The following guide contains a compilation of information about the book, book reviews and a transcript of an interview with the author, Mr. Robinson. Links and full-text are provided to the content. This material is copyrighted and compiled for educational use. Credit should be given if the material is utilized. If you have any questions about this guide, please contact Jan Whitfield by email at jwhitfield@uncfsu.edu or by phone at 910-672-1750.

Author: Robinson, Eugene, 1954-
Title: Disintegration : the splintering of Black America / Eugene Robinson
Publisher: New York : Doubleday, c2010
Edition: 1st ed
Location: FSU Main Stacks E185.86 .R618 2010

**Description**: xi, 254 p. ; 22 cm
**Bibliography**: Includes bibliographical references (p. 239-245) and index
**Contents**: "Black America" doesn't live here anymore -- When we were one -- Parting of the ways -- The mainstream : a double life -- The abandoned : no way out -- The transcendent : where none have gone before -- The emergent (part 1) : coming to America -- The emergent (part 2) : how Black is Black? -- Urgency, focus and sacrifice -- We know who we are, but who will we be?
**Summary**: Explains how years of desegregation and affirmative action have led to the revelation of four distinct African American groups who reflect unique political views and circumstances, in a report that also illuminates crucial modern debates on race and class
**Subject**: African Americans -- Social conditions -- 21st century
African Americans -- Economic conditions -- 21st century
Instead of one black America, today there are four.

“There was a time when there were agreed-upon 'black leaders,' when there was a clear 'black agenda,' when we could talk confidently about 'the state of black America'—but not anymore.” — from Disintegration

The African American population in the United States has always been seen as a single entity: a “Black America” with unified interests and needs. In his groundbreaking book, Disintegration, Pulitzer-Prize winning columnist Eugene Robinson argues that over decades of desegregation, affirmative action, and immigration, the concept (...read more)
in the black community. He calls for all African Americans to come together once again to solve the problems of those blacks who have been abandoned by the greater society. VERDICT This book will have great appeal to African Americans and others concerned about issues of race and equality. -Robert Bruce Slater, Stroudsburg, PA (c) Copyright 2010. Library Journals LLC, a wholly owned subsidiary of Media Source, Inc. No redistribution permitted.

In this clear-eyed and compassionate study, Robinson (Coal to Cream), Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist for the Washington Post, marshals persuasive evidence that the African-American population has splintered into four distinct and increasingly disconnected entities: a small elite with enormous influence, a mainstream middle-class majority, a newly emergent group of recent immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean, and an abandoned minority "with less hope of escaping poverty than at any time since Reconstruction's end." Drawing on census records, polling data, sociological studies, and his own experiences growing up in a segregated South Carolina college town during the 1950s, Robinson explores 140 years of black history in America, focusing on how the civil rights movement, desegregation, and affirmative action contributed to the fragmentation. Of particular interest is the discussion of how immigrants from Africa, the "best-educated group [now] coming to live in the United States," are changing what being black means. Robinson notes that despite the enormous strides African-Americans have made in the past 40 years, the problems of poor blacks remain more intractable than ever, though his solution-"a domestic Marshall Plan aimed at black America"-seems implausible in this era of cash-strapped state and local governments. (Oct.) (c) Copyright PWxyz, LLC. All rights reserved

"BLACK AMERICA" DOESN'T LIVE HERE ANYMORE

It was one of those only-in-Washington affairs, a glittering A-list dinner in a stately mansion near Embassy Row. The hosts were one of the capital's leading power couples--the husband a wealthy attorney who famously served as consigliere and golfing partner to presidents, the wife a social doyenne who sat on all the right committees and boards. The guest list included enough bold-faced names to fill the Washington Post's Reliable Source gossip column for a solid week. Most of the furniture had been cleared away to let people circulate, but the elegant rooms were so thick with status, ego, and ambition that it was hard to move.

Officially the dinner was to honor an aging lion of American business: the retired chief executive of the world's biggest media and entertainment company. Owing to recent events, however, the distinguished mogul was eclipsed at his own party. An elegant businesswoman from Chicago--a stranger to most of the other guests--suddenly had become one of the capital's most important power brokers, and this exclusive soiree was serving as her unofficial debut in Washington society. The bold-faced names feigned nonchalance but were desperate to meet her. Eyes followed the woman's every move; ears strained to catch her every word. She pretended not to mind being stalked from room to room by eager supplicants and would-be best friends. As the evening went on, it became apparent that while the other guests were taking her measure, she was systematically taking theirs. To every beaming, glad-handing, air-kissing approach she responded with the Mona Lisa smile of a woman not to be taken lightly.
Others there that night included a well-connected lawyer who would soon be nominated to fill a key cabinet post; the chief executive of one of the nation's leading cable-television networks; the former chief executive of the mortgage industry's biggest firm; a gaggle of high-powered lawyers; a pride of investment bankers; a flight of social butterflies; and a chattering of well-known cable-television pundits, slightly hoarse and completely exhausted after spending a full year in more or less continuous yakety-yak about the presidential race. By any measure, it was a top-shelf crowd.

On any given night, of course, some gathering of the great and the good in Washington ranks above all others by virtue of exclusivity, glamour, or the number of Secret Service SUVs parked outside. What makes this one worth noting is that all the luminaries I have described are black.

The affair was held at the home of Vernon Jordan, the smooth, handsome, charismatic confidant of Democratic presidents, and his wife, Ann, an emeritus trustee of the John F. Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts and a reliable presence at every significant social event in town. Known for his impeccable political instincts, Jordan had made the rare mistake of backing the wrong candidate in the 2008 primaries—his friend Hillary Clinton. There are no grudges in Vernon's world, however; barely a week after the election, he was already skillfully renewing his ties with the Obama crowd.

The nominal guest of honor was Richard Parsons, the former CEO of Time Warner Inc. Months earlier, he had relinquished his corner office on Columbus Circle to tend the Tuscan vineyard that friends said was the favorite of his residences.

The woman who stole the show was Valerie Jarrett, one of Obama's best friends and most trusted advisers. A powerful figure in the Chicago business community, Jarrett was unknown in Washington until Obama made his out-of-nowhere run to capture the Democratic nomination and then the presidency. Suddenly she was the most talked-about and sought-after woman in town. Everyone understood that she would be sitting on the mother lode of the capital's rarest and most precious asset: access to the president of the United States.

