The Cultural Dynamic of the Prison Industrial Complex: A Critique of Political Rhetoric and Popular Film During the 1980’s

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the Requirements for the degree Master of Arts

in

Ethnic Studies

by

Juliana Jamel Smith

Committee in charge:

Professor David Pellow, Chair
Professor Denise Da Silva
Professor Michael Hanson

2008
The Thesis of Juliana Jamel Smith is approved and it is acceptable in quality and form for publications on microfilm:

________________________________________

________________________________________

________________________________________

Chair

University of California, San Diego
2008
# Table of Contents

Signature Page ................................................................. iii

Table of Contents ....................................................................... iv

Abstract ....................................................................................... v

Introduction .................................................................................. 1

Chapter 1: The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC): An Historical Perspective ............ 16

Chapter 2: How Come There Were No African Americans at Ronald Reagan’s
Funeral? The 1980’s, Political Rhetoric and A Culture of Imprisonment .............. 38

Chapter 3: Prison Logic: A Critical Look at Popular Film Culture during the 1980’s
........................................................................................................... 69

Conclusion ..................................................................................... 116

References ................................................................................. 121
Prisons are places that disproportionately house the poor, the working class, and people of color of this country. While what has been deemed ‘the prison industrial complex’ has been said to serve a number of purposes--a financial project for the state and private companies, a permanent counterrevolution, a place to house surplus labor populations, a place to punish ‘criminals’ or a means to create a “safer” society--it functions in part because American culture encourages and normalizes its presence. This thesis seeks to give credence to the idea that the prison industrial complex is more than its political and economic tentacles. The prison industrial complex is also a cultural phenomenon worthy of study. This thesis examines cultural artifacts from the moment of the 1980’s, including Ronald Reagan’s political campaigns and films such as *Colors,*
Menace II Society, Boyz N the Hood and Clockers. The main argument herein is that during the 1980’s there were rich visual, written, spoken and cultural discourses that implicitly and explicitly buttressed the need for incarceration and prison, normalizing its presence as a way to solve social and economic problems.
Introduction

Prisons are places that disproportionately house the poor, the working class, and people of color of this country. While what has been deemed ‘the prison industrial complex’ has been said to serve a number of purposes; a financial project for the state and private companies, a permanent counterrevolution, a place to house surplus labor populations, a place to punish ‘criminals’ or a means to create a “safer” society, it functions in part because American culture encourages and normalizes its presence. This thesis seeks to give credence to the idea that the prison industrial complex is more than its political and economic tentacles. The prison industrial complex is a cultural phenomenon worthy of study.

On February 15, 2000, the U.S. hit the 2 million mark for the number of people imprisoned. While largely unnoticed, the U.S. continued its global record as the largest incarcerator in the world. It may be hard to imagine, but in 1972, the prison population was less than 200,000 prisoners. In 1980, there were 319,598 prisoners according to the Bureau of Justice. Since 1980, there has been a 450% increase in the number of people imprisoned. The latest statistics show that as of December 2005, there were 2,193,798 prisoners in federal and state prison or jails. If that percentage increase (of 2.7%) continued as it did the previous year, the rate as of today would be 2,248,263 prisoners. That would be an increase of 58,463 prisoners a year. This does not count the number of people under correctional supervision, either on parole or probation which totals over 7 million as of December 2005. In addition, that number of prisoners does not
account for the territorial prisons (15,735), local jails (747,529), facilities operated by or exclusively, for the Bureau of Immigration and Customs Enforcement (10,104), military facilities (2,322), jails in Indian country (1,745 as of midyear 2004), and juvenile facilities (96,655 as of 2003) which would have put the number of U.S. incarcerated at 2,320,359 by the end of December 2005. \{80 U.S. Department of Justice 2007/a/y/h;\}

To highlight this trend further, the United States incarcerates more people per capita than any other country in the world, and more African American men than South Africa during apartheid. \{77 Prison Policy Initiative 2007/a/y/h;\} \(^1\) To get an even clearer picture, in California, it took one hundred years to build nine prisons, but in the 1980’s alone nine prisons were built. In the 1990’s, another twelve prisons were built in California, including three Women’s prisons. \{10 Davis, Angela Yvonne 2003/a/y/s12-13/h;\} According to a study done at Pennsylvania State University, 36% of prisons operating in 1995 were completed from 1985-1995, averaging 48 new prisons a year nationally during that eleven year span. \{65 Farrigan, Tracey L. & Glasmeier, Amy K. 2002/a/y/h;\}

Despite a number of scholars, researchers and even the Department of Justice evidence that crime has been on the decline, this massive build up of prisons and thus the prison population continues to rise. \{80 U.S. Department of Justice 2007/a/y/h;\} \(^2\)

Much of the public dialogue has been doused in the rhetoric of public safety, crime

\(^1\) The U.S. houses 5.8 times more Black men than South Africa during apartheid (1993) according to the Prison Policy Initiative. To highlight this point, in 2000, there were 2,298 prisoners per 100,000 people in the U.S. population.

\(^2\) According the Bureau of Justice statistics total property crime (including burglary, theft, and motor vehicle theft) has declined since 1973. Total violent crime rates (including simple assault, aggravated assault, rape, murder, and robbery) have generally decreased since 1973 but have gone through periods of fluctuation.
control or overcrowded prisons. But how was it that much of the public came to support public policies of massive incarceration? This thesis seeks to understand why much of the U.S. public acquiesced and, at times, endorsed policies contributing to mass imprisonment. My research question specifically looks at the time period of the 1980’s, Ronald Reagan, tough on crime politics, and the War on Drugs, to try and understand why it is that a phenomenal number of prisoners, synonymous with the building of more prisons, increases at enormous rates with relatively little public outcry. I am focusing primarily on this era because of the bombardment of public images around criminals, drugs, ghettos and black criminality is overwhelmingly visible.

The policy of mass incarceration does not reflect the public’s natural inkling to crime but an artificially stimulated fear. The 1980’s was rich with visual, written, spoken and cultural discourses that implicitly and explicitly buttressed the need for incarceration, read crime control and public safety, on a large scale. The 1980’s also saw the increase in mandatory minimum federal laws being passed including the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (revised in 1988), the Omnibus Drug Bill of 1986, and the Immigration Reform and Control Act of 1986. This list of federal laws does not include the additional state laws that cause an upsurge in longer prison sentences and an increase in the total prison population.{{14 Parenti,Christian 1999/a/y/s51/h;}}

Numerous state laws refocused attention on crime and allowed for longer sentences of crimes that twenty years prior would not have warranted such harsh punishment. The Street Terrorism Enforcement and Prevention (STEP) Act of 1988 passed in California is an example of strong mandatory minimum laws that became one of the catalysts to the astronomical prison population. Proposition 184 in California (The Three Strikes and You’re Out statute) and Proposition 21, passed in the early 1990’s and should not be overlooked as they are still a product of the consciousness around crime that drove the War on Drugs. In addition, numerous Forfeiture Laws during the early 1980’s had been passed in states allowing local police
To understand part of this phenomenon, the thesis will focus on sites that contribute to a cultural understanding of prisons and criminals. Specifically, I will look at how the political rhetoric and administration of Ronald Reagan reflect the need to reinscribe social and economic problems created by the state as the result of bad individual choices and morals. The shift from ideas and policies focusing on social democracy (New Deal politics) to individual choices (Neo-Conservative politics) reflected a new racial common sense, as well as a class and gender one within the state’s newly announced public role. This ideological shift held that racism did not exist or was in fact a disappearing feature of American life. Since one’s race and class are often concomitant, the large number of prisoners is covertly justified in the rhetoric of individual choice. This shift in thinking about race and individuals reflects the state’s authority to define and explain conditions. This moment, in what scholar Dylan Rodriguez has called the Post 1970’s White Reconstruction, is signified by the African American population as theoretically equal to their white counterparts and simultaneously part of a colorblind society.\footnote{Rodriguez, Dylan 2006/a/y/s15/h;}{15} The dialogue of racism to understand social problems seemed as though it was a trend of the past. And so without overt racism, justifications for a prison population heavily overrepresented by the poor and people of color, particularly African American became normal within the landscape of the United States.

On the surface, there are some seemingly obvious answers to this question of public acquiescence and a public aptitude towards punishing acts of crime. For one, mass

\footnote{confiscate cash and property. This fueled a pro-active police force that would be able to not only fund their local police headquarters but also consciously get them into the popularly declared War on Drugs.}{4 For Rodriguez, the reference to White Reconstruction recalls U.S. backed counterinsurgency to Black liberation, Indigenous, Third World and Poor People’s movements around the world.
incarceration is a *gradual* phenomenon; it does not happen with just one law, one media story or one politician. The massive prison buildup and thus prison population has happened law after law, media story after media story, reform after reform, and campaign after campaign promising lower crime rates. Mass incarceration’s gradual appearance may partly contribute to a sort of public acquiescence, but it does not necessarily explain the public’s active endorsement of these laws and more prisons.

Another factor is the invisibility of prisons, which enables them to function without very much public scrutiny.\{10 Davis, Angela Yvonne 2003/y/s15, 17/h;\} Prisons are not places the majority of the public drive by past work, they are hardly institutions we see monthly, let alone yearly. As political prisoner Mumia Abu Jamal has said of prisons, they are “about as isolated as you can get and still stay on the planet.”\{71 Abu Jamal, Mumia 2005; \} Prisons are strategically placed away from cities, away from prisoner’s homes and families, and increasingly in rural areas that have been desperate for stable economies since the economic recessions and deindustrialization of the late 1970’s and 1980’s.

Only 20% of the population lives in rural areas, yet 60% of prisons are situated there. The average number of prisons built per year in rural areas in the 1960’s and 1970’s was four. By the 1980’s, the number of prisons built per year had quadrupled to over sixteen prisons per year. By the 1990’s, the number of new prisons built in rural areas per year was twenty five, pointing to the isolation and mass displacement of many prisoners from their communities and civil society.\{3 Gilmore, Ruth Wilson
As scholar activist Ruth Gilmore has written, the expansion of prisons is largely a geographical solution to socio-economic problems. In this sense, prisons become hidden enclaves of state violence. The prison houses social problems like poverty and unemployment, as well as health problems which can be seen as mentally ill patients in jails and prison outnumber those in psychiatric hospitals. Moreover, there is now public knowledge that U.S. prisons are breeding grounds for torture practices abroad, as some of the worst atrocities committed at Abu-Griab Prison in Iraq and at Guantanamo Bay were committed by U.S. prison guards. Despite their invisibility though, the affect on neighborhoods, families, and the social fabric of many communities is highly visible. Specifically in communities that are overrepresented in prison; the poor, African Americans, and communities of color in general prison becomes overwhelmingly evident. Moreover, prisons are places that the public sees on television, in movies, and documentaries perhaps more than in person. In this way, prisons and the policies that have led to mass incarceration are overtly in the public eye and a part of American culture.

**Theoretical Approach**

While this project is completely informed by political, economic, and social histories, I recognize there is something missing in the discussion of mass incarceration
and the prison industrial complex. The conversation is not complete without talking about how public understandings in the form of representations about prison, prisoners, criminals, and crime are addressed. In other words, can a culture form around the policies leading to mass incarceration and the prison industrial complex?

The issues here relate closely to what Antonio Gramsci has written extensively on--common sense and hegemony. Common sense is the notion that there is mediation of certain logics and practices that perpetuate the state’s existence and state’s practices. In Gramsci’s *Prison Notebooks* he says that *all* ideas have an implicit or explicit historical perspective. Ideas are not abstract; rather they are the product of historical conjunctures, surroundings, and environments.\{26 Gramsci, Antonio 1992/a/y/s322/h;\} If ideas stem from different moments, then contextualizing mass incarceration and the first large scale prison boom is denaturalizing it as a necessary feature of American society. According to Gramsci, schools, church, families or the “corporate” all contribute to the public’s common sense. Common sense, however, is not a fixed set of ideas, but rather a negotiation of ideas and values that allow the dominant group to function and stay in power.\{75 Mistry, Reena 1999/a/y/h;\} Another remarkable point Gramsci makes about refuting common sense or exposing it, is if one fights philosophy with philosophy it has a limiting effect; however looking at the social forces behind common sense and how these forces have generated material realities should be the goal of this examination. For Gramsci, common sense is that which is taken for granted or “critically absorbed” ideas about the world; folklore.\{26 Gramsci, Antonio 1992/a/y/s322, 419/h;\} By examining the ideas behind mass incarceration, asking questions like what purpose prison serves as Ruth Gilmore has asked, and what are the public explanations for mass
incarceration (prison) may invalidate the logic that upholds the prison industrial complex, revealing it as a product of a larger trajectory of history. Looking at mass incarceration in strict relation to statistics, the lowering crime rate in the mid 1980’s to 1990’s compared to the higher crime rate in the 1970’s, does not necessarily explain how people’s attitudes and common sense understandings of incarceration are of particular importance during the 1980’s. In addition, strict statistics do not help us understand how the public actively endorses mass incarceration. Looking at statistics and individual acts (only) also limits one’s imagination with regard to solving social problems like crime and poverty. Following Gramsci, I am taking a number of approaches. First, I take an historical approach to understanding why mass incarceration is happening at this moment. Second, I pursue a cultural approach that becomes the embedded wisdom and ‘common sense’ that permeates explanations of mass incarceration or lack thereof.

Gramsci’s idea of cultural hegemony resonates with this moment I am referencing because he focuses on both culture and ideology. Since culture is often taken for granted, it is important to locate those mundane parts of culture that reinforce domination. American culture can be said to be anything from hot dogs and baseball, to rock n’ roll. However, despite this innocent part of American culture, it has an irrevocable

---

7 This is the goal of Elliott Currie’s book *Crime and Punishment in America* which looks at the criminal statistics which appear to have been declining since the 1980’s, yet we will still see high incarceration rates. This also goes along with the California Department of Corrections statistics that say violent crime has been on the decline since 1980. However, prosecution of drug crime has been on the rise.

8 This is tricky because most Americans view crime as solely an individual outcome of an act or as Stuart Hall would say from an “individual frame of reference.” Without respect to outside factors such as one’s class, necessity for survival, one’s race which plays an enormous factor in who is more likely to be arrested and a determinant in one’s sentence, as well as one’s gender. One’s gender plays a significant role in the increase of women prisoners, especially women of color, and their relationship to each of these factors. Therefore, an analysis of crime statistics, simply put, is inadequate.
relationship with the current political economy.\footnote{20 Parenti, Michael 2006/a/y/s16-17/h;} Politics do not mean punching in a chad for a candidate every two or four years. Politics are directly related to the values that uphold a system, which at this moment, needs mass incarceration. If American culture is not an autonomous entity but directly related to values that uphold a system that in fact requires mass incarceration, then how do culture and more specifically film and political campaigning reflect those values? The necessity to restructure the American economy (globalization), coupled with anti-black racism and an innate fear of domestic rebellion, all of which are the foundational logic of the United States, is in part what has led to mass incarceration. The question then becomes how do sites like film uphold the ‘elite dominated values’ and how do they try to counter those values? Moreover, what role do politicians have as being the mouthpiece of state sponsored explanations of crime and prison?

The idea of cultural hegemony and common sense is also informed by British sociologist Stuart Hall. In his book, *Policing the Crisis*, Hall was interested in tracing mugging in England during the early 1970’s as more than “simple pickpocketing with occasional violence.”\footnote{25 Hall, Stuart 1978/a/y/s182/h;} In England during the 1970’s there were a series of “moral panics” around mugging, which were very reminiscent of the crack explosion in the U.S. during the 1980’s. Hall looked at what meanings mugging mobilized or what it was associated with, as well as how mugging produced a moral panic.\footnote{25 Hall, Stuart 1978/a/y/s182/h;} This was imperative in investigating this moment because the public’s reactions to those crimes were not necessarily in response to a statistical increase in the number of muggings, in fact muggings did not increase at that moment. On the contrary, much like in the U.S., criminal statistics were
not numerically increasing, but there was an increased sensitivity to these crimes and an increase in media attention towards these crimes. For Hall there was an important flaw in regards to the mugging panic. Coverage of the mugging panic really needed to be questioned in terms of why in that moment it generated a crisis. What can be gained from Hall’s framework is to base an analysis of particular phenomena less on the phenomena itself and more so on the historical moment and the construction of the phenomena by cultural institutions and forces that shape public opinion, and ways of seeing and knowing. Part of Hall’s conclusion was that the mugging phenomenon was in response to heightened anxieties around an influx of immigrants of color coming to England. In his last chapter, Hall lays down some of the historical conditions of muggings:

When examined in context, these various indices point a critical intersection between black crime, black labour and the deteriorating situation in the black areas. Even these must be contextualized…If they are the classic ‘crime prone’ areas believed by the criminologists, they are also- in conditions of deepening economic recession- potential breeding grounds for social discontent. And the black population stands at the intersection of all these forces: an alienated sector of the civil population, now also a significant sector of the growing army of the unwaged, and one vulnerable to accelerating social pauperization.{{25 Hall, Stuart 1978/a/y/s338/h;}}

Hall’s analysis shows that meanings produced around the mugger were a direct result of political economic conditions at the time. An important way to analyze crime from Hall’s explanation is that culture, while it may perform a number of functions, has the ability to contribute to political agreement or a common sense answers to complicated social problems. Since common sense does not stem from any one site or one sinister mastermind puppeteer in the White House, it becomes increasingly necessary to locate a
number of the sites that produce it, and, for example, uphold the logic of mass incarceration.

