# Forever Idle: The Resilience of Colonial Ideas on Black Bodies

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**ABSTRACT:** My argument hinges on the theme of time: how ideas attached to racialized bodies endure (and mutate) across time. I highlight the question of falling behind and/or failing forward by tracing the failings of social policy and its impacts on Black bodies by conducting a cross-historical analysis of seventeenth-century South Africa, specifically travel diaries from European incursions and twentieth-century United States, specifically works of social policy. My study analyzes the ways that idleness, as a pejorative social characteristic, is tied to racialized bodies across these two colonial contexts.

**KEYWORDS:** Colonialism; Social Policy; Idleness; Time and Space; Welfare State

## Introduction

In this paper I am interested in the way colonial ideas 'stick' to bodies, such that particular discursive and affective regimes endure (and mutate) across time. Specifically, I examine how the concept of idleness is closely tied to Black bodies, framing them as lazy and decadent—and consequently legitimizing oppressive practices. I will analyze the ways in which idleness, as a pejorative social characteristic, is tied to racialized bodies across two different colonial contexts: seventeenth-century travel diaries from European incursions into South Africa and twentieth-century social policy in the United States. It is widely known that European colonizers were present and active in seventeenth century South Africa but my argument is that the racial discourses they constructed survived beyond the explicit institutions of colonialism and are evident in twentieth-century U.S social policy. To be clear, I am not suggesting that these racist discourses proceed linearly in time from South Africa to the United States but rather I contend that there is a confluence of these affects circulating. Beyond the everyday racism that Black bodies are subjected to, I argue that these discourses were used by the state to continue to manage them, therefore perpetuating the colonial project.

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During the colonial period, discourses of 'the idleness of Black people' legitimated the colonial project of bringing 'civilization' to 'inferior groups' (Spillers, 1987, 65). More recently, the 'idle other' in US social policy is constructed as a threat to the political community as a result of their 'dependence' on the state, consequently legitimating the retrenchment of social support and the entrenchment of state discipline which disproportionately affects racialized bodies (Boris, 2007, 599). I will focus on the constructions of the Hottentot Venus (South Africa) and the Welfare Queen (United States) so as to provide a close reading of idleness and colonialism and their effects on Black women.[2]

I address the lasting effects of the discourses of idleness and decadence through resilience theory. The concept of resilience has been taken up widely and is typically "associated with [the individual's] inner strength or resourcefulness and an ability to bounce back following adversity or trauma" (Aranda et al, 2012; Hart and Blincow, 2007); however, in the context of this paper, resilience is not applied only to sentient beings but also to lasting ideas and institutions. There are collective and organizational aspects to resilience that are useful to my study of the racialized lived experience and the sociocultural markers that have 'stuck' to individual bodies and lasted across time and space.

Paul Pierson discusses the resilience of the welfare state, positing that it "has proved to be far more *resilient* than other key components of national political economies and far more *durable* than existing theories of the welfare state would lead one to expect" (Pierson, 1996, 144, emphasis mine). He explains resilience as a characteristic of welfare state retrenchment and mobilizes it as a tool for understanding how the contemporary welfare state carries with it traces of the past. Kay Aranda et al carry this impulse further and add that "contemporary interest in resilience may indeed be a response to broader socio-cultural narratives of fear, anxiety and powerlessness and a further manifestation of neo-liberal welfare's disciplinary logic" (Aranda et al, 2012, 559-560; Leach, 2008). Although the authors gesture to how resilience can refer to sentient subjects, they also extend the definition further and ask, "where resilience resides, [and] how it is achieved"—both queries that demand we apply this theory to ideas and institutions, as well and individuals (Aranda et al, 2012, 550). I am suggesting that idleness and decadence are resilient qualities of deeply embedded racist social

[2] Black women have double the burden than Black men because they deal with patriarchal oppression as well as racial, and this makes them the most vulnerable targets to such colonial constructions (Wright, 2018, 230).

institutions: historically seen in my studied travel diaries and letters, and contemporarily mobilized in social policy.

Prominent scholars of political theory interpret resilience as an adjective used to describe human subjects, providing an alternative reading of this concept. As such, addressing this position is an important step in describing how my study extends this scholarship. Mark Neocleous suggests that 'resilience' has become a significant and popular political category in the past decade and draws on a "2008 OECD document on state-building, styled 'from fragility to resilience', defin[ing] the latter as 'the ability to cope with changes in capacity, effectiveness or legitimacy" (Neocleous, 2013, 3). This definition describes resilience as a state of being that develops for or is acquired by human subjects as a sort of defence mechanism post-trauma.

Similarly, Heidi Rimke, who has published widely on resilience theory, shares Neocleous' position and criticizes resilience discourses because "they promote a neoliberal model of mental distress that frames struggle as a distinctly personal obstacle to overcome by those with the fortitude and the moral strength of so-called resilience" (Rimke, 2018, 33). Both scholars scrutinize these discourses because they perpetuate neoliberal perspectives on individual responsibility: putting the onus on subjects to be resilient enough to 'pull through' harm that is typically state-caused. I argue that resilience discourse is far more capacious than Neocleous and Rimke, among others (Howell and Voronka 2013) suggest. As social benefits are retrenched and welfare is increasingly devolved to the individual, reading resilience as a *quality* of a pejorative idea (idleness, decadence) or institution (welfare state) and therefore a mechanism by which these ideas and institutions endure and mutate across time and space, is imperative in our current political climate.