Others sidling up to the buffet included Eric Holder, soon to be nominated as the nation's first black attorney general, and his wife, Sharon Malone, a prominent obstetrician; Debra Lee, the longtime chief of Black Entertainment Television and one of the most powerful women in the entertainment industry; Franklin Raines, the former CEO of Fannie Mae, a central and controversial figure in the financial crisis that had begun to roil markets around the globe; and cable-news regulars Donna Brazile and Soledad O'Brien from CNN, Juan Williams from Fox News Channel, and, well, me from MSNBC—all of us having talked so much during the long campaign that we were sick of hearing our own voices.

The glittering scene wasn't at all what most people have in mind when they talk about black America—which is one reason why so much of what people say about black America makes so little sense. The fact is that asking what something called "black America" thinks, feels, or wants makes as much sense as commissioning a new Gallup poll of the Ottoman Empire. Black America, as we knew it, is history.

***

There was a time when there were agreed-upon "black leaders," when there was a clear "black agenda," when we could talk confidently about "the state of black America"—but not anymore. Not after decades of desegregation, affirmative action, and urban decay; not after globalization decimated the working class and trickle-down economics sorted the nation into winners and losers; not after the biggest wave of black immigration from Africa and the Caribbean since slavery; not after most people ceased to notice—much less care—when a black man and a white
woman walked down the street hand in hand. These are among the forces and trends that have had the unintended consequence of tearing black America to pieces.

Ever wonder why black elected officials spend so much time talking about purely symbolic “issues,” like an official apology for slavery? Or why they never miss the chance to denounce a racist outburst from a rehab-bound celebrity? It’s because symbolism, history, and old-fashioned racism are about the only things they can be sure their African American constituents still have in common.

Barack Obama’s stunning election as the first African American president seemed to come out of nowhere, but it was the result of a transformation that has been unfolding for decades. With implications both hopeful and dispiriting, black America has undergone a process of disintegration.

Disintegration isn’t something black America likes to talk about. But it’s right there, documented in census data, economic reports, housing patterns, and a wealth of other evidence just begging for honest analysis. And it’s right there in our daily lives, if we allow ourselves to notice. Instead of one black America, now there are four:

* a Mainstream middle-class majority with a full ownership stake in American society
* a large, Abandoned minority with less hope of escaping poverty and dysfunction than at any time since Reconstruction’s crushing end
* a small Transcendent elite with such enormous wealth, power, and influence that even white folks have to genuflect
* two newly Emergent groups—individuals of mixed-race heritage and communities of recent black immigrants—that make us wonder what “black” is even supposed to mean

These four black Americas are increasingly distinct, separated by demography, geography, and psychology. They have different profiles, different mind-sets, different hopes, fears, and dreams. There are times and places where we all still come back together—on the increasingly rare occasions when we feel lumped together, defined, and threatened solely on the basis of skin color, usually involving some high-profile instance of bald-faced discrimination or injustice; and in venues like “urban” or black-oriented radio, which serves as a kind of speed-of-light grapevine. More and more, however, we lead separate lives.

And where these distinct “nations” rub against one another, there are sparks. The Mainstream tend to doubt the authenticity of the Emergent, but they’re usually too polite, or too politically correct, to say so out loud. The Abandoned accuse the Emergent—the immigrant segment, at least—of moving into Abandoned neighborhoods and using the locals as mere stepping-stones. The immigrant Emergent, with their intact families and long-range mind-set, ridicule the Abandoned for being their own worst enemies. The Mainstream bemoan the plight of the Abandoned—but express their deep concern from a distance. The Transcendent, to steal the old line about Boston society, speak only to God; they are idolized by the Mainstream and the Emergent for the obstacles they have overcome, and by the Abandoned for the shiny things they own. Mainstream, Emergent, and Transcendent all lock their car doors when they drive through an Abandoned neighborhood. They think the Abandoned don’t hear the disrespectful thunk of the locks; they’re wrong.

How did this breakup happen? It’s overly simplistic to draw a straight line from “We Shall Overcome” to “Get Rich or Die Tryin’,” but that’s the general trajectory.

Forty years ago, after major cities from coast to coast had gone up in flames, black equaled
poor. Roughly six in ten black Americans were barely a step ahead of the bill collector, with fully 40 percent of the total living in the abject penury that the Census Bureau officially labels “poverty” and another 20 percent earning a bit more but still basically poor. Over the next three decades--as civil rights laws banned discrimination in education, housing, and employment, and as affirmative action offered life-changing opportunities to those prepared to take advantage--millions of black households clawed their way into the Mainstream and the black poverty rate fell steadily, year after year. By the mid-'90s, it was down to 25 percent--and then the needle got stuck. Today, roughly one-quarter of black Americans—the Abandoned—remain in poverty.(1)

And the poorest of these poor folks are actually losing ground. In 2000, 14.9 percent of black households reported income of less than $10,000 (in today's dollars); in 2005, the figure was 17.1 percent.(2) Demographically, the Abandoned constitute the youngest black America; they are also by far the least suburban, living for the most part in core urban neighborhoods and the rural South.

Those who made it into the Mainstream, however, have continued their rise. In 1967, only one black household in ten made $50,000 a year; now three of every ten black families earn at least that much. More strikingly, four decades ago not even two black households in a hundred earned the equivalent of more than $100,000 a year. Now almost one black household in ten has crossed that threshold to the upper middle class—joining George and Louise Jefferson in that “dee-luxe apartment in the sky,” perhaps, or living down the street from the Huxtables’ handsomely appointed brownstone. All told, the four black Americas control an estimated $800 billion in purchasing power—roughly the GDP of the thirteenth-richest nation on earth. Most of that money is made and spent by the Mainstream.(3)

Here's another way to look at it: Forty years ago, if you found yourself among a representative all-black crowd, you could assume that nearly half the people around you were poor, poorly educated, and underemployed. Today, if you found yourself at a representative gathering of black adults, four out of five would be solidly middle class.

