage that men began the violence and women simply frantically followed, women throughout history have taken the lead in employing tactics such as looting to demonstrate their dissatisfaction with unjust conditions or a lack of rights. It then becomes possible for us to see the looters in Watts in a similar vein to activist women throughout American history, black and white, who have used looting as a strategy for taking what they believe is rightfully theirs.

Tilly seems to indicate that this sort of tracking in the development of repertoires for collective action is particularly relevant to violent uprisings such as the one in Watts. He argues that, “violence makes collective action visible: authorities, participants, and

observers tend to set down some record of their actions, reactions, and observations. Collective violence, therefore serves as a convenient tracer of major alterations in collective action as a whole.”¹⁵³ However, we must be careful that we do not view attempts to trace the development of collective violence as a repertoire for collective action as synonymous with legitimizing it as a regular form of protest. Gilje reminds us that this would be an inaccurate assumption when he explains that rioting was never seen as an entirely legitimate form of protest. Although there have been times in our history when “confidence in the right to riot may have grown,” Gilje points out, “all moments of popular disorder were viewed as potentially dangerous.”¹⁵⁴ The danger of such an uprising is evident in the coverage of Watts and, even in acknowledging the aspects of empowerment present in the looters’ actions, we should not deny the fact that the riot, as a repertoire, was used only after people found that more traditional tactics were unsuccessful.

The discussion now moves from portrayals of women as wanton and crazy to portrayals of African American women as exceedingly moral. In the local press readers found that not all African American women were horrible; some, particularly those that attended church or were members of a college sorority, could be moral leaders in their community. In the following chapter I will explain how, in contrast to the role of looter, local papers made a quieter and more upstanding role rhetorically available to certain women in Los Angeles at the time.

¹⁵³ Tilly, *From Mobilization to Revolution*, 188.

¹⁵⁴ Gilje, *Rioting in America*, 20.

Chapter 3

LEADERS OR FOLLOWERS? WOMEN UPLIFTING THE RACE

I will strive to reach the highest educational, moral and spiritual efficiency which I can possibly attain. . . . I will never belittle my race, but encourage all to hold it in honor and esteem. I will not shrink from undertaking what seems wise and good, because I labor under the double handicap of race and sex; but, striving to preserve a calm mind with a courageous, cheerful, spirit, barring bitterness from my heart, I will struggle all the more earnestly to reach the goal.

Delta Sigma Theta Creed written by Mary Church Terrell¹⁵⁵

As the violence in Watts wore on and looting and fires quickly became old news, Los Angeles reporters turned their attention to people who opposed the riot. Initially, reports focused on churches and religious leaders' attempts to stop the violence. Such accounts appeared as small stories almost overshadowed by the spectacular and graphic riot photographs. However, as the week progressed, the local press appeared to take a greater interest in organizations and individuals working toward community uplift rather than violence. In those uplifting reports they made a seemingly different role rhetorically available to African American women. In sharp contrast to their role as looters described in the previous chapter, later in the riot women began to appear in stories and photographs about local churches and a national sorority condemning the violent uprising in Watts. Distinct from earlier visual and discursive portrayals of women stealing or

¹⁵⁵ Mary Church Terrell, *A Colored Woman in a White World*, Ed. Deborah Newman Ham (Amherst, NY: Humanity Books, 2005), 470.

yelling in the streets, readers soon began to see women dressed in their Sunday best heading to church or, in the case of the sorority, prescribing solutions for the riot torn area in Southeast Los Angeles. Both sets of stories relied on the idea of racial uplift and implied that there were many people, good people, who abhorred violence and were working to show the rioters a better path toward achieving justice.

This chapter describes the historical foundations of uplift ideology in black communities and the integral roles women have played in fostering societal commitment to uplift ideals. Understanding this history is a crucial first step to unpacking the representations of church and sorority present in the riot coverage from Los Angeles newspapers: the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and *Los Angeles Herald-Herald-Examiner*. Following a historical look at the rhetoric of racial uplift, I will turn to the newspaper portrayals of the church and examine the historical importance of African American women in their religious communities. There I will explain how the rich history of women's religious involvement was either ignored or undermined by coverage linked to the Watts uprising. Next, I will explore the history of the African American women's club movement and, more specifically, the Delta Sigma Theta sorority which met in Los Angeles during the later part of the uprising. Although it is not possible to cover every element of women's club activities, I will draw from the growing body of African American feminist and womanist scholarship on clubwomen to foreground an informed rhetorical analysis of the coverage of the national Delta Sigma Theta sorority meeting in Los Angeles and the way that meeting was linked, in the press, to the violence in Watts.

Coverage concerning churches and the Delta's convention brought a variety of themes to bear on discourse surrounding women and the Watts riot. Most obvious among those themes was the gendered nature of moral leadership but, examining the coverage further, underlying themes such as age and class also appeared to be intimately tied to the media's conception of African American women's moral response to the uprising. The images and discourse analyzed in this chapter demonstrate the ways that racial uplift ideology was portrayed in sharp contrast to the destructive nature of the rioters. The media, regardless of race, utilized images and stories of racial uplift to distinguish good blacks from bad and perpetuated the notion that the more a person ascribed to middle-class values of progress and uplift, the more acceptable and moral they were.¹⁵⁶ The theme of racial uplift allowed reporters to draw lines between rioters and others in the community and claim that most citizens condemned the violence, despite evidence to the contrary.

Racial Uplift

The concept of racial uplift is closely linked to the value that African American communities have historically placed on self-help. Self-help became most popular among educated African Americans in the 1890s as a way of demonstrating the potential for certain parts of the African American population to integrate into the American dream. Kevin Gaines explains, "The self-help ideology of racial uplift describes the response of

¹⁵⁶ When I say "regardless of race" I mean that both white and black owned papers offered similar coverage.

educated African Americans, who, according to Alfred Moss, numbered roughly 2 percent of the black population in the 1890s, to de jure, or legal segregation.”¹⁵⁷ Among such educated people Gaines includes black ministers, intellectuals, journalists, and reformers who fought against the idea that black people were biologically inferior to white people. Using “ostensibly universal but deeply racialized ideological categories of Western progress and civilization,” educated leaders like Booker T. Washington promoted the idea that, through self-help, African Americans could demonstrate “material and moral” progress.¹⁵⁸ Such progress, in theory, would prove that certain members of the race were capable of becoming integrated with the better (read white) classes in society and allow them to climb the social and economic ladders of success. Self-help, they believed, would improve conditions for African Americans and “diminish white racism” by rehabilitating the popular image of black people as lazy and inferior to one that “embod[ied] respectability, enacted through an ethos of service to the masses.”¹⁵⁹

Although educated African Americans were the primary proponents of racial uplift, it would be inaccurate to assume that the concept was solely based in black middle-class ideals. Because the logic of racial uplift relied on the notion that African American people needed to demonstrate that they were materially and morally better than they were perceived to be by those in power, uplift relied on the dominant values shaped

¹⁵⁷ Kevin K. Gaines, *Uplifting the Race: Black Leadership, Politics, and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Chapel Hill: the University of North Carolina Press, 1996), xiv.

¹⁵⁸ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, xiv.

¹⁵⁹ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, xiv.

by upper-class white America. Therefore, Gaines points out, “black middle-class ideology cannot be isolated from dominant modes of knowledge and power relations structured by race and racism.”¹⁶⁰ The game was rigged from the start as African Americans worked to help themselves and their communities progress within a power structure designed to oppress them. Their progress depended on the successful application of dominant rhetoric on race and class to their own lives and on gaining cooperation from their oppressors. However, Gaines argues that although “both black and white elites spoke the same dominant language in defining their middle-class status,” there remained important differences between the two groups.¹⁶¹ Accounting for these differences allows us to see that while the language of racial uplift was necessarily tied to the language of white supremacy, we would be mistaken to equate the two. Instead, we need to recognize that these discourses rely on each other while each simultaneously opposes the other. This complex connection, Gaines claims, means that we must be constantly aware of the “ambiguous intersection between racist and anti racist discourses, even as they exist in apparent opposition to one another, each echoing and reinforcing the other, particularly on biological notions of race, gender, and sexuality.”¹⁶² Keeping these intersections in mind, we can better understand how appropriate roles for African

¹⁶⁰ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, viv.

¹⁶¹ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, xx.

¹⁶² Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, xx-xxi.

American women have, throughout history, been defined within and against racist, gendered, classist, sexist, and ageist interpretations of morality and material worth.¹⁶³

Although uplift rhetoric became most popular and politically influential in the late nineteenth century, it was present much earlier in black history. Gaines traces one version of uplift discourse to the “antislavery folk religion of the slaves.” He explains that before emancipation slaves relied on notions of group struggle and fostered religious narratives that spoke of “personal or collective spiritual—and potentially social—transcendence of worldly oppression and misery,” a struggle that he says, “regarded education as the key to liberation” and remained influential long after emancipation and Reconstruction.¹⁶⁴ As society endured extreme changes over the years so too did the nature of uplift rhetoric. Continuing to rely on themes of religiosity, morality, struggle, and education, uplift discourses adapted to meet the needs of the people in a given time. With adaptation also came differing interpretations. During and after Reconstruction, Gaines argues, uplift rhetoric demonstrated both African American desires for social mobility and their engagement of the barriers to change. To challenge economic, racial, and, I argue, gendered, barriers to social and economic progress, African Americans used the language of uplift to promote “a vision of racial solidarity uniting black elites with the masses.”¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ Johnetta Betsch Cole and Beverly Guy-Sheftall, *Gender Talk: The Struggle for Women’s Equality in African American Communities* (New York: One World, Ballantine Books, 2003), xxii. Although I am concerned here with the ways that each of these discourses shaped conceptions of appropriate roles for African American women, we should be conscious of the fact that they were simultaneously shaping intersecting roles for all people.

¹⁶⁴ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 1.

¹⁶⁵ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 2.

As black elites progressed through the ranks of education and economic achievement, they professed that they should be seen as different, better than, the stereotypical black masses. Through elite progress, the thinking went, those who had demonstrated their humanity could then educate and somehow “uplift the race.” In this process, many elites came to believe that uplift should mean “an emphasis on self-help, racial solidarity, temperance, thrift, chastity, social purity, patriarchal authority, and accumulation of wealth.”¹⁶⁶ Obviously, these elements would affect various members of black communities differently.

In the nineteenth century, for African American women, racial uplift rapidly became tied to the concept of “true womanhood.” At the time, the “true woman” was seen as one who performed her designated gender role perfectly. To be a “true woman” one needed to be “fragile, submissive, and sexually pure,” she also knew that she should not venture away from her proper place in the home “because to do so would be considered unwomanly.”¹⁶⁷ To be a “true woman,” she had to demonstrate that she needed and deserved protection from the evils of the outside world. The concept was a Victorian ideal which, by design, excluded those who were not white or wealthy because such women could not survive or support their families if forced to adhere to these principles.

¹⁶⁶ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 2.

¹⁶⁷ Lois Tyson, *Learning for a Diverse World: Using critical theory to Read and Write About Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 89. See also Shirley J. Carlson, “Black Ideals of Womanhood in the Late Victorian Era,” *The Journal of Negro History*, 77, 2, (Spring 1992), 61-73.

Poor women of all races could not remain in the home because they needed to earn a living. Despite their best attempts, women who worked outside the home, and/or performed tough physical labor, could not be fragile or submissive if they wanted to survive. Additionally, sexual purity was not easy to maintain in a world where women who labored outside the home constantly faced sexual exploitation at work. “In other words,” Lois Tyson explains, “a woman whose racial or economic situation forced her to perform physical labor and made her the victim of sexual predators was considered unwomanly and therefore unworthy of protection from those who exploited her.”¹⁶⁸ Just as white supremacist norms regarding race and economic status intersected with uplift, so too was this exclusionary model used to prescribe proper sex roles.

Paula Giddings explains that black women activists in the nineteenth century were highly aware of the expectation that, despite practical limitations, women should strive to become a part of the cult of true womanhood. Prominent activists such as Maria Stewart and Mary Church Terrell, she claims, “traversed a tricky and sometimes contradictory path in responding to the challenge [of true womanhood].”¹⁶⁹ As free women, they were conscious of pressure to demonstrate that they fit within the dominant culture and “they agreed with the fundamental premises of the Victorian ethic.” At the same time, “they

¹⁶⁸ Tyson, *Learning for a Diverse World*, 89.

¹⁶⁹ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill, William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984), 49.

opposed its racist and classist implications” and recognized the inherently oppressive nature of the label they were to strive for, that is, “ladies.”¹⁷⁰

Understanding the development of these discourses and the impact they had on definitions of appropriate gender roles, we can not only see the struggle over intersections of oppressive and liberatory ideologies at work in uplift rhetoric and its reliance on “true womanhood” but, as Kimberly Springer has pointed out, we begin to see the early development of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN.¹⁷¹ In the nineteenth century, as in 1965, and still today, “across classes, black women [were] taught to hide their imperfections for fear of being a discredit to the race”¹⁷² Tyson explains that the same definitions of what it meant to be lady-like in the nineteenth century are used today to reinforce patriarchal norms and determine acceptable feminine behavior.¹⁷³ The concept remains but the labels continue to change. In the nineteenth century African American women struggled to demonstrate they were “true women” while also attempting to support their families by working long hours outside the home and being looked down on as dirty and biologically inferior to those who could afford, because of their skin color and economic status, to remain in the home. Jumping far forward to the 1970s Michelle Wallace described a similar dilemma when she sought to identify the struggle African American women faced in becoming the “Superwoman” who could accomplish anything, despite a

¹⁷⁰ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 49.

¹⁷¹ Kimberly Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 27, 4 (2002).

¹⁷² Springer, “Third Wave Black Feminism?” 1071.

¹⁷³ Tyson, *Learning for a Diverse World*, 88-89.

lack of support, and a fair amount of opposition, from the men in their community. Just as we moved toward the twenty first century, the theme emerged again in Joan Morgan's identification of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN who could handle anything without burdening those around her and who could take responsibility for the accomplishments and failures of an entire race on her shoulders. Throughout each of these eras black women have struggled to become the ideal woman within a system that defined them as anything but. In women's nineteenth-century uplift discourse we see that African American women have historically taken unique responsibilities when it comes to image management "Wanting the race to be judged by its best women," Deborah Gray White argues, "they had to become their own persuasive argument for the cause of race and black female advancement."¹⁷⁴

In 1832, Maria Stewart, a twenty-nine year-old African American, became "the first American-born woman to give public speeches and leave extant texts of her addresses."¹⁷⁵ In those controversial addresses to audiences of both men and women, Stewart spoke about abolition, civil and women's rights, and her simultaneous adherence and challenge to Victorian principles. Giddings explains that Stewart "castigated free Blacks for not doing enough for their own uplift."¹⁷⁶ In her speeches Stewart encouraged women to be submissive, to understand the importance of "good house-wifery," and the value of motherhood. She preached that politically lethargic free blacks and uncultivated

¹⁷⁴ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 88.

¹⁷⁵ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 50.

¹⁷⁶ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 50.

women kept the race from overcoming the prejudice at the heart of racial and economic oppression. While she condemned many people for their deviance from dominant moral ideals, Stewart and other activists of her time also posed fundamental challenges to the ideal of “true womanhood.” Giddings claims that “though they may have agreed with many of its precepts, they fought against the idea that morality and worth were inherent to a particular class or race. On the contrary, it was external circumstance rather than natural law that determined character, morality, and in the case of women, ‘true womanhood.’”¹⁷⁷ In order to pose such a challenge, Stewart taught her audiences about “women in history who had a voice in moral political, and religious affairs,” and in doing so, Giddings posits, she and other female activists developed “a distinct ethos which underlined Black women’s activism for generations to come. And as is evident in Stewart’s words, it was an ethos that had its contradictions.”¹⁷⁸

In the following section I will examine the ways that images and stories about the role of the church in responding to the Watts uprising relied on a historical conception of gender roles rooted in uplift ideology and notions of “true womanhood.” I will unpack the portrayals of submissive church ladies that appeared in opposition to the image of young wild women looting grocery stores, and use feminist and womanist scholarship to disarm the myth that these women would have simply stood by in strong, silent submission and waited for men in their community to lead.

¹⁷⁷ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 50-51.

¹⁷⁸ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 50.

Women in the Church

On August 16, 1965, five days after the riot began and just as the violence was beginning to calm down in Watts and shift to other cities, the *Los Angeles Times* decided to depict women doing something other than looting. For almost a week the *L.A. Times*, like the papers analyzed in chapter two, either ignored women who participated in the riot or ran stories about wild (mostly young) women screaming and looting. On August 13, the paper quoted an 18 year-old girl who admitted, “I threw bricks and rocks, anything I could get my hands on . . . to hurt them.”¹⁷⁹ The next day the *L.A. Times* ran a story titled “A Look of Pure Hate Rioters’ Victim Recalls.” In the story a victim described the hatred with which a woman, leading a mob of twenty, came toward him and his fiancé yelling “kill them.”¹⁸⁰ On the following day, August 15, another story appeared titled “In Harlem or Watts, Madness in the Same,” and the author argued that the violence in Watts made the 1964 Harlem riot look like “a Sunday school picnic.” The author, a black radio personality from Newark, New Jersey, proceeded to describe the “Negro Cassandras chanting over whining fire engines.”¹⁸¹ These stories, though sparse, contributed to the image of women in Watts as wild, crazy, hateful, and evil, but the next day, August 16, they suddenly appeared to be almost angelic.

¹⁷⁹ Charles Hillinger and Jack Jones, “Residents Put Blame on Police For Uproar,” *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August 1965, A3.

¹⁸⁰ Eric Malnic, “A Look of Pure Hate Rioters’ Victim Recalls,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 1965, A16.

¹⁸¹ Larry Hall, “In Harlem or Watts, Madness in the Same,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1965, A22.

Just as the violence began to shift to other parts of Southern California, so too did the *L.A. Times* coverage shift to what they portrayed as other parts of the African American community in Watts. For four days the *L.A. Times*, the largest daily newspaper in the area, ran stories about wild, seemingly uncontrollable, hateful women, but on the fifth day those women seemed to disappear. In place of the detailed and violent descriptions, the paper began to cover efforts of churches in the area to address local grievances and find alternatives to the violence. The stories primarily focused on male religious figures and community leaders. However, the photographic evidence of this turn to more docile strategies came in the form of two photographs, one of an elderly woman which I will discuss later in this chapter, and another depicting a line of women ascending the stairs to shake the hand of Reverend Bobby Newman and enter the 103rd St. Baptist Church.

The photograph of women entering the church (Figure 3.1) sends a clear message before one even reads its accompanying text. We see four women, no men, dressed in their Sunday best, dresses, well coiffed hair, and even one in a hat and another with her child, solemn, as they enter the building and are greeted by Reverend Newman. Without reading the caption or story one could see that these women are examples of “true womanhood.” Unlike the women described in the stories on previous days, the kind Maria Stewart certainly would have referred to as “uncultivated,” these women seemed to embody ideal womanhood. They appear in the photograph to be beautifully and modestly dressed, in feminine clothing. Included in the group is at least one good mother bringing her son to church and, although they clearly are outside of their domain the home, these women appear in what Stewart saw as an indispensable role, parishioners in the church.

Figure 3.1

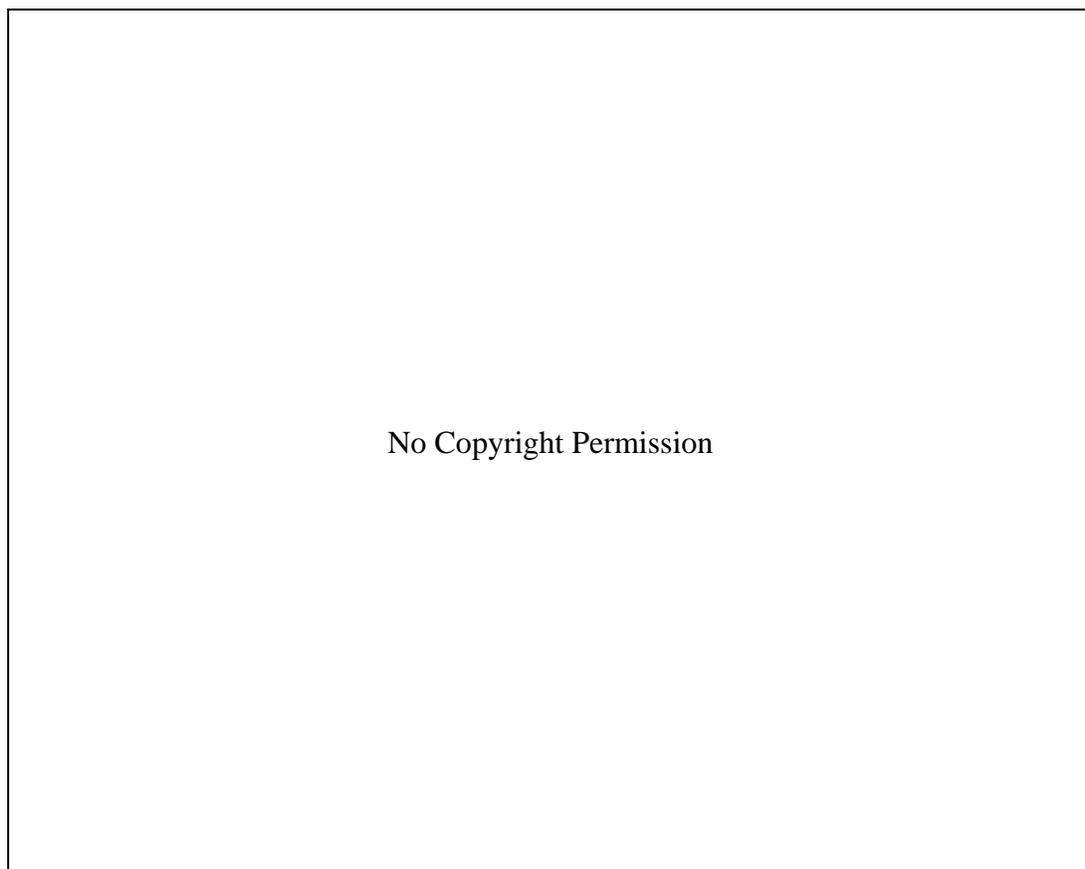


Figure 3.1: Bruce Cox, "Services in Riot Area," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1965, 2-1.

Not only are these women dressed and behaving appropriately, but the angle of the photograph makes them appear submissive. The photograph is taken from a higher position than that of the women, we, the viewer are looking down at them just as the pastor is. The women climb the stairs, ascending into the church from the street below, the same street where violence reigned just hours before.