To further the idea of American culture’s influence over how we view prisons and prisoners, Ruth Gilmore writes that the maturation of policies contributing to massive incarceration have gone,

From the political and economic to that kind of cultural dimension that the prison industrial complex has created, or has recreated I should say. The prison industrial complex has shifted folk’s conceptions of problems and what the solutions to problems should be...Our society has completely normalized extreme-punishment through torturous circumstances, which is what putting people in cages is...{{3 Gilmore,Ruth Wilson 1999/a/y/h;}}

Here it is important to emphasize the necessity of getting the public normalize this type of punishment, where tough on crime politicians, and a consenting media promote and reflect politically driven ideals of locking up “criminals.” In other words, punishment becomes the normal landscape of life in America. It becomes the way to solve problems and not just problems directly related to crime, but poverty, homelessness, unemployment, and mental health. Political scientist Michael Parenti extends this understanding by placing specific attention on the importance of culture. For Parenti, the marriage of a society’s culture and political economy are inevitable. He writes,

Much of what we call our common culture is really the selective transmission of elite dominated values. A society built on slave labor, for instance swiftly develops a self justifying slaveholder culture with its own racist laws, science, mythology, and religious preachments. Likewise, a society based on private corporate enterprise develops supportive values and beliefs that present the business system as the optimal and natural mode of social organization.{{20 Parenti,Michael 2006/a/y/s16/h;}}

Parenti’s analysis here points to two larger concerns. One concern is that public opinion must be controlled. How do you get the public, who always have the potential to rebel, to
believe in a political economy that may not directly benefit them? A culture is not autonomous but often a justification of a larger political economy and a certain kind of social order. There are numerous sites that reflect the political economy of punishment and incarceration in the U.S. Using American culture is just an umbrella to explain the numerous sites that uphold this logic. This is by no means an extensive analysis of the common sense logic upholding mass incarceration but it is a start.

The Goal of Each Chapter

The aim of the first chapter is to provide an historical overview of the prison industrial complex. This history will focus on the function of the prison industrial complex, its ties to globalization and the liberation movements of the 1950’s to 1970’s. The second chapter looks at the political rhetoric and campaigning of Ronald Reagan during the 1980’s. Here, I situate the rise of neo-conservative hegemony endorsed and mobilized through Ronald Reagan’s speeches and campaigns, the legacy it has left in subsequent years, and the culture that has formed around punishment and contempt for poor people and people of color in general. I will also highlight the connection between Reagan’s political rhetoric of individual choices and the end of the New Deal politics will signify people’s lack of resources (poverty) as their own fault. Moreover, examining Ronald Reagan’s political rhetoric will enable a greater depth of understanding concerning how politicians--specifically conservatives, but also liberals--divert attention

---

9 In fact, even during racial slavery, the majority of white people did not directly benefit from slavery. The oft-quoted fact that most whites did not own slaves goes along with this notion that there had to be other advantages besides economic ones for the white population to be complacent in slavery. Their benefit came economically in some forms, but also symbolically and psychologically by knowing they were in principle above any black or African in America.
from state sanctioned policies that lead to deindustrialization, the scaling back of union participation, the subsequent growth in poverty, and prison growth. Sifting through symbolic and coded language will allow for a greater understanding of how certain people’s race, gender and class positions in society are criminalized, thus justifying their presence in prison.

There will also be an emphasis on how Ronald Reagan’s administration inserted ideals of safety and peace in notions of War, as in the “War on Drugs,” and also the numbers of people locked up, in discussions of being “tough on crime.” Ideas of safety and peace are measured through their opposites; war and punishment. This is a moment that must be contextualized as a cultural and political reality that reinforces and supports the practices of mass incarceration as normal and necessary. The goal here is to try and denaturalize mass incarceration as a way to solve problems.

In chapter 3 there will be an examination of popular film, exploring the logic of Black and Latino criminality that permeates these fictional accounts and uncovering the power these films have to inspire a call for more police and prisons. Further, how do films function as cultural productions, contributing to and/or reinforcing the popular discourse around the War on Drugs and common sense answers to a trend of incarceration? How did the state’s rhetoric, particularly from Ronald Reagan’s administration, affect directors and writers of films who may be trying to produce (counter) narratives on lives that are shaped in and around prison? Or, how do images on film reflect a need to buttress the War on Drugs? Here, it may be important to assess the role of the state as hands off when it comes to social problems, and yet increasingly present with regards to policing crime and fueling the War on Drugs.
These popular films, what I refer to as the ‘hood genre of films, are able to reach a large segment of the population. These films present a number of messages about crime, criminals, prison and prisoners. The ‘hood genre tries to counter much of the media’s portrayal of crime being endemic to the ghetto by providing a tactic of empathy. The empathy strategy, while attempting to provide a counter narrative, is characterized by a main character with whom the audience is supposed to identify. Besides the film *Colors* (1988), the writers and directors have the audience identify with what it may be like to be, more often than not, a black male living in the ghetto. As I will explain later in this paper, that empathy does not contextualize crime nor does it provide opposing knowledge to the mainstream positions that crime and violence are concentrated in black spaces like the ghetto.\(^4\) Nor does the strategy take into account a rather unexamined growth in the female prisoner population. Instead, these films provide more fuel for an increased numbers of police and state intervention in the form of incarceration and surveillance.

A central point in this thesis is that there is a common sense around prison and mass incarceration. This is a common sense that tells the public how to think about race, class and gender when it comes to the prison. There is also a common sense around prison that says it is completely normal to lock people away in cages. In fact, anything deemed a “crime” warrants a punitive response and that is considered normal. Since many of the public voters do not have first hand experience with prisons, it is important to examine the sites where they are receiving information regarding state policies of incarceration. For one, the voting population gets much of their information from media

\(^{10}\) Despite ghettos being an amalgamation of different ethnicities, the ghetto has always been synonymous with Blacks/Blackness in the American imagination.
sources. Part of the goal of my thesis is trying to locate *some* of the cultural production and public narratives that implicitly or explicitly justify policies that result in mass incarceration. Popular film and political rhetoric and campaigning are two sites that offer accessible public explanations of such complex problems.
Chapter 1: The Prison Industrial Complex (PIC): A Historical Perspective

My understanding of the prison industrial complex and the context of mass incarceration in the 1980’s, draws heavily from a number of sources. The 1980’s is a particularly important time in the development of this phenomenon, in what many scholars and activists have called the prison industrial complex. Taking into consideration Gramsci’s historical perspective of common sense and Hall’s analysis of mugging, history is central to understand this moment of unprecedented growth in the prison population. One of these sources is Christian Parenti’s seminal work, *Lockdown America: Police and Prisons in the Age of Crisis*, where he historically situates the current prison buildup and U.S. bragging rights for the world’s leading incarcerator. He looks at two events that he believes help shape the modern day era of policing, the anti-crime police state and the prison industrial complex. The first event that fuels the shift for Parenti is the political rebellions from the mid 1960’s to the early 1970’s. This includes the Civil Rights movement, the Women’s movement, the Anti War movement, the Black Power movement, 3rd World movements for independence (which began as far back as the 1930’s and 1940’s), the Poor People’s movement, and an increase in labor militancy.\{14 Parenti, Christian 1999/a/y/sxii/h;\} The second shift that Parenti locates is a global economic shift, globalization.

As a reaction to the first shift of political rebellion, Lyndon B. Johnson and others in congress passed the Omnibus Crime and Safe Streets Act in April of 1968 which created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA). The LEAA essentially consolidates numerous state agencies to enhance communication technology, and then to train police officers in basic unit tactics and military weaponry. The LEAA also made it
possible for police to be trained out of military bases. This means that the police would not only become an aggressive unit, but a domestic strong-arm of the FBI.\footnote{Churchill, Ward 2002; } The advent of the LEAA also meant that police would become offshoots of a domestic military. The LEAA combined with Law and Order rhetoric provided a strong ideological basis for the need to focus on domestic “crime” and the necessity of measuring public safety through the number of police on the street.

The second event is a global economic crisis. Here, Parenti locates the end of the golden age of capitalism and the response to that by the government and corporations.\footnote{Parenti, Christian 1999/a/y/h;} From the mid 1960’s to the early 1970’s profit rates for many big U.S. industries and large companies collapsed because other countries had recovered substantially since World War II. Since Japan and much of Europe had recovered and reindustrialized and were beginning to supply their own markets, U.S. imports no longer took precedence. The U.S. experienced along with the rest of the world in the late 1960’s a crisis of overaccumulation. There were too many products and not enough demand, capital needed to boost its profit rates.\footnote{Parenti, Christian 1999/a/y/h;} This lead to an even more massive campaign by the state starting with Jimmy Carter and amplified under Ronald Reagan’s terms to restructure the whole economy. According to Parenti, what happens next is throughout the 1970’s there is momentum to get rid of New Deal politics and restructure the economy in a way that favored a profit increase for large companies

\footnote{Many scholars and historians have deemed the golden age of capitalism anytime from 1945-1950 to the late 1960’s, early 1970’s. Just to be critical however, I want to question the indiscriminate use of “the golden age of capitalism” and relegate that term strictly for certain large economic industries as it may be argued that the moment was not socially “golden” for much of the population. Part of marking a time or moment like that negates huge economic struggles for many workers in the U.S. at the time, hence the Civil Rights movement and the Poor People’s Movement.}
and industries. This began a process of deindustrialization and globalization. In the 1980’s social spending, assaults on poor people and laborers in general, budget cuts in U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), not to mention the attacks on labor were all ways that allowed capital to boost profits. Changes in laws allowed for deindustrialization, coupled with Latin American regions being inundated with neo-liberal policies causing an influx of cheap labor coming to the U.S. (Mexican/Latin American migration). The announced policy of Reaganomics created an influx of poor people and essentially a new kind of economy for American workers altogether.

According to Parenti, the question became, how are you going to manage a population of poor people who historically have been known to rebel? Social control of the homeless, poor, people of color, labor organizers, and even war veterans to protect a specific status quo is not historically unprecedented. One of the responses to this potential crisis is through the War on Drugs and the return of Federal Crime Bills with mandatory minimums, inevitably increasing the probability of more prisoners. Parenti highlights a number of federal laws that contributed to the burgeoning prison population including the Assets Forfeiture Laws practiced by many local police under the Comprehensive Crime Control Act of 1984, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, the Omnibus Drug Bill of 1986, the 1994 Crime

---

2 The end of New Deal politics also shifts public consciousness away from thinking about the responsibility governments have towards their citizens.

3 Federal crime bills with mandatory minimums were in fact not new to congress. Mandatory minimums had been on the books before in the 1950’s, but politicians including George Bush Sr. realized that those laws were sending too much of the population to prison for long periods of time. See Drug Mandatory Minimums: Are They Working? conducted by the Subcommittee on Government Reform.
Bill, the 1996 the Anti-Terrorism and Effective Death Penalty Act, and the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA).{{14 Parenti,Christian 1999/a/y/h;}}

What do these federal laws mean and how do they translate on the ground? There are a number of ways one can address each of these laws but to start, each of these crime bills in the 1980’s and early 1990’s implemented mandatory minimums. This means a number of things, but one of the more obvious effects is longer sentences for crimes that beforehand would have been considered minor infractions. The other offshoot of these laws is the little discretion with which judges have to consider each case individually. This means that certain crimes, no matter what the context, will constitute a heavy prison sentence. As seen with the continuance of federal laws being passed in the 1990’s, the War on Drugs did not end with Ronald Reagan’s appointment as president. All of the aforementioned laws still exist.

During the early 1990’s when Bill Clinton came into office he promised to be tough on crime and delivered that promise with the 1994 Crime Bill. This effectively opened up the possibility for felony crimes that constituted life imprisonment as well as allocating money for federal state prison building and more police officers.{{14 Parenti, Christian 1999/a/y/s65/h;}} The other federal law that Parenti mentions, passed under Clinton was the Illegal Immigration Reform and Immigrant Responsibility Act of 1996 (IIRIRA), basically an anti-immigrant statute that called for “interior enforcement” and the militarization of the U.S./Mexico border. This in affect allowed for what Parenti calls

---

4 In this sense, a defendant who has two strikes in state court and no federal record, if they get a third conviction for a violent federal felony could result in prison for life.
the “apartheid policing” of Mexican/Latin@ populations. Local police and SWAT teams were going into rural meatpacking areas, heavily employed by Latinos and conducting raids, arrests and deportations, which continue in the year 2007.}} Dana Kozlov, Rafael Romo April 24, 2007/a/y/h;85 Bacon, David & Goodman, Amy April 27, 2007/a/y/h;}} The support for these raids came from federal laws that allowed for greater possibilities of being deported, further exploiting a cheap and expendable labor force. The IIRIRA also effectively put up what would later be the most militarized border in the world. For a number of reasons, the border symbolically and physically became a site of contestation concerning globalization. The militarization of the U.S./Mexico border was supposed to limit, control, and keep under surveillance a surge of incoming Latin American populations. The government and specifically Clinton knew they were going to have a large influx of Mexican immigrants because of North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) and the neo-liberal policies that generally bring lower wages to other countries. To illustrate this point further, scholar Noam Chomsky has explained some of the effects of Operation Gatekeeper and NAFTA.

The Mexican border has been a very porous border. Like most borders, it’s just the result of conquest. It’s an artificial border, and pretty much the same people live on both side, and they were going out and back. It wasn’t very carefully controlled. But it was understood that NAFTA was probably going to cause what is called an economic miracle in Mexico, which means an economic catastrophe for much of the population, and there would be a flood of people trying to escape. So you had to institute Operation Gatekeeper, which militarized the border. So along with NAFTA came the first militarization of the border, and hundreds of Mexicans are killed every year, we don’t know how many, by just trying to cross the border.}}

{63 Chomsky, Noam and Mendieta, Eduardo 2003/a/y/s173/h;}
Chomsky’s sentiments echo the larger point that Parenti has made in terms of the economic restructuring of the post World War II period. On August 12, 1992 the passing of the North American Trade Agreement (NAFTA) set in motion an unprecedented trade agreement that linked three countries, the U.S., Canada and Mexico together. As nice as it may sound, the agreement’s overarching purpose was to eliminate tariffs on goods like motor vehicles and automotive parts, computers, textiles, and agriculture coming into the U.S. and goods going to both Canada and the Mexico. This translated into finding the cheapest way to produce and import goods, by avoiding environmental laws, import and export taxes amongst other things. Moreover, NAFTA can also be seen as a form of social control over domestic populations as labor unions and movements are forced to deal with lowering wages and jobs going offshore and across the border. NAFTA hides some of the worst aspects of globalization, both poverty and economic domination. As a result, NAFTA has, as Chomsky pointed out, devastated populations domestically and internationally everywhere. NAFTA and globalization has caused the inevitable ballooning population of poor, particularly poor people of color both in the domestic and international sphere. Parenti suggests that prisons are a way to solve or at least hide the domestic problems of Reaganomics, globalization and more generally an economy that will inevitably experience numerous recessions. Parenti says social control of those potentially rebellious communities and resuscitation for big business form the logic behind the prison industrial complex and massive incarceration.

In another brilliant assessment of the prison industrial complex, scholar-activist Ruth Gilmore maps out the terrains of prison growth since the late 1960’s in her book and
two articles entitled _Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalization_, _Globalisation and Prison Growth_ and _From Military Industrial Complex to Prison Industrial Complex_ respectively. Gilmore uses California as her point of departure to talk about how socio-economic problems began to be addressed geographically. Like Parenti, Gilmore locates mass imprisonment and the prison industrial complex’s roots in the political rebellions or what may also be described as a moral panic over crime in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. In what she deems a political counterrevolution against the struggles of decolonization, the Civil Rights movement, the Anti-War movement, and the demands from radical groups in the U.S. like the Black Panthers, the prison industrial complex emerges as a “reaction to these struggles.”

In Gilmore’s words, “Crime became the all-purpose explanation for the struggles and disorder that were going on.” News of crime overshadows issues of unemployment rates and high inflation. As she explains of the Civil Rights moment and immediately after it, the abolition of the Jim Crow system did not get rid of the rationalizations for Jim Crow, as racism and white supremacy remained a useful political tool. Crime, as mentioned earlier, becomes a way to disengage with these struggles and criminalize those who fit the category of “black radical extremists” or “domestic/urban disturbances.” Further, labor activists have also felt the brunt of being criminalized and NAFTA was one of the ways of doing that, by institutionalizing violence and punishment.

As a consciousness over crime and criminals solidified, prisons begin being built in the 1980’s, a moment when index crimes decreasing. Gilmore urges readers to debunk the myth that the drug epidemic of the 1980’s causes more prisons, as this explanation is
not logical. Gilmore points to the increase in the number of laws and the amount of punishment allotted to drug offenders as a better explanation for the phenomenon of mass imprisonment. Her answer to the question, “If crime rates peaked before the proliferation of new laws and new cages, what work does the prison do?” lies in two areas: the anti-black racism/white supremacy embedded in the political counterrevolution of the 1960’s, and the economic restructuring (i.e. globalization) in the form of profits prisons promise.