And some African Americans have soared far higher. A friend of mine who lives in Chicago once took a flight on the Tribune Company’s corporate jet. Noticing a much larger, newer, fancier private jet parked on the tarmac nearby, he asked his boss whose it was. The answer: “Oprah’s.” The all-powerful Winfrey is one of the African Americans who have soared highest of all, into the realm of the Transcendent. There have long been black millionaires—Madam C. J. Walker, who built an empire on hair-care products in the early twentieth century, is often cited as the first. But never before have African Americans presided as full-fledged Masters of the Universe over some of the biggest firms on Wall Street (Richard Parsons, Kenneth Chenault, Stanley O’Neal). There have been wealthy black athletes since Jack Johnson, but never before have they transformed themselves into such savvy tycoons (Michael Jordan, Tiger Woods). And while African Americans have made billions for the music industry over the years, even pioneers such as Berry Gordy Jr. and Quincy Jones never owned and controlled as big a chunk of the business as today’s hip-hop moguls (Russell Simmons, P. Diddy, Jay-Z).

And the Emergent? They're the product of two separate phenomena. First, there has been a flood of black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean. In 1980, the census reported 816,000 foreign-born black people in the United States; by the 2000 census, that figure had more than tripled to 2,815,000.(4) You might question my use of the word “flood” for numbers that seem relatively small in absolute terms, but consider these newcomers’ outsize impact: Half or more of the black students entering elite universities such as Harvard, Princeton, and Duke these days are the sons and daughters of African immigrants.(5) This makes sense when you consider that their parents are the best-educated immigrant group in America, with more advanced degrees than the Asians, the Europeans, you name it. (They're far better educated than native-born Americans, black or white.) But their children’s educational success leads Mainstream and Abandoned black Americans to ask whether affirmative action and other programs designed to
foster diversity are reaching the people they were intended to help—the systematically disadvantaged descendants of slaves.

The second Emergent phenomenon is the acceptance of interracial marriage, once a crime and until recently a novelty. A University of Michigan study found that in 1990, nearly one married black man in ten was wed to a white woman—and roughly one married black woman in twenty-five was wed to a white man. These figures, the researchers found, had increased eightfold over the previous four decades.(6) Barack Obama, the man who would be president; Adrian Fenty, the mayor of Washington, D.C.; Jordin Sparks, a winner on American Idol—all are the product of black-white marriages. And the boomer-echo generation, raised on a diet of diversity, has even fewer hang-ups about race and relationships.

In a sense, though, we’re just headed back to the future. Harvard scholar Henry Louis Gates Jr. recently produced a public-television series in which he used genealogical research and DNA testing to unearth the heritage of several prominent African Americans. When he sent his own blood off to be tested, Gates discovered to his surprise that more than 50 percent of his genetic material was European. Wider DNA testing has shown that nearly one-third of all African Americans trace their heritage to a white male ancestor—likely a slave owner.

So forget about whether the mixed-race Emergents are “black enough.” How black am I? How black can any of us claim to be?

So forget about whether the mixed-race Emergents are “black enough.” How black am I? How black can any of us claim to be?
Oprah Winfrey, Beyoncé, Kobe Bryant, Vernon Jordan and Richard Parsons, the retired chief executive of Time Warner.

These Transcendent men and women, Robinson tells us at the outset, live and work in a privileged world of wealth and power. Despite the color of their skin, they do not belong to the black community.

Fair enough, but Robinson does not stop there. Over the next 200 pages, he demonstrates rather convincingly that no one belongs to the black community anymore. The race-based community that was a fixture of American life for generations -- the traditional locus of racial experience and solidarity, the idealized entity that many of us still refer to, indeed still cling to, as an institutional and social reality -- no longer exists. That, in a nutshell, is the thesis of this slim but powerful book.

During the past four decades, Robinson persuasively argues, black America has splintered into four subgroups: the Transcendent elite; the Mainstream middle class, which now accounts for a majority of black Americans; an Emergent community made up of mixed-race families and black immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean; and the Abandoned, a large and growing underclass concentrated in the inner cities and depressed pockets of the rural South.

Divided by economics and culture, these four groups have little in common and little reason to identify with one another. For better or for worse -- and Robinson offers strong evidence for both positive and negative effects -- the ethos of racial solidarity that served blacks well during the Jim Crow era and the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and '60s is gone. Thus, continued references to "black leaders" or the "black agenda" make no sense and serve only to obscure the complexities of race in a vast, multicultural nation.

What we need now, Robinson insists, is, first, an honest recognition that the four black Americas have different interests and competing claims and, second, an immediate and large response to the desperate and deteriorating situation among Abandoned blacks. Redressing their economic and social problems will require a reordering of priorities, including a class-based narrowing of affirmative action programs and an overall effort equivalent to a domestic Marshall Plan. Anything less, Robinson argues, will doom the Abandoned to permanent pathology and underclass status, while consigning the broader society to chronic insecurity and moral dereliction. Recalling W. E. B. Du Bois's dictum that "the problem of the 20th century is the problem of the color line," Robinson warns that the problem of the 21st century "is the problem of the Abandoned."

This book is full of facts, figures and telling anecdotes related to the disintegration of black America, but its real power resides elsewhere. Sometimes writers tell us something familiar -- something that we already know, or that we should know -- but they do it in such a creative and cleareyed way and with such force that we begin to see things differently independent of any new information. This is exactly what Eugene Robinson has done in "Disintegration."

By RAYMOND ARSENAULT

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA245600518&v=2.1&u=faye81655&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|A245600518
IN A PROVOCATIVE 2008 ESSAY, THE NOVEList Charles Johnson declared "the end of the black American narrative." This narrative, Johnson remarked, "is quietly in the background of every conversation we have about black people.... It is our starting point, our agreed-upon premise, our most important presupposition for dialogues about black America." But this old narrative, at the center of which is "the experience of victimization," is now, at long last, obsolete. "In the 21st century, we need new and better stories."

A story held so broadly and deeply could hardly fade away quietly. The old narrative persists, Johnson observed, "as doggedly as the Ptolemaic vision before Copernicus." It persists most stubbornly among scholars and pundits on the Left, who work endless variations on the narrative's theme of promise and betrayal. In the current versions, the hopes for equality raised by Martin Luther King, Jr., and the civil rights movement were dashed by a conservative backlash, the same fate that met the kindred hopes raised during the American Revolution and Civil War. Decades after the civil rights era, the nation that once seemed poised to secure equal rights and liberty for all
has defaulted yet again. American racism, devilishly adept at strategic retreat and self-concealment, remains alive and well.