Male parishioners are noticeably absent from the photograph. We see the male pastor and young boys but no adult men appear in the picture. Their absence seems eerily consistent with the coverage from the days before. Men were the stars in the violent uprising. They burned and looted stores, beat and robbed passersby, and shot at unsuspecting police and firefighters who tried to keep the area safe. The photograph implies that African American men did not seek the Lord that Sunday. We learn from the title of the story below the photograph that only the “Brave and Concerned Attend[ed] Watts Churches” that weekend. Recalling Maria Stewart’s speech, one cannot help but think that maybe this is the nineteenth century all over again, women attending church, to ensure that the race will be judged by its best women, while the uncivilized or politically lethargic members of the community (mostly men) stayed home.

Looking only at the picture, one might assume that the women attended because they were the moral leaders in the community. Adding the article title, one might decide that only women comprised the “brave and concerned” members of the community. Contrary to these possible interpretations, the accompanying story and others like it completely denied women’s integral role in community uplift. As we can see in the picture, they, like the women in turbulent times before them, remain subject to race and gender norms. The accompanying text reinforces the reality that the women we see

entering the church should be subject to rather than determiners of dominant moral norms. While the picture holds the women up as signs of bravery and morality, the article completely ignores their presence. Instead, reading the article on that page and others, we understand that the women in the picture are simply looking, like the rest of the city, for male guidance and leadership in the black community.

The article below the photo on August 16, 1965 was not unique. It was simply another part of the rhetoric calling for black male leadership. From the beginning of the riot, papers had been calling for leaders in the community to step up. On August 12, after the first night of rioting, the Los Angeles County Human Relations Commission called a meeting which began at 2:00 p.m. in Athens Park. The meeting was designed to bring together local leaders and government officials with people in the community so that they could attempt to find common ground and stop the violence. The McCone Commission Report referenced “many vivid and impressive accounts of the work of Negro leaders, social workers, probation officers, churchmen, teachers, and businessmen in their attempts to persuade the people to desist from their illegal activities, to stay in their houses and off the streets, and to restore order.”¹⁸² The report also mentioned Mrs. Frye’s efforts at the park to convince people to stop the violence and “help me and others calm this situation down so we will not have a riot tonight.”¹⁸³ But the papers were quick to declare that the meeting, government leadership, and Mrs. Frye had failed. Nearly 250

¹⁸² John A. McCone, Warren M. Christopher, et. al. *Violence in the City: An End or a Beginning?* A Report by the Governor’s Commission on the Los Angeles Riots, December 2, 1965, 12-13.

¹⁸³ McCone et al., *Violence in the City*, 13.

people were in attendance at the park that afternoon when a 16-year-old male grabbed the microphone and began denouncing police brutality and “threaten[ing] to attack white neighborhoods.”¹⁸⁴ From that point on the papers, especially the *L.A. Times* focused on leadership, specifically male religious leadership, as the solution to the problem.

On the front page of the August 14 issue reporter Jack Jones declared, “Area appears devoid of leadership.” Jones quoted Woodrow Coleman, cochairman of the Non-Violent Action Committee saying “what’s happening out there is out of Negro leaders’ hands.”¹⁸⁵ He went on to claim that Police Chief William H. Parker refused to meet with “civil rights spokesmen” because he did not believe that there were any effective leaders for him to talk to. According to Jones, Parker said, “I am not going to sit down in any kind of meeting and meet with any leaders These rioters do not have any leaders. I see no reason for a big meeting on this thing.”¹⁸⁶ Later in the article Jones detailed other failed attempts by so-called community leaders to call meetings and stop the violence. He also quoted one person who blamed the press for attempting to create too many leaders and confusing the people.

The only leadership that the *L.A. Times* did seem to have hope in were male pastors and priests whom they featured on their pages throughout the riot. The Jones piece described one civil rights activist after the other who was ineffective in their efforts

¹⁸⁴ Della Rossa, *Why Watts Exploded*, 5.

¹⁸⁵ Jack Jones, “Area Appears Devoid of Leadership,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 1965, A1.

¹⁸⁶ Jones, “Area Appears Devoid of Leadership,” A1.

to stop the violence and even to get “women and children out of the boiling area.”¹⁸⁷ The next day there were more articles about the problems with “Negro leadership” and editorials calling for prayer for the riot area. On the front page of the August 15 issue appeared an editorial calling for prayer. The writer, not named in the paper, complimented law enforcement and firefighters for their work but did not mention any community leaders. Instead the writer encouraged community members to pray for guidance.¹⁸⁸ The editorial was accompanied by another article calling for renewed leadership in the black community but the author did not identify anyone they thought would be appropriate for the role. Later in the issue there was another article, “Parker Raps ‘False’ Negro Leadership,” like those that came before it, this article only condemned the people that tried to lead and failed, it did not identify anyone who could or should lead. In fact, the article offered many quotes from Police Chief Parker who blamed “‘pseudo leaders’ of the Negro community” for their inability to stop the looting and violence. Parker said, “The so-called leaders of the Negro community can’t lead at all.” Instead, he argued, they mislead government officials with rhetoric about police brutality and called those who gave him advice early on “meddlers” who intruded in police business encouraging them not to stop the violence. Parker went on to call those

¹⁸⁷ Jones, “Area Appears Devoid of Leadership,” A13.

¹⁸⁸ “Editorial: A Time For Prayer,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1965, A1.

who offered input to the police and government “Modern day Pied Pipers of Hamelin” and blamed them for not helping and only “getting us into trouble.”¹⁸⁹

If the men of the community were either violent and destructive or politically lethargic, the women of the community were hateful looters, and civil rights leaders were “Pied Pipers of Hamelin,” where could one turn for the leadership everyone agreed the situation so desperately required? On August 16, the *L.A. Times* finally had an answer and it was modeled by the photograph (Figure 3.1) of women entering the church. All of these people who were looking for leadership needed look no further than their local church where, the articles and photo implied, the pastor or priest would provide the guidance they sought. Such an implication would not have been entirely inaccurate. After all, the leadership provided by black churches to their communities is undeniable and African American ministers have historically played an integral role in fostering community relations and addressing societal ills. Taylor, Chatters, and Levin explain that, “ministers are an important and vital resource for people in the African American community.” They argue that we cannot ignore “the diverse roles that clergy have played with respect to community leadership, development, and empowerment, and in brokering relations between black communities and social institutions and organizations within the broader society.”¹⁹⁰ Given that history, it is logical that reporters might encourage people to look to churches and their figureheads for guidance.

¹⁸⁹ “Parker Raps ‘False’ Negro Leadership: Denounces Effort to Keep Police Out of Riot Area,” *Los Angeles Times*, 15 August 1965, C1.

¹⁹⁰ Robert Joseph Taylor, Linda M. Chatters, Jeff Levin, *Religion in the Lives of African Americans: Social, Psychological, and Health Perspectives* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2004), 111.

Throughout American history, Barbara Brown Zikmund explains, “Whether urban or rural, the Black church was the only institution totally controlled by Black people. It was the only place outside the home where Blacks could express themselves freely and take independent action.”¹⁹¹ Going back to Gaines’ research on uplift we can see the importance of religion and even Christianity as a space where black people learned the importance of perseverance through struggle. Zikmund also identifies black churches as crucial spaces which offered biblical teachings that guarded against “laws, systems, and structures that rendered black people as nonentities.”¹⁹² Given the role of black churches in addressing social problems and standing as beacons of strength and hope in tough times, even without the newspapers, it is likely that people would have begun to look to their churches for leadership. What was missing from the newspaper coverage, however, was the importance of women’s roles within those churches.

Aside from the photograph (Figure 3.1) women were absent from all of the press’ rhetoric surrounding the churches and church leadership. Earlier in the week the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* began talking about church leadership on their front page. On August 13, the most violent day of the riot, the *Herald-Examiner*, an evening newspaper, offered readers a story about “Bishop R.J. Morris, a Methodist Minister from Compton,” who reportedly “risked his life to save a teenage couple beaten and mobbed by a street

¹⁹¹ Barbara Brown Zikmund, “Feminist Consciousness in Historical Perspective,” *Feminist Interpretations of the Bible*, Edited by Letty M. Russell (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1985), 34.

¹⁹² Zikmund, “Feminist Consciousness in Historical Perspective,” 35.

crowd.”¹⁹³ Although the crowd in the story resisted the bishop’s leadership at first, they ultimately obeyed him and allowed the couple to go free. This story gave a glimmer of hope to the power of the religious leadership in the area, as did another story continued from the front page of that evening’s *Herald-Examiner*. The subsequent story celebrated the efforts of “Ministers of two leading Negro churches” who “spearheaded a community movement yesterday to restore peace to the embattled area.”¹⁹⁴ Of course, the ministers the *Herald-Examiner* referred to were ultimately part of the unsuccessful meeting at Athens Park and coverage of their efforts ceased after that article.

The *L.A. Times* picked up where the *Herald-Examiner*’s celebration of religious leadership left off. On August 16, before the photo of the women entering the 103rd Street Baptist church, readers encountered a story that reported the findings of a recent Harris survey which found that although “people in the South, women, Catholics and Negroes tend to describe themselves more than others as ‘deeply religious’,” the biggest drop offs in church attendance and religious adherence in recent years had been among “Negroes and Jews.”¹⁹⁵ This story set the stage for calls to return to church and follow the examples of religious leaders. Additionally, although it was not explicit in the article, it would have been easy for readers who were so desperate for answers as to the cause of

¹⁹³ Gene Youngblood, “Negro Bishop Saves Mobbed Couple,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, A1.

¹⁹⁴ “Ask Parents Crack Down on Rioters,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, A5.

¹⁹⁵ “Harris Survey Shows Americans Believe They are Less Religious Than Others,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1965, A15.

rioting, to see the article as offering a potential reason for the violence—lack of morals in the black community due to a decrease in religious participation.

Only a few pages after the survey and before the photograph of women entering the church, the *L.A. Times* ran a story titled, “Methodist Cleric Kneels in Prayer for God’s Help in Racial Troubles.” The story told of all the ministers who spoke on Sunday, August 15, to “communicants of all persuasions” and offered sermons and prayers calling for “repentance, understanding, an end to prejudice, and a correction of evils which had contributed to the incidents.”¹⁹⁶ The article recalled that on Friday of that week, James Francis Cardinal McIntyre, archbishop of Los Angeles, encouraged Catholic citizens to strive “for peace and the restoration of order.” Thrapp, the author of the piece, interpreted church services across the city on Sunday as providing extended explanations of McIntyre’s instructions. He quoted Dr. K. Morgan Edwards, a Methodist preacher, extensively. The article furthered a perception that the riot could, at least in part, be blamed on a lack of adherence to God’s word. Thrapp acknowledged Dr. Edwards’ claims that “unemployment, hunger, and poverty played significant roles in creating the situation which the riots exploited,” but he went on to emphasize another part of Dr. Edwards’ sermon and explained, “he blamed much of the recent troubles to ‘our failure to recognize that God is the God of love, and to entertain the God of love in our hearts’.” The article opened and closed with Thrapp’s account of Dr. Edwards’ unusually desperate prayer that Sunday in which he fell to his knees at the end of the sermon

¹⁹⁶ Dan Thrapp, “Methodist Cleric Kneels in Prayer for God’s Help in Racial Troubles,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1965, 2-2.

(something Thrapp reminds readers is not customary in the Methodist church) and begged God saying, “we are fully aware of the extent to which we helped produce this crisis . . . melt the prejudice which burns within us all. Help us to face the question whether we ourselves are willing to suffer and sacrifice to become instruments of love rather than hate.” The article ended with Dr. Edwards’ plea, “make us instruments for suffering love.”¹⁹⁷

Eight pages later the women appeared. They were dressed, as we saw in figure 10, in their Sunday best and accompanied by a title which implied that they were both “brave and concerned.” They may have been brave and concerned that day as they walked into the church. Cole and Sheftall indicate that “throughout our history in the United States, the Black church has been the most important in influential institution in the Black community, and the one we have always been able to control.”¹⁹⁸ In turbulent times such as these, the church would have been the logical place for all community members to go, Cole and Sheftall continue, “it instilled values; dictated how we should and should not behave, often on the basis of gender; provided a safe space for worship given the dictates of segregation; and was an important site of resistance to racism as it challenged the limitations that the dominant society placed on African Americans.”¹⁹⁹ Women, more than men, may have sought out the church on that Sunday morning because they were socialized to see it as a safe space. Daphne Wiggins argues that, beyond their general

¹⁹⁷ Thrapp, “Methodist Cleric,” 2-2.

¹⁹⁸ Cole & Sheftall, *Gender Talk*, 105.

¹⁹⁹ Cole & Sheftall, *Gender Talk*, 105.

contributions to the community, black churches are sacred spaces for women, “a safe public space unlike any other, where women can engage and negotiate the realities of their own lives and of African Americans.”²⁰⁰ But Wiggins’ image of women in the church was not exactly the one made rhetorically available in the *L.A. Times* that morning. While they were pictured entering the church, “brave and concerned,” none of the stories included them.

Women were seen in the photo seeking the guiding hand of their pastor, Reverend Bobby Newman, and the story that followed substantiated such an interpretation. Reporter David Felton wrote, “Those who were brave enough, who were dedicated and concerned enough, went to church Sunday morning in Watts.”²⁰¹ He reported that attendance was down by 80% across the city and some churches remained closed. The reason, he explained, that some people braved church that morning was to hear “words of consolation, questioning, and instruction,” from their ministers. Throughout the article there was not a word about the women in the photograph or other women that may have been in church that day. The only woman mentioned was a pianist who had phoned to say she could not make it to services that morning. Although the article and the multiple stories that followed later in the week, honoring pastors and other religious leaders, may have been partially accurate in explaining that people sought guidance and leadership

²⁰⁰ Daphne C. Wiggins, *Righteous Content: Black Women’s Perspectives of Church and Faith* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 30.

²⁰¹ David Felton, “Brave and Concerned Attend Watts Churches,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1965, 2-1.

from religious leaders, they clearly missed a much larger part of the church experience for women, like those in the photograph.

According to Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, black women understand that they are indispensable to their church and community. They are very aware that in each of these spaces “they matter.” Describing the nature of women’s connection to their communities, Gilkes writes, “When their voices and authority are challenged within their churches, they sometimes respond, ‘If it wasn’t for the women, you wouldn’t have a church’.”²⁰² Although her analysis and the Watts coverage focus mainly on Christian churches, Gilkes argues that black women have, throughout history, been vitally important to various religious communities. Using a more contemporary example, she reminds readers that “even Louis Farrakhan, in his speech at the Million Man March” acknowledged the importance of women in religious communities, and she uses his statements regarding the indispensable nature of women in the mosque to contend that “it was not just in the churches that women were holding things together.”²⁰³

The stories in the *Herald-Examiner* and the *L.A. Times* completely ignored women’s integral role in the churches they were covering. Failing to dig deeper into the reasons some members of the church would have attended that Sunday while many others stayed home, they simply reported what many already knew, “Enter most African American congregations and you are likely to see male pastors standing before

²⁰² Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “*If It Wasn’t For The Women . . .*” *Black Women’s Experience and Womanist Culture in Church and Community* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 4.

²⁰³ Gilkes, “*If it Wasn’t for the Women,*” 4.

predominantly female audiences. This pattern has been characteristic of the Black Church since the late nineteenth century.”²⁰⁴ What most readers might not have realized is, Gilkes and Wiggins argue, that “women are at the core of the Black Church, which could not exist without them.”²⁰⁵ In her study of African American women in the church, Wiggins found that the women she studied were socialized at a young age to understand the importance of church attendance. They learned that it was not only desirable, but also mandatory for girls to attend church. Wiggins explains, “In addition to the church’s being a female enclave, women’s experience of being trained in the faith by women and their observing women responding to each other’s needs as well as those of the larger community foster an additional level of loyalty.”²⁰⁶ Women, more than men, would have felt it necessary to attend church in the midst of rioting because they knew how important they were to its ability to function but also because it was an institution that they were loyal to and one that uniquely met their needs.

As we praise black churches for their unique ability to meet women’s needs, we should also pause to recognize that there are a variety of legitimate feminist and womanist concerns regarding the division of power in these same institutions. For all of the credit black churches deserve for their recognition of women’s contributions, in most churches women remain, as Maria Stewart was, unrecognized as leaders. Lincoln and Mamiya, in their landmark study, *The Black Church in the African American Experience*,

²⁰⁴ Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 1.

²⁰⁵ Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 2.

²⁰⁶ Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 30.

remind us that “all seven of the mainline black denominations are characterized by a predominantly female membership and largely male leadership despite the fact that the major programs of the Black Church in politics, economics, or music depend heavily upon women for their promotion and success.”²⁰⁷ Women are not generally permitted to preach from the pulpit or serve in pastoral leadership positions. Cole and Sheftall identify black churches as, simultaneously, “critical site[s] for the subordination of women and the perpetuation of conservative gender ideologies . . . and a place where womanist and feminist theologians challenge such ideas and practices of inequality and envision the kind of ‘beloved community’ that is constructed on principles of gender equality.”

By failing to make such an empowered role rhetorically available, the papers reinforced the notion that proper place for women was as submissive subjects, brave but in need of guidance. Like the “true women” of the nineteenth century, the papers portrayed a patriarchal ideal, one in which women could be strong or “brave” if they remained silent and allowed others to lead. This move on the part of reporters leads us not only to remember the oppressive standards of “true womanhood” but also, to understand that we cannot forget uplift was initially a male activity. The notion of uplift became contentious when women began to participate because ministers and educated men in the community became upset that women were away from their proper place in the family which, they believed, ultimately harmed the family unit.²⁰⁸ This same

²⁰⁷ Charles Eric Lincoln and Lawrence H. Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1990), 275.

²⁰⁸ Gaines, *Uplifting the Race*, 13.

mentality, we will see in the next chapter, was an underlying theme in the press coverage following the riot.

As the week progressed the *L.A. Times* continued their celebration of male religious leadership and denial of the integral role women played as they featured Dr. Martin Luther King's visit to the area and ran other stories such as "Negro Pastors Begin Program to Gain Peace." In the later story they reported on a group of pastors who planned to "use their influence to call for order and discourage looting."²⁰⁹ The paper even started pointing to white males offering religious leadership and included a large photograph of two "Capuchin Fathers of St. Lawrence Church" who explored the area in order to determine the damage done to a parishioner's shop. The parishioner was too afraid to enter the area so the Fathers went in his place and their picture took up over a quarter of the page covering clean up in the riot torn area that week.²¹⁰ No more women were featured in connection to the churches.

Ignorance regarding the integral role women have played in black churches persists today, reinforcing the notion that black churches are only "agencies of sociopolitical change led by black male pastors."²¹¹ As evidence of the enduring misperception that women are unimportant to their congregations, Gilkes describes the way that supposedly informed "white sociologists who have done research in urban black communities" have confessed after hearing her speak on the subject that even they

²⁰⁹ "Negro Pastors Begin Program to Gain Peace," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 1965, A15.

²¹⁰ John Malmin, "Damage Survey," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 1965, 2-1.

²¹¹ Gilkes, "*If It Wasn't for the Women*," 43-44.

perceived African American women as unimportant.²¹² Readers in 1965 certainly would have made similar assumptions, not only out of ignorance, but based on the stories which accompanied the photograph and followed after it. Still, in 2001 when Gilkes published her study, she found that the perception extended beyond white sociologists to a majority of people and she explained, “White women have trouble seeing black women as agents of culture and community; black men do not want to admit that black women are effective agents of culture and community; black women themselves, knowing that their efficacy contradicts the dominant culture’s expectations of women, often refuse to acknowledge openly their own ability to make a difference.”²¹³ Clearly the problem has a wider impact than simply misunderstanding the driving force behind church efforts for social change. The effect of such portrayals is to leave African American women to justify and promote themselves. Such a requirement creates an impossible choice for women, they can stand up and claim that they have carried a heavy portion of the load in uplift, something that Maria Stewart had no problem doing. But in that scenario they risk being called matriarchs, or being labeled as domineering women responsible for the ineffectiveness of male efforts to lead (the negative impacts of this will become more obvious in the next chapter). Or, feeling the pressure to justify themselves as women, they can do what Cade (Bambara) and Gilkes indicate they have historically done, hide

²¹² Gilkes, *“If It Wasn’t for the Women,”* 8.

²¹³ Gilkes, *“If It Wasn’t for the Women,”* 5.

“from their own legacies of activism and achievement.”²¹⁴ The act of hiding, however, also carries consequences. Because of this historical tendency to avoid taking credit, Gilkes claims, “there has been almost an abject failure to take seriously the legacy of enterprising agency black women have exercised in the worst and best of circumstances, especially in their churches.”²¹⁵

However, church member was not the only positive role made available to women by the press coverage at the time. The papers did incorporate stories about another potential role for African American women, one in which they have been willing to take credit for their activism. That was clubwoman. This role seems entirely appropriate considering the fact that sororities and civic groups have been the only other black institutions to garner as much loyalty as the church in addressing women’s social concerns on a national scale.²¹⁶ In the next section I will examine the coverage of the national convention of Delta Sigma Theta sorority which was held in Los Angeles on the heels of the Watts uprising. I will explore the way that the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, and *Los Angeles Sentinel* portrayed the linkages between the sorority and the people in Watts and explain how these portrayals made another role rhetorically available to African American women, a role that was heavily tied to uplift rhetoric and reliant on class standing.

²¹⁴ Gilkes, “*If It Wasn’t for the Women*,” 5, referring also to Toni Cade, *The Black Woman* (New York: New American Library, 1970).

²¹⁵ Gilkes, “*If It Wasn’t for the Women*,” 5.

²¹⁶ Wiggins, *Righteous Content*, 30.

Clubwomen

Outside of the church, another arena in which black women have addressed women's issues and, more often larger social concerns, has been autonomous women's organizations such as clubs and sororities. In fact, the rise in such organizations was partially tied to some of the losing battles women fought inside their churches. Gilkes explains, "The emergence of the black women's club movement coincided with the very sexist assault on female leadership within black churches and what Evelyn Brooks Barnett describes as black Baptist women's loss of the battle over the pulpit."²¹⁷ Outside the church women formed autonomous organizations in which they could carry out their desired leadership roles while, Gilkes says, "they also formed autonomous and highly elaborate women's organizations within their churches."²¹⁸ The two spaces for women's activism brought individuals from different walks of life together and "reinforced the consciousness of a shared racial oppression."²¹⁹ Despite women's understanding that they needed to unite in order to address various manifestations of racism and sexism, class differences among them eventually became more pronounced and members of these types of organizations had to work to counter class divisions.²²⁰

Women's clubs became particularly popular in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century as a means through which, particularly educated, women could

²¹⁷ Gilkes, *"If It Wasn't for the Women,"* 37.