For many the building of prisons should follow some kind of logical explanation. Explanations may center on the extraction of prison labor being the main motive behind a massive prison buildup or a private prison industry that benefits from having prisons. In fact, prisoners who work only account for 5% of the prison population.\footnote{Parenti, Christian 1999/a/y/h;} The sole reason for mass incarceration and “the biggest prison building project in the history of the world” in her reference to California’s prison growth as well as the nation’s is not purely economic profits.\footnote{Gilmore, Ruth Wilson 1999/a/y/h;} Mass incarceration does not fuel a prison labor class, nor does it produce a revenue or commodity driven economy. The work that prison does is manifold but it does not solely involve cheap labor exploitation. As Gilmore points out in her chapter on the expansion of prisons in California,

The new California prison system of the 1980’s and 1990’s was constructed deliberately—but not conspiratorially—of surpluses that were not put back to work in other ways. Make no mistake: prison building was and is not the inevitable outcome of these surpluses. It did, however, put certain state capacities into motion, make use of a lot of idle land, get capital invested via public debt, and take more than 160,000 low wage workers off the streets.\footnote{Gilmore, Ruth Wilson 2007/a/y/s88/h;}

In other words, for Gilmore prison growth is not a natural manifestation of the 1970’s post-industrial landscape or the post civil rights movement (alone) but rather a
combination of profit driven answers to the use of surplus land, labor (i.e. populations that the capitalist system had rendered expendable), and capital. Moreover, the prison has become a publicly projected solution for redeveloping cities in need of economic revitalization, especially rural cities. As she emphasizes though, it is the initial short term gain like contracts for building prisons and rebuilding local economies that has rendered prisons profitable. This way, the prison for Gilmore becomes akin to an investment project by the state. After prisons are up and running however, they do not generate the revenue or local jobs originally promised. A good example of this is Gilmore’s examination of the increase in housing vacancy and stock rates (which increased only moderately) as a result of the new prison being built in Corcoran, California. Instead of California Department of Corrections employees (CDC) living in the cities they were hired in, more often than not they opted to move out of those cities into more desirable locations. That left those local economies still in desperate need of a base economy. The rural cities that opted to build the prisons do not sustain any base economy and as a result often times present a burden in terms of water shortages, for example.\footnote{Gilmore, Ruth Wilson 2007/a/y/s176/h;} The other statistic Gilmore points to with the case of the town of Corcoran after its first decade of opening the prison is the climbing local unemployment rate from 26 to 29 percent.\footnote{Gilmore, Ruth Wilson 2007/a/y/s176/h;} In terms of city planning and short term benefits for communities that house prisons, they have simply not benefited.

\footnote{According to Dr. Gilmore, there was an anticipated residential and retail real estate boom that never occurred.}
With Gilmore’s emphasis on rural areas vying for prisons it is easy to get caught up in focusing attention on the problem with small towns having little or no jobs or sustainable industry. However, that narrow understanding of Gilmore’s work negates the fact that the economic restructuring that has been occurring in both rural and urban spaces, the flight of global capital and globalization affects both urban and rural areas similarly. Prisons are expensive, not necessarily profitable. According to Gilmore the only large beneficiary of prisons thus far has been the utility companies.

In another analysis of the prison industrial complex, scholar-activist Dylan Rodriguez similarly urges readers to place mass incarceration in the context of mass disappearance from civil society rather than simply the most economically viable option during a moment of post Civil Rights and deindustrialization. Where Rodriguez differs with many popular understandings is that he goes beyond an economic explanation of the PIC. He writes,

…The 1980’s saw an astronomical expansion of the prison regime’s operating capacities: the total prison and jail population grew by 500% from 1980-1992, and has almost tripled since. Under this prison-prison hegemony, mass repression and human containment become ironically perversely linked to the accompanying logic of profit, accumulation, expansion, and strategic annihilation that guide advanced global capital. As racially pathologized and historically disenfranchised communities are effectively surplused by capital’s logic of exploitation and labor expropriation, they cease to be relevant as either exploited workers or consumer markets. Rather, these racially criminalized populations are incorporated into a strategic commodity relation that invokes the history of U.S. racial chattel slavery. {15 Rodriguez, Dylan 2006/a/y/s143/h;}

Rodriguez is focused not only on the logic of accumulation and profit that drive globalization, but what happens to a political economic system that can no longer use populations for economic benefit. He is focused on the stimulation behind prison growth,
but also the human consequences. These consequences are not far removed from the existence of the United States as the major hegemonic force in the global capitalist system. For Rodriguez, it is precisely what history books gloss over that allows the U.S. as a nation to continue to function. Frontier genocide, land conquest, and enslavement are not the “tragic excess of an otherwise progressive developmental national narrative,” but a necessary component of the logic of the U.S.\cite{Rodriguez, Dylan 2006/a/y/s138/h;}

In other words, given the U.S.’s existence, the prison industrial complex is not unprecedented in its ability to disconnect people from their families, communities, livelihoods, and civil society. In fact, it is what forms the United States. This is imperative to understand as it goes hand in hand with the logic of the prison expansion. In continuance with this notion, scholar Ward Churchill has spoken similarly of the U.S. nation’s relationship to Native Americans as a necessary part of imperialist foreign and domestic policy. In recalling Native American genocide he says,

\begin{quote}
Military economic interlock as a matter of state has been the nature of this project we now call the United States since before the United States ever existed. Doing this to other people is the absolute fundamental requirement of what becomes the United States. That whole process that was done to Native Americans in terms of liquidation of populations and the divestiture of land and resources was the absolutely essential ingredient of placing the United States in a position to where it projects itself outward in a world in the same fashion it projected itself inward to consolidate itself as a continental block country, a mega state as it were…The inside and the outside are inextricably linked, it’s a single uninterrupted process.\cite{Churchill, Ward May 2, 2005/a/y/h;}
\end{quote}

It may be interesting to tie the PIC in the movement of global capital internationally and domestically as having genocidal consequences. From Churchill and Rodriguez we can effectively develop an understanding of domestic (prison) policy that invokes the perpetual expansion and the effective deracination of populations seen as unfit for
whatever reason; the political climate of discovery, development/underdevelopment, land, labor, resources, or surplus. In fact, the legal precedent for domestic and international policy that forcefully takes over land, liquidates populations, and simultaneously does not allow communities the legal means to seek retribution still exists today in the form of the Monroe Doctrine and the Doctrine of Discovery of the early 19th century.\footnote{Miller, Robert J. 2005a/y/h;} In the case of the prison industrial complex, it is glaringly obvious that communities of color, specifically African Americans who are heavily overrepresented in prison, experience domestic and foreign policy much differently than white civil society. However, that is not to say that white civil society is not affected by the prison system. The increase in the number of prisoners greatly affects the white population as well. The number of white prisoners will inevitably soar as it has, while the Black population will continue to rise exponentially.

It may be useful to recall the neo-colonial or internal colonial model used heavily in the 1960’s to explain how domestic (prison industrial complex) and international policies (movement of global capital/globalization) are inextricably linked. In a reassessment of the internal (neo) colonialism theory, Robert Allen Ph.D., who published *Black Awakening in Capitalist America*, studied the Black Power movement from an

\footnote{Both the Doctrine of Discovery and the Marshall Doctrine are technically still legal in United States law. The Doctrine of Discovery was a legal precedent established in the 15th and 16th century originally used by Spain, Portugal, England and the Church, allowing them to have both the moral and legal right to explore and obtain non-Christian and non-European lands. The Doctrine became international law (for European countries). Later, it was used primarily in American Law after the American Revolution particularly in interactions where Native American lands were confiscated, purchased, and/or stolen. In an article by lawyer Robert Miller, he argues that the Doctrine is still relevant today, especially with regards to interactions between the federal government and Native Americans. See Miller, Robert J., "The Doctrine of Discovery in American Indian Law" The Monroe Doctrine is somewhat similar. The Monroe Doctrine (1823) effectively allows the United States to confiscate lands in the western hemisphere without competition from Europe. Many scholars argue that it set U.S. imperial ambitions into motion.}
internal colonial model. In a reassessment of this theory, Allen argued that colonies did not have to be the external or the excess of Empires, but could exist within the empire. The relationship between “structures of domination and subordination” was the critical element.\footnote{Allen, Robert L. 2005/a/y/s4/h;} According to Allen, during the civil rights movement one could see the beginnings of neo-colonial model of social control in the black community much akin to colonized communities in Asia, Latin America and Africa who were “dominated and subjugated colonial subjects.” One of the arguments he makes is that the repression and incarceration instigated by the FBI’s COINTELPRO continues in the form of the prison industrial complex. Similar to authors Gilmore and Rodriguez, the reaction to the Black power movement, civil rights and other Third world movements are a form of a counterrevolution. Allen says, “In effect, the criminal justice system has become an instrument of the state for the systematic removal, incarceration, exploitation, and disenfranchisement of a significant part of the black population that is regarded as troublesome, surplus labor.”\footnote{Allen, Robert L. 2005/a/y/s7/h;}

Connecting domestic surplus labor to its international implications and also the potential of an intranational consciousness resisting globalization and its offshoots, Allen goes on to say, “Market globalization—the large scale movement of capitalist nations in search of lower wages and lucrative markets throughout the world—is creating a social crisis and at the same time opening up the possibilities for progressive social change.”\footnote{Allen, Robert L. 2005/a/y/s7/h;}} This is important to connect a potential global movement or at the very least a global consciousness that will develop in regards to domestic and international policy that affects everyone. Again, the international and domestic are inseparable and in many ways reflections of each other.
In continuance with this notion of global capitalism and the haunting domestic and international consequences of the PIC, scholar activist Angela Davis has continued this line of thought. In the vein of Rodriguez, Gilmore and Parenti, Angela Davis does not relegate prison building and mass incarceration to simply the most economically viable solution at the end of the golden age of capitalism and the beginning of large-scale deindustrialization in the 1980’s. In fact, Davis sees it as a counterintuitive solution saying, “The prison has become a black hole into which the detritus of contemporary capitalism is deposited. Mass imprisonment generates profits as it devours social wealth, and thus it tends to reproduce the very conditions that lead people to prison.”\footnote{Davis, Angela Yvonne 2003/a/y/s16-17/h;}

The irony of the prison industrial complex is that it constantly necessitates the very thing (the need for crime to be committed, in other words prisoners) it proclaims to prevent, contain or eliminate. Prison is no doubt an industry but how does it generate profit? Davis continues,

In the context of an economy that was driven by an unprecedented pursuit of profit, no matter what the human cost, and the concomitant dismantling of the welfare state, strained by the looming presence of the prison. The massive prison-building project that began in the 1980’s created the means of concentrating and managing what the capitalist system had implicitly declared to be a human surplus.\footnote{Davis, Angela Yvonne 2003/a/y/s91/h;}

It may be helpful to focus on the prison industrial complex here as a way to understand how the state’s revenue gets used. Where is capital going to flow? In the case of prisons, they provide a short term answer to long term problems. One of the ways the prison profits, if you can say that, is that the state subsidizes salaries for the prison guards, which they calculate by the number of prisoners. Also, the state and sometimes private companies receive money from the initial construction of the prison, having consumers of
catering services (food), and consumers of utilities (electric companies). Prisons are on one hand a low risk investment in the sense that they hide (literally) social problems like poverty and under/unemployment. Prisons are also low-risk because crime is infinite in the sense that “crime” is just an act. Acts are not in and of themselves crimes; they only become crimes when they are defined as such.  

Keeping a growing prison industry, to put it crudely, means having people become the raw materials for the industry. Harsher and longer sentences provide those raw materials. In other words, the prison industry must produce the need for its services. This is not a conspiracy theory of any kind. One can go to the Department of Justice website right now and see that crime has been on the decline for burglary thefts, assault rates, robbery rates, and violent crime since 1973. The decline in crime has been attributed to a number of factors including a mix of the economy improving at times, changes in the drug trade, and limiting the availability of guns to young people. Other scholars attribute lowering and fluctuating crime rates to an inverse relationship in the business cycle. However, despite crime declining, this present moment has seen one of the largest influxes of prisoners due to the “tough on crime” and War on Drugs era in which we find ourselves today. The other important side to this too, is that prisons are state subsidized and barely break even, costing tax payers a

---

7 A great example of this is England in the 17th century, when it was culturally understood that “customary takings” were a socially acceptable norm. A customary taking was an unwritten rule that if you could not afford something that you needed to live, it was customary that you take it. It could be anything from food, to the needles necessary to hem clothes. As history would have it though, when England began to privatize its property, customary takings became illegal and at times, means to be hung. See the London Hanged.

8 Conversation with Professor David Pellow
lot of money. This is even more apparent given recent reports focused on overcrowding and the lack of beds for prisoners.\cite{Editorial 2006; Martin, Mark 2007; Skelton, George 2007; }

So to be sure, the prison industry itself is not profit generating. It is a place where people, so-called criminals, are warehoused and sometimes tortured, away from their communities, social connections and familial ties invoking what scholar Dylan Rodriguez has called a social death.

Part of the reason why I have emphasized the historical underpinnings of massive incarceration, starting in earnest during the 1980’s is because this context forms the basis for current explanations of the prison industrial complex. This thesis argues that these historical moments are a significant starting point to talk about why there is unprecedented prison growth without much public outcry. While prison industrial complex scholars like Davis, Gilmore, Rodriguez and Parenti expose the trend of globalization and describe the effects of the political rebellions during the late 1960’s as the PIC’s catalyst, there needs to be a larger discussion on the cultural impetus that buttresses the trend of massive incarceration. In keeping with the tradition of Antonio Gramsci, the phenomenon of the prison industrial complex is larger than its historical material reality. The prison industrial complex and massive incarceration should be additionally understood as a cultural phenomenon. It is a large scale production, theatrical almost, which is upheld through many different mediums. This common sense says that locking ‘criminals’ away in prison for long periods of time is just, it says that

\footnote{As of late, much of the news around prisons has focused on overcrowding and the state budget. Instead of questioning why there is overcrowding in prison being that crime is declining, conversations center on the most efficient ways to keep “criminals” incarcerated. The solution to the problem often becomes sending prisoners to different states which is the case in California or additional funding to build more prisons.}
Black people and more generally people of color are more apt to break the law, and it also says that prisons equate to safety and a safer society.

While there are many sites that would warrant a study on the cultural work and the common sense that mass incarceration needs, my choice to focus on two, the political rhetoric of the Ronald Reagan administration and films centering in and around the War on Drugs, is meant to give readers a different way of understanding the prison industrial complex. This analysis is meant to add to the conversation of the PIC. How else should we understand the PIC? It is to say that public sentiment must be cultivated for a phenomenon such as the PIC to occur. Phenomena like the prison industrial complex do not happen without the willful acquiescence or appeasement of the majority of the population. Examining some of the cultural values that are produced in and around the prison is just one way to counter that common sense.

**Racism, Gender and the Prison Industrial Complex**

One of the variables in the prison industrial complex is what authors mentioned above have stressed as well, anti black racism. This is not to ignore histories of Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Latin@s in this country, but it is important to trace this anti-black racism back to, at the very least, the end of slavery in this country and the beginning of the convict lease system. The convict lease system is another quintessential historical example of the expendability of African American labor and life. Much of what is deemed human surplus can be traced to this moment of the late 19th century post-emancipation and Black Reconstruction era in America. Prisons were single handedly transformed into Black spaces occupied by ex-slaves consisting of both men and women.
The idea of inherent black criminality was birthed out of this moment in order to justify the current social, political and economic reality. American culture’s promulgation of anti black images, law practices and media campaigns became necessary. State sanctioned punishment of blacks became tolerated and in fact a part of American culture, even an American pastime in many communities.¹⁰

While the history of the convict lease system shows the ease with which Black life is expendable even after the legal system of slavery is abolished, it does not quite explain how racism contributes to the modern day prison regime. It is important to recall that in 1964, 65% of all prison admits were white, while only 35% were people of color. By 1991 those statistics were completely inversed.{{67 Ford, Glen 2007/a/y/h;}}

Without sufficient analysis one could argue that Blacks just started committing more crime after the sixties. But evidence points to a larger historical implication of the United States’ sexist, racist and white settler foundations. In other words, in a white supremacist society, a hierarchy of life places Blacks in a subordinate and oppressed position without question.

In addition, it may be helpful to introduce how gender is implicated in the cultural work of the prison industrial complex. In the political rhetoric section I am using the

---

¹⁰ It may be useful to recall the American pastime of a lynching, where some white communities in the South would have food, gather and lynch most often a Black man, whose body parts they would collect as souvenirs. The moment after the Civil War, particularly after Reconstruction, also points to fear of miscegenation, job competition, and the overall threat of removing the existing racial and class order abhorred the white community. It also points to the need for cheap or relatively free labor that was needed when the South was industrializing with the help of the convict lease system. The encouragement of Black criminality was largely in response to this moment. Prior to this moment, images of Blacks centered on being passive and docile (the Mammy, the tragic Mulatta, the Uncle Tom, the Coon.) Any image of Blacks as being criminal would have been too close to the idea of a rebellious slave. The post slavery moment reflects the need to control and dominate Black mobility through these particular images of crime driven Blacks. The point here is that different historical moments in the political economy require different images and different common sense.
concept of racial masculinity coined by scholar Sherene Razack to explain Ronald Reagan’s political rhetoric. The notion of racial masculinity informs the idea of American racial and national identity. In Sherene Razack’s *Dark Threats, White Knights*, she explores peacekeeping violence by “white nations” in colonized African lands. The concept of the nation, according to Razack, is invested in a particular racial, gendered, and sexual conception of self. {1 Razack, Sherene 2004/a/y/s62/h;} Settler nations like America are always invested in a collective white identity and in this sense invested in protecting a national white body. The espousal of racial masculinity masks racial and gendered violence in state policy.

**What’s the Media Got to Do, Got to Do With It?**

To further understand this moment of the 1980’s and massive incarceration it is also important to consider how the media shaped and continues to shape public concerns. The prison industrial complex is not simply the political economy, politicians, the state, and corporations; it also involves a complacent and supportive media. In Reeves and Campbell’s book *Cracked Coverage: Television News, The Anti-Cocaine Crusade, and the Reagan Legacy*, they provide a comprehensive study of the 1980’s Reagan era, the media’s obsession with the War on Drugs, the rise of neo-conservatism, and the legitimacy of the drug policy. The authors use television as their point of departure to talk about the popular understandings of the “drug crusades.” In this sense, it is a critique of the media, but also an investigation into the neo-conservatism’s rise in popularity through this medium. In order to be sure, the rise of neo-conservative hegemony is not a conspiracy theory of how the right controls the media, the authors look at how a specific
public consciousness concerning crime and drugs affected the American public as a whole. The authors respond directly to what they call the cocaine narrative as “authorizing the disciplinary operations of modern drug establishment.”