Readers familiar with the updates of the old narrative might be forgiven for approaching Eugene Robinson’s new book with certain "preconceptions. One might expect Robinson, the reliably liberal MSNBC commentator and Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist for the Washington Post, to provide a popularized reworking of this tale of backlash and disillusionment. Instead, he produced something genuinely interesting. Viewed in light of Charles Johnson's suggestion, Disintegration is divided between the old and the new—a book that goes far toward answering the call for "new and better stories" about black Americans, although it recurs, at a crucial point, to the traditional narrative.

Robinson's book is divided between old and new because black America itself is so divided. The disintegration in his arresting title reflects his main thesis: there no longer exists a single, unified black America. Instead, there are now four distinct categories of black Americans, characterized by very different experiences, conditions, and prospects relative to one another. Assessing this development, Robinson cautions against nostalgia. What sustained a bygone sentiment of racial solidarity was an experience of injury shared by nearly all black Americans. What makes the present differentiation possible is the abatement of those injuries. In short, what is disintegrating black America is the integration of America, as more and more blacks make good on hard-won opportunities to differentiate themselves by their individual talents and efforts.

For three of the four categories that Robinson identifies—to which the large majority of black Americans now belong—white racism or its legacy no longer imposes any serious encumbrance. The most numerous group he calls the Mainstream, the relatively unnoticed middle-class majority whose heroic rise he celebrates as "truly a great American success story--arguably, the greatest of all." But the most spectacular success belongs to the Transcendent, the tiny elite whose enormous wealth and power places them far above ordinary Americans of any color. For the first time, black Americans mingle among the genuine Masters of the Universe; Robinson notes with bemused pride that "two African Americans [Fannie Mae CEO Franklin Raines and Merrill Lynch CEO Stanley O'Neal] had become big enough players in the financial world to have major roles--I should say allegedly--in triggering a global economic crisis."

The most intriguing group in Robinson's quartet, the Emergent, is itself divided into two subgroups. It includes first, those lately arrived in the largest wave of black immigration since 1808. He characterizes these immigrant-Emergents as America's newest model-minority--highly educated relative to native-born Americans of any color, industrious, enterprising, and animated by a strong belief in America as a land of freedom and opportunity. The second Emergent group comprises the racially mixed offspring of black and white parents, whose rapid growth in numbers elicits the author's confident prediction: "I have seen the future, and it is beige." For Robinson this, too, is a good thing. He expects that members of this subgroup will naturally gravitate to incorporation in rather than estrangement from the American mainstream.

Inspiring much less hope, however, is the final group in Robinson's classification scheme, the Abandoned, the underclass minority experiencing their own, distinctly negative forms of disintegration. The troubles frequently ascribed to black America as a whole are, in reality, concentrated among the Abandoned: the demise of marriage and two-parent families; the failure to persist in or benefit from the educational system; and the subsequent unemployment, poverty, and crime. This group's prospects are as bleak as the rising black majority's are bright, since the Abandoned have "less hope of escaping poverty and dysfunction than at any time since Reconstruction," according to Robinson. He calls on America to make the rescue of this group an urgent priority. For as long as their woes continue, Robinson insists, the Abandoned will be viewed as the authentic, representative black Americans. He updates W.E.B Du Bois: "The problem of the twenty-first century is the problem of the Abandoned."

ROBINSON DESERVES MUCH CREDIT FOR his refreshing divergence from the academic party line on race. Contrary to multiculturalists' dogmatic insistence on preserving black identity, he affirms the justice and goodness of racial integration, happily acknowledging the "miraculous" progress black Americans and America at large have made in
overcoming race-based injustice. At some points he forthrightly acknowledges that bad choices and behaviors perpetuate degradation and poverty in the black underclass. But on that crucial point he equivocates—and the independent spirit that animates much of the book falters. In his analysis and prescriptions regarding the problems of the Abandoned, the old narrative ultimately prevails.

"It is hugely significant," Robinson observes, "that in most Abandoned black neighborhoods ... most households are headed by a single woman." Though well aware that "all else being equal, boys and girls from intact, two-parent families tend to do better ... in all walks of life," he rules out as unrealistic efforts to rebuild marriage, and he equivocates on whether such a goal is even to be desired. Upon reporting that "a stunning 42 percent" of adult black women have never married (the corresponding figure among white women is 21%), Robinson offers the remarkably blithe comment that this phenomenon signifies not "some sort of tragedy" but "instead a fascinating process of self-invention.... Mainstream black women may be blazing another trail that the rest of American society will follow as we redefine the concepts of household and family."

This equivocation on family breakdown belongs to a broader equivocation about how moral choices and moral culture determine the underclass's condition. "Not even the most foggy-headed or starry-eyed," Robinson remarks, "could deny that wrong choices play a huge role in keeping the Abandoned mired in their plight—and that no policies or programs can possibly succeed unless individuals make better choices." And yet the focus of both his analysis and his prescriptions is on ... policies and programs. As Robinson’s terminology suggests, blame for the plight of impoverished blacks rests on negligent others—the larger society that has abandoned its most desperate members. "Since Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty was allowed to peter out in the 1980s, government policies have essentially left the Abandoned to their own devices." He describes the consequences in a chain of passive-voice or impersonal formulations: good working-class jobs disappeared, "neighborhoods fell apart, public school systems were allowed to collapse," and the Abandoned were left hopelessly overmatched by the structural and institutional forces that weigh them down.

The remedy is then to reverse the decades of public neglect. Robinson warmly but briefly praises the efforts of his former colleague William Raspberry, the retired Washington Post columnist, who has founded a nonprofit organization to assist a small town in Mississippi whose residents are predominantly poor and black. But rather than call for the multiplication of such private efforts, he calls for a resumption and expansion of the massive governmental efforts initiated by LBJ: "What is needed is a kind of Marshall Plan for the Abandoned--massive intervention in education, public safety, health, and other aspects of life." Robinson doesn’t even try to explain how such a Marshall Plan would foster the changes in individual choices and behavior that, he has argued persuasively, are indispensable for improving the condition of this class.