**Case Studies**

For the case studies I have selected for this paper I will first provide a broader look at their social and political climates, and then I will conduct my close readings. My two primary sources are travel diary entries from Dutch colonizers in South Africa and a passage of United States social policy from the *Moynihan Report* (1965). In these two sources I will look at how and why they represent racialized understandings of idleness. I chose to examine Dutch travel diaries in South Africa because they document a pivotal moment in South African history: first European contact and the beginnings of racialized sexual discourse around Black women in that area (Dekker, 1995, 2). Scholars have noted that "our

knowledge of African history is not supported by written documents and instead European reports form the only sources" making it all the more pertinent to closely examine a sample of these reports in an effort to understand that colonial moment (Bassant and Tedeschi, 1990, 157).

Similarly important is the *Moynihan Report* by U.S Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan (1965), which was originally titled, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", because it marks a moment in recent history when slavery had allegedly ended ('formally' in 1865) but conversations regarding the 'nature' of Black families and 'managing' them were still present and widely accepted. Conducting close readings of these cases will allow for clearer examinations of the Hottentot Venus and the Welfare Queen, which follow each, respectively.

After establishing how Hottentot bodies were described and abused, I will narrow my focus to the Hottentot Venus, Saartjie Baartman, and how she was reduced to just her body, designated as 'idle', and put in a circus for White visitors to gawk at and consume. I will then move on to a close reading of part of the *Moynihan Report* to examine contemporary constructions of 'Black idleness' before analyzing the construct of the Welfare Queen. In the second part of the contemporary cases, the language of idleness has stretched and mutated to label Black women as 'lazy' and dependant on the state which cripples them (Shahani, 2016, 30; Spillers, 1987, 66). Understanding Saartjie Baartman's story is a way to trace the stickiness of idle discourse around Black women because arguably she set the precedent for the way they have been described and subjugated to date.

**Historical Context**

This section outlines the historical contexts of seventeenth-century South Africa and the twentieth-century United States. I am specifically interested in which groups of people were involved in the colonial activities of the time, what colonial culture looked like, and what the social and political contexts of the Hottentot Venus and the Welfare Queen were. It is important to note that even though the Hottentot Venus was a real, individual woman, and the Welfare Queen is a racist social construct, I am reading both of them as colonial *archetypes* which have impacted history and affected the way Black women (17th century) and as a result, women of colour (20th century and today) are perceived and treated. In his chapter, "Idleness in South Africa", novelist and translator J.M. Coetzee frames the colonial moment in seventeenth century South Africa: he compiles diary entries by European—specifically Dutch—travel writers and so identifies who was

involved in this moment. He also identifies "discoveries" made by British commentators in South Africa at the time, and draws on various philosophers, Jean-Jacques Rousseau among them, who specifically discuss the Hottentots and their "indolence" (Coetzee, 1988, 128-9).

Coetzee and others (Shahani, 2016, 40; Hobson, 2011, 404) give insight on the variety of White colonizers and imposers (not directly colonizing but often visiting on holiday) who came to South Africa to *see* the Hottentots: to watch them, to laugh at them, and to be repulsed by them (Coetzee, 1988, 129; Jordan, 2003). A significant aspect of colonial culture in this moment was that Hottentot bodies were made a spectacle and then pathologized for it: being called indolent, or lazy, a quality that was allegedly inherent to them. In particular, Hottentot women were made to put on shows, parading their bodies for White audiences to consume. In the irony of putting on dance performances, wherein movement is typically necessary, their bodies were still categorized as lazy, immobile, "and perpetually accompanied by danger" (Rousseau, 1984, 13). This fear of the 'lazy and dangerous' Hottentot, will be seen later in the contemporary moment through the fear of the state-dependent body of colour.

Complex networks of meaning develop in this time in history, forming inextricable connections between the Hottentots and discourses of idleness.[3] The discourses themselves were associated with other, related pejorative characteristics. For example, Sarah Jordan discusses how idle Black bodies were also thought to be "grotesque" or repulsive and unnatural (Jordan, 2003, 135). I read characterizations of the grotesque Hottentot as an accusation of being 'out of pace' with what is deemed natural per the colonizers. In her book, *The Anxieties of Idleness,* Jordan compiles extensive primary evidence from the seventeenth to the late eighteenth centuries on the treatment and observation of the Hottentots and points out that reports of African idleness are exceptionally pervasive during this time.

While typically discussion of the grotesque racialized subject had much to do with their physical body (connoting filth, anomalous genitalia, strange eating habits, nudity), Jordan asserts that these ideas were deeply associated with idleness and an innate inability to 'keep up' with normative life, and consequently, normative time (Jordan, 2003, 135). For example, Philip D. Curtin asserts that

[3] Paul Ricoeur (1977) posits that behind every idea is a map, or a network of meaning. These larger meaning structures help us to see the dimensions of socially accepted and historically resilient understandings of idleness.