Looking at 270 news stories, both authors locate the drug--and specifically cocaine narratives--in three phases. According to the authors, the first phase (January 1981-November 1985), is the addiction phase, where the white middle class is implicated as the innocent victims of cocaine and their stories of rehabilitation. This is what the authors call a “discourse of recovery” which pointed to their ability to be rehabilitated. The second phase (December 1985-November 1986) was dominated by a “siege paradigm” that replaced recovery and accentuated the race and class dimensions of chaotic drug use in the street. Here we can see the divisive use of a cocaine narrative used to split suburban, read white, populations into believing that cocaine would pollute or contaminate Middle America or some other vulnerable group (i.e. children, teens, professional sports players, mothers, college students, the stock market, Hollywood, etc.). The third phase (November 1986-December 1988), would be the apex of concern around the War on Drugs as a policy and around drugs more generally. Then, when stories of crack enter the public’s imagination through TV, race and class begin to take a profoundly different turn. The cocaine problem was modified from a largely middle-upper class white problem to a crack “drug menace” problem as Nancy Reagan deemed it, that existed primarily in inner city neighborhoods (read black). The political spectacle of the War on Drugs accomplished a few things according to Reeves and Campbell. One, it took publicity away from the failing economic promise of
Reaganism. This meant that the largely imagined black poor, unemployed and disposable laborers were criminalized for their inability to succeed under Reagan’s new economic agenda. Secondly, this spectacle also meant that those most affected by the end of New Deal policies were once again on their own. The importance of this study is manifold but generally it should be seen as a key example of how a public consciousness does not develop naturally. The media are able to produce a crime-drug and a race-crime connection whether real or imagined.

In addition, news coverage of violence is very illusive when it comes to crime trends. In 1990-1998, when crime rates were falling by 20%, TV showed an 83% increase in crime news. Media images and violence may also contribute to the fact that twice as many white Americans believe they are going to be victimized by a person of color. In reality, whites are statistically three times more likely to be victimized by other whites than by people of color. Statistics point to the poor and people of color feeling the brunt of victimization. In general, African Americans are more likely to experience crime victimization and so are people who live in lower income households. Paralleling those conclusions, a national survey of local TV stations found that in crime news, 73% of the time, perpetrators of crime were people of color. In addition, white people held the majority of positive news roles such as reporters, anchors, official sources, and crime victims according to Rocky Mountain Media Watch in 1995. In another study on media images at UCLA, researchers found that subjects watching news crime stories where there was a perpetrator only part of the time.
Even in cases where there was no indication of a perpetrator, 42% still identified a perpetrator; and two thirds of those people identified the suspect as being African American. As Washington D.C. Sentencing Project coordinator Marc Mauer has pointed out, “Most images of the crime problem communicate fear, anxiety, and a distorted sense of the actual extent of the problem.” Much of the images that promote black criminality accentuates a perceived threat and, in turn, allows or at the very least normalizes the racial makeup of the prison. Without a critical lens, common sense would tell us who commits more crime and therefore who deserves prison time.
Chapter 2: How Come There Were No African American’s at Ronald Reagan’s Funeral? The 1980’s, Political Rhetoric, and a Culture of Imprisonment

It was not too long ago that I was talking to my father when he mentioned that he had watched Ronald Reagan’s funeral on CNN. He said he was laughing because as they were panning the crowd during the funeral processions, each of the commentators had alluded to the fact that there were no Black people in the audience. The commentators said, and I am paraphrasing, “Gee Bob, there don’t seem to be too many African Americans here. I wonder why?” I am not going to explain the mysterious phenomenon of the missing African Americans from Ronald Reagan’s funeral, but an examination of Reagan’s presidency—including his political campaigning and political rhetoric—may provide striking clues. So, I will allow the reader come to their own conclusion on this question to which the CNN commentators alluded.

In order to get a sense of why many African Americans would not be caught dead at Ronald Reagan’s funeral, one may start to look at his presidency as fueling and encouraging racist, classist, and sexist policies. As the mouthpiece of the state, Ronald Reagan fueled common sense answers to complex social problems. Individual choices, a society without racism and a purposeful historical amnesia places people of color and/or the poor in their deserving positions when it came to the new prison population. This is not to say that Reagan directly referred to the prison population, but it is to say that his administration and policies that were passed under his presidency gave an overarching common sense as to why people were in the positions they were in. To build on what political prisoner and activist Mumia Abu Jamal has said about a cultural mandate that comes along with mass incarceration. Abu-Jamal says,
What our people are subjected to today is something that we didn’t really fall under back in the 60’s and 70’s and that’s really this sort of cultural imperialism and cultural terror…To destroy our people’s minds into thinking that there ain’t no struggle. That all we need to do is get our pockets fat with money and then we are free. Instead of the struggle for human dignity, for life and liberty, for the things they talk about but they don’t really live in this country. People need to go back to old fashion things like studying, because life is serious…When you look at young brothers that come in these joints, when they are in these joints with these crazy sentences its some of the first time they read a book without being forced to. If they can read. When you see a brother’s mind light up because he’s learning about the history of his people, that’s a beautiful thing. But that’s something that our people should have learned in our younger years certainly long before they came to these hellholes. But where are they going to learn it? They’re not going to learn in their history classes or schools, they’re not going to learn it in the newspapers…{{82 Abu-Jamal,Mumia 2002; }}

Abu Jamal speaks to a number of layers that foster a cultural landscape around the prison industrial complex. For one, there is a black aesthetic that reflects individual success as key to one’s survival rather than the greater community. This is backed by a hegemonic shift away from the collective towards the individual. This kind of consciousness reflects on all of America, not just African Americans, Latinos, Asians, or Whites. As Abu Jamal points out though, it has even greater detrimental affects on the populations most likely to go to prison, African Americans. The other point he makes is that if people are not critically engaged with the world around them, then they will be subjected to uncritical common sense of how the world works and thus more apt to be acquiescent. That cultural dimension that Abu-Jamal mentions is located in numerous sites. And as this thesis argues, mass incarceration should be understood as a political, economic, and cultural phenomenon.
The culture that developed in one of the most unprecedented moments of increased prison populations is a common sense that locking people up and punishing people for crimes, whether it be for writing bad checks, assault, robbery, drug possession or car tickets, all warrant punishment without recourse. This is the kind of environment that has lead to the some of the most draconian policies that disproportionately affect Black and Brown communities.

I want to start with a broad understanding of the particular moment of the 1980’s, beginning with Ronald Reagan’s presidential campaigns and political rhetoric, then looking specifically at how the Reagan administration used racism to fuel a campaign of pitting the white working class against people of color. I will emphasize economic shifts such as deindustrialization, high unemployment, and social spending cuts that were used to try and appeal to a time before deindustrialization despite major changes in the political economy. With the disappearance of well-paying blue collar jobs, going offshore or across the border, and American wages generally decreasing, Reagan tried to rekindle American hope for the dispossessed white blue collar worker through his campaigns of "Its Morning Again in America" and a resurgence of American patriotism. His campaigns were largely symbolic gestures to go back to the 1950's and white suburban dreams of economic stability, and what many refer to as the “golden age of capitalism.” His campaign and presidency were not unbiased. The Reagan era marked the beginning of the largest increase in incarceration to date in US history. Massive incarceration on the level that we see it today is a reflection of the hostile environment ushered in by the Reagan administration during the moment I refer to.
Political Rhetoric

Throughout modern U.S. presidential elections, campaigns have been aimed at selling an image. In 1905, Parker and Lee was the first public relations firm to open offering marketing resources to presidential and political hopefuls. Today, public relations firms offer image consulting, styling, and marketing research to help craft images of people. The consultant and mastermind behind Ronald Reagan’s presidential victories, as well as Richard Nixon’s in 1968 and 1972 and George Bush Sr. in 1988, was a man named Roger Ailes who would later become the CEO of Fox News. Ailes wrote the book *You Are Your Message: Getting What You Want by Being Who You Are* in which he discusses communicating with the public, effective listening skills, body language, especially with regard to television images. It is no surprise then, that Reagan’s image gave him high approval ratings despite many of his failing policies. Reagan’s deputy Chief of Staff, Michael Deaver, summed up this essential point about imagery and public opinion by saying, “I really do believe that people absorb impressions rather than substance, particularly in this day and age.” Deaver may have been right, as Reagan’s “common man” approach worked very well, despite his not so common privilege, conservatism, and upper class background. Ronald Reagan, the “great communicator” as he has been called, was symbolically and physically central to many American voters. Symbolically, Ronald Reagan was an All American, good old fashioned
cowboy compared to the feminized Jimmy Carter.\footnote{\cite{McAlister,Melani 2005}} It was no coincidence that Reagan’s role as a cowboy in *Death Valley Days* (1964-1966) and in “B Movies” made him appealing to mainstream American voters.\footnote{Since Reagan was the oldest president to take office at age 70, his campaign focused heavily on crafting an image of an able-bodied cowboy. His campaign advisors had taken many photos of him on his California ranch, cutting wood and horseback riding. This image of a cowboy in American mythology has symbolically meant rugged individualism, strength, and adventure. For scholar Marshall W. Fishwick, “The American cowboy has come to symbolize a freedom, individuality, and closeness to nature which for most of us has become a mere mirage; hence he can serve as a safety valve for our culture.”\cite{Fishwick, Marshall W. April, 1952}} Since Reagan was the oldest president to take office at age 70, his campaign focused heavily on crafting an image of an able-bodied cowboy. His campaign advisors had taken many photos of him on his California ranch, cutting wood and horseback riding. This image of a cowboy in American mythology has symbolically meant rugged individualism, strength, and adventure. For scholar Marshall W. Fishwick, “The American cowboy has come to symbolize a freedom, individuality, and closeness to nature which for most of us has become a mere mirage; hence he can serve as a safety valve for our culture.”\footnote{Of course these attributes of cowboys are not without racial undertones. Clearly, the cowboy embodies that historic trek westward toward “open land”, which also resulted in the conquests of Mexican and Native American land.\cite{Fishwick, Marshall W. April, 1952/s79}} Of course these attributes of cowboys are not without racial undertones. Clearly, the cowboy embodies that historic trek westward toward “open land”, which also resulted in the conquests of Mexican and Native American land.\footnote{It may be best to think of the American cowboy as the epitome of white masculinity and, in turn, white supremacy. Reagan was neither the first nor the last president to wear the cowboy façade; however he displayed it along with his political convictions to mean something very specific.}

\footnote{In part Jimmy Carter’s feminization is due to the Iranian hostage crisis and the public’s reaction. The Carter administrations attempt at rescuing the hostages was a failed effort and indicates the U.S.’s “limits of power.”}

\footnote{It should not come as a surprise that one of Ronald Reagan’s B movies was a film about the capture of John Brown, the white abolitionist who planned to end slavery by arming his men and other slaves. In this film, the *Santa Fe Trial*, Reagan is one of the soldiers sent to subdue John Brown.}

\footnote{I am only speaking of the cowboy symbolically because some of the first cowboys were Mexican in present day Texas.}
Reagan’s use of racism to bring white Americans, particularly white Southerners and blue collar workers, together with his presence, campaigning, and political rhetoric fostered an environment of contempt for non-whites as undeserving and those that could not make it, namely the poor. Thus, Reagan’s presidency should be seen as signifying an important turn in the racial common sense, which is a moment I would argue we are still in. Race was rendered invisible in some cases, implied in others, while crime, poverty and the War (on drugs) were covertly an attribute of racially pathologized populations.

Reagan’s 1980 Campaign: Campaigning to Appeal to a Time before Deindustrialization

In an interview with Kevin Phillips, Richard Nixon’s strategist, he summed up the Southern Strategy succinctly in an interview in 1970. He said, “From now on, the Republicans are never going to get more than 10 to 20 percent of the Negro vote and they don’t need any more than that….but Republicans would be shortsighted if they weakened enforcement of the Voting Rights Act. The more Negroes who register as Democrats in the South, the sooner the Negrophobe whites will quit the Democrats and become Republicans. That’s where the votes are. Without that prodding from the blacks, the whites will backslide into their old comfortable arrangement with the local Democrats.” {91 Boyd, James May 17, 1970; } The Southern Strategy on one hand denotes the desperate attempt to gain votes, and on the other hand the successful use of racism to further political goals. Political Scientist Michael Parenti has called this political tactic, “A good way to split the voting population against each other for class interests through non economic issues...” {90 Parenti,Michael 1996; } Taking his cues
from Richard Nixon’s campaign, Ronald Reagan’s new twist on the Southern Strategy in his 1980 campaign blatantly called for a rekindling of white American superiority. Reagan’s campaigning in the 1980’s might best be described as a campaign that allowed whites to vote against their class interests and for their racial interests.\(^4\)

In 1980, when Reagan started his campaign, his first stop was in Philadelphia, Mississippi. Philadelphia, Mississippi is a city infamous as the site of the killing of the Mississippi 3 in 1964, where three young men--James Chaney, Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner--were killed trying to get Blacks registered to vote. Famous *only* as a city for that incident, Reagan symbolically and literally appealed to Southern whites’ racism. Cloaked in their garbs of red, white and blue confederacy, the crowd chanted Reagan’s presence as he gave them a dose of comforting racism by saying “I believe in states’ rights. I believe that we’ve distorted the balance of our government by giving powers that were never intended in the Constitution to the federal establishment.”\(^{153}\)  

It was Reagan who was notoriously anti-union. This is exemplified in one of his first political moves, where he fired all the air traffic control strikers in the Patco strike.\(^4\)
segregation (anti-busing), a rabid anti-communist, and an avid supporter of conservative law and order policy to see the long running thread of support for racist and reactionary policies.

**Reagan’s 1984 Campaign: Its Racism in America, Again…**

While Ronald Reagan’s 1980 campaign may have appeared as overtly racist, his second campaign may be described as covertly anti-black, anti-women, and anti-poor. Ronald Reagan’s “Its Morning in America” campaign provides striking symbolism of 1950’s suburbia, white picket fences, and heteronormative families. In the minute long commercial of “Its Morning in America,” the campaign goes through Reagan’s patented simple and feel good exercises of praising American progress. The measuring stick of American success here is the independent but disappearing farmer, the happily married couple and the ability of families to buy houses. While it may seem neutral, it was a moment ripe with 1950’s imagery of white suburban America. This symbolic appeal, where white flight out of the cities is the catalyst, appeals to white fears of a changing American racial landscape. This fact is highlighted in the many reversals of civil rights initiatives throughout the 1980’s.

Recall also that Reagan’s 1984 campaign was also a moment when Reagan got an unprecedented amount of the religious right and a particular faction of right wing Evangelists to support him by appealing to them with his “moral majority” proposal. This was the idea that promoted “traditional moral values” including making abortion illegal, having prayer in school, and having Christianity be the official religion. Reagan’s stake in hailing anti-abortion as moral
is of particular interest being that Republicans up until that point were not anti-abortion at all. In fact, when Roe vs. Wade passed with the aide of a conservative Nixon appointed Supreme Court, abortion was considered the best alternative to poor mothers having babies that supposedly usurped the state’s financial safety net.\cite{Parenti1996}

Most conservatives were for legal abortion in the 1970’s, until they realized during the late 1970’s that it was an issue that could solidify voters, the Reagan campaign took advantage of a voter split and ran with it. All of these ideas remained at the foundation of the Republican and Religious Right agendas throughout the 1990s and 2000s.\footnote{This refers to a conversation with Professor David Pellow.}

Both of these campaigns point to the ease with which a popular consciousness could develop around a presidency that counters and roll back the strides of a number of civil rights laws and the consciousness that came with it. The point of looking at some of Reagan’s campaigning and political rhetoric is to examine the kind of common sense atmosphere that breeds such racist, sexist and class antagonist policies that continue to fuel the prison industrial complex. It is important to know what kind of common sense answers were available to talk about social problems. Better yet, how do people including, but not limited to the president, explain the world around them? What I show here is that the Reagan years marked an historic moment that refueled racist policies. It is not surprising that Reagan’s presidency marks the ascension of the unprecedented amount of people--particularly people of color, women, and the poor--headed to prison. This era was openly hostile to the poor, blacks and women. This presidency also marks
the beginning of the War on Drugs, a timeless and infinite call to criminalize people of color and the poor by locking them up.

Orally Armed to do Bodily Harm: The Emergence of Neo-Conservative Hegemony, From Goldwater to Reagan and Beyond

It would be unfair to give Ronald Reagan all the credit on the peculiar rhetorical twists that produced neo-conservative hegemony. Neo conservative hegemony, which was in part a rhetorical tactic, started almost twenty years prior to Reagan’s rise to the presidency. Beginning with the likes of Barry Goldwater, republican presidential candidate in 1964, it was clear that the nation’s majority would no longer tolerate explicitly racist public discourse. The majority of the public supported at least moderate civil rights for Blacks. However, Goldwater was publicly seen as someone who opposed civil rights, being “against equality of opportunity.” Despite being seen as someone against civil rights, he managed to camouflage his policies in a coded, race neutral language, replacing outright white supremacy. In the case of the 1964 Republican convention this was clear when Goldwater spoke in the midst of many riots and rebellions, as well as during the Black power movement. At the 1964 convention, Goldwater called for “security from domestic violence,” keeping the streets from “bullies and marauders,” and “enforcing law and order.”

---

6 This can be seen in the polling during 1965, which showed a majority, 73-27, supporting L.B. Johnson’s presidency and policies that supported voting rights for Blacks, federal aid for education, and medical care for the aged.

7 In 1964 alone there were seven riots within the two months of July and August. There was rioting in Philadelphia, Chicago, Elizabeth, Paterson, Jersey City, Rochester and New York City.
literally this meant America must keep rioters--read the Black population--in control.