ROBINSON IS HARDLY ALONE, OF COURSE, in believing that America’s great failure over the past four decades has been its retreat from the Great Society agenda of ending poverty and eradicating every consequence of slavery and racism. Sharing this view is James T. Patterson, an emeritus history professor at Brown University, who chronicles that retreat in his latest book, Freedom Is Not Enough: The Moynihan Report and America’s Struggle over Black Family Life--from LBJ to Obama.

Patterson frames his story as a great fall. It begins at the summit of liberal enthusiasm, when President Johnson declared with characteristic circumspection in December 1964, "These are the most hopeful times since Christ was born." Regarding justice for black Americans, those hopes reached far beyond fully securing civil and political rights. "Freedom is not enough," Johnson declared in his famous Howard University commencement speech the following June. "We seek ... not just equality as a right and theory but equality as a fact and as a result." To achieve the comprehensive socioeconomic equality that he envisioned, however, his policymakers would need to overcome obstacles more formidable than discriminatory laws and bigoted opinion.

Enter Daniel Patrick Moynihan, Johnson’s 38-year-old assistant secretary of labor and would-be architect of the administration’s efforts to combat endemic poverty among black Americans. In a 78-page report entitled The Negro Family: The Case for National Action, Moynihan attempted to guide the administration’s efforts by applying
the tools of social science analysis to the most vexing dimension of that poverty. In the report's preface, he bluntly identified the focus of his concern: "The fundamental problem ... is that of family structure. The ... Negro family in the urban ghettos is crumbling ... So long as this situation persists, the cycle of poverty and disadvantage will continue to repeat itself."

And then all hell broke loose. Just as the report was first leaked to the press in August, 1965, what Patterson calls "the worst urban violence in U.S. history" erupted in Los Angeles's predominantly black Watts neighborhood. It would have been reasonable enough to view that riot, along with the many riots that followed it in major cities in the next few years, as prompt validation for the language of alarm in Moynihan's report. However that might be, Moynihan's linkage of poverty and a host of other social problems with family breakdown--more precisely, with the absence of fathers--has been abundantly confirmed in subsequent decades of research. Yet the immediate response to his report, amid some measured praise, was a wave of hostile criticism from liberal academics and militant black leaders. In the minds of his most severe critics, Moynihan had violated the primary commandment of discussions of race in America:

Thou shalt not blame the victim.

Those critics misrepresented his meaning, as Patterson rightly observes. Despite dramatic references to "the fundamental problem" of family breakdown and the "tangle of pathology" surrounding it, Moynihan took care in the report to avoid blaming the victim, insisting that white racism and unemployment were the underlying causes of family dissolution among impoverished blacks. But the critics' charge stuck, and the fateful effect, according to Patterson, was that "until relatively recently ... many liberals and civil rights leaders ... continued to avoid talking about many black family issues."

Let us note that the regrettable effect of the controversy, as Patterson sees it, is the intimidating effect it had on liberal discussion. Anxious to avoid the charge or the offense of victim-blaming and wary, too, of licensing conservatives to engage in it, liberals in this period confined their public commentary, according to Patterson, to an increasingly feeble refrain that white racism in some form was the only cause of black troubles worth discussing. But in so confining themselves, liberals ceded the public discussion of family issues to conservatives, who emerge as the real villains--the true victim-blamers--in Patterson's story. The rise of "family-values" conservatism in the 1970s signified not an advancement but an "obstacle to meaningful dialogue," he contends, because woven into its understanding of the family-breakdown problem as fundamentally cultural, not structural or institutional, was a moralistic denigration of the black poor as "undeserving." By this means, conservatives convinced most Americans that freedom under law actually is enough, contrary to LBJ's, Moynihan's, and Patterson's conviction, thereby undermining support for the "large-scale public programs" that liberals believe are the necessary and perhaps even sufficient condition for saving impoverished blacks.

PATTERSON'S BOOK IS A WELL-RESEARCHED history of public policy and debate on black family issues in this period, and it provides a fair-minded, persuasive defense of Moynihan against his critics on the Left. He agrees with Moynihan, against the doctrinaire liberals who excommunicated him, that moral culture really is a significant cause of poverty and social dysfunction among the black underclass. Aided by other independent-minded scholars, such as James Coleman and Orlando Patterson on the Left and James Q. Wilson on the Right, the vindication of Moynihan's view of the importance of moral culture and family formation signifies a genuine advance in mainstream academic discussion.

Important as it is, however, the progress that Patterson here chronicles and exemplifies remains only partial. Moral culture plays a prominent part in Moynihan's explanation of underclass ills, but it plays no intelligible part in the remedies that he prescribes. The "heart of [Moynihan's] approach to social welfare," as Patterson reports, was "his longstanding advocacy of a ... system of family allowances," designed to guarantee an income floor for all families and thereby to supply the vital needs of poor children. Moynihan believed this plan to be revolutionary: "the most startling proposal to help poor persons ever made by a modern democratic government."
But the connection between diagnosis and proposed remedy is elusive. How does a program of cash assistance, "generous and bureaucratically simple" as it might be, address the issues of family structure and moral culture, which Moynihan called "fundamental" to the problem of poverty among blacks? How is any program aimed at the material dimensions of poverty to assist in restoring the personal desires and disciplines that sustain marriage, parental responsibility, success in school, and industrious employment? Insofar as such policies fail to address these moral dimensions of poverty, how can they be said to supply what needy children need most desperately? That central incoherence in Moynihan’s thinking on race and poverty points up an irony that pervades Patterson’s account. When the subject turned to remedies, the man who braved a political and academic firefight over the importance of family disintegration was curiously reluctant to face the full implications of his analysis.

FOR AN ARGUMENT THAT SHARES MOYNIhan’s insight into causes, but shows none of his or Robinson’s reluctance to match a conservative remedy to a conservative diagnosis, we must look to the sharply argued new book by Amy L. Wax, Race, Wrongs, and Remedies: Group Justice in the 21st Century. Wax, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania Law School, combines conceptual insights from the law of torts and remedies with a thorough reading of the scholarship on racial disparities to bring much-needed clarity to the discussion of the black man’s burden.