European colonizers and observers were “clock-conscious” and as such labeled Africans as lazy when they did not keep up similar labour habits (Curtin in Smith, 1997, 132). The most convincing reading of the connection between idleness and the grotesque is brought forward by Coetzee who argues that "idleness often comes together with, and sometimes *as the climax of*, a set of other characterizations", all of which depict black bodies as lazy abominations (Coetzee in Jordan, 2003, 129, emphasis mine). Indeed this reading is seen in nearly all notable records of Hottentot life as published by their observers and imposers.

Arguably the most profound example of the objectified and sexualized "idle" Hottentot is Saartjie 'Sara' Baartman. Saartjie Baartman was originally from South Africa and she went to Europe willingly because she was promised a better life—but instead she was made into a 'still' circus attraction, forced to showcase her naked body by standing still to an audience who had never seen a bare Black woman. Her White audience was fascinated by her protruding buttocks, breasts, and hips, a physique profoundly different than their own women's, and so they stared, touched, and laughed at her. Conclusions were made about her not being human because she looked nothing like a White woman (Hobson, 2011, 405). Baartman's body and identity had been categorized and colonized – from her non-African name with Saartjie being a Dutch diminutive of Sara, to her body that was made an idle spectacle. Here we see a stark contradiction between the non-African name and the othering of her body, as though she were simultaneously being domesticated and exoticized. Knowing her history is important because it allows us to see the travel writer's observations and conclusions in real-world application.

The latter half of my analysis focuses on the United States in the twentieth century, specifically in and around 1965 when Moynihan wrote his *Report.* Keeping in mind that slavery was legally abolished one hundred years prior, the political climate at this time still had residual racism through segregation in the everyday (schools, theatres) in some states. Even though slavery was over and the government policy was amended to desegregate schools, individual states implemented this law on their own timelines. The Civil Rights Movement was nearing its end at this time, and progress had indeed been made in terms of more rights for Black bodies (Bradley, 2016, 5; Berghel 2017, 422). This was a post-slave trade moment wherein Black people were still subjected to unfair treatment, socially and financially[4]—the latter impacting how and to what extent

[4] Some examples of unfair social and financial/economic treatment are: socially embedded everyday racism, non-state sanctioned segregation, and poorer wages and employment

they could support their families. Often the result was that these groups of people had to rely on state-funded assistance, or welfare—a program that started in 1935—and up until the mid-sixties (and today) was far from equal for Black people as the financial stipends they are afforded are statistically less generous than those given to White people (Brown and Wellman, 2005, 197).

Because of the still substantial racism and racially divided socio-economic outcomes of the time, the derogatory construct of the Welfare Queen emerged later through the media in 1974 (Kohler-Hausmann, 2015, 762). The Welfare Queen was an archetype used to describe women, specifically Black women, who were unmarried or divorced, had multiple children, did not rely on their husbands or any male partner, and either misused state assistance or collected too much of it, all while not working to support themselves or their families. Scholar Eileen Boris outlines specific qualities that are attributed to the Welfare Queen: their lack of motherhood insofar as having many children but not child-rearing in the 'traditional' way, their 'untamed' sexuality, and their lack of dependence on husbands and *overdependence* on the state (Boris, 2007, 598).

This archetype shares much in common with Baartman insofar as they are both positioned as idle bodies who are othered, sexualized, and ostracized from those around them *based on* their racialization. Much like Baartman, the Welfare Queen is feared but for different reasons: she is 'getting away' with misusing the system, a system that is now criticizing her for the precarity it put her in. What joins these two archetypes together is the marker of laziness, and more specifically, the inability to keep up with clock-time, or "bourgeois time", per Neocleous (2014, 68). Much like the Hottentots who are 'out of pace' with clock-conscious Europeans, neoliberal rhetoric frames racialized welfare recipients as delayed, uninterested in setting and meeting goals for progress, and crucially, that these grotesque qualities are willful.

As stated above, Neocleous might conclude from my reading that these neoliberal markers are the pejorative side-effects of resilience rhetoric being pushed on vulnerable subjects, that bourgeois time should compel us to consider the harmful impact of resilience rhetoric. While his reading is helpful, I assert that

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outcomes (Brown and Wellman, 2005, 196). For example, in the 1970s, "even when Black workers made substantial economic gains, Whites did better. Between 1947 and 1959, the absolute median income gap between Black and White workers grew from about $7,000 to about $11,500. It remained there until the economic boom of the 1990s" (Brown and Wellman, 2005, 196).

resilience—as a theoretical lens used to analyze racist ideas and discourse that have lasted and mutated across time and space—is a useful tool in delineating the lasting effects of racist affective and discursive regimes that still linger in contemporary social policy.

**Theoretical Framework**

This section details how idleness and stickiness can be understood as temporal concepts, lasting and mutating over time. Idleness has multiple connotations which construct a web of meanings through which we can understand it and its related concepts. Idleness is directly connected to a subject's assumed/constructed inability to be 'active', and productive—all qualities demonstrated by 'working hard' in the everyday (Coetzee, 1988, 18, Rousseau, 1984, 13). As a racialized concept, idleness is articulated through notions of civility, activity, and productiveness. As the European travelers discussed the Hottentot's "misery, purposeful lack of work, and alleged lethargy", the diary writers (willfully or not) construct a binary by tying these characteristics to a particular population defined by their racialized identity of 'Blackness' (Coetzee, 1988, 22). Idleness, then, comes to be a kind of central signifier for moral, spiritual, and physical decay and inferiority (Turner, 2003, 5). The inverse of this binary is implicitly constructed and is represented as that which is active and hardworking: Whiteness.