²¹⁸ Gilkes, *"If It Wasn't for the Women,"* 37.

²¹⁹ Gilkes, *"If It Wasn't for the Women,"* 38.

²²⁰ Gilkes, *"If It Wasn't for the Women,"* 38.

participate in the movement for racial uplift. Deborah Gray White claims that regardless of regional differences among them, “the guiding principle behind all the clubs was racial uplift through self-help. Black clubwomen believed they could help solve the race’s problems through intensive social service focused on improving home life and educating mothers.”²²¹ In the early twentieth century women came to believe that they were uniquely well suited for club and uplift work. Women in general and the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) in particular, became increasingly discouraged as they observed more and more instances of disenfranchisement, lynching, Jim Crowism, and race riots in which white people violently attacked black people in their communities. It seemed to these women as if nothing was being done to fix the situation. An editorial published in the *Women’s Era* claimed that men had failed “to strengthen the belittling weaknesses which so hinder and retract us in the fight for existence.” The writer went on to express a desire for “timid men and ignorant men to stand aside.”²²² At the time, activists such as Fannie Williams and Anna Julia Cooper criticized men for the numerous conventions and conferences they held. In these meetings, it seemed, men would talk endlessly about the problems but then fail to take decisive actions. Association leaders believed “Women were better suited than men for social welfare work because man’s nature was belligerent, aggressive, and selfish.”²²³ As women became more educated they believed they could use their knowledge and skills to improve their

²²¹ Gray White, “*Too Heavy A Load*,” 27.

²²² *Women’s Era*, September 1984. Quoted in White, 36.

²²³ White, *Too Heavy A Load*, 37.

community, fight racism, and pick up those who male organizations were leaving behind.²²⁴

Activist Mary Church Terrell was one of the more outspoken proponents of using education to “uplift the race.” Speaking as “one of the most educated Black women of the time,” she proclaimed that “Self preservation demands that [Black women] go among the lowly, illiterate and even the vicious, to whom they are bound by ties of race and sex . . . to reclaim them.”²²⁵ In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries women transformed their style of activism through clubs based their recognition that black women would always be “perceived in light of those who had the fewest resources and the least opportunity.”²²⁶ Therefore, they rallied around Terrell’s slogan “lifting as we climb,” which became the motto for the NACW and implied that as clubwomen worked to improve their lives they would lift the rest of the race with them. Writing about the motto, Terrell claimed that women in the organization had “determined to come into the closest possible touch with the masses of our women, through whom the womanhood of our people is always judged. It is unfortunate but it is true that the dominant race in this country insists upon gauging the Negro’s worth by his most illiterate and vicious

²²⁴ In discussing the rift between male and female organizations I do not mean to imply that they were entirely separate or antagonistic toward one another. Many scholars who have written about the club movement have expressed a sense of interdependence between men’s groups and women’s groups. However, there were importance divisions between the groups that affected their ultimate goals and, I think, are pertinent to this discussion of women’s organizational efforts.

²²⁵ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 97.

²²⁶ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 97.

representatives rather than by the more intelligent and worthy classes.”²²⁷ This brief passage from Terrell’s writing demonstrates clubwomen’s desire to use their education to help those who were less fortunate than themselves as well as their belief that they had to engage in uplift work so that there would no longer be “illiterate and vicious” people by which the entire race could be judged.

As more women entered college in the early twentieth century they built on the club movement’s success as they formed sororities to help African American women adjust to and survive on college campuses and often also reach out to help those in surrounding communities. The first African American sorority, Alpha Kappa Alpha, was formed on the campus of Howard University in 1908.²²⁸ Five years later, on the same campus, twenty-two young women started the Delta Sigma Theta sorority. According to Giddings, the sorority’s historian, “Seventy-five years later it has become one of the largest Black women’s organizations in the world with over 125,000 members in 730 chapters in the United States, Africa, and the Caribbean.”²²⁹ The founders of Delta Sigma Theta set out to form an organization that would foster bonds of sisterhood between its members and, therefore, focused mainly on “transforming the individual.” However, given the timing of their founding and the intense movements growing around race and

²²⁷ Mary Church Terrell, “What Role is the Educated Negro Woman to Play in the Uplifting of Her Race?” *Twentieth Century Negro Literature*, Edited by D.W. Culp (Naperville, IL: JL Nichols & Co., 1902), 175.

²²⁸ “Honoring the Past,” Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc. <http://www.aka1908.com/past/> (accessed April 11, 2007)

²²⁹ Paula Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood: Delta Sigma Theta Sorority and the Challenge of the Black Sorority Movement* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1988), 15.

sex issues, they incorporated “a secondary purpose: to have an impact on the political issues of the day, notably the woman suffrage movement.”²³⁰ Within twelve years the Deltas were making public statements against racism and they created a Vigilance Committee to teach members about political issues and help them contribute to efforts for political and legislative change. These moves, argues Giddings, distinguished Delta’s beginnings “from the other sororities, both Black and White, that preceded it.”²³¹ Perhaps these beginnings are what ultimately led them to Los Angeles in 1965 for their national convention where they planned to address the turbulent race dynamics of the era.

All three local papers: *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, and *Los Angeles Times*, covered the sorority’s meeting in the city. The meeting was planned long before the riot began and was not initially designed to focus on local politics. This was the sorority’s regularly scheduled biennial national convention where they would honor activists and group members who made notable achievements, remember the sisters who died (including two founders that year), and hear from prominent speakers. The *Los Angeles Sentinel* anticipated the event in its August 12 issue. On the front page of the paper that day the *Sentinel* announced “Angelinos Welcome Convention Delegates.” The story offered details about the convention which was set to begin on August 15 and bring 3,500 members to the city. The first story began on the front page and continued for two more columns later in the paper alongside another feature on the group. Readers learned about awards that would be given including the “Mary Church

²³⁰ Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood*, 6.

²³¹ Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood*, 6.

Terrell award for projection of human dignity, freedom, and democratic principles,” which would be awarded to Dorothy Height, president of the National Council of Negro Women.²³² They could also find the names of speakers at the convention such as Theodore Berry, director of the Community Action Program Office of Economic Opportunity, and Mrs. Patricia Robert Harris, a Delta, who had recently been named Ambassador to Luxembourg. The paper documented the themes of planned panels on civil rights and a discussion on “Decisive Action for Freedom from Poverty.” In addition to the detailed articles in the first section of the paper readers could find a variety of pictures taken of organization members in the third section of the paper, a regular segment titled “For and About Women.” This segment offered “a look at Delta Sigma Theta” and claimed that their roles as “hostesses” and “members of local chapters serving on committees of various projects” were what made “Delta a truly great organization.”²³³ Pictures such as the one (Figure 3.2) of the “Delta Sponsored Toy Shower” for Project Headstart, of women in their dresses and party hats, showed the privileged yet generous nature of the members in the Delta Sigma Theta sorority. The purpose of the *Sentinel* coverage was clearly to welcome the women and foster excitement about the event.

It was not at all odd that the *Sentinel*, the largest black weekly at the time, would celebrate the Delta convention in their city. In 1965 the sorority, “one of the largest Black

²³² “3500 Will Attend,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 12 August 1965, A5.

²³³ Jesse Mae Brown, ed. “A Look At Delta Sigma Theta,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 12 August 1965, C1.

Figure 3.2

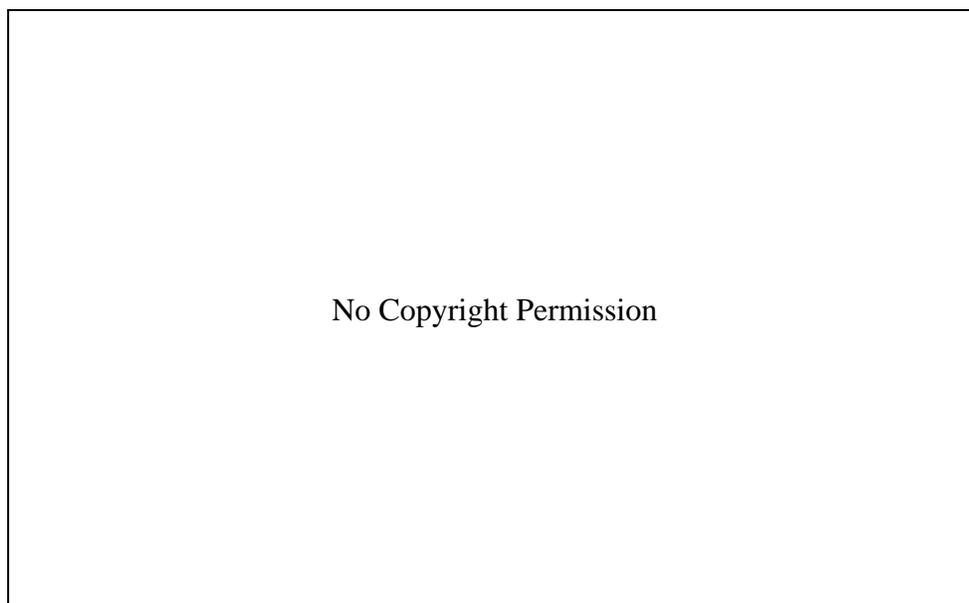


Figure 3.2: "Delta Sponsored Toy Shower," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 12 August 1965, C1.

women's groups in the world, with some 125,000 members," whose membership over the years had "included significant historic and contemporary figures such as Mary Church Terrell, Sadie T.M. Alexander, Patricia Roberts Harris . . . and many other women leaders and pioneers in their fields" had just celebrated their 50th anniversary.²³⁴ Over fifty years the organization had become known for its political and social activism. By 1965 they had gone far in building on traditions, especially those started over thirty years earlier by their Vigilance Committee who demanded federal action to stop lynchings and pressed the Secretary of Labor to create "a long range public works program" along with federal programs that "would accord economic security for Blacks."²³⁵ In the early sixties the Deltas raised money to pay fines for those arrested in sit-ins, gave money to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and other organizations fighting school segregation, and developed a Social Action Committee to act similarly to the former Vigilance Committee. The Social Action Committee proved to be integral in lobbying fights for the 1964 Civil Rights Act and the 1965 Voting Rights Act, two landmark pieces of legislation in the movement for civil rights. The organization participated in the historic 1963 March on Washington and continued to gain national respect "because of its ability to mobilize opinion so quickly and have it heard at a time when the government was particularly sensitive to lobbying power."²³⁶ Their convention

²³⁴ Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood*, 5. The anniversary was in 1963.

²³⁵ Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood*, 127-128.

²³⁶ Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood*, 241, 262-3.

in Los Angeles was designed to celebrate all of these major accomplishments and the *Sentinel* coverage seemed to comprehend that.

In the next issue of the *Sentinel*, on August 19, they followed up on the convention with more large photographs and stories in the “For Women” section describing the way that Delta’s used the event to stress women’s role “in America’s civil rights battle and the war against poverty.”²³⁷ Again the paper detailed the events of the convention and described what was still happening as the event came to a close but they never made any connection between the riot and the sorority. Despite stories in the city’s major paper, the *Los Angeles Times*, throughout the week that explicitly linked the two events, the *Sentinel* chose to keep them separate.

The *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* also avoided making the connection between the sorority and the riot. Although their coverage of the riot was far more pronounced and their coverage of the sorority incredibly modest in compared to the *Sentinel*, the *Herald-Examiner* ran two stories about the sorority, neither making any connection to the riot. None of the *Herald-Examiner* stories about the sorority appeared on the front page of the paper or even got close. Instead they were buried in section D of the paper, “Women’s World” on August 16 and 17. There were other pronounced differences between the coverage in the two papers. Most obvious, was the difference in attendance numbers documented in the *Herald-Examiner*. Whereas the *Sentinel* reported 3,500 in attendance, the *Herald-Examiner* only reported 1,500, a significantly lower number. Additionally, while the *Herald-Examiner* offered quotes from Dorothy Height regarding the sorority’s

²³⁷ “Delta’s Stress Women’s Role In Civil Rights, War On Poverty at 28th Biennial Confab at Ambassador,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 August 1965, C3.

involvement in lobbying for the Voting Rights act, they also portrayed an organization much like the men's groups early clubwomen abhorred by including statements from Dr. Jeanne Noble, a speaker at the convention. Dr. Noble explained that while she was happy for those who were earning a great living and finding success, she thought it was more important that the mission of the sorority be to "turn away from silly teas and partying and concentrate on social service."²³⁸

The *Herald-Examiner* story on August 16 focused on minority women's status being raised in the U.S. and some of the sorority women's focus on becoming leaders. The story quoted Dorothy Height and described her excitement over the passage of the Voting Rights Act about which she rejoiced, "We worked long and hard to get that legal base. Now that we have a foundation of law, our task of uplifting other Negroes will be a little easier."²³⁹ On August 17, the paper continued the uplift theme focusing on speaker Theodore Berry's encouragement of the women to "help the less fortunate."²⁴⁰ Although we can never be certain exactly why editors and reporters for these papers made the decision to maintain a separation between spectacular riot stories and encouraging uplift pieces, from a rhetorical standpoint there is a clear distinction between the divergent portrayals of African American women in the *Sentinel* and *Herald-Examiner*.

Whereas the *L.A. Times* focused on the connection between the upstanding women of Delta Sigma Theta and the wild rioters on the streets of Watts, the *Sentinel* and

²³⁸ "Sorority Aims for Leaders," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 16 August 1965, D3.

²³⁹ "Sorority Aims for Leaders," D3.

²⁴⁰ Mary Barber, "Help the Less Fortunate Sorority Speaker Urges," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 17 August 1965, D3.

Herald-Examiner simply offered two competing roles for women in the city at the time. As we saw in the last chapter, early in the August 19 issue the *Sentinel* quoted women looters who were just anxious to *take*, anything they could get their hands on. On August 12, and August 19, the *Sentinel* defined the women of Delta Sigma Theta around their desire to *give*. The Delta's were hostesses, civil rights warriors, history makers. Women looters were given only a brief and judgmental comment whereas the clubwomen were afforded multiple pages across two separate issues.

The *Herald-Examiner*, during its week of riot coverage, had more opportunities to describe women involved in the riot. They covered looting in great detail and offered stories about young women looting stores, throwing rocks, and yelling, while older women puzzled over all of the destruction. Juxtaposing the pictorial representations (Figures 3.3 and 3.4) of the two groups of women in the *Herald-Examiner*, we can see clearly the difference between good and bad women agitating for change. In the first photo (Figure 3.3) from chapter two we see, like the descriptions from the *Sentinel*, women taking goods that do not belong to them. In the second photo we see very different women, Dorothy Height and Geraldine Woods, the leaders of Delta Sigma Theta sorority sitting in front of two American Flags. Not only do the later women appear passive and upstanding, they are even patriotic! It is clear when we look at these photographs side by side which of the women we should perceive to be working for positive change in this country.

Figure 3.3

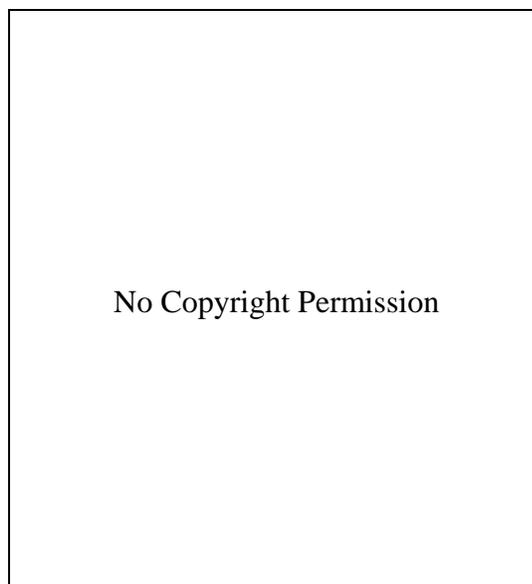


Figure 3.3: A Soft Sofa on the Move. *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 14 August 1965, A4.

Figure 3.4

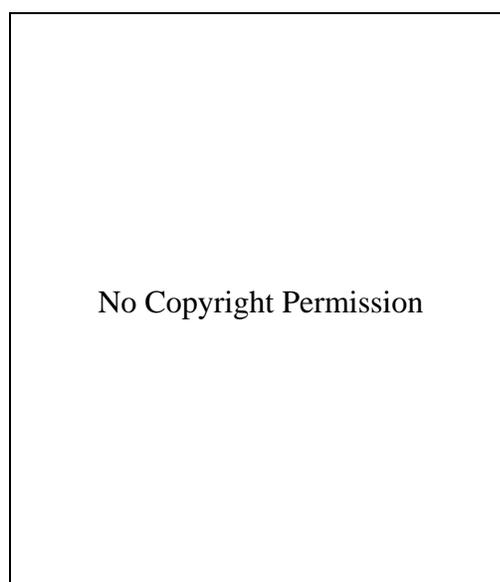


Figure 3.4: Cliff Hall, "Sorority Aims for Leaders," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 16 August 1965, D3.

In these depictions, the *Sentinel* seemed to subvert the dominant paradigm that Terrell identified nearly sixty years earlier while the *Herald-Examiner* seemed to reinforce it. Rather than focusing on the looters, the *Sentinel* hardly acknowledged them at all and when they did, the stories emphasized looters' deviant status. Instead of concentrating on the looters, they documented extensively the positive efforts of the Deltas. The *Herald-Examiner*, on the other hand, focused nearly an entire week on the violence and looting in Watts. The riot made the front page consistently in the *Herald-Examiner* all week and only two brief stories about the sorority appeared buried in section D on the last two days of that week. Some might argue that the difference in coverage has something to do with one paper being a weekly publication and the other appearing daily, but the fact is that despite their circulation schedules, the *Sentinel* covered the Delta meeting five days before the *Herald-Examiner*. Just after the riot began the *Sentinel* featured positive examples of women's political action and did not bury them late in the issues. Clearly the *Herald-Examiner* gave readers a more traditional focus, one that did exactly what Terrell criticized. By centering attention on looters, the *Herald-Examiner* set up a situation in which readers would perceive African American women "in light of those who had the fewest resources and the least opportunity."²⁴¹

The message in both cases, though unstated, was clear. Either you were part of the problem (looters) or part of the solution (clubwomen). The distinction between the two roles was not only based on behavior, it was based mainly on class. Making this distinction, the *Sentinel* and *Herald-Examiner* fell in line with centuries of uplift rhetoric,

²⁴¹ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 97.

particularly that of Mary Church Terrell, who drew clear distinctions in her writing between the educated and economically privileged or “more intelligent and worthy classes,” of which the Deltas were a part, and the “illiterate and vicious” masses.²⁴²

The most prominent paper, the *Los Angeles Times*, took a different route. The *L.A. Times* only ran two stories about the sorority convention, one at the beginning of the convention and one near the end, both linked the meeting to the riots. Diverging greatly from the coverage in the other papers, the first story “Sorority to Scan Roots of Racism” explicitly labeled the riot as a “convention focus.” In fact, the entire section explaining the convention’s purpose talked only about the riot. Reporter Ellen Schulte quoted Dr. Noble, who referred to the riot in a press conference saying, “the entire community will have to face up to the Negro’s problems if there is to be peace.” Noble continued, “the tensions of poverty and discrimination bring about two main reactions. We either see apathy—shown by school dropouts—or anger—such as the riots you have here.”²⁴³ This story, buried in the third section of the paper offered some details about the sorority, including its size and purpose, “to overcome two of [their] biggest handicaps—[their] race and sex.”²⁴⁴ However, the rest of the story, nearly two-thirds, focused on what members had to say about the riot. At the end of the week the paper continued to emphasize the link between the sorority and the riot in its first section on August 18. There appeared a small story titled “Rioters Condemned by Service Sorority.” The sole

²⁴² Terrell, “What Role?” 175.

²⁴³ Ellen Schulte, “Sorority to Scan Roots of Racism,” *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 1965, 3-5.

²⁴⁴ Dorothy Height quoted in Schulte, “Sorority to Scan Roots of Racism,” 3-5.

purpose of the story was to report on a statement issued by the sorority's legal advisor and drafted by the Social Action Committee at a luncheon meeting. The statement read, "We abhor the violence to which the city has been subjected by a small number of lawless individuals." The statement went on to commend the citizens who "sought to alleviate the pressure on their community and who have conducted themselves with dignity throughout these trying days."²⁴⁵

None of these papers told the whole story. Although it was not planned, there was a connection between the sorority meeting and the riot. In her history of the Deltas, Giddings writes "At the August 1965 Los Angeles convention, the organization itself would come face to face with the rawer aspects of racial confrontation. . . . From the windows of the elegant Ambassador Hotel in that city, the registrants were literally able to see the smoke from the insurrections that had begun in Watts and spilled over into Los Angeles proper."²⁴⁶ Giddings confirms the story about the statement drafted and money collected for Watts at a convention luncheon. She also documents many other controversial issues that arose during the convention which never made it into any paper including "threats of being held hostage by the Black Panthers, a radical California-based group," and a speech made by Mayor Yorty concerning the riots which sorors met with pointed silence.²⁴⁷

²⁴⁵ "Rioters Condemned by Service Sorority," *Los Angeles Times*, 18 August 1965, 14.

²⁴⁶ Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood*, 266.

²⁴⁷ Giddings, *In Search of Sisterhood*, 266.

Having already explored the moves made by the *Sentinel* and *Herald-Examiner* which excluded these portions of the proceedings, we are left to wonder why, and to what effect, the *L.A. Times* chose to focus on the Deltas condemnation of the rioters. One possible answer can be found in Derrick Bell's book, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. There he describes the way that white people who deny the existence of racism feel justified by those instances in which "a black person stands in a public place and condemns as slothful and unambitious those blacks who are not making it."²⁴⁸ Again we see Terrell's fears rise to the surface but in a different form. Whereas the *Herald-Examiner* allowed readers to draw their own inferences and simply created, through placement of articles and photographs, a situation in which the "good women" in later stories would be judged by the overwhelming evidence of "bad women" in earlier stories, the *L.A. Times* made the connection explicit. Not only did they make the connection explicit, but they used the words of the sorority to demonstrate the "slothful and unambitious" nature of the women who appeared only as looters in the paper throughout the week.