This clarity begins with her forthright declaration that "the taboo against blaming the victim has profoundly distorted thinking about race" She knows very well that it is unjust to blame victims for the injuries others have inflicted upon them, and agrees "that current racial inequalities are the result of historical oppression" But Wax denies vigorously that identifying malformed cultural mores as the primary present cause of black-white disparities amounts to blaming the victim. The widespread opinion to the contrary has fueled a massive effort to locate the causes of disadvantage in factors external to the behavior and mores of the disadvantaged. The result, she contends, has been a massive diversion of mental, moral, and material resources away from the only effective remedial strategy.

Common abuses of the victim-blaming charge, Wax suggests, reflect a failure to acknowledge the distinction between liabilities and remedies. She offers the elementary example of a pedestrian struck and injured by a driver who ran a red light. The driver is entirely culpable, and justice (the law of remedies) requires the driver to rectify the wrong--to make the pedestrian "whole" so far as possible. But the crash has left the pedestrian incapacitated, and his recovery will require a protracted, laborious regimen of physical rehabilitation. Thus the liability and the remedy diverge. The driver can and must compensate the pedestrian for medical expenses and monetary damages, but the pedestrian’s full recovery is beyond the driver’s power to effect; unfair as it may be, recovery is unattainable without the victim’s self-healing efforts.

The divergence between liability and remedy is particularly sharp, Wax continues, in cases in which the injuries damage the victims’ human capital by impairing capacities or distorting patterns of thinking and behavior. In particular, "social science evidence shows that enduring injuries to human capital now represent the most destructive legacy of racism." She reviews that evidence in two crucial areas. Regarding educational achievement, she argues that success depends critically on "the characteristics, behavior, and education-related attitudes of the students themselves." The same holds true in employment, where the evidence shows that "personal and behavioral attributes related to productivity are by far the most important predictors of job-market success, regardless of race."

It follows that the "dominant view" with regard to remedies--that "racial inequality can only be eliminated by eradicating racism and providing effective, well-funded social programs"--is radically mistaken. No known school-reform program has ever succeeded in transforming students’ attitudes toward studying and learning, Wax observes, just as no known job program has ever fostered the attitudes and habits needed for individuals to take available jobs and perform them well. Above all, no program of external intervention has supplied a remedy for the fundamental problem of family disintegration. Because "virtually all that ails black America today lies outside the power of others to fix," Wax concludes, "a radical shift in strategy" is needed. "The future belongs to self-help"
IN READING THESE THREE BOOKS, ONE IS IMPRESSED by the authors' efforts to reform (Robinson and Patterson) or to replace altogether (Wax) the longstanding narrative about race in America. But no less impressive is what they convey, intentionally or not, about the difficulty of the task. Whereas Robinson, Moynihan, and Patterson fail to break entirely free of the old orthodoxy, Wax succeeds admirably in charting a new (or, in fact, much older) course; but her stark analysis and proposed remedy make clear that her strategy will face tenacious resistance.

Among the sources of that resistance, one is especially powerful. "The self-help insight," Wax concedes, "offends our deepest sense of justice." Justice pure and simple demands that the wrongdoer (1) pay for his crime and (2) repair the victim. These demands are predictably felt with special urgency in response to such massive historical wrongs as those inflicted by slavery and segregation. It is entirely understandable that many blacks would resent the self-help imperative as a means of "letting whites off the hook" and many whites would also resist that imperative out of an earnest desire to atone for a history of black subjugation. To adherents of the old narrative, blacks were for so long, so obviously and grievously victims of whites' injustices that there simply must be a programmatic remedy available to the larger society, cost what it may. Let justice be done, the reasoning seems to say, though the heavens should fall.

As all three books make clear, however, while the search for such remedies continues, the heavens really are falling in many of America's black neighborhoods. The urgency of this fact must be underscored, as Moynihan and Robinson do, and it must be leveraged to open more minds to alternative remedial approaches, as Wax endeavors to do. Liberals would do well in this debate to acknowledge, in a spirit of humility, the limits of our knowledge of how to help people mired in a culture of poverty, and the abundant capacity of would-be benefactors to do unintended harm. For their part, conservatives must draw their own portion of humility from an understanding of the magnitude of the historical wrongs and the depth of the psychological sensitivities involved.

Both might learn a bracing lesson from Tocqueville's observation that white Americans tend to act, in relation to blacks, out of interest, pride, or pity. Proponents of self-help must make their stand, in the end, on the common ground of simple human dignity. Let us all recognize that to ignore or excuse blacks' vices is to insult their virtues. The insistence on internal moral reformation must not be shunned as an affront to blacks or an evasion of white responsibility. To the contrary, it must be affirmed as the only way forward that properly respects the moral responsibility shared by all people of all colors.

Peter C. Myers is professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin, Eau Claire, and author of Frederick Douglass: Race and the Rebirth of American Liberalism (University Press of Kansas).

Myers, Peter C.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)

Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA262691521&v=2.1&u=faye81655&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE|A262691521

Title: The 'Splintering' Of America's Black Population
Document Type: Audio file, Broadcast transcript, Interview
TERRY GROSS, host:

This is FRESH AIR. I'm Terry Gross.

There was a time when there was a clear black agenda, when we could talk confidently about the state of black America. But not anymore, writes Eugene Robinson in his new book, "Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America."

Desegregation, affirmative action, urban decay, the decimation of the working class, and waves of immigrants from Africa and the Caribbean are some of the reasons why instead of one black America there are four increasingly distinct groups with their own mindsets, hopes and fears.

Robinson says there's the mainstream middle class; a large group of the abandoned poor; a small transcendent elite with enormous wealth, power and influence; and two newly emergent groups, individuals of mixed-race heritage and communities of recent black immigrants.

Eugene Robinson is a Washington Post columnist who won a Pulitzer for his commentary on the 2008 presidential campaign. He's also a news analyst for MSNBC.

Eugene Robinson, welcome to FRESH AIR. So you know, in your book, "Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America," you've divided black America into four separate categories, just û just have a way of thinking of black America, not because everybody fits so neatly, but...

Mr. EUGENE ROBINSON (Washington Post Columnist): Right.

GROSS: But anyways, so the two possible categories I could see you fitting into would be the mainstream middle class or perhaps the transcendent elite - not that you have Oprah Winfrey kind of money or Barack Obama kind of power, but you are a Washington Post columnist and an MSNBC news analyst, so you do have a lot of sway, and a lot of visibility.