The implications were clear, despite his neutral language. In response to the Black power movement, Goldwater had this to say,

> Absolute power does corrupt, and those who seek it must be suspect and must be opposed. Their mistaken course stems from false notions, ladies and gentlemen, of equality. Equality, rightly understood as our founding fathers understood it, leads to liberty and the emancipation of creative differences; wrongly understood, as it has been so tragically in our time, it leads first to conformity and then to despotism.\cite{68 Goldwater, Barry 2006; }

For Goldwater and conservatives alike political tactics pitting the Black Power movement and Blacks in general against white populations by heightening anxieties was a sound method for the next coming elections.\footnote{This is not a new tactic, nor is it a tactic that has not played itself out organically. Historically, this has played a large role in the acquiescence of white working classes to white upper class policies that detrimentally affect them. If the white working class aligned themselves with the Black working class, that would mean they would forgo their white privilege, seeing Blacks as their equal. David Roediger’s \textit{Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class}, Piven and Cloward’s \textit{Poor People’s Movement: Why They Fail and Why the Succeed} and W.E.B. DuBois’ \textit{Black Reconstruction in America 1860-1880} discuss the chasm between the white working class’ racism and its inability to mobilize with Black workers at length. Also, the 1863 Draft Riots, the Populist Movement, and the 1930’s Communist movement are all historical moments that show the failure of white working/middle class to mobilize for their own class interests. Race has always been a dividing factor among Black and white working class populations.} In Goldwater it was clear that his political rhetoric indirectly spoke about Blacks as the, “growing menace to personal safety, to life, to limb, and property.”\cite{68 Goldwater, Barry 2006; }

For the following elections of Republicans like Richard Nixon, Ronald Reagan, and George Bush Sr., politics directly or indirectly involving race would largely be in conservative’s favor due to their ability to manipulate rhetoric on race.\footnote{Recall Ronald Reagan gave one of his infamous speeches, “A Time for Choosing” in support of Barry Goldwater 1964 campaign.} Moreover, Goldwater’s campaign has been adopted since that moment because of his ability to equate law and order (harsher policing) with protection and safety. While Goldwater lost that election, he had won in a sense that his
language and rhetoric would carry on. Making law and order a kindler, gentler and appealing public sentiment was right around the corner. In continuance with this strong advocacy of state power, the Nixon campaign and eventually Reagan presidency solidified this hegemonic policy.

Richard Nixon’s use of law and order as public policy was a carbon copy of Goldwater’s rhetoric, just toned down in its more implicit racism. In 1968, Nixon did something very similar to Goldwater with his “silent majority” campaign, running on a platform that stressed the notion that most Americans were quiet, normal, hard working people who wanted equality, but did not want substantial residential and educational integration.{{19 Edsall,Thomas Byrne 1992/s75;}} Without overt racism or denial of citizenship rights for Blacks, Nixon was able to avoid any backlash by appealing to notions of equality, but denying “preferential treatment” that some believed was a form of inequality. Recall it was Richard Nixon’s Chief of Staff who wrote that Nixon, “Emphasized that you have to face the fact that the whole problem is really the Blacks. The key is to devise a system that recognizes this while not appearing to.”{{47 Haldeman,H.R. 1995/s53;}} Nixon was well aware of how discrete white supremacy had to be in order to gain political mobility and carry through (outright) racist policies. The tactics used by Ronald Reagan follow a similar course of action, with the apex of neo-conservative hegemony being quite literally embodied in Reagan’s two terms, carrying on a long tradition, but also popularizing it.\footnote{Part of the reason why the Reagan era has signified the rise in neo-conservative hegemony is that many of the ideas that the left and right, conservative and liberal, Blacks and whites use are directly linked to this line of thought. Eduardo Bonilla-Silva has a great discussion of the ways in which ideas of a colorblind society have influenced both white and Black people in his book \textit{White Supremacy and the Post Civil Rights Era}.} In Reagan, the culmination of a colorblind
society, conservative egalitarianism, and meritocracy all served to legitimize and substantiate racist institutions and racial disparities in public policy.\textsuperscript{11}

The Political Rhetoric of Ronald Reagan: Racial Masculinity and the American Identity

Reagan’s political rhetoric has a couple of distinct points to it that solidify neo-conservative hegemony in the American imaginary. One is the idea of a resurgent American identity, which is distinctly national and inherently racial; it is also a tactic of exclusion. For Reagan, Americans “were the most generous on Earth, who created the highest standard of living”\cite{78 Reagan, Ronald 2007; } and “the most productive people in the world.”\cite{92 Reagan, Ronald; } But America for Reagan was also, “a group of families who dared to cross a mighty ocean to build a future for themselves in a new world. When they arrived at Plymouth, Massachusetts, they formed what they called a “compact”; an agreement among themselves to build a community and abide by its laws.”\cite{92 Reagan, Ronald; } In Reagan’s second presidential inaugural address, speaking of the mythic origins and values that all Americans shared, he said, “George Washington, father of our country, placed his hand upon the Bible, he stood less than a single days journey by horseback from raw, untamed wilderness. There were 4 million Americans in a union of 13 states. Today, we are 60 times as many in a union of 50 states.”\cite{78 Reagan, Ronald 2007; } For Reagan, the mythical past of American history is filled with barren terrain, undiscovered land and men brave enough to explore its vast depth. What is significant, yet often the real uncharted territory is the

\textsuperscript{11}This can be seen, but will further be analyzed with regards to the Anti-Drug Abuse of 1986.
acknowledgement of the violence that had to take place for this country called America to exist. While Reagan was invested in the mythical and ahistorical America, it is important to note that the very formation of America was and remains a violent process. This process of violence should be examined with regard to its racial and patriarchal contours. For Reagan, speaking of America in these mythical terms meant solidifying the nation’s historic white roots. While many may remember Reagan’s campaign as mere feel good politics, the real physical responses to espousing American superiority are defined through its pure and timeless white origins.

Part of Ronald Reagan’s appeal to mainstream America was, as his website says, his ability to, “Speak for the American people, capturing the hearts of small-town citizens”{{78 Reagan, Ronald 2007; }} or as his former Secretary of Defense Casper Weinberger has said, his, “Marvelous ability to communicate and identify with his audiences.”{{53 Weinberger,Caspar W. 1990/s11;}} While American identity may seem like a neutral category, it is particularly contingent upon gender and race, stemming from its roots in nativist sentiments of the founding fathers, settlers, and frontiersmen. References to those who have founded America or laid the groundwork for American values like Abraham Lincoln, George Washington, and Thomas Jefferson amongst others, are in direct contention with the histories of people of color in America. Nativist elements of American identity are directly tied into the logic of white supremacy making the genocide of Native Americans and the racially and gendered violent system of slavery mere obstacles for the original inhabitants of America, white citizens. The resurgence of American identity or white nationhood is imperative to understand at this time because of
the discourse surrounding the “colorblind society” and the supposed “declining significance of race.”\{93 Wilson, William Julius 1980; \}

Part of Ronald Reagan’s surge of American identity was being produced at a time when democrats were seen as a party of women, people of color and queer people.\{19 Edsall, Thomas Byrne 1992/s151-152; \} In 1980, the incumbent president, Jimmy Carter, was imagined to be an emasculated representation of America making way for Reagan to run on a platform embodying the very foundations of America. Carter’s image in his 1980 campaign was considered mean spirited when he attacked Reagan and the Iran hostage situation publicly failed. The need to reinscribe America as having a masculine presence reemerged and a particular racial masculinity manifested itself.

As scholar Sherene Razack has explained, what it means to be American is contingent upon the violence or threat of violence towards bodies of color and women. Moreover, this violence rightfully directed towards gendered and racially pathologized bodies should be seen as necessary protection and defense of the white national body/identity. This sense of self, a resurgence of American identity can be symbolically (through words) and physically violent toward racially pathologized and gendered bodies.\{16 Razack, Sherene 2004/s90; \} In this moment, being American is the cloak in which racial and gendered violence covertly exists. The masculine and racial undertones of identifying with America further serve to distinguish that which is American. Implicitly or explicitly, the institutions and policies that propel anti-brown and anti-black
forms of control and containment must be seen as profoundly American and deeply necessary to the foundation and prosperity of America.\(^\text{12}\)

While it may seem as though figuratively only white males can assert such a racial masculinity, the opposite is true. Men of color who participate in violence towards Black and people of color are indeed learning how to be “men” or “American.” In a nation that is contingent upon a racial masculinity as its identity, it is no wonder that any man or woman establishing their identity learns that this kind of violence is a natural part of being American. Men of color participating in this violence according to Razack achieve a ‘national belonging’ or are driven by a masculinity that engages in racial violence. While for Reagan fostering a strong sense of American identity was an attempt to unite through exclusion, it was also a way for the excluded to take part in this identity.\(^\text{13}\)

\(^{12}\) Much of this idea emerged from conversations with Dr. Dylan Rodriguez.

\(^{13}\) Mark Bracher’s has discussed how Reagan’s speeches invoke the master signifier. In his argument, Reagan’s speeches had the audience identify with this feeling of security through the master signifier, America. Bracher calls America, the phallic signifier that has succeeded in making a collective identity, providing Americans with a sense of security. With the rhetoric of America, Bracher is making a case that the identification with America is a way for the public to repress their anxieties of job loss, inflation, etc. by holding onto this specific identity. See Lacan, Discourse, and Social Change: A Psychoanalytic Cultural Criticism.
groups (Blacks in particular) by running on a platform in 1964 of a pro-civil rights agenda, aligning himself with citizenship rights for Blacks and federal aid for the poor.\{30 Edsall,Thomas Byrne 1984/s35;\} As Thomas Edsall points out, Richard Nixon was able to capitalize on issues of race without being seen as a racist, by acknowledging past discrimination and calling for equality.\{19 Edsall,Thomas Byrne 1992/s74;\} Even though Nixon co-opted the Black power movement by uttering phrases like “power to the people,” he minimally acknowledged past discrimination. Calling for equality of opportunity versus equality as an outcome allowed for Nixon to acknowledge at least some form of past discrimination. In fact, under the Nixon presidency, affirmative action was implemented as a policy under which federal contracts had to operate. Jimmy Carter also formed an historical tie to present racial equity by supporting affirmative action. Until Ronald Reagan, conservatives and liberals alike at the very least had to acknowledge the history of people of color.\footnote{I do not want that discussion on Presidents Johnson, Nixon, and Carter to be viewed as an understanding of their politics as progressive because socially each one of them was very conservative. However, either because of the moment or because of a certain public consciousness, each of them was forced to at the very least acknowledge racial equality.}

During the Reagan era, however, there was a distinct shift in part due to neo-conservative hegemony but also in the way that racial equality could exist. Racial equality existed in so far as race as an idea did not exist. In a speech given at the signing of Martin Luther King Jr.’s birthday as a national holiday, Reagan remarked that, “True justice must be colorblind” and in this sense being colorblind in practice meant an opposition to racial and gender preferences in employment, college admissions, or court ordered busing.\{19 Edsall,Thomas Byrne 1992/s144;\}\{94 Reagan, Ronald November 2, 1983; \} The irony is that Reagan’s presidency almost completely overturned civil
rights gains. Affirmative action requirements of corporate recipients of federal contracts, which even Nixon enforced, were cut back, the role of the Civil Rights Division of the Justice Department in filing discrimination claims were cut, and federal and state benefits under Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) were cut drastically.{{66 Fields, Walter 2004; }} In fact, race-specific civil rights policies were seen as the opposite of equality. Reagan opposed equality, pushing resentment away from the rich and toward the poor, minorities, and federal government. This resentment can be seen as part of a longer track record in many ways given Reagan’s opposition to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and 1965, Fair Housing legislation and even the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday. Ronald Reagan could appropriate, after just 16 years, the language of civil rights and equality. Continuing on the day of Martin Luther King’s holiday’s induction, Reagan said of the 1964 Civil Rights Act that it, “…Guaranteed all Americans equal use of public accommodations, equal access to programming and …and the right to compete for employment on the sole basis of individual merit.”{{94 Reagan, Ronald November 2, 1983; }} While Reagan’s seemingly neutral speech gives precedence to individual rights, there is a deeper meaning in the context of neo-conservative hegemony. Merit has always been juxtaposed in the minds of Americans against affirmative action and since only people of color and women are seen as benefiting from affirmative action (in theory), merit must be seen as a category that can only be occupied by whites. So, what does it mean for American citizens that have historically been denied housing rights, employment, and higher education to base a remedy on individual merit? As critical race theorist Kimberle Crenshaw has suggested, formal equality under the law,
To proclaim victory contain within them the seeds of defeat. To demand “equality of opportunity” is to demand nothing specific because “equality of opportunity” has assimilated both the demand and the object against which the demand is made—it is to participate in an abstracted discourse that carries moral force of the movement as well as the stability of the institutions and interests that the movement opposed. {40 Crenshaw, Kimberlé 1995/s106;}

Reagan’s equal rights doctrine is so hollow that it echoes. To co-opt the civil rights moral imperative and turn it around to mean its literal opposite is, as Crenshaw notes, pointed out a way for institutions, and anyone for that matter, to dodge the responsibility of the real life outcomes of equal opportunity. Narratives of civil rights and the struggles of people of color are ahistoricized with Reagan’s civil rights backlash.15 While Reagan is not the only one to espouse that America is a colorblind society, the Reagan era marks, for one, the end of mainstream dialogues around race. It demarcates the extent to which one can talk about past discrimination and continuing structural racism. The result is an eradication of these painful histories and their continued affect on contemporary society.

**Ronald Reagan’s Inconsistency: The Anti-State State?**

The third shift by Reagan was an aspect of the anti-state mentality or anti-government push. Of course this notion has a symbolic and real effect. Symbolically, the government was seen as the carrier of laissez faire individual rights. Reagan was anti-government in the sense that he thought that government should not be present in the lives of single mothers and their need for assistance.16 According to Reagan, the public

---

15 When I say civil rights backlash, I am talking about civil rights in terms of its intended meaning not its literal meaning.
16 Dorothy Roberts makes the argument that “single mother” is often assumed to be a Black cultural trait that seeps into white middle class culture. See Dorothy Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*. 
should not bare the brunt of the government’s taxes either, yet he was heavily pro-government when it came to drugs and crime and the military. One aspect of the anti-state mentality that Reagan pushes is the notion that government is not supposed to be in your life. This hands-off mentality, whether it exists or not, says that one cannot blame the government for one’s situation. In his remarks concerning the implementation of the Federal Initiatives Against Drug Trafficking and Organized Crime, he said,

This rise in crime, this growth of a hardened criminal class, has partly been the result of misplaced government priorities and a misguided social philosophy. At the root of this philosophy lies utopian presumptions about human nature that see man as primarily a creature of his material environment. By changing environments through expensive social programs, this philosophy holds that government can permanently change man and usher in an era of prosperity and virtue. In much the same way, individual wrongdoing is seen as the result of poor socio-economic conditions or an underprivileged background. This philosophy suggests in short that there is crime or wrongdoing, and that society, not the individual, is to blame….What has also become abundantly clear in the last few years is that a new political consensus among the American people utterly rejects this point of view.{{95 Reagan, Ronald October 14, 1982; }}

Reagan took responsibility away from the government, making the rhetoric of individual choices so divisive in reasons for failure, not surviving, being poor, resorting to “crime” or being on welfare. Stuart Hall has called this kind of analysis “the last refuge of liberalism.”{{25 Hall, Stuart 1978/s183; }} It is in fact a desperate attempt at explaining what is happening at this moment, a result of a larger political history. What is left out of Reagan’s speech is an assessment of the “socioeconomic conditions.” Stemming from the post civil rights era, the reconfigurations of anti-black and anti-brown containment take form in a number of arenas.
In the late 1960’s and 1970’s in inner cities were undergoing a major moment of deindustrialization as a result of global capitalism. Factory jobs and manufacturing jobs in general were exported en masse to foreign countries. With fewer jobs in the cities, many whites took their capital, jobs, and fled to the suburbs. While the black working class faced higher rates of unemployment, a rise in crime along with an influx of drugs translated to the justification for the reintroduction of Law and Order policies (without a political counterrevolution), harsh punishment for crime, and more police. It should be noted that one of the detrimental effects of the drug influx is not only its use/abuse but the solidification of it as a separate economy. The drug economy and the attention drugs received in short, provided the political justification for more police, more surveillance, unprecedented racial profiling and mass imprisonment. Recall that it was Reagan who said, “Today, there is an increasing number who can’t see a fat man standing beside a thin one without automatically coming to the conclusion the fat man got that way by taking advantage of the thin one. So they would seek the answer to all the problems of human need though government.” {{96 Reagan, Ronald October 27, 1964; }} When Reagan called for less government or invited an anti-state consciousness he created a rupture in terms of how the public imagined the role of the state. On one hand, an anti-state mentality contends that government should not be present in the lives of individuals. Jobs, welfare, and education are all realms in which the government should let laissez-faire individual competition play out, and this was reflected in certain segments of the public. {{19 Edsall, Thomas Byrne 1992/s153; }}

Unfortunately, shrinking government  

---

17 In 1980, polls showed whites split 62-38 saying that government should just let every person get ahead on their own instead of guaranteeing work. The Black community polled had a complete split the opposite
and anti-government stances have a direct impact on blacks. One fourth of black men and one third of black women have government jobs. What happens when the government shrinks and government jobs are lost? According to Ronald Reagan’s analysis, the individual cannot seem to make it and government should not be the one to blame. With matters of drugs and crime, however, the government must be overwhelmingly present.

In this moment it seems there is a rhetorical twist, rupturing the accepted notion of what the state does or should do. One thing that is clear in all of this, is how the racial common sense affected those on welfare, those who commit “crime,” and those who could not find a job; they had no one to blame but themselves. This is imperative to understanding as this sort of bourgeois individualism blames racially pathologized populations for any position they are in. Both the rich and the poor, the incarcerated and free are deserving of their positions in this kind of anti-state mentality.