Conclusion

Throughout this dissertation the focus has been and will continue to be on rhetorics of depiction. However, in the other chapters the rhetoric only depicts one type of women, those that are aberrant and selfish. This section is distinctive because it

²⁴⁸ Derrick Bell, *Faces at the Bottom of the Well: The Permanence of Racism*, (New York: Basic Books, 1992), 4.

addresses the only time in the riot coverage where interdependent yet completely opposite roles were made rhetorically available to African American women simultaneously. Although the *L.A. Times* made one positive role rhetorically available to the women of Watts through their photograph of women entering church, this role was undefined. Rather than fully accounting for women's prominent role in the church, the paper only depicted a patriarchal ideal, the attractive, submissive women looking for male guidance. In stories about the sorority a more positive and well defined role became available to African American women. However, that role was defined by all of the papers in such a way that the women of Watts could never fit into it. The role of sorority member was an exclusive one, only those with the right education and class standing could take part. Those who did not fit, like the women of Watts, were condemned—as evidenced by the *L.A. Times* sparse coverage.

These depictions demonstrate Tyson's argument that survival of the true womanhood ideal in today's society "excludes poor women of all races whose survival requires them to be tough, assertive, or in any way 'unfeminine.'"²⁴⁹ Such women today, as in the nineteenth century, are stereotyped as "loud, brassy, promiscuous . . . unattractive to men," and otherwise uncultured.²⁵⁰ This is one area where unpacking the myth of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN becomes particularly difficult. To celebrate women's survival, in any of these roles, is a celebration of their strength. However, strength alone does not define the SBW. Zikmund reminds us that, "Throughout the

²⁴⁹ Tyson, *Learning for a Diverse World*, 89.

²⁵⁰ Tyson, *Learning for a Diverse World*, 89.

history of the United States, the interrelationship of white supremacy and male superiority has characterized the black woman's reality of a situation of struggle—a struggle to survive in two contradictory worlds simultaneously, one white, privileged, and oppressive, the other black, exploited, and oppressed.”²⁵¹ All of the women in depicted in this chapter struggle in different way. What Morgan struggles against in denying her SBW status is the idea that black women are only truly strong, black, and women, when they take on the world bravely and quietly and solve problems without making waves. They can be a true SBW only when they ascribe to the ideals of “true womanhood.” In this chapter we see that model in only one group, the idealized depiction of church women who are not given a voice or a leadership role in any way.

The same day that the church women appeared on the pages of the *L.A. Times*, “brave and concerned,” another photo appeared. This photo (Figure 3.5) demonstrated the reward for being a “true woman,” protection and “compassion.”²⁵² The woman pictured in the photo is clearly not a young, deviant rioter. She is older, perhaps even older than the church women or the clubwomen, she is submissive, her head is down and she is dressed modestly. She is also the only woman in all of the *L.A. Times* coverage who appears to be smiling. Looking over all of the images and articles in this chapter, this photograph and its caption send the message most clearly.

²⁵¹ Zikmund, “Feminist Consciousness in Historical Perspective,” 30.

²⁵² Bruce H. Cox, “Compassionate Scene,” *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1965, A3.

Figure 3.5

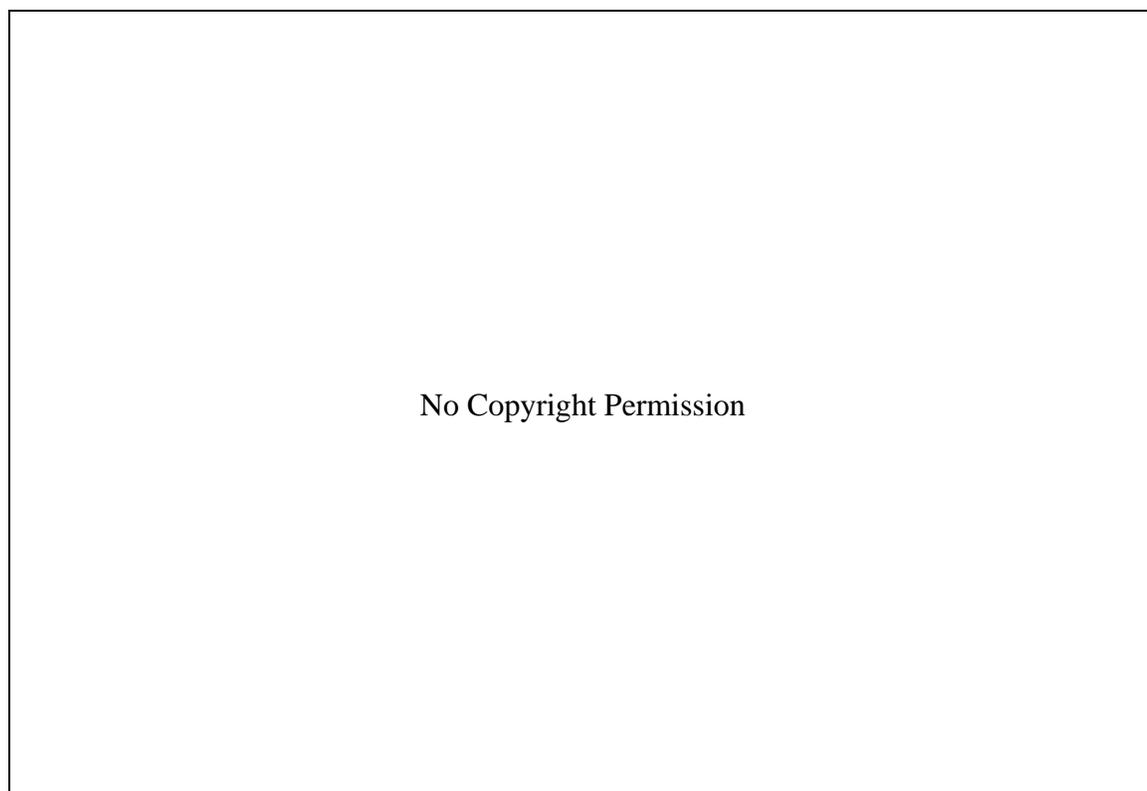


Figure 3.5: "Compassionate Scene," *Los Angeles Times*, 16 August 1965, A3.

The caption for the photo reads, “Compassionate Scene—a national guardsman escorts an elderly woman resident of the riot area across fire—and violence—scarred Wilmington Ave. at 103rd St. Sunday as sporadic outbreaks continue.” This woman is the only one in any of the press coverage to occupy both the space of “resident of the riot area” and “true woman.” Her weakness is rewarded with protection by a prominent representation of patriarchy, the National Guard.

I do not mean to imply that protection is never warranted or that the elderly woman should have marched bravely across Wilmington Ave. but this is the bind that such a rhetoric of depiction inscribes in our minds. It seems as if there is a false choice: we must either accept that she is weak and submissive, needing a powerful escort for protection, or she must be an SBW. Yet it will become even clearer in the following chapter how the SBW would be punished for her strength. Instead, my aim is to call for remembrance of our history and understanding that the choice is not that simple. The cult of true womanhood, combined with legacies of racist stereotyping, in Giddings’ words, “left a bitter legacy.” Giddings reminds us that the cult of true womanhood affected women of different races in different ways. She argues, “For White women, it was used as a means to circumscribe, and make dependent, the very women who had the education and resources to wage an effective battle for their rights. . . . reduce[ing] them to an image of frailty and mindless femininity, which in itself became a rationale for their inability to withstand the rigor of the franchise or anything else outside the domestic circle.”²⁵³ Furthermore, she claims, “the cult caused Black women to prove they were

²⁵³ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 54.

ladies,” despite their existence within an economic system that precluded them from being a “lady” and surviving simultaneously. Forgetting the complex nature of these struggles is what allows for us to think that the photographs and articles in this chapter can only be interpreted in binary ways as either signs of women’s strength or their weakness. Remembering, on the other hand, helps us begin to disarm the racist and sexist assumptions behind each depiction. As we move into the next chapter and examine depictions of welfare dependents and “matriarchs,” remembering the complex and intersecting nature of oppression based on various identity categories including race, sex, gender, class, and age, will become even more important in understanding these rhetorics of depiction.

Chapter 4

DEPENDENCY OR CHOICE? THE MOTHERS OF WATTS

Black women are not impervious to pain. We're simply adept at *surviving*. The problem for the SBW is telling the difference.

Joan Morgan²⁵⁴

Once rioting came to an end and the National Guard retreated, clean up began, and relief poured into the area. While some groups worked to help the people of Watts, others studied them in an attempt to learn the roots of their wild ways. Within one week of burning and looting, Raphael Sonenshien claims, “the indifference with which white Los Angeles had viewed the black community was shattered.”²⁵⁵ People at the local and national levels fixed their attention on Watts and its outlying areas and race suddenly became the most pressing issue in politics. The press, federal government, local officials, and “black and liberal leaders all competed to interpret the riot” and to propose solutions for the problems facing people in “the ghetto.”²⁵⁶ Photographs and reports of women waiting in line for food and imploring local and national leaders for help brought longstanding complaints about the welfare system, and a brewing debate about the role of

²⁵⁴ Joan Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost: A Hip Hop Feminist Breaks it Down* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999)104.

²⁵⁵ Raphael J. Sonenshien, *Politics in Black and White: Race and Power in Los Angeles* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 77.

²⁵⁶ Sonenshien, *Politics in Black and White*, 77-8.

family life, to the forefront of debates regarding problems and solutions in Watts. In contrast to the proper sorority and church women in the previous chapter, the women were portrayed after the riot ended as desperate. These women needed “relief” and relied on the government to help their families. As political pundits, sociologists, and newspaper reporters sought to explain the desperate conditions in Watts after the riot they often relied on one major theme, motherhood.

This chapter examines scholarly research on motherhood in African American communities to inform a reading of the ways women were represented in the press following the Watts uprising. I begin with a discussion of the value and varying roles mothers have played within African American families. No brief examination can possibly account for all of the ways that mothers contribute to family life. However, this analysis will focus on those details that are integral to understanding the portrayals of mothers in Watts. A survey of scholarly research on African American motherhood provides the grounding for an informed examination of the portrayals of women in the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, and *Ebony* magazine. Looking to each of these sources and their coverage of Watts after the uprising we will see first, the way that debates over President Johnson’s War on Poverty and common fears about rising welfare costs were used by reporters to tell a story of needy families in Watts. Next, we will examine reporters’ strategic deployment of a government report on African American families in order to see how the selective use of this report (commonly known as “the Moynihan Report”) contributed to public perceptions of African American women as overly strong and suffocating matriarchs whose power destroyed their families. Although I will attempt to separate out portrayals of women in

line for food and accompanying stories about the failure of the welfare system from accounts of the Moynihan Report in order to highlight various themes in the portrayal of African American families, it is important to recognize that these discourses were heavily reliant on one another for their coherence and would have necessarily been linked in the minds of newspaper and magazine readers at the time.

Throughout this dissertation we have seen the conflicting roles in which African American women were portrayed during the Watts riot. In this chapter we will see that motherhood, so common a role that it might otherwise be taken for granted, played a major part in the follow-up reporting on Watts. Of all the roles rhetorically available to the women of Watts, motherhood was the most complex. Relying on discourses about their race, class, sex, and gender, stories about the mothers in Watts and other poor areas of the nation portrayed poor African American women in a unique light, recognizing their integral role in the family and simultaneously demonizing them for playing their part all too well.

Motherhood

Fascination with African American families generally and motherhood specifically was not new in 1965. Prominent scholars from W.E.B. DuBois in 1908 to E. Franklin Frazier in 1939 emphasized the important role mothers played in the development not only of the family but of larger African American communities as well. In the conclusion to his 1908 book, *The Negro American Family*, DuBois argued that the family, and its connection with the church, played a critical role in facilitating “a further

transition from ignorance, poverty and moral darkness, to enlightenment, thrift, industry, and improvement of the individual Negro family.”²⁵⁷ In order to accomplish such a transition, he claimed, one of the most important actions the family and the church could take, was to teach young men to “revere womanhood and motherhood.”²⁵⁸

Many scholars seeking to understand African American motherhood, have looked back on the institution of slavery. However, Niara Sudarkasa indicates that, “in order to understand families and households among African Americans, one must realize that *these groupings evolved from African family structure, in which co-residential extended families were the norm.*”²⁵⁹ She suggests that although slavery had an undeniable impact on the structural development of black families, Frazier, and later Moynihan, were mistaken in suggesting that slavery ought to be the starting place for analysis of black families. We should recognize that there are obvious differences between African *roots* of the family structure today and characteristics that exist based on current conditions. However, Sudarkasa claims, it is important to understand particularly that African American family’s roots in extended family networks if we are to serve the needs of African American families presently.²⁶⁰

Across the United States, “to varying degrees,” many families still rely on a form of organization rooted in extended family networks that distinguish them from the

²⁵⁷ W.E. Burghardt DuBois (Ed.), *The Negro American Family* (New York: Negro Universities Press, 1969), 153.

²⁵⁸ DuBois, *The Negro American Family*, 153.

²⁵⁹ Niara Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers: African & African American Women & Families: Essays and Speeches* (Trenton, NJ: Africa World Press, Inc., 1996), 24. Emphasis original.

²⁶⁰ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 11.

traditionally white view of the “nuclear” family structure. Sudarkasa emphasizes a scholarly understanding of extended family networks because, she says, “many researchers and policy makers studying Black families only look at individual households and therefore miss the ‘web of kinship’ and patterns of cooperation that tie these households together.”²⁶¹ She further contends that understanding the unique web of kinship in many black families is important because “the black family is seldom described, understood, or accepted on its own terms. For more than a century, it has been portrayed as “disorganized” and “unstable” because it has not conformed to the white American idealized model of what a family should be.”²⁶² Black families’ failure to fit an idealized mold has led to the creation of various myths which aim to explain their deviation from the norm. Common myths range from belief in the superiority of the nuclear family and inherent instability among black families, to the misconception that most black males do not contribute to their family and that black families do not value education. Each of these myths provided a basis for explanations of problems among African American communities at various times throughout our nation’s history and they were all present in the Watts coverage.²⁶³ The most devastating of these myths during the Watts riot was the myth that the black family structure is the cause of the deplorable conditions in many inner cities.

²⁶¹ Sudarkasa (citing Fortes 1949), *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 24.

²⁶² Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 13.

²⁶³ For more elaboration on these and other myths see Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 14-20.

Despite a wealth of over a century of black family studies, Sudarkasa discovered that many of those who study black families, regardless of their own ethnic heritage, “seem to accept the value premise that there is ‘more wrong’ with black families than with white families, and the black families can only ‘improve’ to the extent that they approximate the ideal of the nuclear family.”²⁶⁴ In family scholarship the term “nuclear” is used to describe the basic European family structure and to indicate that it is the accepted arrangement to which all other families can be compared. Although, Sudarkasa explains, “the soundness of this value premise has never been demonstrated,” many scholars such as George Peter Murdock have long maintained that the nuclear family should be “the building block of all other types of family structure.”²⁶⁵ This idea can be traced back to nineteenth- and twentieth-century portrayals of the family by sociologists and anthropologists who ignored evidence of extended family structures throughout the United States. Instead, these researchers “regarded the isolated nuclear family as an ideal form,” and further, as “an essential underpinning of the American way of life.”²⁶⁶ Those families which did not conform to the nuclear family structure were often regarded by scholars as “disorganized,” “unstable,” and “dysfunctional.”²⁶⁷ Because of these portrayals, many scholarly assessments of black family life in the United States from at

²⁶⁴ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 4.

²⁶⁵ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 4-5. Sudarkasa looks specifically at George Peter Murdock, *Social Structure* (New York: Macmillan Co., 1949).

²⁶⁶ Steven Ruggles, “The Transformation of American Family Structure,” *American Historical Review*, 99, 1. February, 1994, 104.

²⁶⁷ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, xxi.

least the early twentieth century to the present, have viewed black family institutions “as aberrant forms of the nuclear family rather than as readaptations of the African extended families out of which they evolved.”²⁶⁸ Whereas the living conditions on many slave plantations made it possible for people to maintain “African-type extended family households,” scholars tend to ignore the ways that black families maintained modified forms of “the extended family . . . in ‘plantation America’.”²⁶⁹

Moving away from the European-centered focus on the value of the nuclear family structure, we can begin to see that there were (and are) a variety of family and household arrangements that exist for African Americans now and in our nation’s past. As we shift away from a single-minded concentration on nuclear families we see that there are not only a wide variety of families, related by birth, but also of people coming together in mutually supportive household configurations that do not necessarily rely on blood relations.²⁷⁰ When scholars focus only on nuclear families they tend to rely on “marital stability [as] the most important indicator of family stability; however, in other types of family structures, marital stability may be less relevant as an assessment of family of household stability.”²⁷¹

²⁶⁸ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 7.

²⁶⁹ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 7.

²⁷⁰ Sudarkasa warns that we should not conceptualize family and household as one in the same. Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 52.

²⁷¹ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 15.

Sudarkasa contends that, for black Americans, survival “*has demanded and will continue to demand cooperative family networks.*”²⁷² The reason for this reliance, she believes, is that extended, cooperative, family networks can be extensive and “multipurposed” which allows them to better serve the diverse needs of their members. Additionally, with an extended network, family stability does not, necessarily, have to rely on marital stability. Like those African family organizations from which they have grown, extended African American family networks that rely on a variety of interdependent relationships rather than solely on one couple’s marital status may also provide a more stable core from which individuals can grow and learn. Examples of these networks might include “a core of adult ‘blood relatives’ such as a mother and her daughter(s), and sometimes, also, her grown son(s).” In these and similar cases other people, such as “boyfriends,” might live with the mother and her children occasionally or even on a regular basis.²⁷³ Press coverage and scholarly investigations, as in the case of Watts, have often ignored or condemned these groupings in their rush to lament high rates of divorce or to maintain a singular focus on potentially negative impacts of absent fathers in black households.

Relying on extended networks may have helped African American families better adapt to change across time. Looking back on studies from the early twentieth century to the present Sudarkasa reminds us that “scholars from E. Franklin Frazier (1939) to Andrew Billingsley (1992) have emphasized the adaptive nature of African American

²⁷² Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 11.

²⁷³ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 16.

families.”²⁷⁴ Although she recognizes that all families are, “by their very nature, *adaptive institutions*,” she argues that to fully understand the development of African American family structures we must be able to see that those changes were influenced by specific historical contexts and conditions including “slavery, segregation, urbanization, changing economic conditions, changing educational opportunities, changing demographics, housing options, welfare restrictions and other public policies”²⁷⁵ Another important aspect of African family structures that we need to keep in mind is the traditional value placed on people rather than material. Whereas the esteemed nuclear family tends to place a high value on work for material success, “the supreme thing in a black value system would be people.”²⁷⁶ Sharon Harley, Francille Rusan Wilson, and Shirley Wilson Logan emphasize the value of people in black families describing a “collectivist ethos” in which various family members work toward survival of the unit. This ethos, they argue, extends beyond blood relations and often involves an entire community working toward common goals and drawing on “communal strengths in order to advance the entire community.”²⁷⁷ They argue that “this emphasis on community welfare, one which helped

²⁷⁴ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 43.

²⁷⁵ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 43.

²⁷⁶ I do not intend to imply that all nuclear families are white or that they all value material success over people. However, I do think that we should understand how different family structures rely on the prioritization of different values. This particular statement comes from Elaine, a resident of Watts interviewed after the riot, and it reflects the sentiments offered by the other scholars cited in this chapter including Sharon Harley, Francille Rusan Wilson, and Shirley Wilson Logan. See *The People of Watts. Watts: The Aftermath, An Inside View of the Ghetto*, Edited by Paul Bullock, (New York: Grove Press Inc., 1969), 71.

²⁷⁷ Sharon Harley, Francille Rusan Wilson, Shirley Wilson Logan, “Historical Overview of Black Women and Work,” *Sister Circle: Black Women and Work*, Edited by Sharon Harley and The Black Women and Work Collective, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2002), 5.

to ensure survival during slavery, was often sharply at odds with notions of rugged American individualism.”²⁷⁸

While scholars have recently demonstrated the diverse nature of African American family configurations, we must also recognize that, “historically, between one-fifth and one-fourth of them,” a significant portion, “were female-headed.”²⁷⁹ Additionally, Sudarkasa points out, that whether families were headed by one adult or two, “Of necessity, African American women have been the bedrock of many, if not most, of those families.”²⁸⁰ Some prominent historical figures have celebrated women’s integral role in family. For example, Mary Church Terrell argued that “moral women were the cornerstone of good homes, and it was only through the home that people [could] become really good and great.”²⁸¹ Sudarkasa indicates that countless African American women are well aware of their prominent role in the family and, as a result, they are not afraid to speak up for their own interests and help make family decisions. Additionally, her research indicates that many women are “just as often disciplinarians in the home as are their husbands or male companions.”²⁸² But women do not only, as we learned in the previous chapter, attempt to live up to their place as the moral compass of

²⁷⁸ Harley, Wilson, and Logan, “Historical Overview,” 5.

²⁷⁹ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, xvii.

²⁸⁰ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, xxiii.

²⁸¹ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America* (New York: Quill, William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1984), 99.

²⁸² Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 298.

family and community as Mary Church Terrell and others might have it. Historically they have also been essential to the financial upkeep of the family. Although, as Sudarkasa indicates, “there are very few working Black males who do not contribute to the upkeep of some households—oftentimes that of their mother or sister if not a wife or girlfriend,” she further points out that, “The anthropological and historical data show that, *regardless of household structure, in most parts of the world in most social classes, women have been co-providers or primary providers* for themselves and their children.”²⁸³ Despite the prominent role women have played in African American families throughout history, and those notable figures such as Mary Church Terrell, who have publicly commended them for their contributions, their failure to conform to the traditional nuclear model of a family, means those female-headed households are regularly blamed for problems within African American communities. This is what happened in Watts.

The value several researchers place on nuclear families with male leadership tends not only to create scholarly misunderstanding of female-headed households, but also to support the notion that those who deviate from the nuclear model are likely to face more difficulties than those that do not. Therefore, even in cases where women are prevented from rearing children with men due to early death rates, migration, men having to move in order to find work, and other non-preventable occurrences, women are still looked upon as deficient and blamed for problems not only within the family but also within larger black communities.²⁸⁴

²⁸³ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 18 and 29.

²⁸⁴ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 28.