Mr. ROBINSON: Yeah, I would certainly put myself in one of those two categories. If you're just talking bank account, obviously I'm in the mainstream category. But you know, I put other people in the book who had that sort of juice and influence.

So I guess as long as I have these platforms that I have, and I blame it mostly on the platforms and not (unintelligible), but I guess I probably would put myself in that category.

GROSS: You grew up in South Carolina, in a community that was very educated. You grew up, like, a few hundred feet from two African-American colleges. There were a lot of African-Americans with Ph.D.s, a lot of African-Americans who were affiliated with colleges in one way or another, where a lot of the white people in the town weren't nearly as educated.

Mr. ROBINSON: That's correct. I grew up in what was kind of like a college town. Most of the adults I knew had advanced degrees. And white Orangeburg was basically an agricultural community. So I kind of grew up thinking that black folks had all this û they didn't necessarily have a lot of money, but they had a lot of sophistication, and
they traveled widely, they read books all the time. And white people had more money and power but maybe not as much culture or learning. It was the impression that I got as a little kid.

GROSS: Now, did that impression that you got as a little kid jive with what you were seeing in American popular culture? Though at the time there were far fewer African-Americans in - represented in American popular culture on TV or in the movies. But nevertheless, how did it jive with what you saw?

Mr. ROBINSON: It û well, as you said, there wasn't all that much to see. I remember when "I Spy" with Bill Cosby as one of the two lead characters in a network series - this was revolutionary.

I remember whenever Leslie Uggams would appear on Mitch Miller, we would all be...

(Soundbite of laughter)

GROSS: Oh God.

Mr. ROBINSON: Yes - dating myself and maybe you too. We would all be called into the living room because Leslie Uggams was on, or if one of the jazz greats was on Ed Sullivan, for example, Ella Fitzgerald or Sarah Vaughan.

What we were able to see, we held onto, and it was so exciting to see African-Americans, even if in a very small way, kind of break into popular culture. And it was exciting that they were being seen by the rest of the country at the same time.

GROSS: Now, you went to a school that was part of a series of schools built by a philanthropist at the turn of the 19th century, the Rosenwald Schools. And I had never heard about this before. So I'd like you to tell the story of your school and how it fit into this chain, or whatever, of schools.

Mr. ROBINSON: Right, this û I went to a school called Felton Training School. That was the name of the school at the time. It was on the campus of South Carolina State University. It was a very simple kind of literally four-room schoolhouse, four big rooms, two grades per room.

And there were four main teachers, but the schoolhouse itself was one of some thousands built throughout the South by a Chicago philanthropist named Julius Rosenwald. That's where most of the money came from.

And he started doing this as a result of a meeting he had with Booker T. Washington, who had the idea that he could fund schoolhouse-building projects in the South, and that this was a great vehicle for a kind of black uplift.

GROSS: You grew up in a kind of African-American elite, in a way. You know, you were in a small town, but your community was built around two colleges, and your family was connected to those colleges. You got a good education in a small school, but a good education. And yet you were growing up in the segregated Jim Crow South.

So you were an elite, but you were also not part, you were not allowed into mainstream America. So what was your sense then of where you and your family fit into America?

Mr. ROBINSON: First of all, even as a kid, I think I was, and I think most of, if not all of my friends were acutely aware of the civil rights struggle and what was going on. And I think we really defined ourselves in terms of that struggle, as participants, as soldiers in the struggle for freedom and equality.

And there were, you know, pressing issues about the right to vote and about public accommodations. There were stores in Orangeburg that you ū you couldn't go in the front door. You had to go in the back door.
In 1968, when I was in high school in Orangeburg, there was an incident called the Orangeburg Massacre, in which three black students were killed by highway patrol, state troopers, at the culmination of a three-night demonstration that started as a protest over a segregated, whites-only bowling alley in 1968.

So the kind of reality of Jim Crow was a huge factor in forging really my sense of myself. At the same time, if I’m being honest, because it was essentially a college town, there was a certain intellectual arrogance that we all shared, and you know, when I go home to Orangeburg, or when I run into folks from Orangeburg, then I think, you know, we still share in a way.

GROSS: What do you mean by intellectual arrogance? How would it express itself?

Mr. ROBINSON: It was said at the time that Orangeburg was the town with the most black Ph.D.s per capita of any town in America. You know, I never tried to truth-squad that, to be honest, Terry. So I don’t know if that’s true. But that was always what was said.

And that, I think, gave those of us who came from that community just a sense of ourselves as special and as capable and as, you know, smart and kind of special.

And that feeling of specialness, really, in the context of Jim Crow, at least, was a kind of armor, I think. It certainly helped me at Orangeburg High School. I didn’t go in with any sort of feeling of, you know, gee, can I measure up here. It was like, you know, wait till they see this, you know.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. ROBINSON: You know, I’m not taking any stuff from these people. And I had a geometry teacher who seemed to really resent the presence of black students. And so I resolved that I would never give her the satisfaction of grading me down one iota in geometry.

So I would study geometry for hours every night. I’m not really good at math. And I don’t really have a good spatial sense. But I got an A-plus in geometry just because I wasn’t going to give anybody the satisfaction of not giving me an A-plus in geometry.

GROSS: My guest is Washington Post columnist and MSNBC News analyst Eugene Robinson. His new book is "Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America." We’ll talk more after our break. This is FRESH AIR.

(Soundbite of music)

GROSS: My guest is Eugene Robinson. He’s a Pulitzer Prize-winning Washington Post columnist and an MSNBC News analyst. His new book is called "Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America."

We’re talking about his coming of age. Earlier he said that growing up in the segregated South, he and his friends defined themselves in terms of the civil rights struggle.

So being very caught up in civil rights movement, when you went to college - and this would have been early ’70s?

Mr. ROBINSON: This was 1970.

GROSS: Okay. So this is a period when the Black Panthers are active. There’s still a very strong civil disobedience movement. So you’ve got, like, both ends there. You’ve got, you know, a much more, like, aggressive, angry
movement, and a much more, you know, Martin Luther King-oriented movement. Where did you fit in, and how did your family feel about where you fit in to that?