Yet, idleness is not just a concept which occurs *across* time but is a temporal concept in and of itself. Typically, idleness is a quality or trait assigned to bodies, just like other colonial descriptors of people's hair, skin colour, dress, and the like. I argue that idleness differs from typical descriptors because it implies wider assumptions on the colonized body (Turner, 2003). Idleness signals a lack of mobility, progress, and change. These assumptions imply a slowed down version of time: that life for bodies deemed idle does not 'move' at the 'normative' pace, or that the bodies themselves are the impediments, per the colonizer's assumption that they are abject, stupid, and other. As such we can observe the resilience of these affective and discursive regimes tied to idleness and how they have endured over time and space.

This understanding of idleness leverages deep and complex Eurocentric moral frameworks which give it meaning. Although this history is too broad to engage with fully in this paper, I will draw on work by Bryan Turner who discusses how particular affects are tied to particular bodies in this Eurocentric history. For example, idleness is tied to inactivity, lethargy, and potentially moral and physical

obesity, which are understood (interrelatedly) as individual moral failures which connote melancholy, excess, a lack of control, and a sign of social corruption (Turner, 2003, 2). Conversely, activity, sacrifice, and discipline imply 'responsible' regulation of the body, which benefits society (Turner, 2003, 5).

Similarly, decadence is tied to inactivity, excess, and lack of control, and is also a sign of social and moral decay (Sanders, 2011, 124). The common understanding of decadence is the act of over indulgence in what is luxurious, excessive, and pleasurable. The variation of decadence that I am utilizing traces back to the mid sixteenth century, from the Latin term "decadentia", meaning to decay (Sanders, 2011, 124; Turner, 2003, 2). This definition intersects with the racist language of idleness that the travel writers included in Coetzee's text use in relation to the Hottentots *choosing* to be poor and miserable, *opting into* lethargy (a synonym for decay)—as a result of their "innate" idle qualities.

When discussing idleness as a racialized concept, it is useful to consider leisure per William Gleason. For Gleason, leisure is "the counterpoint to work" and he posits that we can understand the formation of the self in relation to national identity by studying the growing emphasis on notions of leisure (Gleason, 1999, 300). If, for this paper, the opposite of idleness is work, and for Gleason, the opposite of leisure is work—then how are idleness and leisure similar if they are both counterpoints to work? I argue that there is a racial dimension to this binary (leisure versus idleness), because typically, leisure is a privilege (read: I like to sit and read for hours; I enjoy lying by the beach; I prefer to spend my days thinking about the world) afforded to subjects as a result of past effort or class–and therefore, 'well-earned'. Conversely, 'idleness' is a result of *a lack of* effort (read: you are lazy; you are unemployed; you lack ambition) which is typically deployed to described people of colour and poorer people (Ali and Syed, 2011, 352). As such, leisure somewhat haunts discussions of idleness as its 'other face', yet it does not manifest in these cases as it is not deployed for people of colour.

The cultural history of idleness and decadence (particular in colonial, Christian European, and later, American contexts) provides a social, moral, and cultural lexicon in which idleness, decadence, and activity are situated, draw upon one another and other related concepts, and crucially, 'stick' to bodies. 'Stickiness' is a concept discussed by Sara Ahmed in her book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*; it describes the ways that emotions are tied to particular words and discourses which can operate across different contexts. In this way, 'traces' of affective-discursive regimes from a particular context can be mobilized and used in other

contexts. Through this phenomenon we can begin to parse the ways in which the discourses and affects tied to idleness in seventeenth century colonialism re-emerge in twentieth century American social policy (Ahmed, 2007, 565). Othered bodies are assigned names (per Hortense Spillers), and those names "stick" to their bodies (per Ahmed), travelling with them, and remaining over the passage of time, as we will see in the examination of the Welfare Queen.

Should discourses of idleness appear in both temporal and spatial contexts, there is a premise for arguing a possible connection. This is not to say that contemporary discourses of 'lazy Black people' or 'the welfare queen' come from people who read seventeenth century colonial travel diaries, but that the discourses articulated by the latter were sufficiently 'stuck' to Black women that they retained salience across time and space. Historical scholars have asserted that "the conviction that Africans were *idle* specifically provided a splendid justification for slavery" and I would like to examine the ways these justifications have continued (not necessarily linearly) across time and space (Jordan, 2003, 158; Smith, 1997, 133; hooks, 2015, 91). The following section will outline the criteria by which my examinations will unfold, focusing on how idleness as a temporal concept can have more specific dimensions: mental and physical idleness.