The prominent role of the nuclear family as a standard by which researchers measure other family arrangements means that, when looking at female-headed households, scholars perceive them simply as nuclear families without fathers. This perception has, since the 1930s, been the basis for welfare to mothers with dependent children in the United States. However, in the case of many African American family networks, the characterization is entirely inaccurate. Historically, many female-headed African American families have tended to be “multigenerational units clustered around a core of consanguineally related adult women or adult women and men.”²⁸⁵ These sorts of family formations have been, and continue to be, accepted forms of domestic arrangement that are legitimate groupings in which to bear and raise children.²⁸⁶ Although different dynamics underlie each household, making it difficult to generalize about female-headed households as a group, we do know that most women in single parent households “are women who are working *and* rearing their children.” Additionally, despite a pervasive belief otherwise, “those on welfare at any given time constitute a small percentage of African American mothers.”²⁸⁷

²⁸⁵ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, xxi.

²⁸⁶ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, xxi. Here she further explains the traditionally high value placed on child bearing within African American communities regardless of whether or not a father would be present during the child’s upbringing.

²⁸⁷ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 298.

Throughout American history, “like immigrant women, most black women had to work, but unlike Whites, they were rarely employed in the home or family business.”²⁸⁸ Black women have always had to work all day and come home to rear their children at night, all the while attempting to survive in areas “where rents are large, standards of dress and recreation high and costly, and social danger on the increase.”²⁸⁹ This, however, does not mean that black women have always worked while black men did nothing to contribute. On the contrary, both men and women in the black community have worked diligently to contribute to the family arrangement that they are a part of. However, women workers tend to earn less than males for a variety of reasons including but not limited to, “underemployment, unemployment, and welfare benefits that are below adequate subsistence levels.” This problem is regularly referred to in scholarly literature as the “feminization of poverty.”²⁹⁰

In recent years feminist scholars have come to better understand the feminization of poverty and to identify some of the reasons that it exists, particularly among African American women. African American women and their children have long been proportionally “the largest group living in poverty.”²⁹¹ One of the major factors in this feminization of poverty, argues Shirley Lord, is that many of these women take on the

²⁸⁸ Paula Giddings, *When and Where I Enter: the Impact of Black Women on Race and Sex in America*, (New York: Quill, William Morrow and Company, Inc. 1984), 148.

²⁸⁹ Giddings, (citing Elise McDougald), *When and Where I Enter*, 148.

²⁹⁰ Harrell R. Rodgers, Jr. *Poor Women, Poor Families: The Economic Plight of America's Female-Headed Households* (Armonk, NY: M.E. Sharp Inc., 1986), 46. Shirley A. Lord, *Social Welfare and the Feminization of Poverty* (New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 2.

²⁹¹ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 297.

sole responsibility for the care of their children.²⁹² Caring for children while working long hours for inadequate wages and receiving little or no monetary child support leaves many of these mothers facing an insurmountable income deficit. Such deficits tend to be too large to be alleviated by welfare and Social Security benefits.²⁹³

The reality of impoverished female-headed households often leads to the assumption that these families are, by their very nature, inadequate arrangements in which to properly raise a child. Even before Moynihan and others began to look specifically at the family structure, Michael Harrington, in his landmark study of poverty in America, argued that “fractured family life pervades the contemporary slum” and described problems such as gang membership “as products of the failure to establish community in the ghettos.”²⁹⁴ Sudarkasa argues that this myth is the hardest to overcome because people both within and outside of black communities have been convinced that there is truth to it. Rather than examine the inner workings of the economic system to better understand poverty and, as a result, “high crime, unemployment, school dropouts, teenage pregnancies, drug abuse, and disaffection among young people in many of our inner cities,” scholars have a tendency to place the blame squarely on female headed households without examining possible alternate causalities.²⁹⁵ Instead, dependency takes

²⁹² Lord, *Social Welfare*, 2.

²⁹³ Rodgers, *Poor Women, Poor Families*, 47. Rodgers indicates that the increase in these deficits was most notable during the Reagan administration.

²⁹⁴ Robert Asen (summarizing Harrington), *Visions of Poverty: Welfare Policy and Political Imagination* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2002), 51.

²⁹⁵ Sudarkasa, *Strength of Our Mothers*, 20.

center stage. Rickie Solinger argues that dependency is regularly linked to bad choices and “shapes dangerous terrain for women today, just as these concepts did in the past.”²⁹⁶ She explains that while the white middle-class mother was the target of “slurs regarding dependency and bad choices” during the postwar years, between 1950 and 1980 with debates about welfare, the U.S. underwent an attitude shift “regarding who we define as dependent.”²⁹⁷ By 1965, and even today, “the foregrounded target [became] the poor, unemployed [non-white] mother.”²⁹⁸

Female-headed households, explains Sudarkasa, are “*not inherently unstable, nor [are] the children in them necessarily disadvantaged.*” Her research indicates that “most single mothers worked for a living, owned or rented their homes, and made many sacrifices in order to give their children more education than they had had.” The problems these families face have less to do with who is leading them and more to do with an economic structure that prevents women from providing for their families alone.²⁹⁹ Despite these barriers, black mothers have historically taken on the responsibility of holding their families together across generations.³⁰⁰

²⁹⁶ Rickie Solinger, “Dependency and Choice: The Two Faces of Eve,” *Whose Welfare?* Edited by Gwendolyn Mink (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 34.

²⁹⁷ Solinger, “Dependency and Choices,” 13.

²⁹⁸ Solinger, “Dependency and Choices,” 34. The insertion of “non-white” comes from an earlier section of Solinger’s piece in which she is more specific about the race and class aspects of the contemporary dependency label and she specifically articulates a shift to criticizing minority women as dependents, see p.23.

²⁹⁹ Sudarkasa, *Strength of Our Mothers*, 36. Emphasis original.

³⁰⁰ Sudarkasa, *Strength of Our Mothers*, 298.

While black mothers have a history of working to support their families and ensure their survival, in the 1950s and 60s white women too were beginning to take on the role of working mothers. At the time, “white women were perceived as thrusting themselves into the workforce because they were psychologically disturbed, while African American and other women of color were described as fully alienated from the civilized complexities of psychology,” meaning that while white women should feel conflicted over their decisions to work, that problem could be excused for the black woman because she needed to work in order to survive.³⁰¹ Solinger argues that 1965 marked a turning point in this mentality. She claims that at this point the “*choicelessness* associated with the work and other life experiences of women of color began a process of mutation.” Academics and reporters alike began to see poor women and women of color not as having “no choice” but instead they began to blame these women for making “bad choices.” The shift was zero sum. She indicates that “as middle-class, white women were beginning to win rights to make sensible and depathologized choices for themselves about work, contraception, and abortion . . . poor women of color replaced middle-class working mothers in the foreground of public discussion and concern.”³⁰²

Throughout the late 1960s and into the 70s and 80s, African American women were participating in the workforce at astonishing rates yet earned less than any other group.³⁰³ Poor black women were “trapped” in a paradigm where their “race, gender, and

³⁰¹ Solinger, “Dependency and Choice,” 20.

³⁰² Solinger, “Dependency and Choice,” 22.

³⁰³ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 296. Solinger, “Dependency and Choice,” 26.

class combined [create] a position of ‘triple jeopardy’” and confine them to the role of dependent that, “by definition,” left them “bereft of strength and devoid of power.”³⁰⁴ Such a paradigm was made possible by the sad fact that “most White Americans know little or nothing about African American families beyond the negative stereotypes portrayed in the visual media and sensationalized in the press.”³⁰⁵ Given press coverage surrounding different family issues, particularly those families dependent on welfare, the public has been led to believe, and are convinced, that “poor women as dependents do not and cannot make good choices.”³⁰⁶ In the next section we shall see that press coverage of the clean up efforts in Watts alongside stories about the rising costs and potential cheaters on welfare, as well as the alarmist rhetoric about food shortages and massive relief shipments, perpetuated this mindset. Reporters conveyed an image of African American women in Watts as welfare moms, dependent on everyone from the government to churches and private donors for their survival and ability to raise multiple children. Later we will also see how the selective release of the Moynihan report further legitimized this problematic image of African American women while simultaneously criticizing them for becoming matriarchs that harmed, rather than helped, their families and communities.

³⁰⁴ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 296. Solinger, “Dependency and Choice,” 11.

³⁰⁵ Sudarkasa, *The Strength of Our Mothers*, 45.

³⁰⁶ Solinger, “Dependency and Choice,” 33.

Welfare and Needy Moms

By the time the Watts riot occurred, welfare had already become a hot topic in the press. Asen explains that “In the 1960s, attention shifted from poverty to ‘dependency’ as the contradictions of poverty discourses exploded onto the national political scene.” He indicates, “forces that had been developing since 1935 accelerated rapidly during the decade—rising costs, altered caseloads—so that what started in the beginning of the 1960s as an attempt to address the ills of poverty became an attempt to address the ills of the welfare system.”³⁰⁷ In his 1964 State of the Union address President Johnson declared “unconditional war on poverty in America,” and in his March 1964 address to Congress he outlined his battle plan for winning the war. His contention was that the federal government could play an integral role in helping Americans “escape from squalor and misery and unemployment.”³⁰⁸ Eileen Boris indicates that the president’s remarks, among other factors such as migration, led to a “welfare explosion” which “developed from a newly rights-conscious group demanding access to resources often withheld by bureaucracies.” She further contends that “As part of the civil rights movement, welfare rights organizing took on a black face, even though the majority of women on welfare remained white.”³⁰⁹

³⁰⁷ Asen, *Visions of Poverty*, 48.

³⁰⁸ Asen, *Visions of Poverty*, 20.

³⁰⁹ Eileen Boris, “When Work is Slavery,” *Whose Welfare?* Edited by Gwendolyn Mink (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1999), 38.

Despite the president's commitment to eradicating poverty and the increased organizing around welfare rights, poverty proved too pervasive and complex to be overcome by war. Asen explains that, "the tenacity of poverty manifested in rising welfare costs also enabled its rediscovery."³¹⁰ Although "the War on Poverty deflected for sometime what might have been more sustained criticism," as they saw increasing amounts of money poured into the war, reporters and politicians soon realized it was probably going to be a losing battle. Their feelings of helplessness resulted in an inability to conceal not only their distrust of the welfare system, but also "burgeoning fear of the poor, who represented reemerging threats to the social order. This time the threats came not from eastern and southern European immigrants but, especially as the decade proceeded, from black families."³¹¹ By the time the Watts riot occurred publications such as the *Los Angeles Herald Examiner* had already begun to criticize the welfare system and the riots only seemed to feed their arguments and put a face on the poor.

By August 13, the most destructive day of rioting, the *Herald Examiner* was already on its sixth installment of a series titled, "The Welfare Explosion," which purported to explain the problems with welfare spending in Los Angeles. On that day the author of the series, Al Bine, investigated the high turnover rate of welfare caseworkers. The story, which was titled "Overworked, Underpaid and Fed Up: Case Workers Quick to Quit," painted a picture of hardworking "girls" who tried to help families on welfare but became "fed up" with the system and the families they tried to serve. Bine

³¹⁰ Asen, *Visions of Poverty*, 51.

³¹¹ Asen, *Visions of Poverty*, 51.

interviewed a sociologist from the University of Southern California who explained that although it may be difficult for some people to believe, the person on welfare doesn't like it any more than the tax payers who fund it. Bine followed the sociologist's comment with his own opinion that "Someone else who doesn't like 'relief' is the social caseworker."³¹² As the story continued in the next section under the title "The Welfare Load: Bigger and Bigger," Bine explained that rather than admitting they have failed to be able to help someone, workers who quit usually make up a reason for leaving. "None of them ever comes right out with it and says I quit. I've had it: this job stinks and the people on relief don't appreciate what we're trying to do anyway!"³¹³ Comments such as these failed to grasp the complexity of the welfare system and caseworker's relationships to their clients. Asen explains that, "in the wake of post-World War II applications of psychoanalytic theory," social work became invested in a rehabilitative approach to poor families.³¹⁴ In this system the caseworker became "all important, and the welfare mother [was] literally under her dominion."³¹⁵ Bine, failing to recognize that while some caseworkers were "sympathetic and anxious to help their clients," many more were

³¹² Al Bine, "Overworked, Underpaid, and Quick to Quit: Case Workers Fed Up," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, B9.

³¹³ Al Bine, "The Welfare Load: Bigger and Bigger," *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 13 August 1965, C8.

³¹⁴ Asen, *Visions of Poverty*, 47

³¹⁵ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 207. Many Watts residents comment on unfair treatment from caseworkers who concentrated harder on the bureaucratic system than on the needs of families. Some caseworkers even conducted night raids to see whether or not women had a companion sleeping with them in the home. If they did, their benefits would be reduced or eliminated because the assumption was that if there was a man in the house he should be supporting the family entirely.

“officious and patronizing, or contemptuous of their lower-class clients,”³¹⁶ went on to lambaste the poor.

After comments such as these, which clearly implied that people on welfare were unappreciative of the great efforts being made on their behalf and did not understand the privilege of welfare, Bine continued, saying that there would be “no relief, now or in the immediate future, for taxpayers who complain about the rising costs of welfare . . . growing twice as fast as population and at an increase 90 percent above 10 years ago.” On top of lamenting the fact that costs were rising and that costly poor people were ungrateful, Bine ended his article with news that, even with improvements to the system, expenditures would continue to “soar,” and a preview of the story for August 14 titled “Relief is just a swallow away for everyone . . . everyone except the tax payer.”³¹⁷

Articles like Bine’s and editorials about the rising cost of welfare littered the paper that day among some of the most spectacular riot coverage available, and along with that coverage was another story which made the link between welfare recipients and the riot perfectly clear. In a piece describing the L.A. County Board of Supervisors’ four point plan to maintain law and order readers found that one solution to rioting was to launch “a campaign by social welfare workers to advise welfare recipients of possible consequences of being involved in the riots other than as bystanders.”³¹⁸ This story,

³¹⁶ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 207.

³¹⁷ Bine, “The Welfare Load,” C8.

³¹⁸ “Civic Leaders, Board Act on Riots,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 13 August 1965, A5.

which appeared even before Bine's series that day, legitimized what many were already prone to suspect, that the selfish and destructive rioters must be welfare recipients.

On the same day, the *Los Angeles Times* also featured stories concerning the problems with welfare. One story seemed optimistic, reporting that Los Angeles was expanding its own anti-poverty program to eight districts including the Watts area. While this may have seemed like a positive step for some, many (including those following the series in the *Herald-Examiner*) would likely have perceived expansion, even of local poverty programs, as another poor decision to increase welfare spending. Skeptics may have felt more justified in their concerns after reading Paul Weeks' article on the second page of the paper which indicated that "the welfare check helped kill society."³¹⁹

Stories about welfare waned in the papers of August 14 and 15, presumably because they were overshadowed by more exciting photographs and descriptions of the dramatic riot events. However, as people began to line up for food on August 16, stories about welfare and other forms of relief returned. On the 16th and 17th the *Herald-Examiner* and the *Los Angeles Times* presented a variety of different relief stories and photographs that reinforced the link between dependency and motherhood as they ran stories about relief donations, welfare spending, and mothers in need of food for their families. The proximity of these stories to one another as well as their emphasis on dependency placed women, particularly mothers, at the center of the controversy surrounding government sponsored relief. The coverage in these two papers

³¹⁹ Paul Weeks, "Grasp of Poverty Gradually Eases: Some Local Programs Make Fast Advances but Overall Result is Still Unpredictable," *Los Angeles Times*, 13 August 1965, A2.

demonstrated Solinger's point that dependency is a key area in which the discourses of sexist, racist, and classist oppression converge. She explains, that "when cultural, political, and legal authorities" have denied women "independence and access to self-determining decision making, these authorities have also been able to treat different groups of women differently, depending on the variables of race and class."³²⁰

On August 16 the *Herald-Examiner* alternated stories about food shopping with stories about increased spending in the war on poverty and food donations being sent to Watts. In the first story readers learned about all of the stores that rioters had destroyed and one of the only stores, owned by Archie Hardwick, that was not ruined in the uprising. Hardwick was opening his store to the "needy" and he "bitterly" supplied "hard pressed Watts housewives" with food and supplies.³²¹ Although Hardwick was a Watts community member and initially proposed that he and his staff be able to register shoppers so that they might enter the store in small groups, police chose to modify the plan and only allow women into the store because "they feared men would aggravate the crowd control situation."³²² In addition to legitimizing the women's role in finding food for their families, Hardwick claimed, this type of behavior by police aggravated the situation by humiliating the men. This story, a seemingly simple report on stores re-opening in Watts, brought together many of the themes utilized by reporters throughout the riot and the clean up effort. First, it continued the theme of violent men and needy

³²⁰ Solinger, "Dependency and Choice," 23.

³²¹ "Only Game in Town: Archie Gets Food to Watts Needy," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 16 August 1965, A3.

³²² "Only Game in Town," A3.

women that we saw in chapter two. By portraying the women as those who truly needed to enter the store and buy groceries and men as the troublemakers who could not be trusted, the police and, consequently the paper, furthered a perception of divided households in the Watts community. These households contained women trying their best to keep everything together while men tore it all apart. In fostering such a mentality, these sources furthered two more problematic attitudes that we will examine further in the next section of this chapter. Next, by offering vivid details of men “pushing women, some of them pregnant, out of line,” they demonstrated to the public that men were inherently violent and untrustworthy while women were helpless and in need of protection from the men in their community. Second, even the store owner recognized, “They humiliated the Negro man, hurt his pride by limiting the shoppers to women.”³²³ By doing so, they made it clear to the men themselves that women held a more esteemed place in society. As we will discover later on, these portrayals would become absolutely devastating once the Moynihan report appeared on the following day.

Following the story about men and women standing in line for hours outside of Hardwick’s store because they had no food, the *Herald-Examiner* ran reports on increased welfare spending and food donations being sent to “hungry” in Watts. They explained to readers already agitated by Bine’s inflammatory “Welfare Explosion” series, that while Watts’ residents were waiting in line for food, legislation “doubling [the] price tag” for the War on Poverty was headed for its “last hurdles” in the Senate. Rather than offer a description of the legislation or details regarding the debate in the Senate, the

³²³ “Only Game in Town,” A3.

paper gave a dramatic account of how supporters of welfare were “ready to steam roller a GOP attempt to cut the \$1.65 billion program.” Furthermore, they quoted a Republican senator who shared his view that the bill was more wasteful spending including “extra money earmarked for chronically unemployable adults in the community action program.”³²⁴ The paper followed this story with two more about operations sending food to Watts and another in the Bine series which explicitly linked the generosity of people in the area to the high cost of welfare for tax payers and the likelihood that charitable individuals would be scammed out of their money by dishonest people seeking relief.³²⁵

Although Bine mentioned in a previous story that less than five percent of people on welfare “abuse it,” this story contributed to a popular belief that “cheating is widespread among welfare recipients.”³²⁶ In both stories Bine was mistaken. According to Paul Bullock, “precisely the reverse situation prevails.” An audit of welfare cases in California at the time “detected fraud in less than one percent of the cases.” Further, Bullock explains, it is usually the poor who are scammed by the welfare system, not the other way around. “Thousands of persons, eligible for welfare in one form or another, never receive it. Many welfare recipients never obtain the full benefits to which they are legally entitled, or they may be unreasonably disqualified from assistance.” Unfortunately, whether it is true or not, misinformation such as that offered by Bine’s stories persists today. Rodgers explains that, “Since poverty is generally considered to be

³²⁴ “Poverty Bill Heads for Last Hurdles,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 16 August 1965, A7.

³²⁵ “Food Sent to Hungry in Watts,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 16 August 1965, A13. Al Bine, “Welfare Relief Spending Doubles,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 16 August 1965, B6.

³²⁶ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 263.

the result of personal rather than systemic malfunctions, the state of poverty is considered an illegitimate condition. A poor person is suspected of sloth, moral corruption, or personal shortsightedness; and it is feared that aiding those who become poor only encourages such behavior.”³²⁷ Therefore, stories like Bine’s continued to support the notion that money was being thrown away on able bodied poor and their children who are “parasitic on the economy.”³²⁸ Contempt for such families would only increase as the days wore on.

Just as they had earlier in the week, the coverage in the *L.A. Times* and the *Herald-Examiner* matched. Although the *L.A. Times* offered less information about the rising cost of welfare relief, they did play up the stories about people without food. A story titled “Many in Ravaged Area Without Food, Medicine,” explained that so many stores had been looted and burned that food and medicine shortages were becoming a problem. This story, like the grocery feature in the *Herald-Examiner*, drew a dividing line between those violent rioters who were to blame for the shortage, and the “innocent persons” who “played no part in the riot” yet were without food or medicine. The message again was clear; some people had a more legitimate claim to relief than others.

In coverage throughout the riot there was only one story that explicitly linked welfare and rioters. But if the link between rioting and relief was tangential before, by August 17 it was made perfectly clear by Walter Burke’s story in the *Herald-Examiner*, “Relief Funds Given Riot Area Needy.” On the second page of the paper that day Burke

³²⁷ Rodgers, *Poor Women Poor Families*, 63.

³²⁸ Rodgers, *Poor Women Poor Families*, 63.

reported, “Mailmen trod gingerly through the debris of riot racked southeast Los Angeles today, delivering an estimated \$1.1 million in county relief checks. The checks represent part of \$5 million monthly paid by the county to 92,000 persons on various relief programs in the curfew area.”³²⁹ He went on to describe the large number of families, “averaging four children each” receiving \$1.1 million twice a month for Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), and to break down the large amounts of money allocated specifically for “Negroes” in the riot area.

Supporting the image of AFDC families in the riot area were more stories that quoted mothers at food distribution centers saying “We have eight children at home . . . they haven’t had any bread or milk since Saturday.”³³⁰ On the “second front page” of the *Herald-Examiner* that day there appeared a panoramic photograph that covered the entire top quarter of the page with people standing in a long line accompanied by the headline “Food Rushed to 65,000 in Riot Zone.”³³¹ No story accompanied the photograph and headline but further down the page another of Bine’s series appeared. With food rushing to such a long line of people Bine asked readers, “What’s Being Done to Cut Relief Costs?” and for the first time in the series he also made the link explicit between relief and motherhood. The connection between relief and single mothers would have been understood prior to this story mainly due to the fact that welfare generally, and AFDC

³²⁹ Walter L. Burke, “Relief Funds Given to Riot Area Needy,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 17 August 1965, A2.

³³⁰ “Food Flows to Riot Area, Markets Open,” *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, 17 August 1965, A14.