**Rhetorical Twists in the War on Drugs**

The changing racial common sense of the 1980’s, combined with Reagan’s three distinct moves in his political rhetoric--a resurgent American identity, an anti-government ideology, and decontextualizing the experiences of historically oppressed groups--provided the War on Drugs with ample legitimacy as a form of state violence. The War on Drugs was seen as a justifiable and permanent outgrowth of, “one of the most serious problems we face today...crime.” (78 Reagan, Ronald 2007; )

---

way, 70-30 in favor of government providing jobs. This is in Edsall’s *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics.*
in October of 1982, Reagan called for the War on Drugs. His reasons were simple: drugs were breaking down the structure of the American family, and they were causing more crime and constituted a major public health crisis. Claiming that a case study in South Florida had given the administration proof that drug related arrests and drug and forfeiture seizures gave ammunition to the idea and placement of an armed domestic law enforcement and militarized border. To Reagan and the public that heard these sentiments echoed, the War on Drugs was summed up as, “Drugs are bad and we are going to go after them….We’ve taken down the surrender flag and run up the battle flag. And we’re going to win the war on drugs.” The permanent aggression without regard for what may have caused an influx in drugs in the first place or, as Stuart Hall might say, what this crisis signified at this moment, left few options. Through the Reagan administration, there were going to be more drug laws, harsher sentences, more drug arrests and intense publicity. Part of the appeal of the War on Drugs would be its ability to be imagined as a War with distinct enemies that touched deeply racialized and gendered ideologies. Consider the way the War on Drugs produced the infamous racial characters of the Welfare Queen, the Illegal Alien and the Drug Dealer.

Introducing...The Welfare Queen, The Illegal Alien and the Drug Dealer

The creation of the Welfare queen developed before Ronald Reagan’s first presidential campaign. While touring around the country in 1976, Reagan spoke about a woman from Chicago who, “Has 80 names, 30 addresses, 12 social security cards, and is collecting veteran’s benefits on four nonexisting deceased husbands. She’s got Medicaid, getting food stamps and she is collecting welfare under each of her names. Her tax-free
cash income is over 150,000.” The only person who even came close to this description was one Linda Taylor, who had used four aliases and collected $8,000. Of course this was a fictitious account of a woman who had taken advantage of the government’s welfare system. But beyond the fictitious account lay a deeper moral symbolic part of the story. The lesson linked Reagan’s anti-state and individual choice rhetoric to those who existed outside the nation’s value system. The Americans that Reagan was speaking to were a public driven by values, a public that worked hard and paid their taxes. Unlike the “slum dwellers” whom Reagan referred to, Americans could distance themselves from the racially pathologized Welfare queen. The Welfare queen became larger than life; in the American imagination she became a real poor Black woman.

A study in 1990 found that 78% of white Americans thought that Blacks preferred to be on Welfare. This is no easy feat, to make a majority of people believe that Black people want to be poor. Since the Welfare queen, according to Reagan, was part of the reason why taxpayer’s money was being usurped and the economy was not doing well, the image of a Welfare queen represented by a Black woman pathologized all Black women. Black women were perceived to be conniving, immoral and larger reflections of poor decision making. They also became the source of more criminals and drug dealers, raising children with the same criminal tendencies. Dorothy Roberts has said of this myth that the contemporary image of the welfare queen is seen as having children to manipulate taxpayers into getting more money and fattening her paycheck. For Reagan
though, this tactic of pitting imaginary enemies against Americans would take on a life of its own.

The Drug Dealer was another critical racial prototype during this era, and this was relatively easy to sell to the public. The Drug Dealer was racialized as a person of color and gendered as male. He became larger than life, manifesting himself on TV, in the News, in popular culture, in the movies and in Hip Hop music and videos. Ronald Reagan referred to him as the “drug menace,” forming his own “criminal subculture” and without a handle on his lawlessness he would make a career out of “preying on the innocent.” {95 Reagan, Ronald October 14, 1982; } The drug dealer was the “drug menace” aggressive and plotting who could only be stopped by force. The call for more police and harsher sentences was directly tied into how the drug dealer was portrayed. The drug dealer was quite literally the black, male, inner city youth who needed to be stopped before he started. 18 It should be noted that the drug dealer is distinct from the drug abuser. At certain moments the drug abuser was seen as someone in need of rehabilitation and usually white middle class or professional. For the drug dealer no rehabilitation was possible.

The fantasy of the “illegal alien” is directly tied into the anti brown discourse that emerged ever since the late 1960’s. With Reagan’s talk of the War on Drugs, developments concerning drug smuggling and drug trafficking had been concentrated at

---

18 In the discussion of popular culture I will go into detail about how these fantasies of the drug dealer, illegal alien, and welfare queen were fed to the public. These cultural texts are produced directly in relation to what is being discussed in Reagan’s political rhetoric. So the drug dealer will later be filled in visually by popular culture. In the discussion on popular culture I will go into detail how these fantasies of the drug dealer, illegal alien and welfare queen were fed to the public. This is where racial logic takes on a mind of its own because statistics and proof aside, the public learns who commits more crime, who is a drug dealer, illegal, etc.
the border, the site of enemy infiltration. Scholar Leo Chavez has written about anti-
immigration discourse and the ways in which alarmist images of “illegal aliens” flooded
newspapers and magazines in the US since the mid 1970’s. Titles of articles that depict
immigration as “out of control,” a drain on the economy, displacing citizens from jobs, a
permanent “invasion” and as a “problem” tie directly into how much violence can be
directed toward these populations. By the time Ronald Reagan was president there was
already an overwhelming amount of money allocated to the INS in the form of new hi-
tech air support resources, new helicopter and surveillance equipment.{{1 Dunn,Timothy J. 1996/s43;}} The justification for the militarized border was very much tied into the
discourse that the War on Drugs had produced. The border had to be policed more
heavily because of “illegals” who may be smuggling drugs into the U.S.

In War, America will always be seen as in need of “protection from” and Reagan
was the privileged voice who conveyed to the public the enemies of the U.S. Reagan’s
characters, fantasies or perhaps hallucinations of the illegal alien, the Welfare queen and
the drug dealer/smuggler put forth a pervasive racial logic. This racial logic justifies
violence against those who cannot escape the immoral and threatening implications of
their own bodies. Each character had to be filled with a body and so everyone who is
racially pathologized is potentially one of these characters.¹⁹ The fantasies consumed by
the public had and still have real life consequences for racially pathologized populations,
icarcerated or nearly incarcerated. This is why ideology is so important, because facts

¹⁹ The creation of a subject, which is pathological, means that they have the potential to perform one of
these parts at any time. This is why the LAPD can pull a black or brown person out of their car and search
the vehicle, because the subject is either about to play the part (of one of the characters) or is one of those
characters. Probable cause becomes a public justification for the containment or imprisonment of “people
that fit the description,” before and during their role-playing.
and statistics cannot fully combat these ideas, which take on a material reality. The pervasive racial common sense must be examined in relation to its historical significance and its production concerning public justifications of phenomena like mass incarceration.

**Case Study: The Anti Drug Abuse Act of 1986**

During the beginning of the War on Drugs the number of arrestees and harsh sentences for drug offenses signified an “enemy within” mentality that Reagan articulated. In a show of aggressive and masculine rhetorical force, Reagan laid out his protection plan for the U.S. and then asked, “Can we honestly say that America is a land with justice for all if we do not now exert every effort to eliminate this confederation of professional criminals, this dark, evil enemy within?”{{95 Reagan, Ronald October 14, 1982; }} Protection from “the dark, enemy within” signifies one of the previously mentioned themes of American identity. In this moment, the symbolic white national body has to be protected from inside enemies of darker hues, making protection in the form of punishment and aggression a justifiable maneuver towards people of color.

One only need to look at the impact of the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 to get a better understanding of the impact draconian laws had upon Blacks. In 1983, the total number of prisoners in federal, state, and local prison was 660,800. Of those imprisoned 8.8% were incarcerated on drug related charges. Within a span of ten years, the prison population increased to 1,408,000, holding 25.1% of inmates on drug related charges.{{29 Cockburn,Alexander 1998/s76;}} Between 1980 and 1995, the number of prisoners serving time for drugs increased 1000%.{{62 Subcommittee on Criminal Justice Drug Policy, and Human Resources of the Committee on Government Reform}}
Not only were the drug laws passed during this era reflective of longer sentencing in the form of mandatory minimums, but they were also heavily racially biased in terms of who was being sentenced. Between 1986 and 1991, the rate of white men charged on drug offenses increased 106%, while the increase for Black men and Black women increased 429% and 828% respectively. This does not reflect a greater level of drug use by Blacks, as federal health statistics point to the same rates of drug use across racial groups. What it does mean however, is that black (and therefore those that are racially pathologized) are more likely to be profiled for occupying one of the above mentioned characters. The racial common sense says that these people are more likely to commit crime and sell drugs amongst other things. While it is clear that all populations were affected by the passage of laws like the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986, particular populations have a different and more violent relationship to the state.

Part of the reason why the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 has had such detrimental affects concerning racial and gender disparities is the difference in logic between crack and cocaine. Crack is punished at a rate of 100 to 1 against powdered cocaine, despite the fact that cocaine’s market-value is more profitable. Why is crack punished harsher than cocaine? Reeves and Campbell, authors of *Cracked Coverage*, have explained the phenomenon in the War on Drugs as a discourse on discrimination. There is a distinct separation for the authors between drug offenders that are seen as in need of therapeutic transformation and the
“pathological other” who is regarded as a delinquent beyond rehabilitation. According to them, the way the Reagan administration ran its campaign for support on the War on Drugs meant that delinquency was literally inscribed on the body of young, urban, poor, black males.\footnote{8 Reeves,Jimmie Lynn 1994/s41;}

Scholar Joy James attests to a similar phenomenon when the monotony of racial state violence is analyzed with respect to the “specificity of the body.”\footnote{32 James,Joy 1996/s25;} With respect to the body, James says that the body must be understood as a carrier of non-observance or non-conformity. In this sense, bodies that are considered more docile (i.e. white bodies) do not require physical punishment and are allowed to be self-policied. Other bodies are required to show more obedience as they are considered more threatening and markers of deviance or criminality.\footnote{32 James,Joy 1996/s25-26;}

Angela Davis also writes about the body with respect to the goals of rehabilitation and the prison. In her article “From Convict Lease System to the Super Max Prison,” she points to the original goal of the prison, which rested in the movement to reform “harsh corporal punishment”\footnote{20 This is also Foucault’s idea in Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison. Corporal punishment in public led to the formation of the prison, where bodies would be disciplined and punished internally and privately, through daily regiments. Joy James and Angela Davis however, make the critique that at this point in time, 17th to early 20th century; there is still corporal punishment for Blacks in public, in the form of lynching and even scalping of Indians up until the 19th century. One could even argue that police violence towards black/brown bodies is a form of public corporal punishment that still happens today. Rehabilitation then, must be seen as a privilege allowed for white bodies only.} and the “rehabilitation of white males” as signifying the difference between Blacks and non-whites versus whites’ relationship to prisons.\footnote{50 James,Joy 2000/s64;} Subsequently, when prisons became spaces open to non-white bodies, specifically Blacks, after the Civil War, the idea of the prison as a site of rehabilitation became null and void. The U.S. penitentiary, with an overwhelming
number of Blacks, became a site of free labor through the convict lease system. Davis argues that individual rehabilitation has basically disappeared as the principle ideology upholding the prison’s existence. Thus, punishment of bodies that lie beyond rehabilitation is proof of the criminal pathology that racially pathologized populations carry. The institution of the penitentiary is then powerful for the legitimacy that punishment assumes. Harsh punishment is seen as an unequivocal part of retribution for social problems like crime and uneven economic distribution.

Scholars Reeves and Campbell’s continue an analysis of bodies beyond rehabilitation by looking at the news coverage on cocaine starting in 1981 up until 1985 in which cocaine is seen as abused by the white middle class. They argue that the use of cocaine is seen as a drug that is able to endure recovery. This is due in part to its public view as a “white” drug. When crack enters in late 1985, it is largely seen as a diabolical drug incapable of regulation or management. It is from the inner city, it is black and it is threatening. In September of 1986, during a televised address by the president and first lady, Nancy Reagan described crack as, “An explosively destructive and often lethal substance which is crushing its users. It is an uncontrollable fire.” Crack is unlike cocaine in that it is aggressive and poses a threat to anyone who is near it. Crack in this way is much more harmful than cocaine and requires “no moral middle ground” as Ronald Reagan would say. The collective white national body had to be protected and through Reagan’s racial masculinity the implicit message called for a defense in the form of the War on Drugs.
From Ronald Reagan’s political rhetoric a common sense formed around the enemies in the War on Drugs. The racial characters solidified who the public needed to be protected from and who was in need of protection. The other rhetorical twists in Ronald Reagan’s political rhetoric; the purposeful historical amnesia of U.S. racism, the use of individual choices to quell any criticism of racist, sexist, and class driven policies, and the anti-state state, all fed the legitimacy of massive incarcration. Newly admitted prisoners, largely the black population had only themselves to blame.
Chapter 3: Prison Logic: A Critical Look At Popular Film Culture during the 1980’s and early 1990’s

Why Study Film?

In the era of Reaganism, the War on Drugs, and harsh domestic public policy, film offers some insights into public imagination and the preoccupation with ghettos and crime. In the 1980’s and early 1990’s popular culture overflowed with visual markers that taught the public how to imagine and interact with so-called criminals and prisoners. In particular, what I call the ‘hood genre of films became increasingly popular as films about the ghetto, crime and poverty were permanent themes. The visuals in these films manifest into the perpetuation of stereotypes and racial fantasies against which real bodies are judged.¹ As many film scholars have suggested, ideology permeates film by producing meaning, norms and representations. As film scholar Susan Hayward writes, “Mainstream cinema…puts ideology up on screen. Genres function ideologically…they provide simple common-sense answers to very complex issues, the difficulties of which get repressed.”¹² I am locating the site of popular film where common sense notions about race, state violence, incarceration, and history are being represented and repressed in the public. This will allow me to do the following: consider how the film Colors continued the narrow national debate on the War on Drugs; examine the role of the state in Colors and subsequent films; and critique the post-Colors narratives that maintain individual choice as the critical factor for success. This will allow the reader/audience to get a sense of the conscious and unconscious ways the

¹ Conversation with Michael Lujan Bevacqua
practice of massive incarceration is justified, recognizing that when the space of the
ghetto is rendered a place of inherent violence in need of restraint, proposals for more
laws (with longer sentences), more police, and more incarceration are communicated
ideologically. The concept that locking people away in cages is the way to solve social,
economic, and political problems, far away from their communities, family, and friends,
is normalized in these film representations.

In his discussion of the construction of African American culture in film, Vincent F.
Rocchio contends that film has been another conveyor of the social institution of racism
within American culture. Representation in film is the foundation upon which the public comprehends, disregards, or accepts knowledge. Several studies have indicated that most individuals in mass society receive vast amounts of information through mediated texts, rather than direct experience. This is not to say that film only reproduces mainstream sentiments, but its inherent ability to, as Rocchio says, “reinforce the status quo of racism,” cannot be overlooked. Cinema and film should be treated as a visual and textual discourse worthy of study. With that understanding, Rocchio attempts in his book to understand the synergy between American culture, racism and the media by discussing what racism is (and is not) and what racism does. Racism, according to him, is not simply prejudice or discrimination, but a process whereby meaning is assigned to what we see and hear. Further, ideas around gender-- both masculinity and femininity are constantly being defined in films.

---

2 When referring to the ghetto, I am referring to it not only spatially and temporally, but culturally as a figurative space of blackness. The ghetto is often synonymous with blackness and African American culture in general.
While many institutions convey what it means to be a man or a women, film has the ability to bestow, both audibly and visually, the range of culturally acceptable behaviors for men and women. While those norms of behavior are always being contested, the mere fact that the U.S. is a patriarchal society, results in the privileging of masculinity.{{51 Benshoff,Harry M. 2004; }} Film, unintentionally or intentionally, produces common sense notions of the world around us. In particular, the hood genre produces taken for granted ideas of how individual choices (only) affect each of the characters. In this sense, film can produce common sense notions about how society ought to function.

The idea that American culture is embedded with racism is nothing new. This is why certain instances of racism cannot be obliterated by the mere passage of laws, new moral standards or a growing black and brown middle class. State violence, which can take form in gentrification, poverty, perpetual unemployment, welfare reform, police violence, deindustrialization, and globalization, becomes decontextualized and can serve to perpetuate the idea that violence and despair are endemic and a natural fact of life in communities of color.{{3 See Joy James Resisting State Violence for a more in depth understanding of how state violence is deployed in relation to race and gender. 4 Presently there are 2,212,451 incarcerated people in the U.S. That is the highest incarceration rate in the world. If you break that number down by race, there are 393 whites per 100,000, 957 Latinos per 100,000 and 2,531 Blacks per 100,000. Clearly, race plays a huge part when it comes to state policy.}} Communities of color--especially black communities-- experience state violence more intensely than other communities, incarceration rates being one example. Communities of color and their inhabitants represented in the hood genre of films are seen as in need of state intervention only in the form of more police and more punitive laws. When state violence is erased,
the killing that goes on between communities becomes a natural fact. In congruence with
the Reagan administration’s deployment of a common sense around the state’s role,
subsequent state intervention in the form of social services like health care, welfare and
fair housing are criminalized, while state intervention in the form of police, surveillance
and incarceration becomes necessary.

My concern is not primarily finding out if a director or writer is racist or purposefully
produced a racist film. I am looking instead at what conversation a film is engages and
whether or not it reproduces a dominant national script (e.g., the War on Drugs, crime,
etc.) or attempts to counter it. And if the film seeks to produce a counter narrative to the
national dialogue, what is the film saying about history and how is it contextualizing that
time period? Also, do the representations uphold a justification for state violence in any
way? I maintain that there are material effects of representations in these films that make
the public quiescent to a policy of mass incarceration and perpetual state violence.

I have chosen here to focus on the ‘hood genre of films in the late 80’s, early 90’s
because crime, prison, and incarceration are central fixtures of these films. In this sense,
the public is given an opportunity to imagine life in prison and lives that revolve around
prison. This is even more important given the fact that many states have laws prohibiting
television interviews with prisoners, including California, Pennsylvania, and Virginia.