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. ROBINSON: I kind of û that was kind of the period when I kind of didn’t, in a way. I mean, I got to û I went to the University of Michigan in 1970. And everything was going on.

My father had gone to school at Michigan. I remember he drove me up to school, and he’s showing me around the campus and, you know, this is this hall, and this is that hall. And we went to the Michigan Union, this old gothic kind of building in the middle of campus.

And we’re walking upstairs and look out the front window, and down in the plaza, you know, in front of the union, radical lesbians are doing street theater, complete with fake blood and simulated copulation and everything. I thought my dad was going to have a heart attack.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. ROBINSON: But I, I was thrilled. I was, like, oh wow, actual lesbians, you know. You know, I’ve read about them.

(Soundbite of laughter)

Mr. ROBINSON: And there were like actual Jewish people. I had met one in my life until then. And there - so I was kind of very fascinated with the whole û what was happening with young people at the time, and much less fascinated at the time with specific questions of race.

And then I stumbled into the student newspaper. I had wanted to be a architect. I was a lousy architecture student, but I stumbled into the student newspaper, and that was love at first sight. And so kind of the combination of everything that was going on in Ann Arbor in 1970 plus this whole new way of looking at the world, this journalistic way of going up to people and asking them questions that were none of your business, and they would answer you, and you could write about it. You know, I found that a really interesting and satisfying way to experience the world, and thrilling in a way. And so that’s kind of what I did in college.

GROSS: So you grew up in an African-American community, very college- oriented, and then when you had children, you were bringing up your children in a predominately white neighborhood, predominately white middle-class neighborhood. How did your sense of what it meant to be African-American compare to your father’s?

Mr. ROBINSON: Entirely different. And it’s really, if you look at those three generations, you just see how much things have changed. My father as an infant made the great migration. He was born in 1916 in rural Georgia. His family was kind of gradually making the trek north.

Every û there were six siblings, and every one was born in a different city. As they made their way north out of Georgia, they went someplace else, and then to Columbus, Ohio, and finally ended up in Ann Arbor, Michigan, which is where my dad grew up.

And he served in the segregated Army in World War II, as did his brothers. He moved to the Jim Crow South to marry and be with my mother, whom he had met during the war years.
So he grew up at a time when those basic, fundamental civil rights battles were being fought. He was there in Orangeburg when there were NAACP meetings at our church, and Dr. King came to speak at our church. And it was a question of basic, fundamental rights that were being denied.

And that's kind of different from the way things were by the time I reached adulthood, when those sorts of fundamental rights were guaranteed and totally different from the world in which my kids grew up.

You know, one evening I will never forget was the election night in 2008, when I, from the MSNBC set, got to call my mom and dad. My dad was 92 at the time. He has since passed away. My mother at the time was 87. And I got to call them and tell them that they had lived to see the election of the first African-American president, and then spent several days thinking about that, the fact that a life had spanned such a period, thinking about the world in which, into which my father was born and the world in which he died, two different worlds.

GROSS: Do you think that President Obama's political opposition is using language or positions that are a reaction in one way or another to his being African-American?

Mr. ROBINSON: I do think so. I see it in the emails that I get from critics, and fortunately this is just a small portion of the email that I get.

But I've got to tell you, I get some flat-out racist stuff of a kind that I don't think I've seen since the old Jim Crow days, and...

GROSS: Really? Like what's the tone of it? I mean, what's the û what's it focused on?

Mr. ROBINSON: Sometimes just flat-out racism. You know, the coloreds, you know, couldn't organize a two-car funeral. And then, you know, a caricature of the president's a monkey and, you know, that sort of stuff.

Again, that's not most of the email I get, and I get a lot of very reasoned, fair, I think, conservative or progressive criticism of the president. But I get more of this really racist stuff than I thought I would get and than I've ever seen before.

And I'm talking, you know, I get a few of these things a week, and they're not all coming from the same person.

GROSS: So what do you think it is that has empowered people to think it's okay to write emails to you like this and to express overt racism like this? I mean, there was a time not too long ago when even racists thought it was socially inappropriate to express it publicly or that there'd be too much criticism for them if they expressed it publicly. But now you're finding that it's okay in some circles to just let it rip.

Mr. ROBINSON: Yeah, it's okay to just let it rip. And I think there are a number of different reactions that I think President Obama's election and inauguration have provoked. To some people, and I don't think this is a whole lot, but to some people it provoked them to write me emails or comments on my column that essentially say, you know: What more do you people want? You've got a black president. What more do you people want? That sort of thing, that sort of you people construction that we used to hear and we haven't heard a lot of recently.

And what I think it has done to some people is kind of stoke anxieties that are partly demographic, about the fact that, you know, in 30 years or so there won't be an ethnic or racial majority in this country, there won't be a white majority, everybody'll be a minority; anxiety about the economy, and not just about the recession but about the kind of structural economic problems and whether or not my kids are going to have more opportunities and a better life than I have; and if they're in danger of not having more opportunity and a better life, well, who's to blame for that? And they look at President Obama.
So that's why you can finding, like a poll I saw a few months ago in which really a staggering number of Republicans, I don't think it was a majority, but it was a huge percentage, who really and I think honestly felt that President Obama's policies had somehow favored or were designed to favor African-Americans, when in fact the White House has kind of gone out of its way to not propose policies that have that sort of overt goal, that speak specifically to African-Americans, precisely, I think, because that's the sort of thing they'd be accused of.

So I can't think of a single one that they've come forward with, and yet there's this sense out there, and I think it's I just think it has to do with these anxieties, and there's something about Obama's election that brings them out and for some people I think makes them more acute.

GROSS: Well, Eugene Robinson, thanks so much for talking with us. It's a pleasure to talk with you.

Mr. ROBINSON: Well, Terry, it was great to be here. Thanks so much for having me.

GROSS: Eugene Robinson is the author of the new book "Disintegration: The Splintering of Black America." He's a Washington Post columnist and an MSNBC News analyst. You can read an excerpt of his book on our website, freshair.npr.org. I'm Terry Gross, and this is FRESH AIR.

Source Citation (MLA 7th Edition)
Document URL
http://go.galegroup.com/ps/i.do?id=GALE%7CA243303476&v=2.1&u=faye81655&it=r&p=LitRC&sw=w

Gale Document Number: GALE | A243303476