³³¹ “Food Rushed to 65,000 in Riot Zone,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 17 August 1965, B1. I chose not include this photograph because it was of poor quality and would not have enhanced the analysis.

specifically, were designed for women without a male breadwinner in the home.³³²

However, Bine made mothers and their children his targets in the August 17 column explaining that “needy children” were a “big relief item.” He further advocated a reduction in “the pool of poverty,” which he explained was full of “Under-Skilled, Under-Educated” people. His solution was to do exactly the opposite of what the picture demonstrated. Rather than handing people relief, he proposed, society could help the poor by teaching them to help themselves and making them participants, not just recipients. Previewing the next story in the series Bine closed the article asking, “Are we pumping wel(fare) dry?”³³³

The *L.A. Times* also used photographs alongside their poverty stories on August 17. Reports documenting the distribution of food relief made the front page of the *L.A. Times* that day but the biggest story was featured alongside large photographs in section two of the paper. The first picture of people lined up at a food center loomed large at the top of the page (Figure 4.1). Characteristic of the *L.A. Times*’ riot coverage, a National Guard troop is the most obvious person in this photograph. However, upon closer inspection we can see that there are mainly women and children standing in line for food at this distribution center. Although the accompanying story describes a scene in which, “men, women, and children waited” for food, the women are more prominent than the

³³² Welfare as we know it grew out of the concept of mothers pensions in the 1930s which aimed to keep dependent children with their mothers after the male breadwinner died or became otherwise unable to support them. The policies eventually became Aid to Dependent Children and later, under Kennedy, AFDC for which father were slowly becoming eligible in 1965. For a more detailed history see Lord, *Social Welfare*, specifically chapter three.

³³³ Al Bine, “What’s Being Done to Cut Relief Costs?” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 17 August 1965, B1.

Figure 4.1

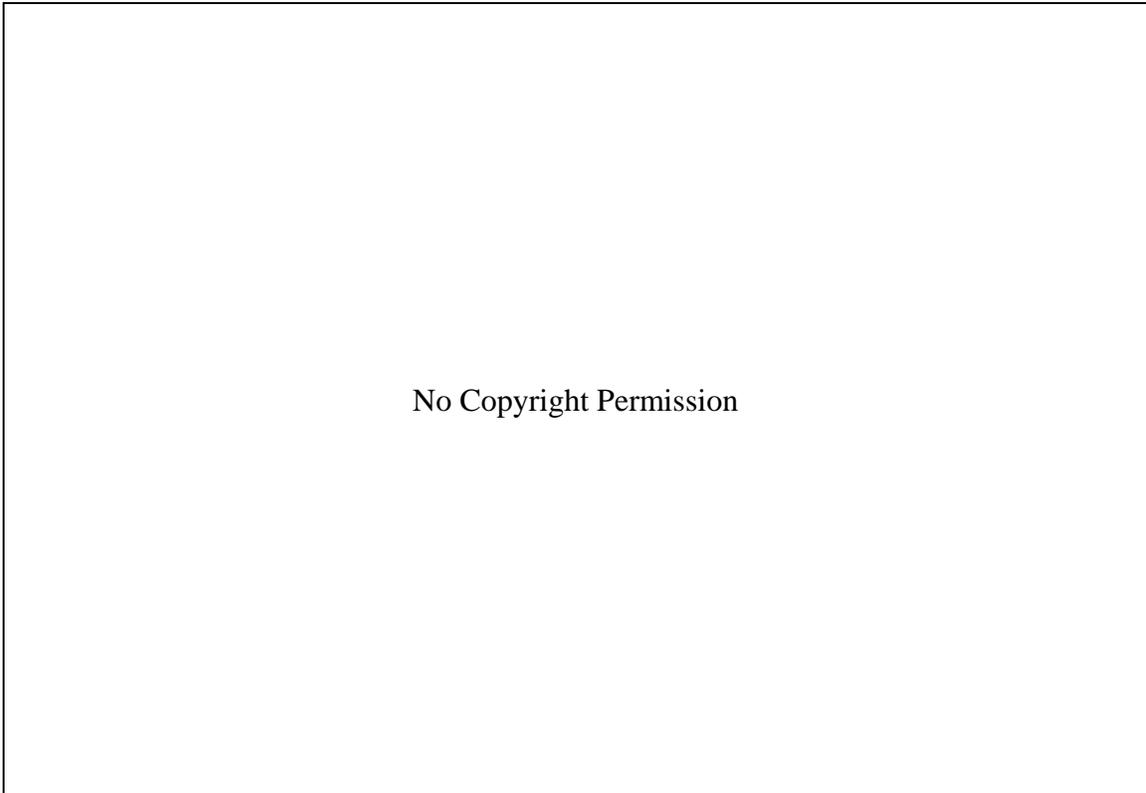


Figure 4.1: "Food Center," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 August 1965, B1.

men. They are at the front of the line and they appear to be standing with their children and no adult male companions.

In fact, in the accompanying story titled “Food and Milk Arrive, Protected by Guns,” the opening paragraphs focus on comments from three “Negro mothers” all requesting milk for their babies. The third mother is quoted as saying, “I want some milk, my baby is hungry.”³³⁴ Here we see that these mothers believe they have a right to food and supplies. This attitude runs contrary to the dominant understanding and official treatment of welfare “as a privilege, never as a right.”³³⁵ This is not simply a case of innocent mothers who need help because their town was destroyed, what we see here are mothers who feel justified in taking relief for their oversized families. This story, we will see later in the chapter, identifies a symptom of matriarchal power that would become famous in later accounts of the Moynihan report. The women in this piece, trying to feed their babies, would in the days afterward be characterized as overbearing mothers responsible for the disintegration of black families and their condition of dependency.

Another photograph which filled the next third of the page further demonstrated the poor and desperate condition of Watts’ mothers and their children (Figure 4.2). In the picture we can see women outside of a grocery store, much like the one described in the *Herald-Examiner* the day before. The caption explains that women were the only ones allowed into this grocery store as well. A young boy, probably the child of one of the women, stands in nearby glaring at the National Guard troop (once again in the

³³⁴ “Food and Milk Arrive, Protected by Guns,” *Los Angeles Times*, 17 August 1965, II-1.

³³⁵ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 207.

Figure 4.2

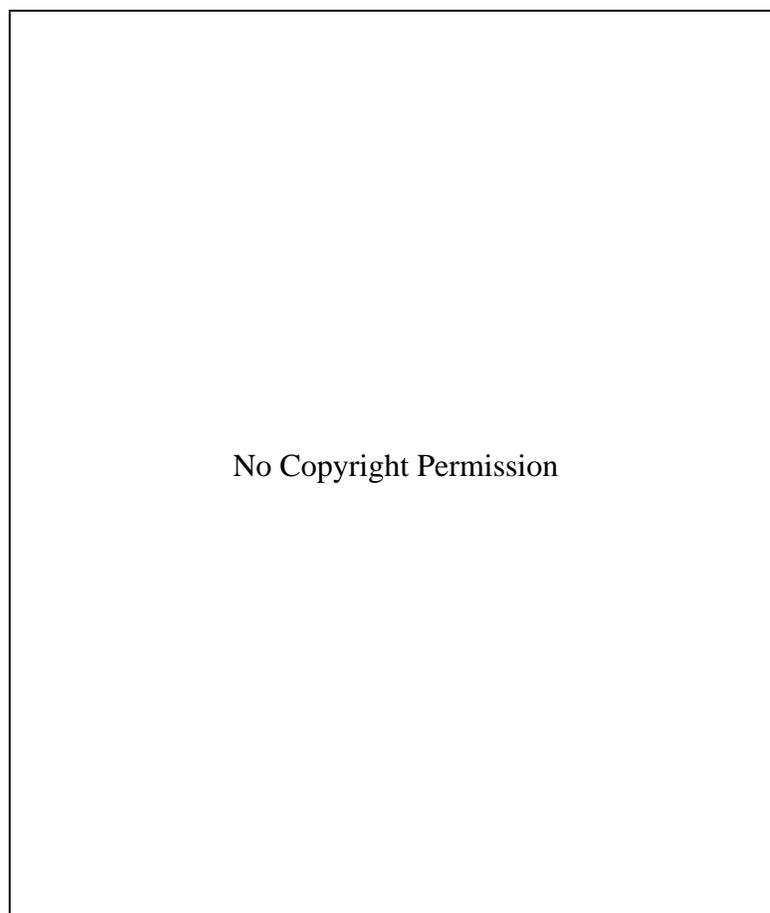


Figure 4.2: "Reopened," *Los Angeles Times*, 17 August 1965, B1.

foreground). The story, which opened with desperate women looking to feed their numerous hungry babies, went on to explain that only two hours after food for 500 families arrived, it was gone. At least 300 still waiting in line were told they would have to return later while a crowd at another food center “grumbled” when they heard that a food shipment which was promised them had not come. Grumbling was later replaced by “laughter and lighthearted chatter” when the shipment finally arrived. The story went on to describe the large numbers of families in poverty stricken housing developments who benefited from food shipments into the area that day.³³⁶

Photographs such as these and their accompanying stories made “welfare mother” yet another role for African American women as the riot came to a close. Rather than painting a picture of mothers responsibly caring for their children during a time of need, the juxtaposition of photographs and stories picturing mothers and children waiting in line for relief alongside reports on the failure and high cost of welfare put a face on the problems with relief in general. Although African American women were not the majority of those on welfare at the time, welfare and dependency discourses converged on them as reporters linked the violence in Watts to poverty and broken families in the area.

Later in the week even the *Los Angeles Sentinel* added their voice to the chorus of articles blaming the riots on poverty. They also added to the problem a concern over the lack of consultation with fathers on what to do for their families, a theme that seems

³³⁶ “Food and Milk Arrive Protected by Guns,” B1.

directly related to the Moynihan thesis.³³⁷ On the front page of their first issue after the riot, the *Sentinel* ran a photograph of a crowd of people in front of the offices of the Non-Violent Action Committee where they stood in what the paper described as “breadlines reminiscent of the depression,” which were similar to those “formed throughout the riot torn areas where victims of pillaged stores were given bread and milk to help sustain their families.”³³⁸ The same photograph appeared again two months later in *Ebony* magazine. Since neither source ran a story with the photograph each deployment of the picture could only be understood in the context of similar coverage, in this case coverage from the *Herald-Examiner* and the *L.A. Times* as well as a story that appeared later in this issue of the *Sentinel*.

Eleven pages after the “breadlines” photograph, *Sentinel* reporter Bill Lane explained that poverty was an underlying factor in the riot. He argued that although police brutality was obviously part of the problem, “there [was] another underlying spark behind the riots which shook this city to its foundations. That hidden factor,” he said, “is poverty.”³³⁹ He described the heated debates between “the city’s Mayor and Congressional leaders” over the distribution of relief to the Watts area which Lane acknowledged, might greatly benefit the Watts family. However, he went on to state that

³³⁷ This is one of the spots where it is particularly difficult to separate the Moynihan and welfare stories. This story appeared days after the Moynihan report became a hot topic and would, therefore, logically have drawn on some of that rhetoric. However, since the story does not explicitly mention the Moynihan report we cannot draw an undeniable connection between the two.

³³⁸ Dick Stone, “Breadlines,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 August 1965, A1. I chose not to include the photo here because the quality was so poor that it would be difficult to fully see all of the detail if I reduced it to fit this format.

³³⁹ Bill Lane, “Poverty: An Underlying Factor,” *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 19 August 1965, A12.

despite the intense debate that was happening among government officials, “Nobody asked the Watts father what he thought of the program, or how he could participate in placing the funds where they would do the most good. NOBODY asks him now.”³⁴⁰ Presumably, no one needed to ask the Watts father because, as the pictures and stories in the prominent local papers had shown, mothers were the ones waiting in line for food to feed their children. It is almost impossible for us to fully understand the underlying assumptions behind these stories, particularly this one calling for increased input from Watts’ fathers, without also recognizing another set of stories that appeared at the time. In the next section I will outline the counterpart to these accounts about welfare and dependency, articles concerning the Moynihan Report on the state of the “Negro family.”

The Moynihan Report

When policy makers and reporters such as those for the local press in Los Angeles discussed welfare and implied that poor black women were dependent and making bad choices, Solinger explains, “the charge was complex.”³⁴¹ Not only did these stories imply that women were raising too many children without enough money, they often “referred to the fact that these women were unemployed.” In accompanying stories about the Moynihan report women who were employed were accused of having jobs “while African American men did not.” Either way, the women of Watts were incapable of choosing the right path to help their family.

³⁴⁰ Lane, “Poverty,” A12.

³⁴¹ Solinger, “Dependency and Choice,” 22.

Once these articles associated the women of Watts with inability to make the right decisions for themselves and their families, Solinger indicates, “the charges spread to cover all the important areas of their lives: work, sex, marriage, family, and motherhood.” In 1965, she reminds us, the Moynihan Report enumerated the consequences of these bad choices: “African American women were making a mistake by taking jobs and status from black men; they were making a consequential mistake by presiding over families constructed, non-normatively, as matriarchies. They were making bad choices when they didn’t marry and had babies anyway. All these mistakes and bad choices inexorably led African American women (and other poor women of color) deep into welfare dependency.”³⁴² As if the reports and photographs detailing the dependency of Watts’ mothers was not enough, to add insult to injury, various members of the federal government had begun to leak the now well known Moynihan Report to the press, implying that it could be seen as some sort of official explanation for the violence in Watts.

Before looking at the articles pertaining to Watts, we must understand some of the historical details behind the Moynihan Report. Months before the Watts uprising began, “in February 1965, Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Assistant Secretary of Labor for Policy Planning and Research, completed a report on minority male unemployment and the breakdown of black families in America’s inner cities.”³⁴³ A shortened version of the

³⁴² Solinger, “Dependency and Choice,” 22

³⁴³ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man! Race, Manhood, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2005), 107.

document (which was officially titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*) was prepared for President Johnson, who was impressed by the arguments Moynihan made. In June the president included significant portions of the report in a commencement address that he presented at Howard University. Following the address, “civil rights leaders initially applauded the president’s frank willingness to address the problems of inner city poverty.”³⁴⁴ The fact that this speech was based on a Department of Labor report, and the nature of that report, “slowly became public over summer and early fall.”³⁴⁵

The Howard University speech was only the first phase in the release of the report. Early in the summer of 1965 the White House began planning a conference based on Moynihan’s report and their desire to bring together “sociologists, writers, psychologists, churchmen, and civil rights leaders” in sessions that would “lay the intellectual groundwork for discussing specific questions of concern.”³⁴⁶ Approximately 500 to 600 of these people would head to the White House for a conference that was to “fashion concrete solutions to the problems faced by African Americans.”³⁴⁷ While the conference was in its planning stages government officials as well as interns for White House staff began to leak details to particular high powered reporters such as Mary McGrory of the *Washington Star* and others from the *New York Times* and *Wall Street*

³⁴⁴ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* 107.

³⁴⁵ Lee Rainwater and William L. Yancey, *The Moynihan Report and the Politics of Controversy*, (Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press, 1967) 133.

³⁴⁶ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 136-7.

³⁴⁷ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 133; Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* 107.

Journal. Although it is unclear when and if anyone was given a complete copy of the report before August, the details of Moynihan's argument slowly emerged in various prominent papers.³⁴⁸

Although the administration had been slow to release the report amidst fears by people such as Secretary of Labor Willard Wirtz that the report had the potential to be highly controversial, the Watts uprising created an exigence that could not be ignored. On August 17, "Moynihan remembers that Bill Moyers, the White House press secretary, gave copies of *The Negro Family* to the press." Although Moynihan asserts that Moyers handed over the report "when journalists began 'demanding to know what was happening in California' . . . other federal officials suspect that Moynihan himself leaked the report, knowing the additional attention it would receive in the wake of the riots."³⁴⁹ Regardless of who leaked the contents of Moynihan's report, press coverage of the document led many to see it "as the Johnson administration's official analysis of the urban 'riots' that rocked the nation in the late 1960s."³⁵⁰ This was likely the effect that the administration hoped for. Rainwater and Yancey claim that leaking the report in this way allowed the

³⁴⁸ For the most detailed account of the way the report was likely leaked and then released to the press see Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*.

³⁴⁹ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* 117. Estes offers the most solid assertion of how the report was finally given to the press, citing Moynihan himself. However, multiple sources tell a variety of stories. For another, more hesitant view on the process see Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*. Rainwater and Yancey contend that regardless of how the report was leaked, the result was that very few copies were available for review.

³⁵⁰ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* 108.

Johnson administration to release some of their views while retaining the ability to deny accountability for those views until they could see how the public would react.³⁵¹

Estes explains that although “a significant minority of the participants in the Watts uprising were women, contemporary analysts focused on explaining the men’s actions and they believed they had found the answer in the theory of family breakdown cited in Moynihan’s report.”³⁵² The report began by outlining the successes of the civil rights movement and explaining that there remained a need “for an unflinching look at the present potential of Negro Americans to move from where they now are to where they want, and ought to be.”³⁵³ The look, Moynihan explained, needed to be at the “Negro family,” because “At the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family.”³⁵⁴ The report outlined what Moynihan saw as both historical and contemporary causes of family breakdown in black communities. He discussed the hostility faced by black men during times of slavery and segregation and argued that men suffered more from these instances of racism than women did, which resulted in men’s inability to emerge as a strong “father figure.”³⁵⁵ He also quoted liberally from Frazier’s 1939 study, *The Negro Family in the United States*, to

³⁵¹ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 156.

³⁵² Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* 117.

³⁵³ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, March, 1965, 4. Contained in Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 50.

³⁵⁴ Daniel Patrick Moynihan, *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, March, 1965, 5. Contained in Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 51.

³⁵⁵ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* 112.

demonstrate the problems with urban migration and an increase in female headed households. He focused heavily on the problem of unemployment among black males, arguing that employment was more important for males than females in securing the stability of the family. “Based on this analysis, Moynihan concluded that the government should focus its attention on both unemployment and poor black families.”³⁵⁶

With few copies and many rumors circulating about the report, papers began to tell the story of the damaged black male and his family. They offered it, some of them sight unseen, as an explanation for the violence in Watts. Although, Rainwater and Yancey argue, “The Administration was clearly aware that the report could be distorted, could be used as an excuse by whites for their own failings,” the administration made minimal efforts to teach reporters about the sensitive nature of the report’s contents and, “apparently made minimal efforts to ensure against press reports that either contained or facilitated distortions and excuses.”³⁵⁷ Even if, as some have argued, Moynihan initially set out to help black families by highlighting their instability “and thereby encourag[ing] the government to systematically design programs to strengthen black families and communities,” the myopic view with which he was working as well as the insensitive nature of the press coverage, “inadvertently placed black women at the center of black America’s problems.”³⁵⁸

³⁵⁶ Steve Estes, *I Am A Man!* 112.

³⁵⁷ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 157.

³⁵⁸ Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 198. Paula Giddings explains that Moynihan was likely shocked by the reaction to his report because “he had taken great pains to be racially sensitive.” Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 327.

Three days before Moynihan claimed that Moyer leaked his report to the press, the *L.A. Times* was already interviewing psychologists who drew upon Moynihan's research as an explanation for the riot. On August 14 the *L.A. Times* ran a front page story titled "Racial Unrest Laid to Negro Family Failure." The article used Johnson's Howard University commencement address and the Moynihan report to outline the deteriorating condition of families in the Watts area and explain how young black men "with little or no previous contact with police," could possibly be responsible for such violence as the city was experiencing. Reporter Thomas J. Foley explained that the federal government would be redirecting its poverty efforts from the South to large urban areas based on an "unpublished Labor Department report that blames Negro unrest on the breakdown of the Negro family structure."³⁵⁹ The story continued on page eleven explaining how the president's address in June "which called for equality as a fact, not just as a theory, was based on the department report." The limited space of a newspaper article could never do justice to Moynihan's treatise on the family, however, Foley and the reporters who followed on August 17 and later focused their attention primarily on only one section of the detailed report.

Foley described the contents of the document to readers saying, the report "emphasizes the effect that oppression of the Negro man has on destroying Negro family life. The report says that as a result, more than five out of every 10 Negro children have lived in broken homes by the time they are 18—compared to one out of every 10 white

³⁵⁹ Thomas J. Foley, "Racial Unrest Laid to Negro Family Failure," *Los Angeles Times*, 14 August 1965, A1.

children.” He went on to highlight Moynihan’s points about the promiscuity of African American mothers, citing their high rates of divorce—“three times the number of white women”—and the fact that “One Negro Family out of four is fatherless and one Negro baby out of four is illegitimate.”³⁶⁰ Foley added exigence to the problem by highlighting Moynihan’s prediction that there would be “no social peace in the United States for generations if this cycle is not broken.”³⁶¹ This attack on women, Deborah Gray White argues, was similar to those made about black women’s promiscuity by James Jack in 1895. The difference was that while women at the turn of the century had organizations like the National Association of Colored Women (NACW) who came to their defense, in 1965 the NACW was focused on civil rights and similarly condemning black women. There was no organization to come to women’s defense.³⁶² Furthermore, Michelle Wallace argues, black women were defenseless because no one had written a report for them.³⁶³ So, people accepted this explanation and it spread as the *Herald-Examiner* and *L.A. Times* continued to use the Moynihan report to demonstrate the root causes of Watts residents’ wild ways.

Foley’s story on August 14 was only the beginning but its prominent place in the paper that day and its sensational account of the destructive behavior of black mothers set the stage for the welfare reports, food line photographs, quotes from overburdened

³⁶⁰ Foley, “Racial Unrest,” A11.

³⁶¹ Foley, “Racial Unrest,” A11.

³⁶² Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 200-201.

³⁶³ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 12.

mothers, and multiple Moynihan articles that followed. By the time the *Herald-Examiner* began to tell the story on August 17, the citizens of Los Angeles were already well aware of the problem caused by the black “matriarchy.”

On August 17, on the “second front page” of the *Herald Examiner* readers learned that “Negroes” can’t relate to their fathers. A local expert explained the problems associated with “negro family breakdown,” and although there was no mention of Moynihan, his thesis was clearly present. Overbearing women were ruining black families and fathers, too oppressed and unemployed to help, were no where to be found. The result was rowdy youths and poor mothers; the evidence was all over the riot coverage.³⁶⁴

Two days later, on August 19, the *L.A. Times* published what became, “in the eyes of some scholars . . . ‘the most influential news story connecting the report with the post riot atmosphere.’”³⁶⁵ In the paper that day readers found a column titled “Seepage of the Moynihan Report.” The article was written by two well known “conservative Washington columnists,” Roland Evans and Robert Novak. The authors downplayed Moynihan’s discussion of the historical forces that contributed to black family problems and the heavy weight of unemployment and instead focused on illegitimacy and a lack of male leadership in black families. Evans and Novak drew a causal link between Moynihan’s conclusion that there was a breakdown occurring in these families with the outbreak of

³⁶⁴ The paper ran the same story in two different versions of the August 17 issue under two different titles: “Blame Breakdown of Family Life,” or “Expert’s View: Family is the Root of Riots,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 17 August 1965, B1.