I do recognize that it is problematic to refer to the ‘hood genre as some monolithic entity simply because stories revolve around the living in
the ‘hood. There is intricacy and complexity in each of these films. However, I do want
to recognize that these films have a number of things in common. All of these films
came out during the same time period—the late 1980’s and early 1990’s--and they all
deal with some aspect of the War on Drugs, including but not limited to prison, drug laws, police violence and gang violence. What S. Craig Watkins terms the “ghetto action film” had three crucial developments that led to the production and commercial success of these productions. One is the postindustrial ghetto’s rise in media attention, leading to a vivid public imagination about these spaces. There is also a popular culture economy and youth consumer market that is booming, and the commercial promise of Hip Hop culture, gangsta rap specifically. The ghetto action film then competes with other representations of the post industrialized ghetto. My analysis departs from Watkins however, as I am attempting to look at the ‘hood genre as shaping discourse not only about the deindustrialized ghettos, but on incarceration as a strategy to address social problems. My approach is important because I am interested in how these representations of criminals, crime, police, prisons, prisoners and violence may allow or acquiesce to state violence. I push beyond a strict analysis of discourse and reveal the material and structural consequences of these representations.

In the first part of this section, I will focus on the film Colors (1988), which was released during the height of the War on Drugs, to show how portrayals of “real life” limit the public’s scope of understanding regarding black and brown prisoners. Although Colors did not break box office records that year, it did become a cult classic. In 2006, activist and farmer Jesus Ramirez—who was active in the land dispute over the nation’s largest urban garden in South Central--said, “…I don’t want to go back to the 80’s like movies of Colors and Boyz N the Hood. Where we can go all over the world and say ‘yes I am from South Central LA’ and people cringe and say that is an unlivable place!”

{{101 Democracy Now Wednesday, June 14th, 2006; }} Clearly, the images from Colors...
and *Boyz N the Hood* have had a lasting effect for people from inside and outside South Central LA. Moreover, in the recent and very public staged encampment against developer Ralph Horowitz, actress-turned-activist Darryl Hannah and environmentalist Julia Butterfly Hill discussed their surprise and amazement that there was even a farm in South Central Los Angeles. In an interview with Amy Goodman of *Democracy Now*, Hannah said, “I was so moved by it and so impressed that the biggest urban farm in the nation is right here in the middle of South Central L.A. It’s a place that I wouldn't have expected in a million years, and it's such a beautiful surprise. And so I just want to do everything in my power to help support these farmers.” Her comments reflect the effect of popular imaginings of black and brown communities. The fact that farming and agricultural subsistence could exist in what is perceived to be a concrete jungle, is a testament to the representations that have permeated in the ‘hood genre of films. This is why film will continue to be a medium that attempts to provide anecdotes about life, albeit fictional.

In *Colors* (1988), particular social realities like high unemployment, deindustrialization, poverty, and police violence are decontextualized or erased in these tales of fictional reality. Specifically, the narratives in the ‘hood film genre reflects the popular understandings of criminals, ghettos, and prisons as havens of bad moral choices and inherent violence. *Colors* is one of the first films to depict the ‘hood during the War on Drugs. Like many films that come after it, this film does not look at people and situations historically, instead pathologizing individual bodies, behavior and spaces. Through the film *Colors*, subsequent movies, and other media depictions, the policy of more prisons and more police is not only justified but deemed necessary.
In this section I interrogate the authenticity *Colors* assumes and the consequences of that assumption by analyzing the comments of reviewers and critics. The main concern here is how it is that the story in *Colors*, and therefore the ideology behind it, is allowed to explain the current conditions. Claims by critics and politicians alike will show that, once again, these conditions are portrayed without context.

Next, I will examine the effect of portraying the space that people of color occupy as pathologically violent in these films. I am borrowing from Sherene Razack and her analysis of the violence Canadian peacekeepers perpetrated in Somalia to reveal how state violence and state practices are relieved of critique. Razack examines what she calls the Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) or the traumatized Canadian peacekeeper narrative that becomes popular during and after the Somali Civil War. For her, this narrative, which can be located in political rhetoric, literature, documentaries, newspaper articles, and TV shows, reinforces the myth that the perpetrator of violence is in fact the victim. Canadian peacekeeping violence becomes an aberration of sorts as those “exceptional” stories of violence towards Somalis are trumpped by the stories of post-traumatic stress disorder made so prevalent in news stories and documentaries. The stories of how Canadian soldiers’ psyches were in turmoil after seeing so much violence in a foreign land like Somalia became the oft-repeated story. Stories of Somalis in the Civil War and their psychological and physical trauma almost never appeared. The peacekeeping trauma narrative became a way to sanction and legitimate the peacekeepers’ *exceptional* violence toward Somalis and mobilized a portrait of Canadian peacekeepers’ innocence. When the explanation of violence is the inherent military (or in the case of the ‘hood genre, the police’s) culture of racism, sexism, and homophobia that
is acted out whenever violence occurs, it has a naturalizing effect. Explanations that exceptionalize the violence because of circumstance, whether it is considered a “by-product of war and of place” or “as a response to a cruel environment,” are also insufficient. Razack argues that the danger in such explanations is that excessive violence is seen as normal or an understandable behavior. Razack seeks to move away from thinking about excessive violence as a natural outcome because of the institutions one is a part of, or as inevitable, given an exceptional situation (war-time). In fact, “violence” is something that the Other performs/engages in, while the police or soldiers engage in something else—defense, security, protection, peacekeeping, but not violence. The first thing we can learn from her analysis is to stop making excuses for violence that occurs under any circumstance and, instead, work to denaturalize the occurrence of violence. This is where the PTSD narratives alone exonerate the conditions that western nations have produced in so-called Third World nations. This is similar to the narratives of black on black crime in black communities, as it alleviates the white racial state responsibility for producing the conditions that propel poverty and crime. While Razack focuses on the juxtaposition of those nations that are considered uncivilized and civilized, she points out that those seen as uncivilized are in need and should welcome the “civilized.” The civilized may come in a number of forms like Western religion, TV, even McDonalds, but the western nation coming in as a civilizing intervention is one of the most naked and glaring examples of justification for state violence. The peacekeeping narrative from western nations accomplishes a few things according to Razack:
To look at peacekeeping as performance, and to consider what the performance secures, an international sphere that positions some actors as more civilized than others, and some states as having the right to intervene and discipline others, is not to deny that the conflicts of the post-Cold War period have not been bloody and terribly violent and do require intervention. What the hegemonic peacekeeping story accomplishes is to turn these conflicts into attributes of Third World states and Third World peoples, qualities that are somehow innate and unconnected either to colonial histories or to contemporary Western dominance. \{16 Razack, Sherene 2004/s47;\}

The importance of Razack’s analysis is how that specific narrative can be used to alleviate critiques of contemporary state policy, colonial history and justify western intervention. Moreover, these narratives attribute permanent characteristics to bodies and spaces. This is the danger as we will see in the hood genre films as they do not complicate the violence that occurs in these communities, communities that are often treated like colonies or foreign lands in need of submission. Moreover, they fail to explore the range of forms of state violence that produce the more sensational interpersonal violence featured in popular cultural productions.

Finally, I will analyze how these films reflect the particular racial common sense that was becoming popular during the 1980’s. Part of the reason why I choose Colors is because it ushers in this whole genre of ‘hood movies. After Colors (1988), similar films emerge including, Boyz N The Hood (1991), New Jack City (1991), Juice (1992), South Central (1992), American Me (1992), Menace II Society (1993), Blood In, Blood Out (1993), Mi Vida Loca (1994) and Clockers (1995). Many of these films are a reaction to a movie like Colors, as we see these later films of the ‘hood genre being told from an entirely different perspective. Where Colors privileges the police experience in communities of color, the subsequent movies privilege “authentic” community members’
voices. These later movies are either revising or copying familiar terrain, but nonetheless are representing a particular experience. *Colors*’ place within this genre is important not only because it is the first, but since it gives one of the first “insider” views of what is happening in L.A. and more general communities of color during a historic surge in drugs and gang violence. It is no wonder that the popularity of this movie precedes the TV show *Cops*, which is essentially a ride-along with police.\(^5\)

**Keeping it Real (Wrong): How Seemingly Authentic Representations Distort Reality**

*Colors* is a film directed by Dennis Hopper and written by Michael Schiffer. It is a film about a rookie cop, Officer McGavin, and a veteran cop, Officer Hodges, who are selected to work on an anti-gang task force assignment in South Central L.A. Their particular unit, Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (CRASH), emerges in response to the number of gang killings that have occurred throughout L.A. Officer McGavin and Officer Hodges quickly disagree on how to police effectively. Throughout the film we see both of their methods being tested. The liberal approach seems to offer a better result, but the audience is not sure until the end which method will end up working the best. There are also two subplots; one is that Officer McGavin has a short-lived relationship with Luisa Gomez who lives in the barrio where he polices. Since Officer McGavin is beginning to have a reputation as a disrespectful and egotistical cop, that begins to ruin their relationship. The other subplot is that there are two rival gangs, who

\(^5\) *Colors* came out in April of 1988 and in March of 1989, the first show of *Cops* aired on Fox, becoming one of the longest syndicated shows to hit TV airwaves. I am not looking to prove a cause and effect relationship here by any means, but I want to point out that this relationship is reflective of a heightened focus on crime, policing and ghettos.
do not have much character development, fighting each other for unknown reasons while the two police officers are in between a “take-no-prisoners street battle.” {{57 Duvall, Robert 2001; }}

*Colors* manages to pull off an almost documentary-like feel despite both the director, Dennis Hopper and the writer Michael Schiffer’s voyeur gaze to the subject matter. This is striking because, in an article written years later, screenwriter Michael Schiffer would talk about how he never has, “Any knowledge of anything when I start writing. I knew nothing about gangs in LA when I wrote *Colors*, and the same with submarines when I started *Crimson Tide*. Everything comes from research.”{{156 Epstein, Daniel Robert; }} Dennis Hopper’s thoughts about the film are also quite revealing. While being bombarded with bad press prior to *Colors*’ release, Hopper retorted to his critics who complained that he glorified gangs, “It’s a police action picture….There’s nothing glamorous about a drive-by shooting.”{{98 Van Gelder, Lawrence April 15, 1988; }} For Hopper, his portrayal of gang violence is all he could do, “To point his finger at the problem and say, look!”{{98 Van Gelder, Lawrence April 15, 1988; }} In Hopper’s eyes his noble deed was in fact bringing attention to a problem that already existed. Claims that his movie would be perceived as glamorous or that gang violence would occur as a result of the film were insulting. Hopper responded by saying,

I don’t think they’ll be a shooting in any theater-I can almost guarantee it. If there’s going to be some kind of gang retaliation- it’s going to be on their turf- in their territory. I mean they’re not coming in the white areas to attack. If they were, there wouldn’t be any white people around right now-they have better weapons than the police. They’re killing each other, which is even more pathetic. But as long as they have the drug dealer who’s in front of them making money and as long as they live in poverty with no way out, with a mother on welfare with six kids who don’t know
who their father is, they’ll be killing each other. There’s going to be that kind of violence.  

The telling part of Hopper’s remarks is his understanding of what is happening in American society. The problem, as Hopper describes it, is poor mothers or single family households (non-normative households), poverty, drug dealers and the violence being perpetuated through the influx of weaponry to the ghetto. Incarceration, surveillance, routine traffic stops and arrests are merely logical reactions to this violence. In Hopper’s analysis, harsher policing and more police seem like the only recourse for a community that is depicted as out of control and violent. Hopper’s suggestion that there will not be any violence in the white community continues to reify a hierarchy of life. He is basically assuring the white public not to worry because black and brown life or premature death is a natural outcome of the embedded violence in their communities. His explanations of crime and poverty sound strangely familiar. As I have argued before, the national dialogue via Ronald Reagan and other media sources has shifted understandings of crime and poverty to be the making of bad individual and moral choices. These sentiments are not a far cry from cultural (and thus pathological) explanations that have been lingering since Daniel P. Moynihan’s *The Negro Family: A Case For National Action* (Published in March 1965). Hopper’s comments echo the claims made 20 years prior in Moynihan’s report. Hopper’s comments about black communities and their hand in creating the violence and poverty in which they find themselves are not without context. It also reflects the colonizer’s sense of “knowing” the colonial subject. Consider the following quote from the Moynihan Report in 1965:
In essence, the Negro community has been forced into a matriarchal structure (non-normative) which, because it is 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. There is, presumably, no special reason why a society in which males are dominant in family relationships is to be preferred to a matriarchal arrangement. However, it is clearly a disadvantage for a minority group to be operating on one principle, while the great majority of the population, and the one with the most advantages to begin with, is operating on another…A subculture, such as that of the Negro American, in which this is not the pattern, is placed at a distinct disadvantage. (Moynihan, Daniel)

Given this analysis of poverty as a product of cultural practices, we might ask what work do cultural explanations do and what do they mobilize? By dismissing the structures of power that create social and economic inequality, the individual--particularly the black mother--and the family unit are the primary variables in poverty, and thus for the crime and violence that ghettoes house. In this way, the marker of poverty or the poverty-stricken can be attributed to this space and has implications, not only for people who inhabit black and brown spaces, but also for black and brown bodies as a whole. As many statistics have shown, this manifests itself in the rising number of people of color going to prison. Seventy percent of people arrested annually in the U.S. are white, yet seventy percent of those in jail are people of color. Here, we can see that being a person of color means that you are more likely to be treated differently than your white counterparts when it comes to sentencing. Despite Moynihan’s liberal attempts to explain racial inequality, he ended up writing part of the explanation that would end Lyndon B. Johnson’s “great society” program by weakening the welfare state. (Moynihan, Daniel)

---

6 I say Brown families as well because of the reports that came out almost at the same time. Oscar Lewis, an anthropologist came out with the book, *La Vida: A Puerto Rican Family in the Culture of Poverty--San Juan and New York* which was very similar to the Moynihan Report in the sense that it explained poverty as an extension of cultural values.
One of the common sense understandings that is developed after the Moynihan Report (vocalized by Hopper) of crime, poverty and violence is that the black population has a cultural deficit. In this case, prison seems like a natural and fitting place for those who commit crime or are violent. The logical conclusions one might draw are that these people commit more crime, their neighborhoods are more violent, and they absorb a disproportionate and undeserved portion of state revenue and tax dollars.

Despite Dennis Hopper’s liberal tendencies to want to bring attention to a social problem, he merely reiterates the national dialogue about these communities. The subject of Hopper’s analysis remains the individual living in this community, not a policy or the changing landscape of urban cities. This sort of decontextualization is not only reflective of a larger public rationale to abandon the examination of political and racial struggles historically, but a trend in individualizing larger societal problems like poverty, unemployment, and even crime. Recall that it was Reagan who once said in a speech that, “I don’t believe that there is anyone going hungry in America simply by reason of lack or ability. It is about people not knowing where or how to get this help.”

It should come as no surprise then, that much of the public has similar sentiments. It is the impoverished ignorance or their non-normative cultural practices that find them in the situations they are in. The poverty that is endemic to the inner cities becomes natural and isolated from a deeper history.

For reviewers of Colors, the film manages to engender some kind of credibility with the real life of these communities, whether it is the gang member or a cop’s vision of
the place they are policing. Upon its release, reviewer Roger Ebert contended that *Colors*, “Tries to understand a little of the tragic gang dynamics, to explain why in some inner-city neighborhoods they seem to offer the only way for young men to find power and status.” For Ebert, one of the most important moments in the film is when “A group of Los Angeles gang members is trying to explain why the gang is so important to them.” In Ebert’s final assessment, *Colors* is, “Not just a police thriller, but a movie that has researched gangs and given some thought to what it wants to say about them.” Ebert’s comments highlight a few important themes; one being the neutrality or the fair look that is gained by viewing this movie. Second, is the objective research that sheds light or gives some element of truth to gang life. In a review by Hal Hinson of the *Washington Post*, he states that part of the movie’s lack of direction and purpose is due to director Dennis Hopper’s refusal to insert “His own point of view…on some level abdicated his responsibility as director.” For Hinson, Dennis Hopper refrains from, “Passing judgment on the gangs, and while he’s evenhanded in this regard, you may feel that the movie is short on insights about gang life.” The review of Hinson is a bit different than Ebert’s because according to him, the objective portrayal has failed to deliver some “insider voice.” In fact, for Hinson, the movie’s neutrality does not allow the audience the gaze of these “mean streets” as he calls them. But neutrality/objectivity means that Hopper is just reporting “the facts” plain and simple, as if in a documentary. For the Los Angeles City Attorney James Hahn, the film was “very realistic.” Another article on *Colors* gave the film credit for its authentic portrayal of “gang life in the downtown LA landscape.” For
this reviewer, Hopper’s “Huge cast of actors to play various racially mixed gang members and street types and all of them speak in realistic sounding tough-guy slang…adds greatly to the feeling of authenticity.”

In this article all praise is due to Hopper for, despite the harsh criticism he receives using “real” gang members, he manages to get that authentic feeling of a gang infested L.A. The author then adds that the “Violence between these two groups is such a fact of their lives that they even have customs surrounding it, like wearing “In Memory of” gang shirts for a member’s funeral.” These comments about the film’s authenticity and reality are remarkable given that they allow Colors to perform a truth-telling function.

Many reviewers had similar reactions to the film. Either Colors is objective because of the research that has been done, authentic because real gang members and slang is being used, or neutral because it absolves gang members from condemnation. Despite the film’s display of apparent objectivity and authenticity, Colors is allowed to perform an explanatory function for certain social problems. The film managed to decontextualize gangs, their emergence in mainstream media coverage, usefulness in political campaigning, as well as their relationship to youth poverty or the drug economy. These are all very important reasons why gangs become particularly violent and have more sophisticated weaponry than ever before.