*Criteria.* In each case I am looking for two main topics of discussion: activity (a physical action or movement) and initiative (mental action initiated by the self). In conversations about and descriptions of Black bodies, it is usually the case that they are deemed to *lack* activity and initiative. Examples of physical activity could anything from performing a dance, to going to work to make money for your family. An example of initiative would be to make 'productive' decisions to generate wealth and 'progress'. Mental and physical idleness are often interwoven, as 'laziness' describes both physical inactivity and a lack of initiative.

**On Travel Diaries and the Hottentot Venus**

In this section of the paper I will be conducting my comparative case analysis between seventeenth century travel diaries and the twentieth century *Moynihan Report* to examine idleness through discussions of activity (physical) and initiative (mental) and the ways they may be tied to race. Following each case will be an analysis, per the same criteria, of the colonial ideas as they apply to Black women in each time, specifically the Hottentot Venus and the Welfare Queen. As previously mentioned, the reason I have chosen to examine these ideas applied to Black women specifically is because they experience double the burden, facing both patriarchal and racial oppression. I will begin with the seventeenth century

travel diaries. The travel diary sources (primary) I have compiled are many and so I will draw on brief passages from a transcribed entry from traveller Christopher Fryke, an entry by traveller John Ovington, and some historical background on diary entries by scholar R.M. Dekker to support each examination. It is important to note that all of these entries are coming from the same historical and geographical moment: they discuss the Hottentots from the Cape of Good Hope in seventeenth century South Africa.

Christopher Fryke notoriously composed nineteen categories (although they might not always be applied to every case he looks at) called "Account of the Hottentots" or "Description of the Hottentots" (Shahani, 2016, 14). Some of the categories included are: "Physical Appearance", "Dress: (a) clothing, (b) ornamentation, (c) cosmetics", "Habitation: (a) dwelling, (b) village layout", and "Language" (Shahani, 2016, 14). He applies this framework in a letter wherein he is observing the Hottentots, and explicitly records his 'account' "by stringing together anthropological commonplaces from the categories, Physical Appearance, Dress, Diet, Recreations, Customs, Habitation, Language, and Character" (Fryke in Shahani, 2016, 16). Crucially, despite the variation of categories, they all seem to revolve around the Hottentot's 'idleness' (Hottentots sleeping all day, lying all over each other, eating cowhide and guts, not 'proper cuts of meat') and 'primitiveness' (living in huts "like hogs", utilizing a language which sounds like turkey noises, displaying their sexual organs openly) (Fryke in Shahani, 2016, 16). Again, the 'observations' on the Hottentots construct a racialized identity that revolves around idleness and primitiveness as signifiers of inferiority, inadequacy, and lack of progress – all of which were opposites of signifiers which constructed 'ideals' tied to whiteness (i.e. activity, progress, hard work, etc.) (Spillers, 1987, 66).

The repetition of these signifiers tied to Black bodies – along with the negative affective and moral connotations – cause them to 'stick', to become connotations of 'Blackness' itself. Significantly, noting that the Hottentots speak a language that sounds like animal noises speaks to a sort of 'mental' idleness because their 'tongue' is deemed unproductive because it is not understandable by their colonizers. Their physical idleness is alluded to through their living conditions, which are also likened to the living conditions of animals: in close quarters, and nude. John Ovington observed the Hottentots to be "a very lazy people [who] choose to live […] poor and miserable, than to be at pains [effort] for plenty" (Ovington in Coetzee, 1988, 27).

Further, it was decided that "their native inclination to idleness and a careless life, will scarce admit [hardly allow] of either force or reward for reclaiming them from that innate lethargic humour" (Ovington in Coetzee, 1988, 27). Crucially, the Europeans described the Hottentots as 'choosing' to live lethargically while also saying that it is their 'native inclination' (positing that they 'cannot help themselves'). In this way, although idleness leverages a discursive regime which locates it as an individual failing, it is generalized across an entire racialized population. Ovington's observations seem to imply that the way the Hottentots live is their *innate* 'nature' (subsuming all Hottentots under one identity), and further, that they, (crucially in contrast with all other humans) are limited by their nature, that they cannot become different (active) than what is being observed of them (Coetzee, 1988, 28). Conversely, the idea of change and self-improvement would become central to Western notions of identity.

Although the travel writers were allegedly 'just observing' the Hottentots, Ovington, among other travel writers, was drawing *conclusions* on the Hottentots and *constructing identities* for them. However, observation is neither neutral nor innocent, as their 'conclusions' construct (and reinforce) a racial hierarchy which was central to the colonial project (I elaborate on this toward the end of this section). Coetzee notes that "although the framework of categories within which the travel writers operate *is nowhere explicitly set forth by them, it is not hard to extract it from their texts"*, which is to say that the travel writers' recorded thoughts are their own, but the body of knowledge they are drawing from is a cultural and social structure they are products of – including their understandings of the moral connotations of idleness (Coetzee, 1988, 13, emphasis mine). The Hottentots' alleged idleness and primitiveness were described in opposite terms to what were considered moral and social ideals of the observers. Overall, the Hottentots are seen as idle because of a lack of 'progress' by Eurocentric standards, which implies a lack of physical activity (or 'hard work') and of initiative (to want to be more 'productive').