³⁶⁵ Estes, *I Am A Man!* 117.

violence that occurred in Watts. Evans and Novak played up the controversial “much suppressed, much leaked” status of the report gathering intrigue and adding to the sense of controversy. They also indicated that the government feared people would be upset over discussions of preferential treatment for black families as a way to “avert continuous guerilla warfare in Negro ghettos.”³⁶⁶ Looking at the alarmist rhetoric regarding welfare and aid to black families that ran consistently over the previous week in Los Angeles papers, there could be no doubt that such a report would spark intense controversy, and it did.

Although Moynihan’s goal was to define problems more than it was to propose solutions, Evans and Novak outlined some of the random suggestions people made for solving the problem nonetheless. They pointed to a “*basic need* for male directed discipline in Negro ghettos,” and then asked how that might be accomplished.³⁶⁷ The solutions they described ranged from “using men instead of women to deliver welfare checks” to “lowering military requirements to get more Negro youths out of the ghetto and into the army.”³⁶⁸ Evans and Novak and other reporters like them chose to focus on the problems that Moynihan claimed were created by the existence of a black “matriarchy,” without ever explaining that Moynihan’s contention had never been that female-headed households were bad, only that they were not the norm and being outside

³⁶⁶ Roland Evans and Robert Novak, “Seepage of the Moynihan Report,” *Los Angeles Times*, 19 August 1965, B5.

³⁶⁷ Evans and Novak, “Seepage,” B5. My emphasis added.

³⁶⁸ Evans and Novak, “Seepage,” B5.

of the norm placed African Americans at a disadvantage.³⁶⁹ Together, Rainwater and Yancey suggest, the press coverage of Moynihan's report effectively, yet "subtly," exaggerated "the already dramatic and sensational aspects of Moynihan's presentation and as a result to considerably deepen the impression that the report dealt almost exclusively with the family, its 'pathology' and 'instability,' as *the* cause of problems Negroes have."³⁷⁰ It would have taken a careful audience with wide access to the larger report to pick up on the detailed and intricate elements of the cycle Moynihan was trying to portray.

Selective discussion of the report and its connections to rioting in Watts became intertwined with stories of welfare and women waiting for food just at the time, "the mid-1960s," when African American women were, "in very large numbers, making significant and sensible choices in their own interests, even within the context of a violently racist society."³⁷¹ Solinger argues that in the mid-1960s African American women were starting to find employment outside of domestic service, increasing participation in civil rights struggles, and generally improving their lot in life.³⁷² However, portrayals like Evans and Novak's placed African American women in a double bind by locking in the idea that poor women were making bad choices and therefore responsible for their condition whereas women who made progress did so at the

³⁶⁹ Giddings, *When and Where I Enter*, 328.

³⁷⁰ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 153.

³⁷¹ Solinger, "Dependency and Choice," 23.

³⁷² Solinger, "Dependency and Choice," 23.

expense of the men in their families and communities, thereby causing the deterioration of the family which placed them in the “tangle of pathology” that Moynihan feared. The problem, it became clear, was any form of “strong black woman.” Moynihan and his supporters, Wallace argues, were “suggesting that the existence of anything so subversive as a ‘strong black woman’ precluded the existence of a strong black man or, indeed, any black ‘man’ at all.”³⁷³ Stories about grocery stores not allowing black men to buy food for their families because they were too hard to control only bolstered the argument and legitimized men’s perception that they were victims “of an abnormal family structure.”³⁷⁴ Deborah Gray White contends that the report insufferably damaged the black woman’s image by implying that “if only black women could be less dominant and domineering, the black man would have a chance.”³⁷⁵

Conclusion

On August 20, 1965 as papers were wrapping up their coverage of the riot and clean up efforts, the *Herald-Examiner* ran one last story that seemed to exemplify all of the problems with the “matriarch” and “welfare mom” roles that they made rhetorically available to women throughout the clean up phase of the riot. The story on page A3 of the paper one week after the height of violence in Watts, described the governor’s second trip

³⁷³ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 30-1.

³⁷⁴ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 12. Wallace argues that this complaint was not new, it was just brought to the surface by the Moynihan report.

³⁷⁵ Gray White, *Too Heavy a Load*, 199.

to listen to “Negro concerns” in Watts. Reporter Ed Leydon described some of Governor Brown’s interactions with citizens including one “young Negro” who apparently asked the governor, “Did you know there were people hungry in Watts before this thing?” To which the governor responded, “No I didn’t. Weren’t they getting relief checks?”³⁷⁶ This story which had as its underlying theme the failures of government officials in the eyes of Watts citizens, also succeeded in reminding people of the problematic, pushy, Watts matriarch.

At the top of the page next to Leydon’s article there was a picture of a mother with her baby, surrounded by the governor and other men (Figure 4.3). The woman, named Mrs. Stella Brown, was quoted as saying “I’d rather be working.” Mrs. Brown does not appear to be happy. Instead, she asserts herself pointing to her desire to be “independent.” Carrying her baby through what appears to be a group mostly comprised of reporters, she shares that her husband left her and she has three children to feed. Rather than evoking sympathy, the article seems to legitimize Moynihan’s point that African American women have too many illegitimate babies and their families’ problems stem from high rates of divorce or separation as they drive their men away. Mrs. Brown complained, “I hate getting that check from the County, I want to be able to go out and make my own money!” In doing so she demonstrated her status as an ungrateful welfare dependant while simultaneously illustrating the problem that black women wanted to take jobs from black men and undercut their ability to run the family.

³⁷⁶ Ed Leydon, “Brown Hears Negro Woes: 2nd Trip Through Riot Area,” *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, 20 August 1965, A3.

Figure 4.3

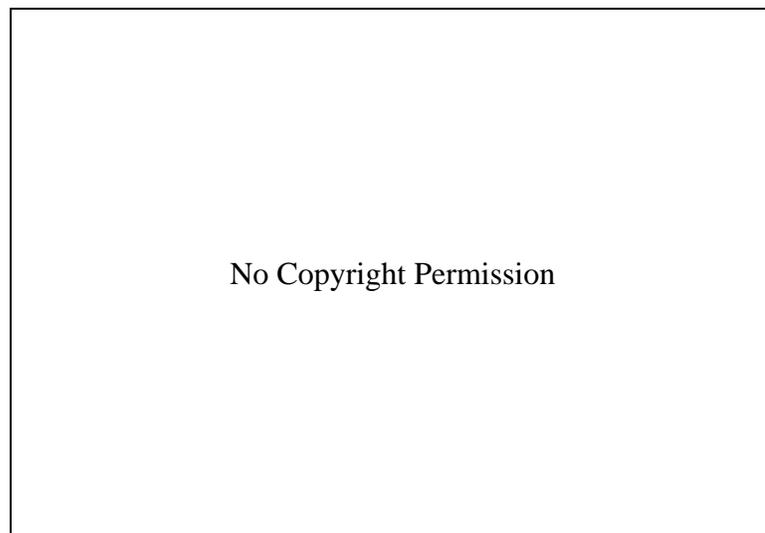


Figure 4.3: "Governor Brown Makes Second Tour of Riot Torn Watts, Talks to People," *Los Angeles Herald Examiner*, August 20, 1965, A3.

Michelle Wallace argues that although “everybody wanted cut Daniel Moynihan’s heart out and feed it to the dogs,” many also believed he had a point. As Leydon’s article confirmed, “The black woman had gotten out of hand. She was too strong, too hard, too evil, too castrating. She got all the jobs, all the everything. The black man never had a chance.” Presumably, he left her because “he needed a rest.” Rather than asking for more chances to become independent, black women like Mrs. Stella Brown, welfare and Moynihan pieces implied, should try to be “more submissive and, above all, keep her big, black mouth shut.”³⁷⁷ With no where to turn and no way to defend themselves, many black women learned to do just that. As the civil rights movement waned and black power became popular, many relationships in the black community continued to suffer from the conclusion that emerged from the most publicly accepted roles made rhetorically available to women in Watts, “welfare mom” and “matriarch.”

Both official and public focus shifted quickly from Watts back to the war in Southeast Asia moving debates about poverty behind debates about troops and military spending.³⁷⁸ Additionally, the connection between Watts and the Moynihan report faded in the public imagination and, by September, “was no longer mentioned.”³⁷⁹ However, both sets of coverage maintained long lasting devastating effects on the image of African American women. In the eyes of many African American men they would be seen, over the next several years, as the reason for his oppression damaging men and women’s

³⁷⁷ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 11.

³⁷⁸ Estes, *I Am A Man!* 123.

³⁷⁹ Rainwater and Yancey, *The Moynihan Report*, 152.

relationships as well as their ability to maintain a united front in the fight against racism. In the eyes of many white people, the African American woman was a drain on welfare relief, a label that would not only stick but snowball into the 1980s when Reagan coined the term “welfare queen” and beyond. In the final chapter of the analysis I will explore some of these developments further and argue that they, along with the other roles made rhetorically available to women during the riot, played an integral role in shaping the contradictory image of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN today.

Chapter 5

WOMEN OF WATTS: STRONGBLACKWOMEN AND RACE RIOT RHETORIC

For every woman like Harriet Tubman there were twenty who died in childbirth, went mad, or became old by the time they were thirty. The existence of a Harriet Tubman only meant that some unusually talented woman had emerged despite a vicious and cruel system of human devastation.

Michelle Wallace³⁸⁰

Intersecting oppressions of race, class, gender, and sexuality could not continue without powerful ideological justifications for their existence.

Patricia Hill Collins³⁸¹

In 1990, reflecting on her controversial 1978 treatise *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman*, Michelle Wallace confessed, “It is impossible for me to look back at this book without the conviction that the significance of black women as a distinct category is routinely erased by the way in which the Women’s Movement and the Black movement choose to set their goals and recollect their histories.”³⁸² Nearly twenty years later we still face huge gaps in our memory and scholarship regarding black women.

³⁸⁰ Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho and the Myth of the Superwoman* (New York: Verso 1990), 153.

³⁸¹ Collins, Patricia Hill. *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 69.

³⁸² Michelle Wallace, *Black Macho*, xvii.

Although dedicated researchers are slowly making African American women's history more visible and accessible, there remains a vast amount of work to be done. One of the ways that feminist rhetorical scholars have taken on the task of filling those gaps is to recover African American women's own discourse. These studies range from investigations of women's discourse, rhetorical style, and ethos to examinations of their rhetorical influence in notorious struggles for emancipation, education, civil rights, and more.³⁸³ Another scholarly response to the gaps in our rhetorical history has been to examine representations of African American women in media and popular culture.³⁸⁴ This study seeks to contribute to the latter.

Despite the fairly recent growth of scholarship on African American women, particularly in rhetoric and women's studies over the past decade, "little is known about the images and representations of black women in the news."³⁸⁵ Most of the current rhetorical scholarship addressing representations of African American women focuses on

³⁸³ See, for example, LaVerne Gyant and Deborah F. Atwater, "Septima Clark's Rhetorical and Ethnic Legacy," *Journal of Black Studies*, 26, 5 (May, 1996), 577-592; Shirley Wilson Logan, *We Are Coming: The Persuasive Discourse of Nineteenth Century Black Women* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press, 1999); Marsha Houston "Multiple Perspectives: African American Women Conceive their Talk," *African American Communication and Identities: Essential Readings* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), 157-164; Karla D. Scott, "Crossing Cultural Borders: 'Girl' and 'Look' as Markers of Identity in Black Women's Language Use," *African American Communication and Identities: Essential Readings* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), 165-174; Coretta Pittman, "Black Women Writers and the Trouble With Ethos: Harriet Jacobs, Billie Holliday, and Sister Souljah," *Rhetoric Society Quarterly*, 37, 1 (Winter 2007), 43-70.

³⁸⁴ See, for example, Tracey Owens Patton, "Ally McBeal and Her Homies: The Reification of White Stereotypes of the Other," *Journal of Black Studies*, 32, 2 (2001) 229-260; Marian Meyers, "African American Women and Violence: Gender, Race, and Class in the News," *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 21, 2 (June 2004), 95-118; Marian Meyers, "Crack Mothers in the News: A Narrative of Paternalistic Racism," *Journal of Communication Inquiry*, 28, 3 (July 2004), 194-216; Tina M. Harris, "Interrogating the Representation of African American Female Identity in the Films *Waiting to Exhale* and *Set It Off*," *African American Communication and Identities: Essential Readings* (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, 2004), 189-196.

³⁸⁵ Meyers, "African American Women and Violence," 97.

television shows and movies, and those studies of the news that do exist tend to look only at portrayals of women as victims of violence or drugs, not as agents within particular events.

The purpose of this study was to explore visual and discursive representations of African American women in press coverage of the 1965 Watts uprising. This study aimed to fill the gaps not only in our understanding of African American women's roles in important historical events but also to add to the sparse literature on race riot rhetoric. Michelle Wallace writes, "Not only do I see 'invisibility' as a problem of ideology; I also see it as the final, and most difficult to combat, stage of racism. . . . Today I understand the problem as one of representation."³⁸⁶ Reflecting upon Wallace's challenge to overcome the invisibility of intersecting categories of oppression such as racism, sexism, heterosexism, and classism, *Women of Watts* is an attempt to heed her call to unpack, examine, and disarm, instruments of invisibility. I focused here upon the coverage of the 1965 Watts uprising for many reasons. First, I believe that race riots serve as a rich and largely uninterrogated terrain of rhetorical constructions that have much to teach us about the intersecting nature of oppression. Second, the Watts uprising was one of the most famous riots in U.S. history as it came at a turning point in African American struggles against racism. Third, I believe that the press portrayals of African American women in Watts have much to teach us about the way that representations simultaneously depend on and alter dominant stereotypes about oppressed groups.

³⁸⁶ Wallace, *Black Macho*, xix.

This study relied on Joan Morgan's concept of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. The SBW is a label that helps us understand perceptions that African American women should constantly strive to be the rock that holds their family and community together while they are simultaneously condemned for their inevitable failure to rise to that impossible challenge. Drawing on this understanding, my analysis centered on the conflicting roles made rhetorically available to women through press coverage of the Watts uprising. After explaining the significance of rioting, and the Watts riot in particular, to the racial landscape of the U.S. and contending that women played a significant role in the uprising, I traced the portrayal of women in photographs and articles connected to the uprising. As I argued in Chapter One, these portrayals, taken together, demonstrate the ways that stereotypes regarding race, class, gender, and sexuality, converged on the women of Watts. The convergence of these stereotypes ultimately resulted in the availability of contradictory yet interdependent roles being made rhetorically available to African American women in Watts. These roles, when taken together, demonstrate the normalization of the impossible standard of STRONGBLACKWOMANHOOD. In the chapters that followed I not only examined the roles made rhetorically available in various publications, but also drew upon historical and sociological research to unpack and disarm some of the negative force of each portrayal.

The first role made rhetorically available to African American women in the Watts uprising was "looter." When women were portrayed as participants in the event, they were not violent nor were they depicted as integral to any form of protest. Women were thieves—either opportunists or crazy and selfish, or perhaps both. Here we saw the

way that reporters ignored the long history of looting as a repertoire for collective action that has been used, often by women, as a successful protest tactic in American history. Instead they drew upon more readily available stereotypes of African American women as primitive and savage, inordinately strong, and uncontrollable. Furthermore, these stories and images began to contrast the behaviors of female looters stealing family necessities and male looters stealing alcohol and firearms. The latter form of representation served not only to further existing stereotypes about African American women but to prepare audiences for more devastating stereotypes that would emerge after the riot and shape future struggles against racism the U.S., the images of STRONGBLACKWOMEN opposed to ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN.

Before linking the destruction done by rioters to the failure of women in black communities, newspaper reports made a seemingly positive role rhetorically available to African American women, that of moral compass. In Chapter Three I argued that depictions of African American women as church goers and sorority members relied on the historical notion of racial uplift and women's integral role in that process. These stories perpetuated the perception that there were "good" African Americans in Watts who opposed the riot and a smaller group of "bad" African Americans who were set on destroying their community. My reading of the local press coverage in this chapter was guided by an understanding of uplift rhetoric and its reliance on the notion of true womanhood. In the uplift mentality, certain African Americans, particularly the rising middle class, were called upon to demonstrate their humanity and goodness through an adherence to Christianity and a focus on service to the community. Women were particularly susceptible to criticism in the uplift mentality because to be a good woman

meant that you could demonstrate fragility and submissiveness. During the Watts uprising local papers portrayed “good” African American women as passive women attending church to seek guidance from male leaders, and as members of the Delta Sigma Theta sorority who met in Los Angeles at the time and were portrayed publicly condemning the rioters. This chapter demonstrated the difficulty reporters seemed to have finding “good” African American women. In stark contrast to the multiple pictures of women looting in publications like *Life* and the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, and the numerous women lined up for food relief in Chapter Four, there was one photograph of the “good” women of Watts. Only a few “brave and concerned” women were pictured in the *Los Angeles Times* attending church. Whereas there were only a handful of moral women in Watts, there were an abundance of photographs and stories celebrating the good women of Delta Sigma Theta. This chapter demonstrated the way that class, along with race and sex, was used to determine African American women’s morality.

In Chapter four I analyzed representations of African American women after the riot which fell into two categories: welfare moms who stood in line asking for relief, and matriarchs who were the focus of selective coverage of the Moynihan report as an explanation for urban rioting. Whereas the stories and images in Chapter Three gave some African American women a reprieve from depictions of them as savage and immoral or overly strong, the stories and images in Chapter Four gave the stereotype of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN its full force. Stories about the failure and expense of welfare alongside photographs of women and children waiting in line for food were combined with selective accounts of a government report which portrayed overbearing women as the cause of black family break down. These portrayals implied that African

American women's failure to live up to their proper roles in society as the perfect provider, submissive wife, and stay at home mother, resulted in urban riots.

Whereas each chapter provided an account of the ways in which stereotypes present in the Watts coverage existed earlier in the American imagination, taken together they demonstrate a unique convergence of those stereotypes on the women of Watts. That convergence gave full force to the myth of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. In Chapter One I explained that scholars such as Joan Morgan, Kimberly Springer, and Michelle Wallace have traced negative portrayals of black women's strength to the culture of slavery where it was used to justify the mistreatment of African American women and to perpetuate a contrasting image of frail femininity for white women. In Chapter Three we saw how, particularly during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African American women were able to use clubs and sororities to demonstrate the positive potential of their strength. However, by the late 1960s and early 1970s, as the Black Power Movement expanded, Michelle Wallace argues that black women's strength was once again portrayed as negative and destructive. Today, Joan Morgan labels that negative image the STRONGBLACKWOMAN a contradictory and impossible standard of perfection that black women are expected to meet and demonized when they inevitably fail to do so.

In the beginning of this dissertation I wondered how the shift occurred between early twentieth century portrayals of African American women's strength as an asset to their community, to the present where it is understood as stifling black male progress. After examining the convergence of race, class, sex, and gender stereotypes on the women of Watts, I argue that press portrayals of African American women during and

immediately following the uprising were integral to the development of the myth of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN that exists today. In the early twentieth century, Deborah Gray White argues, the National Association of Colored Women may have placed a heavy burden on black women to be “chaste and moral.” However, she explains, “for all its elitism, it did not allow them to be slandered without rebuttal.”³⁸⁷ By the time the Watts riot occurred, despite outcry against the Moynihan report by public intellectuals, there was no organization like the NACW, which came to the defense of African American women. But it was not the Moynihan report alone that created the image of STRONGBLACKWOMEN who were responsible for the development of ENDANGEREDBLACKMEN. As Michelle Wallace argues, the perception that African American women have it easier than African American men was not new. However, coverage of the Watts uprising demonstrated that poor African American women were, obviously, doing something wrong. As reporters worked to explain to newspaper and magazine readers the reasons for what they perceived as the nation’s worst race riot, they used the portions of Moynihan’s report that fit with the story they were already telling. The black woman was strong, she was able to obtain professional employment, she married (and divorced) at will, had many children, and was often their sole provider. Sometimes, as we saw in Chapter Three, she used her power for good, going to church and as a sorority member helping the community. However, African American women were also causing a number of problems. Despite their gains in employment women

³⁸⁷ Deborah Gray White, *Too Heavy A Load: Black Women in Defense of Themselves 1894-1994* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1999), 211.

made bad decisions and remained poor. These women were, by their very nature, deviant and the looting photographs proved it. They were crazy and selfish, taking things that didn't belong to them simply because they could. They were promiscuous. In Chapter Four we saw women with up to eight children asking for relief to help feed them all. Al Bine of the *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner* was quick to point out that their dependency was costing loyal taxpayers far too much. Moynihan simply explained that black women's strength was also their greatest weakness. These women, who we now see as STRONGBLACKWOMEN, are so strong that they take jobs from men, keeping men from prospering and being able to support their families. They divorce often further undermining the strength of any black family unit. Their decisions, articles about Moynihan's report implied, were costing black families and communities dearly.

It is no wonder that in 1999 Joan Morgan wrote, "*for reasons of emotional health and overall sanity, I've retired from being a STRONGBLACKWOMAN.*" After acting like an SBW all her life Morgan chose to draft "*a reorientation memo.*"³⁸⁸ The STRONGBLACKWOMAN, Morgan explained, is charged with taking on the world, surviving any life challenge, and smiling through it. The SBW does not have the option of acknowledging her pain or her difficulties yet she must handle everything with *silent* strength and dignity, similar to the "true woman" ideal at the turn of the century. But, unlike the turn of the century, since the mid 1960s her strength has also served as a justification for her oppression. In the Watts coverage African American women were, more often than not, portrayed as delinquent. They stole, collected welfare, and were evil

³⁸⁸ Morgan, *When Chickenheads Come Home to Roost*, 85. Emphasis original.

matriarchs. These women made poor choices and the implication was that their suffering (and their community's suffering) was a result of those poor choices. Some women, like those in church or the sorority, made better choices and thus lived better lives. Here, as it did during slavery, African American women's strength again became justification for her oppression.

In black communities today, Morgan explains, the myth of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN is that she does not have needs. She can take on everyone else's problems, she is as Wallace described in 1978, a "Superwoman." The SBW is not simply strong, black, and woman, she is all three at all times, living in constant fear of failure. But, as the Watts coverage demonstrated, failure is inevitable. In the meantime, other people's dependence on her strength, as in the case of the ENDANGEREDBLACKMALE, perpetuates the problem. As the coverage of Moynihan's report explained, so long as the black woman is strong, black men can only be weak and that weakness prevents them from holding their community together—something the SBW ultimately fails to do.