An example of the travel writers' conclusions in application can be found in the abuse of Saartjie Baartman. We know from the above sections that she was brought from South Africa to England—and was made to tour Europe for several years—to showcase her body to White audiences (Hobson, 2011, 405, Allen 2011, 669). What is most significant here is what her 'performance' consisted of: Baartman was forced to stand 'still', or 'idle' for the enjoyment of her spectators, making for a great deal of irony. Typically, 'performances' by definition consist of activity, or physical movement, and initiative, or showmanship. Conversely in

Baartman's case, her show was 'put on' and it lacked both activity and initiative; she was *made* idle and then *mocked* and pathologized for being idle.[5]

In this way, the colonial concept of the idle Black body is both borne on and adhered to (stuck to) Baartman's body—and each time she put on another 'show', in a different place or time, these ideas remerge, remain resilient, and are reinforced by her audience. Regulus Allen, George Boulukos, Gretchen Gerzina, and Simon Gikandi are all scholars who have significantly contributed to studies on transatlantic cultures and have published widely on the ways that bodies of colour were sexualized, compared to wild beasts, and crucially, deemed unable to reason or be productive (Boulukos 2008 42-3).This is to say that they way Baartman was abused was not anomalous but rather evidence of deeply entrenched views on blackness and the racialized dimension of idleness during the seventeenth century. In a chapter dedicated to black bodies and dancing, Gikandi explains that despite the physical movement involved in this activity, dark skin "essentially fated [the subject] for slavery (Gikandi, 2011, 47) and consequently condemned them to a life where their movements are unrecognized and unvalued much like Baartman in her performances.

In the time that Europe was colonizing the Cape in South Africa, the Protestant reformation was ongoing and mobilized a discursive regime rooted in notions of activity, effort, and hard work as central to religious identity (Coetzee, 1988, 18). Martin Luther condemned the 'contemplative life' (a life spent doing more thought that physical activity—something Coetzee speculated the Hottentots did), and the discursive regime he helped develop is the inverse of the pejorative 'observations' of the Hottentots and their idleness. Hottentot idleness was understood by many travel writers to be "a sin, that idleness is a betrayal of one's own humanity" (Coetzee, 1988, 21). These Reformation attitudes on idleness, according to Coetzee, certainly informed the frameworks used by travel writers when observing the Hottentots. In this way, the stickiness of idleness to Black bodies reinforced the racial hierarchy which informed many efforts to legitimate the colonial project, from the 'white man's burden' to proselytization to Christianity (Ali and Syed, 2011, 350). The way the Hottentots were described and the way Saartjie Baartman was 'displayed' reflected Eurocentric understandings of physical and mental activity which ascribed 'idleness' to both the Hottentots and Baartman. This ascription was argued to be both innate to

[5] Medical students came and watched her 'shows' and took notes, observing her body, per criteria similar to Fryke's (Hobson, 2011, 406).

their 'race' and a result of their moral weakness, implying inverse traits – Eurocentric ones – as positive and moral.

**On Moynihan's *Report* and the Welfare Queen**

This section will consist of a close reading of a passage from Daniel Patrick Moynihan's report titled, "The Negro Family: The Case for National Action", and an example of his understanding of the 'idleness' of Black bodies in practice, through the archetype of the Welfare Queen. Similar to the last case study, I will be looking for discussions of activity (physical), and initiative (mental) and deciphering whether these ideas were tied to race in each example. Moynihan's *Report* is a policy document which utilizes some statistical data, but primarily relies on vague arguments about the 'nature and history' of Black families.

It is important to note that no primary ethnographic or interview data was collected from the Black people Moynihan was discussing. Moynihan published this document so as to convince the government at the time that social policy reform alone would not be enough to create racial equality. While his position might be read as 'progressive' (for his time, or otherwise), his arguments still perpetuate deeply colonial ideas regarding the alleged 'decadence', delay, and/or idleness of Black bodies. Arguably, in positioning himself as someone who supports the civil rights movement, but clings onto colonial understandings of Black bodies, his is an especially damaging voice in history; this is because he will be remembered for championing racial equality, all the while linking ideas like 'idleness' to race.

The particular pejorative understanding of idleness tied to racialized bodies which was prevalent during seventeenth-century colonialism can be seen as 'traces' in contemporary racialized discourses and practices. Mid-twentieth century (and onward) US social policy retained the practice of reducing racialized bodies to 'innate' pejorative characteristics. Two important passage of Moynihan's document read:

> "In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure which, because it is to out of line with the rest of the American society, seriously retards the progress of the group as a whole, and imposes a crushing burden on the Negro male and, in consequence, on a great many Negro women as well" (Moynihan, 1965, 18).

> "[The Black community is a] tangle of pathology […] capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world, and at the heart of the deterioration of the fabric of Negro society is the deterioration of the Negro family" (Moynihan, 1965, 20).

These two quotes evoke similar ideas to the seventeenth-century travel diaries examined above. The 'Black community' (like the Hottentots) does not reflect Eurocentric values (are "out of line with the rest of the American society") and therefore are 'idle' as a community, not 'progressing'. Given that the dominant cultural discourses of the post-world war two period in the United States were defined by the Protestant ethic—hard work, 'industry' (initiative), self-reliance, and self-discipline—that is very likely what was implied by Moynihan when he said the Black community was "out of line with the rest of American society", and therefore, were mentally and physically idle (Kolozi, 2013, 20; Mitrea, 2017, 24; Hudson and Coukos, 2005, 13). Further, Moynihan frames this condition as inherent to race, as the Black community's "tangle of pathology [is] capable of perpetuating itself without assistance from the white world".

A 'lack of progress', in and of itself, suggests lethargy and idleness, and implicitly leverages the colonial discourses which saw 'primitiveness' tied to ('stick with') Black bodies. Similar to the travel diaries of the seventeenth century, this report implicitly constructs Whiteness in its 'observations' of 'Blackness'. Instead of explicit discussions on idleness, lethargy, and 'primitiveness', Moynihan employs a 'tidier' language that still evokes the same ideas. For example, "to be out of line with the rest of American society" is a statement on Black families' unequivocal otherness in their own lives because they are explicitly not 'in line', or 'the same' as others—others who make up the alleged majority of the population at the time.

Here, Moynihan is suggesting that his observations of African American social and familial relations, rather than influenced by a history of slavery and oppression, are effectively endogenous behaviours – innate ways of being which are so regressive and self-destructive that they are linked to disease ('pathology'). He is insinuating that they are 'limited' *because* they are 'like this' or 'cannot help themselves'—similar to the ways the Hottentots were perceived to be limited by their natures, according to the travel writers. Both the Black families in Moynihan's work and the Hottentots have identities created and *stuck* to them by

external subjects (with more power/social capital)—and further, both examined groups are assumed to have certain 'innate limitations' that defer their social progress, and ability to be more like their white neighbors/observers.

Hortense Spillers examines Moynihan's use of particular diction to name, define, and differentiate between White families (active), and Black families (idle). According to Spillers, Moynihan's thinking that, "ethnicity itself identifies a total objectification of human and cultural motives—the "white" family, by implication, and the "Negro Family" by outright assertion, is in a constant opposition of binary meanings" (Spillers, 1987, 66). As such, Moynihan moves to position White families as "present", and "tense", unlike Black families who he frames as "frozen in meaning as a result of their ethnicity" and "still" (idle) (Moynihan, 1965, 30). Again, the repetition of discourses of idleness (lacking progress, 'out of line with society') makes these signifiers and their moral connotations 'stick' to Black bodies. Contemporary social policy, however, also evokes the long colonial history discussed in the previous section by utilizing similar terms in similar ways to similar effects: tying ('sticking') idleness to Black bodies.

While in the seventeenth century, making signifiers of idleness 'stick' to Black bodies legitimated colonial projects based on the inferiority of the racial other, in the twentieth century, 'traces' of that discursive regime legitimates the retrenchment of social support and the entrenchment of state discipline for Black and other bodies of colour. A common (colonial) trope of Black women within the United States is the label of the "Welfare Queen". In an article aptly titled, "On Cowboys and Welfare Queens; Independence, Dependence, and Interdependence at Home and Abroad", Eileen Boris defines the two cultural and political archetypes mentioned in the title as both simultaneously gendered and racialized, as the cowboy represented a symbol of white male individualism and the welfare queen stood for a despised Black womanhood. Behind the image of the cowboy stand the workings of empire; behind the portrait of the welfare queen lies the punishment of poor women, often African American or Latin American, for their motherhood, sexuality, and lack of dependence on husbands (Boris, 2007, 599).

The archetype of the Welfare Queen was originally introduced in 1976 in a campaign speech Ronald Reagan gave on welfare and poverty. In this speech he discussed a woman from Chicago who was allegedly defrauding the welfare system, by using "80 names, 30 addresses, 15 telephone numbers to collect food stamps, Social Security, veterans' benefits for four nonexistent deceased veteran husbands, as well as welfare. Her tax-free cash income alone has been running

$150,000 a year" (Reagan 1976 Interview). In a sentence, he constructed an image of a woman who has come to represent all women despised by his voters[6]—the woman who does not work hard (or at all), who takes advantage of the 'good' and 'supportive' system upheld by the government, and one who 'fakes' her dependence on her husband(s).

In similarly tidy language to Moynihan, Reagan evokes the idle other, specifically the idle Black body. This archetype lacks both activity and initiative but in his reading of her, she somehow 'gets ahead' of good, hard working (White) Americans. Again, similar to how the Hottentots were described and how Saartjie Baartman was 'displayed', the Welfare Queen is a pejorative idle figure who does not make efforts or take initiative toward being productive in a Eurocentric framework. This subject then lives in idleness and decadence by not actually working. However, the difference and tension here is that this subject *does* make physical efforts and takes initiative, but does so in a manipulative, deceitful, and non-heteronormative way (by not relying on a single patriarchal husband to provide for her – speaking to the 'pathology' identified by Moynihan) which is a threat to the political community of 'properly active' (White) subjects. In this way, the Welfare Queen leverages older colonial discourses on the idleness of Black bodies and combines them with patriarchal discourses on the deceitfulness of women, altogether constructing a figure which legitimates the retrenchment of social policy.