There is another problem with the myth of the SBW that exists in the minds of many white people and people of privilege today. In 1978 Wallace described a disturbing interaction she had with a black male friend who had a Ph.D. in psychology. She said:

We were looking at some footage of a black woman who seemed barely able to speak English, though at least six generations of her family before her had certainly claimed it as their first language. She was in bed wrapped in blankets, her numerous small, poorly clothed children huddled around her. Her apartment looked rat-infested, cramped, and dirty. She had not, she said, had heat and hot water for several days. My friend, a solid member of the middle class now but surely no stranger to poverty in his childhood, felt obliged to comment—in order to assuage his guilt, I can

think of no other reason—“That is a *strong* sister,” as he bowed his head in reverence.³⁸⁹

This interaction demonstrates the way in which the SBW image allows those with privilege to assuage their guilt over any suffering or oppression that African American women face. The SBW image allows even educated observers, like the man in Wallace’s story, to believe either that African American women are strong enough to survive such horrible conditions or, that the process of surviving is good because it makes them stronger. Just as this theme emerged in the welfare and Moynihan stories after Watts, it too appeared in coverage during the more recent devastation of Hurricane Katrina in New Orleans. After the Hurricane in which so many lost their lives, newspaper stories and magazine covers proudly featured various portrayals of STRONGBLACKWOMEN and their children as symbols of survival.³⁹⁰ This myth, which gained momentum in press portrayals of the Watts uprising, persists today. By embracing Wallace’s call to unpack, examine, and disarm such harmful representations this study aimed to give visibility to this pervasive and damaging myth and offer the historical backing to begin decreasing its rhetorical force.

³⁸⁹ Wallace, *Black Macho*, 108-9.

³⁹⁰ Some examples included the covers of special issues of *Time* (12 Sept. 2005) and *National Geographic* (August 2005) and stories like “A Hard Road; Even its Name Stirs Painful Memories of the 9th Ward Devastation. But Somehow, Amid the Memorials to Katrina Victims and Skeletons of Houses, Faith and Hope Survive on Flood Street,” *Times-Picayune* (29 Oct. 2006), Living-1.

Contributions to Feminist Rhetorical Studies

This study arose out of my desire to add a feminist voice to burgeoning conversations regarding race riot rhetoric. In that process I learned that there have been more “race riots” in U.S. history than I ever could have imagined and most, if not all, of them were not only about race, but generally included other dynamics such as class and gender as well. As I gained a more nuanced understanding of race riot rhetoric I came to see that the public understanding of what occurred in each situation and why, was heavily dependent upon popular representations of the event. Additionally, I saw that although women seemed to be present in many riot events, even the most attentive riot scholars often failed to acknowledge women’s roles. My study of press portrayals of women in the Watts uprising is an attempt to understand and articulate the ways that representations rely on and simultaneously alter stereotypes about a particular group. Recognizing Wallace’s point that “the mainstream media still make [the] basic error on a daily basis” of failing to talk about multiple forms of oppression at the same time, “giving combinations of racism and sexism additional power to do their dirty work,”³⁹¹ I believe that this study is a step toward understanding the intersecting nature of oppression as it is manifested in media portrayals of African American women.

This dissertation is an interdisciplinary effort which contributes to many areas relevant to rhetoric and women’s studies scholarship. To complete this study I combined a methodological focus in feminist rhetorical criticism with scholarship from communication, women’s studies, history, and sociology, to answer the question: how

³⁹¹ Wallace, *Black Macho*, xviii.

did the media use stories and images to represent African American women in the Watts uprising? I see this work contributing to rhetorical theory and criticism as well as women's studies in at least four important ways: by advancing our understanding of a politics of representation, adding to scholarly work on African American women, highlighting the importance of riot studies to rhetoric and women's studies scholarship, and using black feminist theory to shape a method of rhetorical criticism particularly well suited for disarming harmful representations of multiple identity categories.

Politics of Representation

This study hopes to advance our understanding of the politics of representation. Thinking of oppression in terms of visibility, as Wallace calls us to do, forces us to interrogate representations. Recognizing racism, classism, sexism, and heterosexism in terms of representation gives us way of tracing who has the power to construct these discourses and what they use their power to say. Thus, we can see representation as a political endeavor whereby dominant groups gain and maintain power by perpetuating particular images of those who lack the power to represent themselves.

As I mentioned in Chapter Four, Solinger explains that, "When cultural, political, and legal authorities have taken the right to deny all women independence and access to self-determining decision making, these authorities have also been able to treat different groups of women differently, depending on the variables of race and class."³⁹²

³⁹² Solinger, "Dependency and Choice," 23.

Examining press portrayals of African American women in Watts we have learned the ways that those with the cultural authority exercised “symbolic power” to represent women in the riot torn area of Los Angeles.³⁹³ Drawing on well engrained and conflicting stereotypes about African American women, the press was able to paint a picture of women in Watts that the public could accept without much effort. Combining pictures and stories about looters, church goers, and dependent mothers, these cultural authorities managed public perceptions of the women of Watts. Even as women rioted to protest their oppression, the press painted a disempowering picture of these women as strong yet ill equipped to make the right decisions that would help their families and communities move out of a condition of poverty and live the American dream.

African American Women’s Rhetoric

My examination addresses another rich area of study to the growing body of research on African American women. As feminist scholars and our colleagues in rhetoric, history, sociology, African and African American studies, and a plethora of other disciplines continue to work toward a comprehensive understanding of the integral roles African American women have played in U.S. history we should increase our focus on riots. In recent years scholars like Belinda Robnett have courageously questioned the

³⁹³ For more on the politics of representation and symbolic power see Stuart Hall, “The Spectacle of the ‘Other’,” *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices* (London: Sage Publications, 1997).

exclusion of women from scholarly work on the Civil Rights Movement.³⁹⁴ Such interrogations have yielded a wealth of new insights into the major roles women played in struggles for racial equality.

However, while we seem to want to celebrate the efforts of particularly non-violent Civil Rights reformers, there remains an unstated reluctance to identify and interrogate the position of women who participate in more violent means of social change. We remain in a moment where it is easier to view women of all races as victims of violence rather than participants in it.³⁹⁵ This study is only a first step in recognizing that riots and the rhetoric surrounding them have played pivotal roles in African American women's history and if we are to fully understand that history we cannot ignore the violent aspects of it.

Race Riot Rhetoric

Just as this study demonstrates the importance of race riot rhetoric to African American women specifically, it also highlights the significance of race riot rhetoric as a

³⁹⁴ Belinda Robnett, *How Long? How Long? African American Women in the Struggle for Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997). In her introduction to the book Robnett describes her experience while writing on the topic of women in the Civil Rights Movement and indicates that some of her colleagues viewed the inclusion of gender as an issue for consideration in the movement as "inherently divisive to the African American Community," and saw "any analysis of gender as a white woman's issue" (4).

³⁹⁵ See for example, Meyers, "African American Women and Violence." Although this a groundbreaking study on representations of African American women in the news, it is part of a larger trend of describing African American women as victims. I am not saying that we should avoid recognizing that African American women are regularly the victims of unwarranted violence. However, I believe it is important to also recognize those times in which any group of women chooses to use violence as a means of expressing discontent or agitating for some form of change.

more general area of rhetorical inquiry. Despite the rich and complex rhetorical terrain that riots afford, sociologists seem to be the only scholars who have made sustained efforts to understand them. While those efforts have yielded a number of valuable lessons, I believe that rhetorical scholars have a different perspective with which to enhance the field of riot studies.

As we have seen here, the symbols we use to represent what happens in a riot, and why it happened, matter for a broad spectrum of people. Although communication scholars have given some brief attention to riot rhetoric, with more frequent investigations emerging in the wake of the 1992 Los Angeles riot, there has been a lack of sustained rhetorical inquiry into riots from which researchers might formulate critical perspectives or theoretical conclusions regarding riot rhetoric generally and race riot rhetoric more specifically.³⁹⁶ What makes race riots interesting from a rhetorical perspective is that to understand their dissident force we must draw on rhetorical conceptions of agency, identity, and representation. Depending on which of those rhetorical elements are emphasized at a given moment for a given group in a riot, public perception of the event changes with lasting effects on the transformative power of the uprising.

³⁹⁶ For communication research on riots generally see: Darnell M. Hunt, *Screening the Los Angeles "Riots": Race, Seeing, and Resistance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997); John Drury, "when Mobs are Looking for Witches to Burn Nobody's Safe: Talking About the Reactionary Crowd," *Discourse & Society*, 13, 1 (2002), 41-73; Sorin Adam Matei and Sandra Ball-Rokeach, "Watts, the 1965 Los Angeles Riots, and the Communicative Construction of the Fear Epicenter of Los Angeles," *Communication Monographs*, 72, 3 (Sept. 2005), 301-323. For rhetorical investigations see: Patrick C. Kennicott and Wayne E. Page, "H. Rap Brown: The Cambridge Incident," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 57, 3 (Oct. 1971), 325-335; John Fiske, "Radical Shopping in Los Angeles: Race, Media, and the Sphere of Consumption," *Media, Culture, & Society*, 16, 3 (1994), 469-486; Benjamin I. Page, "Speedy Deliberation: Rejecting '1960s Programs' As Causes of the Los Angeles Riots," *Political Communication*, 12 (1995), 245-261.

Feminist Rhetorical Criticism

This study also suggests new strategies for feminist rhetorical scholars in analyzing the intersecting nature of oppression. Drawing on Michelle Wallace's insight that "conjunctions not only of racism and sexism but also conjunctions of capitalist exploitation and compulsory heterosexuality . . . cannot be resolved at all. Rather they must be unpacked, examined, and disarmed,"³⁹⁷ I have approached this study with an eye toward refining those tools upon which rhetorical critics can draw to combat racism. I think that this project demonstrates a productive way of going about that process by offering more historically grounded readings of representational texts. I am not saying that rhetorical critics do not generally provide some historical backing for their reading of a given text. However, in this study I have not only used history as context for my critical unpacking of each portrayal; rather, I have offered detailed historical analysis alongside critical examinations in order to begin disarming some of the mythological constructions inherent within the texts. If racism truly is a problem of representation, this form of rhetorical criticism should prove useful in creating an informed readership whose historical knowledge informs and equips them to disarm harmful representations as they see them.

Such a perspective is particularly important as scholars strive to produce research that is more accessible to our students. Talking about this dissertation in the context of guest lecture on "race rhetoric" to upper division Communication Arts & Sciences majors, it became painfully obvious to me that we need to do a better job of educating our

³⁹⁷ Wallace, *Black Macho*, xix.

students about women's history in the U.S. In my brief lecture I began by quickly tracing the development, as I did in the introduction to this dissertation, of the myth of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. In a truncated version of the story I had planned to rely on at least a vague recognition by my audience of names such as Mary Church Terrell and Ida B. Wells Barnett as well as some familiarity with the women's club movement and the concept of "true womanhood." I was shocked and appalled to learn that none of the 40 students in the room had heard of these major figures in our nation's history nor did they have any familiarity with the concepts I planned to simply review. We cannot hope to break down myths and stereotypes about any group of people until we, as a society, know enough about the history and rhetoric of the people around us to understand the development of those stereotypes and have the power to debunk them.

Limitations

The texts that I chose for this study, *Life*, *Ebony*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, and *Los Angeles Herald-Examiner*, each contributed to a rich and nuanced view of the women in Watts during and after the 1965 uprising. Yet their varied perspectives, circulation patterns, and audiences made the performance of a coherent rhetorical criticism challenging. One of the primary yet tricky tasks when dealing with such a wide variety of texts is to describe each one not only in its own right but also in the context of the other publications in the study. Although I have attempted to craft thorough and detailed descriptions and analysis, there are some critical gaps in this study that require consideration.

First, although I have been trained as rhetorical critic and am well versed in the interdisciplinary perspectives of women's studies and feminist theory, in this study I have had to rely heavily on literature from multiple disciplines in which I am not an expert. As I mentioned, the bulk of riot studies exist in the field of sociology. Although I have had a course in social movements from a sociological perspective and read a breadth of sociological riot studies, there are bound to be elements of this literature that I missed either from lack of training or comprehension. However, I have done my best to summarize what I saw as the relevant parts of the literature, particularly in chapters one and two. Additionally, the methodology with which I chose to analyze these texts relied heavily on a historical understanding of particular constructions of race, class, and sex. Again, I have taken courses from talented feminist and rhetorical historians which equipped me to employ historical studies in the process of conducting rhetorical criticism. Using that knowledge I included what I believe were brief yet detailed histories of concepts such as looting, racial uplift, and welfare, but I have no doubt that a trained historian could add volumes to each of these sections. While I have read extensively in these areas and attempted to conduct a comprehensive rhetorical analysis of these five sources' representations of African American women at the time, I am sure that a critic well versed in African American women's history or sociological literature on race riots could add many more levels of critical insight to my observations.

A second limitation to this study is that I am not an African American woman. I recognize that because I am a white woman who grew up in suburban Southern California watching race riots on television and worrying about my father as he went to work in Los Angeles during the 1992 riot, I have a particular perspective on riots. From

this perspective I may miss aspects of the coverage that someone from a different ethnic background or social location might see. However, I do not believe critics should limit themselves to researching only those topics that appear, on face, to be relevant to their social location. Although I am not affected in the same way by representations of African American women as are African American women themselves, for better or worse, these representations do play a part in shaping my worldview and I have a responsibility as a citizen of the United States to understand how different representations have shaped the way I perceive other citizens.

In the conclusion to his book, *Watts: The Aftermath*, Paul Bullock explained:

If there is a justification for a white man like myself to write about the problems of black people, it lies in the duality of the world through which the problems must be approached. The Negro trapped in a ghetto lives in the midst of a society fashioned by others to serve their own needs and interests. The larger community defines the “role” of the Negro, and then condemns the Negro for playing the role, or finds a rationale for its attitude in the resultant stereotyping of the black person.³⁹⁸

Bullock articulates an important point, that we need to be able to see multiple sides to the problem of racism and the roles made rhetorically available for one group by the group that holds power over them. The roles made rhetorically available to African American women by media outlets during the Watts uprising and other prominent events in our nation’s history contribute to my own understanding and stereotyping of African American women. Therefore, I have a responsibility to learn about the development of those representations and the way I process them. This does not mean that because I am white, I automatically am more powerful than someone who is not. What it means that I

³⁹⁸ Bullock, *Watts: The Aftermath*, 266.

must recognize my social location and understand the ways that racist discourses convey privilege upon me based on the color of my skin or the class to which I belong.

Like Bonnie Dow, I recognize that “as a white, middle class female, I share racial and class privilege with other women in the demographic category. Yet how we experience that privilege, how we interpret it, and what we do with it differs greatly with regard to our personal histories and our daily, material circumstances (just as does our experience of being oppressed or marginalized as women).” Although I understand that my social location always already imposes some limits on my critical perspective, I also believe that interrogating representations of different groups in mainstream media helps each of us to better understand the differences that exist “*within* as well as *among* categories of oppression and privilege,” and understanding which Dow identifies as “crucial to unpacking the politics of social location.”³⁹⁹

An additional limitation on this study was the potential exclusion of relevant sources, or stories within particular sources. Although I conducted a thorough search of every publication I could get my hands on, hard copy, electronic, and microfilm, and I included all of those in which I found pictures and stories that specifically mentioned the women of Watts, it is highly likely that I missed some. Occasionally while searching I came across publications that The Pennsylvania State University library did not own and they were too difficult to obtain. Even as I finished the first chapter of this work I was still waiting on microfilm of the *Sentinel* and *Herald-Examiner*. Once I received these resources and saw the material that they contained I had to go back and add them to the

³⁹⁹ Bonnie Dow, “Politicizing Voice,” *Western Journal of Communication*, 61, 2 (Spring 1997), 247.

study. At some point it would have been too time consuming to wait on loans of other sources and waiting would likely have delayed my completion of the dissertation and made the analysis overly cluttered and complex. At the same time, the inclusion of more sources could also have offered a more comprehensive look at the riot coverage.

Suggestions for Future Research

This study focused only on representations of African American women in the Watts uprising in five specific publications. In doing so I was able raise a number of important issues that should interest rhetoricians and women's studies scholars alike, including the intersecting nature of oppression, the importance of historical knowledge in critical analysis, and the development of the myth of the STRONGBLACKWOMAN. But these are just small steps in the larger potential field of race riot rhetoric. It is my hope that this study has peaked more interest and generated more questions than it has answered. I believe that it points us to at least six different yet related directions we might take future research.

First, I hope that this study fosters interest in a larger field of race riot rhetoric. Although scholars like Benjamin Page and John Fiske have drafted essays that inspired me to write about race riots and there were at least two papers on riots presented at the National Communication Association conference in the previous year, there is a vast amount of work to be done in this area.⁴⁰⁰ Scholars interested in racism, classism, sexism,

⁴⁰⁰ The two papers at the National Communication Association convention in 2006 were not necessarily studies in race riot rhetoric but they were a step in the right direction of expanding

heterosexism, and other interlocking forms of oppression have much to learn from the rhetoric surrounding race riots and would be well served in further developing the critical vocabulary necessary to take on careful work in this area. As rhetorical critics continue to play with a variety of texts and blend traditional training in the analysis of public address with critical inquiries into music, television, monuments, and more, they will find many opportunities to stretch their critical skills in understanding race riot rhetoric. For example, although the most concentrated body of rhetorical analysis on a riot event concerns the Los Angeles riot of 1992, there are a plethora of texts that have not yet been touched by rhetorical critics on the topic including popular music, poetry, and artwork arising out of the 1992 riot.

Second, while this study focused only on representations of African American women in Watts, a comparative analysis might be made between African American women and women of other races appearing in the same publications. As I scanned the pages of each publication there were, on occasion, depictions of white women as nurses in the uprising or, in later section of the paper, attending social functions such as dances and club meetings. Since these are simply passing observations and not the result of sustained attention to the representations of other women, I cannot offer any critical comparison of the groups. However, I am sure that a critic interested in the interdependence of certain types of racial depictions would find much to work with in these texts.

communication scholarship on riots in general. The first paper was a content analysis by Kenneth Lachlan, J. Peter Blair, Paul Skalski, David Westerman, and Patric Spence, titled "Public Relations for Law Enforcement: Implications of the Media Coverage of the Cincinnati Riots." The second paper was focused on social movement theory and was written by a student, Christopher Roberts, titled "Street Urchins in Christopher Park: The Role of Street Urchins in the Stonewall Riots."

My own discussion of the Watts riot tends often toward a binary, black and white, description of the event. This is because, while there were some Latino residents in Watts at the time, they were rarely mentioned and in the 1960s coverage. Most of the press, as well as scholarly accounts that were produced, were well engrained in the reductionist black versus white mentality of the time and I wanted my research to demonstrate the pervasive nature of these binary constructions. However, in other riots, including the “zoot suit riots” in Los Angeles 1942, and the “Rodney King Rebellion” in Los Angeles 1992, were very much about a clash of multiple cultures and might yield a more nuanced view of race relations in the U.S. Alternately, if one wanted to look back further in history to massive riots like the one in Tulsa 1921, they might retain the black versus white dichotomy but examine what happens when the roles are reversed and white citizens riot brutally attack black citizens.

Just as this study added representations of women to scholarship on the Watts riot that mainly focused on men, other studies could do the same with different riots and different mediums. For example, my own brief investigation into television portrayals of women in the 1992 Los Angeles riot yielded some overlap with this study that might suggest larger patterns in race riot reporting. It also yielded many observations that differed from my analysis of the press coverage in Watts. These differing insights may serve to explain the adjustments reporters make when utilizing different mediums or help rhetorical theorists develop an understanding of different rhetorical techniques.

We should also avoid being entirely focused on the U.S. in our studies of race riot rhetoric. In only the past six years, since 2001, we have seen riotous outbreaks in countries such as England, France, and Australia. It is possible that scholars with an

international focus could join the conversation and bringing a different view to the table or widen our perspective on the rhetorical constructions riot events around the world.

Additionally, this analysis helps us to see the ways in which intersecting discourses of oppression converge on African American women producing and perpetuating the SBW stereotype. Later work could and should continue to ask how this myth is used against women in today's society. Although Hurricane Katrina in late August of 2005 did not result in rioting, only what some called looting, coverage during and after the hurricane relied heavily on depictions of black women looking desperate for help alongside stories of survival. Perhaps what we saw in that coverage was not the STRONGBLACKWOMAN, but I am inclined to think that a careful rhetorical critic could either find evidence of the myth of the SBW in Hurricane Katrina coverage or else, they might be able to show the latest twist in representations of African American women in crisis.

In a discussion I had with students about this dissertation, one young woman asked me if the solution to stereotypical portrayals of the SBW in the media was to begin to show images of weak black women, to show them as unable to lift themselves up. I explained to her, and continue to believe, that the solution is not that simple. Showing only weak women would not solve the representational dilemma because portrayals of weakness are the status quo and they reinforce the myth that no matter how strong these women are they will ultimately fail. In Watts we saw photos of black women in line for food, a potentially weak state, but we read that photo knowing that she was the matriarch of the family, that she was really there because she was an SBW who would use that food to sustain her damaged family. Over the past few years we have seen similar images

coming out of disasters like Hurricane Katrina. There women appeared in perhaps the most weak and desperate of states, yet we read the stories, saw the women struggling to swim to safety or protect small children, and we knew that they would take the weight of the world on their shoulders and lift their family and community out of devastation—a noble goal if it were within reach. Unfortunately overcoming racist and sexist oppression is not as simple as the pictures we display or the captions we write, those are symptoms of a much larger problem.

The understanding which has developed over time is that we can not simply celebrate the strength and resolve of black women, a celebration that might prove to be fruitful. Instead through depictions like those of Watts, we come to use celebrations of the SBW's strength as justification for a deadly combination of racism, sexism, and classism that many black women face. The STRONGBLACKWOMAN is not celebrated merely because she is strong, but because she bears the weight of the American Dream on her shoulders—she is responsible not only for overcoming the depths of despair, but for pulling everyone else up with her and if she falters, even for a moment, she has failed not only herself but her entire community. We cannot simply reverse this portrayal. Instead we must continue to learn about African American women's history and the rhetoric that surrounds it. In doing so we continue to unpack, examine, and disarm these harmful stereotypes as we encounter them and slowly break apart harmful myths about African American women and other oppressed groups.

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