What is significant here is the stickiness of the 'Welfare Queen' figure and the understanding of idleness that we can trace back to historical colonialism because of how "welfare dependents have become the primitive other, politically assaulted, responsible for national decline, who need taming through cowboy social policy" (Boris, 2007, 599). In the case of the Hottentots, because their form of work or activity did not sufficiently resemble that of their White observers—and crucially, that they were framed as lethargic bodies—they were deemed idle by colonial travel writers. Similarly, in the case of the 'welfare queen', because she does not conform to patriarchal understandings of the normative household (i.e. depending on her husband to provide for her and her children, working)[7] , and

[6] Non-white men and freed male slaves only got the right to vote in 1870—so Raegan's voters would have still been largely White (Brown and Wellman, 2006, 198)

[7] Double whammy: assuming the welfare queen has multiple children so as to further benefit financially from the political community.

instead relies on welfare stipends, she is deemed "a primitive other", idle, and responsible for the decline of the nation (Boris, 2007, 560).

**Contemporary Stickiness: 1990s-Present**

The goal of this paper is to demonstrate how the concept of idleness, when tied to Black bodies and/or bodies of colour, has colonial roots and has proven to be resilient (has 'stuck') over time. This final section is devoted to examples of the effects of the discourse of idleness tied to Black bodies. The examples are not exhaustive but serve to illustrate the salience of this discourse and how it is deployed in policy and by political actors. For example, in *Shut Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education in Post-Welfare American*, Valerie Polakow critiques the United States' "viciously anti-feminist, anti-poor, White supremacist, and 'anti-family value' welfare reforms of the mid-1990's (notably the 1996 *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act)*" (Polakow, 2004, 25).

Briefly, the *Act* was meant to put "work first [and] education later"—a reform that "confines welfare recipients [and single mothers of colour especially] to low-wage employment and denies [them] access to post-secondary educational resources" (Polakow, 2004, 25). This reform, signed by former President Bill Clinton, demonstrates idleness and primitiveness were mobilized as characteristics which defined 'lazy' welfare recipients who 'did not work', and which disproportionately targeted people of colour. For instance, the *Act* placed an enormous discursive and policy emphasis on 'individual responsibility' for life outcomes, eliding the structural trajectories of American society which led to increasingly unequal outcomes. The Act contains terms like "obligations of the individual" to "attend school, maintain certain grades and attendance, keep school age children of the individual in school, immunize children, attend parenting and money management classes, or do other things that will help the individual become and remain employed in the private sector"(*Act* 1996).While this excerpt and the *Act* itself do not explicitly refer to Black people, it explicitly targets 'behaviours' which are heavily tied to those bodies, and was seen by many scholars as disproportionately targeting people of colour (Kolozi, 2013, 20; Hudson and Coukos, 2005, 13; Polakow, 2004, 25).

This retrenchment in social policy was predicated on the idea that idleness (not working) was an individual failing and a threat to the political community. If we return to the alternative reading of resilience offered to us above by Neocleous and Rimke, we can see how contemporary social policy favours

resilience terminology and instructs subjects to behave resiliently (i.e. in the *Act*) but the underlying discussion of race demands that we see how these behavioural instructions are products of racist discourse that has endured across time and space. For those who could or would not 'reform' and 'activate' themselves through personal responsibility and determination (again, explicit discourses derived from the Protestant ethic), escalating disciplinary measures would be taken[8] (i.e. the state rescinding all social support) (Ali and Syed, 2011, 352).

Another salient example that is even more recent (2017) is an article that details an economic study, positing that "states with more Black people have less generous welfare benefits" (Jan 2017). The quoted statement is connected to Ronald Raegan's discourse on the 'welfare queen', wherein her 'dangerous idleness' (to the state and to 'good taxpayers') must be addressed through retrenched welfare benefits (such as through the 1996 *Act*). Finally, a Canadian example of colonial discourses on idleness was demonstrated through a comment made on April 18, 2018 by Nova Scotia Progressive Conservative leadership candidate Elizabeth Smith-McCrossin. In a House of Assembly discussion on cannabis legalization, Smith-McCrossin "told the Legislature that legalizing cannabis could potentially make Nova Scotians as unproductive as Jamaicans" (Boon 2018). Despite whatever intentions she might have had with her comment, she perpetuated 'idle' discourse around Black bodies, which, as critics pointed out to her, "portrays Black people as lazy and unproductive" (Boon 2018).

**Conclusion**

The particularities of the constructed identity of welfare recipients is rooted in historical ideas which 'stuck' idleness and race together. From the Hottentots we see the emergence of a resilient colonial discourse around idleness. This discourse was then deployed with Saartjie Baartman, Moynihan's *Report*, the 'Welfare Queen' archetype, and other contemporary examples. Idleness as a racial concept was used to legitimate colonialism – bringing 'culture and God' – as well as contemporary retrenchments of social policy. This discourse was tied to Black bodies across history, shaping how they were understood and 'managed' by European and American powers (Ahmed in Riedner, 2004, 701).

[8] Polakow demonstrates how "far from lazy and deficient they [welfare recipients] are, as [their social circumstances pushed them to] demonstrate their perseverance, skills, and energy, just so they can navigate" the precarity of their lives (Polakow, 2004, 81).

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