In reality, the database of so-called “gang members” ran the range of anything from associating with gang members, corresponding with gang members, having one’s name appear on a gang document, being identified as a gang member by another gang
member, having gang style tattoos, making gang hand signals, writing gang graffiti, or wearing gang clothing, including but not limited to red and blue clothing as well as baggy pants. To be deemed a gang member one only had to fit into two of the three categories.\footnote{14 Parenti, Christian 1999/s122;}

The “gang member” label was already being deployed as a surrogate for black or brown person. This is the extent to which surveillance had already taken precedence. To a real extent, if someone is labeled a “gang member,” one can justify their arrest, their incarceration and even their death. It is because of the knowledge that has been ascribed to the gang member’s body as violent and illegal that allows state violence to occur vis-à-vis a black or brown body. One is no longer the essence of themselves, they are that label. It is the same thing that happens with race; it is a justification for taking or not acknowledging one’s humanity. It is in the context of fearing the gang member that you have numerous police operations occurring. In the mid-80’s Operation Hammer and Operation Pipeline are a few (that we know about) being directly targeted at populations deemed more likely to be gang members. This of course translates to racial profiling, more arrests, surveillance and incarceration. Operation Hammer, as historian Mike Davis has described, was an operation that began in L.A. and “arrested more Black youth at any time since the Watts Rebellion of 1965.”\footnote{28 Davis, Mike 2006/s268;} Operation Hammer picked up over 1,500 black youth in South Central LA, but mostly drunks, delinquent motorists, and teenage curfew violators.\footnote{28 Davis, Mike 2006/s277;} We have to understand Operation Hammer in a couple of different fashions. One, it must be

\footnote{7 See also Mike Davis’ *The City of Quartz* and *Search and Destroy: African American Males in the Criminal Justice System* by Jerome Miller.}
seen as a political move by LAPD’s Darryl Gates and for those politicians like City Attorney Hahn to look tough on crime, which meant that they were engaged in ensuring the public safety because of these politics. The operation must also be understood as an overall technique of surveillance. Many of those arrested were put into anti-gang databases whether or not they were gang members. It is also important to look at the operation for its fueling of the criminal justice system buildup, legitimizing policies leading to mass incarceration, and disengaging with the problem of poverty in general. Crime was isolated from larger social conditions produced by the state (again).

Operation Pipeline was a national program run relatively secretly by the Drug Enforcement Agency (D.E.A.) aimed at stopping drug trafficking on the street level. It was based on pulling over young black and brown men and searching for drugs. If the passenger or driver had a map with a circled destination, if they had fast food wrappers on the floor, if they had detergent in the car, if they had a high pulse rate, these were all reasons to have one’s car searched to look for drugs.{{121 Gibson, Thomas 2005/s26:00;}}

Recall, it was during the 1980’s that numerous federal mandatory minimum laws were passed such as the Crime Control Act of 1984, the Anti-Drug Abuse Act of 1986 (revised in 1988 as well), and the Omnibus Drug Bill of 1986. This list does not include the numerous Operations taken up by local police during this time to raid and arrest numerous people in Black and Brown neighborhoods. It is important to recall these state policies because it is during this time that the public witnesses a large influx of black and brown people going to jail for longer periods of time. It should also be noted black women experienced one of the largest increases in incarceration at that time, a trend that continues today. Although many of these operations clearly targeted black
men, black women were also subject to increasing surveillance. This reality often gets ignored, despite the fact that the percentage of black women going to prison on drug charges increased by 828% between 1986 and 1991, while the conviction rates for black men and white men rose 429% and 106% respectively.{{29 Cockburn,Alexander 1998/s76;}}

In a study conducted by USC researchers, in the counties labeled “gang-infested,” of the 741 arrests made, only 25% were active gang members.{[28 Davis,Mike 2006/s313;]} The point is that gangs are not solely outlets to solidify the drug market. And the drug economy was not completely synonymous with an increase in gangs. Gangs are not a new phenomenon by any means. Gangs have existed since the beginning of urban cities in the U.S. In fact, the Crips formed as a way to protect themselves against other local gangs. According to Stanley “Tookie” Williams, notorious for starting the Crips, and celebrated for his subsequent unwavering commitment to gang peace, co-founded the gang, “To protect everybody….but eventually we gravitated towards gangsterhood. We became something else we really didn’t plan to become. We became what we were attacking.”{{122 Barbara Cottman Becnel 1993, August 22;}} While gangs received more media attention, they were not a new phenomenon. The new phenomenon was the attention they received and the anti-gang policing tactics, which translated into policing significantly more black and brown communities. Gangs are not as organized nor do they have a central cohesive unit like the media would have us believe. However, this is not to say that gangs are not involved in selling drugs, but it must be acknowledged that their organization is, if anything, a middle man in the hierarchy of a larger drug economy. The relationship worth researching may not be
between gangs and drugs, but perhaps unemployment and the opportunities of selling drugs, or poverty and living wage and semi-skilled job opportunities. The point here is not to directly locate gangs as the center of drug activity but rather to locate gangs as the target of a drug frenzied media and law enforcement offensive.\(^8\)

Also missing from *Colors* is any mention of the Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums (C.R.A.S.H.) unit as it relates to real SWAT Teams and the no-knock policies. The audience’s first encounter with the seemingly innocuous CRASH unit appears in the introduction of *Colors*. Similar to the way *Star Wars* opens up, the audience is introduced to the saga that the LAPD is forced to contend with, numerous gang members and not enough police. Simply put, that is the only context the audience receives. However, there is an historical relationship between communities of color, especially Blacks, and the way that they are currently policed. SWAT teams are a direct result of the way the Black Panther Party (BPP) and other radical groups in the 1960’s were policed and eventually physically neutralized. When local police and the FBI’s COINTELPRO raided BPP headquarters in cities across America, they knew that the BPP stance on self-defense made them a potential threat for violent retaliation against police violence. There was potential for, and at times there were, violent clashes resulting from the police raids they conducted. The strategy that the FBI and local police would use as a result in these calculated confrontations turned into domestic military tactics of sorts. After radical and reformist groups like the BPP were strategically neutralized, SWAT teams did not simply end or disintegrate; as political prisoner

---

\(^8\) In their pivotal study, Reeves and Campbell discuss at length the media offensive highlighting youth of color and the War on Drugs. See *Cracked Coverage*. 
Dhoruba Bin Wahad argues, ‘every local police force worth their salary’ now has a Swat team.”\cite{18 Bin Wahad,Dhoruba 1993/s50;} In Christian Parenti’s seminal work, *Lockdown America* (2000), he locates the current aggressive policing techniques like no-knock policies and SWAT teams to massive urban rioting, containing radical groups of the 60’s popularity and making sure that the kind of resistance seen in the 1960’s did not repeat itself. It was apparent to political leaders in the White house during the mid to late sixties that the state was not as organized as it needed to be to put down a riot or rebellion. It was not until the Omnibus Crime and Safe Streets Act of 1968, which created the Law Enforcement Assistance Administration (LEAA), that policing takes a different turn. The act that was passed allowed numerous state agencies like the local police, highway patrol, and the Sheriff’s department to communicate with each other; it allowed them to increase their weapons technology like computers, radio communication and helicopters.\cite{14 Parenti,Christian 1999; }

The modern day policing that the public associates with now has a history directly rooted in this era that I have summarized. Despite the history that is ignored or forgotten, SWAT teams continue to terrorize black and brown communities, which was their intended purpose. Routine domestic policing therefore becomes a form of terror or preemptive rebellion control, to make communities cognizant of their subordinate place and the threat of going to prison. During the 1980’s, particular communities were policed with a heavy hand, not solely for outright politically threatening reasons, but for different political reasons. The communities that are being policed with heavier armor are not necessarily politicized, nor are they supposed to be. The political part of the policing strategy becomes controlling populations that have been known to be politically
dangerous. These are the same populations that are feeling the direct effects of Reagan’s economic recession and other public policies that have increased income and wealth inequality. For instance, this can be seen in the first term of Reagan’s presidency as social spending, including unemployment, welfare, food stamps, school lunches, that go directly to individuals and families was slashed by 101.1 billion dollars from 1982-1985. It should be noted also that at that time 62% of those on Welfare were white and 35% were black.\{30 Edsall,Thomas Byrne 1984/s39;\} There is not necessarily a correlation between being poor and police repression. When is the last time you saw a helicopter (a.k.a. ghetto bird) fly over a trailer park? There is, however, a relationship between poor communities of color and police repression. There is also a relationship between just being a person of color and police repression. As the government had seen, these same black and brown communities birthed some of the most revolutionary groups in the mid to late 1960’s and they had to be taught their place.

One could argue however that there is a real threat when police are making drug busts and that may or may not be true, but SWAT teams endure precisely because of the terror they inflict upon a community. They are used to terrorize communities with an outright show of force. That history of the political upheavals and rebellious groups like the BPP is lost when we see a film like Colors show SWAT teams enter a house. To the audience it is routine policing, but that neglects the larger trajectory of aggressive policing targeted at poverty stricken communities of color. Kicking down doors, being swarmed by police in even minute incidents, and taking down names is part of this larger history of control and surveillance. Watching films like Colors erases that history of
SWAT teams and no-knock policies that are not used solely for political neutralization; but are now used in drug busts, possible armed robberies, and INS raids.

In addition the relationship between a drug influx on one hand and high incidents of violence at this particular moment is obscure in the film. While there is some reference to gangs fighting over territory, there is no in-depth dialogue about why drugs would warrant such violence. Recently, strong evidence suggests the drug influx, particularly crack cocaine, can be traced back to the CIA’s clandestine operation with the Contras in a counterrevolution in Nicaragua. For some the story may sound far fetched, however the money made has been traced to these particular communities of South Central L.A. In 1996, Congress held a hearing entitled, “Allegation of a CIA Connection to Crack Cocaine Epidemic.” Congress was responding largely to an article that had been published in the San Jose Mercury News entitled “Dark Alliance” by Gary Webb that implicated the CIA in allowing drugs to be brought into the South Central L.A. community in order to fund the Contras or counterrevolutionaries in Nicaragua.{{34 Webb,Gary 1999;}} Besides the obvious bias that comes with the government investigating its own government agency like the CIA, the possibility of the CIA knowingly working with the counterrevolutionaries who were funding themselves with drug money was not out of the question. Although representatives from the CIA denied personal involvement, they did nonetheless admit to some understanding concerning drugs and CIA funding. In one of the hearings, Jack A. Blum, former special counsel said,

…You should be looking at…the relationship in general between covert operations and criminal organizations. The two go together like love and marriage. It’s a problem which really has to be understood by this
Criminal organizations are perfect allies in a covert operation....They’ll do anything I want for money. It’s a terrific working partnership. ([157 United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence Wednesday, October 23, 1996; Tuesday, November 26, 1996/s9;])

Implied in part of this statement is negligent importation of money laundering through drugs. This is an inescapable part of running a covert operation according to Blum. The drug trade ended up being not only foreign policy, but domestic policy of social control and the logic behind yet another buildup of police and incarceration and more fuel for the War on Drugs. In other words, it’s the social construction of crime and particularly the social construction of what constitutes a drug related offense—when black and brown folks are dealing versus when the state deals in these poisons. Ultimately, the logic is what counts. In the state’s case, it is excusable, even necessary because it is for national defense; in the case of communities of color and gangs, it is for their own ‘dark purposes.’ As Gary Webb has said of the purposeful reason for the drug influx,

When I was researching the book I found a funny exchange in a congressional hearing where it was Al Stamos asking the Secretary of State for Central American affairs, what would happen if Nicaragua was given over to the communists? What would be the danger to the United States? And she says frankly I can’t think of anything. So here you had this revolution in this foreign country that meant nothing to us, but it angered the CIA and it angered the Reagan administration, who was afraid they were going to have another Cuba in their backyard. So they authorized the CIA to secretly overthrow the government. The problem was that it takes a lot of money to run a war, and the only thing the Reagan administration authorized was 19 million dollars...And you can’t fight any kind of war these days with 19 million dollars, so they had to turn to other sources of income to finance this thing. And the source they turned to was cocaine. ([158 Horton, Scott 2002; ])

How were the writer and director of Colors to know about these events or this history?

To a certain degree, these events were accessible, yet it is clear that both the writer and
director of *Colors* are products of 1980’s War on Drugs, crime and poverty rhetoric. The problem however, is not that they did not know about the counterrevolution in Nicaragua, but more so the assumptions that are made that further decontextualize larger societal problems. The question then is not why was *Colors* not more authentic or real? The question is what kind of common sense or ideology does a movie like *Colors* reproduce and mobilize? The history that is obliterated or ignored continues to play a significant role in the way that the nation imagines and treats black and brown communities. *Colors* reflects a larger, limited national public dialogue on the War on Drugs and mass incarceration as public policy. *Colors* and many of the films that follow reiterate the commonly held public rationale for increasing crime control.

**The National Dialogue: Legitimizing the Police State and Mass Incarceration**

Throughout *Colors*, the police presence and state policies that lead to more incarceration are rarely questioned, if only in passive ways when the two cops disagree on the extent of punishment that should be administered. In fact, the police presence is only challenged in the form of dialogue between the two cops. When McGavin and Hodges argue over how to police, McGavin offers a seemingly Broken Windows

---

9 The Broken Windows thesis was first coined by Criminologist James Q. Wilson and George Kelling in a 1982 Atlantic Monthly article. It stated that by arresting and policing minimal crimes the police could prevent larger crimes. The idea of a broken windows policy was made popular by William Bratton, ex-police chief in Boston and New York City, and current police chief in Los Angeles. Bratton favored and implemented a zero tolerance policy, one that recognized the link between disorder and crime. The theory is that if you get “criminals” for petty crime, then violent crime will decrease. 9 Petty crimes such as loitering, hoping turnstiles, prostitution, public urination, being drunk in public, and graffiti were, in Bratton’s eyes, bigger crimes waiting to happen. This means a number of things. Police are allowed and encouraged be more proactive and aggressive. It also means police are making more arrests. For Bratton, it also boosted morale for police. Embedded in this policy is an overall preemptive surveillance of *potential* criminals. Unintended in this policy (or maybe not), is the policing of black and brown
approach while Hodges prefers a carrot approach.{{14 Parenti, Christian 1999/s71;}}

Although “liberal” in his approach, Hodges still treats the “criminal” as pathological by saying that, “The plan as I see it is to get them used to talking to us, so that when something big does come along…”{{57 Duvall, Robert 2001; }} Hodges prefers a more enticing and liberal vision than the punitive measures McGavin seeks. Instead of punishing every crime, you create rapport with the community in order to better police them. He goes on to say, “You ever heard the one about the two bulls….These two bulls are sitting on a grassy knoll overlooking a herd of cows. The baby bull says ‘hey pop lets go down there and f*ck one of those cows.’ But the papa bull says ‘no son, lets walk down and fuck em all’.”{{57 Duvall, Robert 2001; }} Hodges’ approach is reflective of actual liberal police techniques that encourage obtaining the community’s trust and soft surveillance.{{11}} McGavin’s idea of policing however, involved a more punitive vision, a beat-em-up style of getting citizens to comply. After having thrown a few of the neighborhood juveniles around, who appear to be gang-affiliated, McGavin slams one on top of the hood of the car and says, “That’s what you get for messin’ with the police!”

After displaying his philosophy on policing physically, McGavin then proceeds to

__________________________

10 The first mention of the “carrot approach” was used in an interview with James Baker on the Ali G Show (3/28). James Baker, Secretary of State (1989-1992), referred to it when asked how to get foreign countries to “…do what the U.S. wanted them to do.” He stated that the carrot approach was the best way to go about U.S. foreign policy.

11 In the town where I live there was direct competition between the Police Athletic League (PAL) and the grassroots outreach program to have a basketball league. The outreach program was in a section of town that had the most people of color, including a large Latino, black, Samoan, and Tongan population. Of course, the PAL had more funding and was looking to “help” or “support” the already established outreach basketball program. But some of the community was very resistant to their presence. Historically though, PAL leagues followed an approach that was being used by the Black Panthers years ago. Outreach programs (even Panther breakfast programs) were put in place to gain the people of the community’s trust. The same goes for police activities like the PAL, only that trust is a purposeful way to maintain surveillance.
explain to his partner his approach. He says, “We get ‘em for a rock, then we get ‘em for something else and when he does something serious, it’s not a first f*cking offense!”\cite{57 Duvall, Robert 2001; } While Hodges’ approach may seem liberal and McGavin’s punitive, both were projecting a similar apparatus; surveillance on a population that, in their mind and based on their police training, was prone to crime. Presumed criminality is built into police practice which works hand in hand with state policies.

Hodges’ carrot approach is reflective of U.S. foreign policy as it encourages developing good relationships in order to secure and protect US interests. It usually manifests itself in a number of ways like giving aid to foreign countries or developing trade agreements. The main goal is to develop a relationship that fosters acquiescence to U.S. corporate interests and state policy. Obviously, this is a scaled down version of U.S. foreign policy, but it lays out a strategic approach to interactions much like Officer Hodges has in the film. You develop a positive relationship with a community, and when you need something from them, you can get the information you need more efficiently because you have developed a relationship.\footnote{It should be noted that there has always been resistance to this tactic of policing. There has always been an unwritten rule of silence when it comes to calling out other community members. This can be seen now in a more public light as many hip hop artists have come out supporting a “Stop Snitchin’” stance. In DVD’s, music videos, t-shirts, and articles hip hop artists as well as other community members have resisted policing methods that pit one community member against the other. Sometimes it will manifest itself in having to cop a plea or getting a shorter sentence if one tells on someone else. These tactics are nothing new, however lately they have received more publicity as of late.}

This brings us to a very important part of the film. The passive disagreement over how to police in this film limits the audience’s choice. You either police with a heavy hand and stop crime before it happens or create a system of trust with the community, which will evade critique of being too harsh. Ultimately, they will bring about similar
consequences; more routine traffic stops, more arrests, more police, more surveillance and a greater probability for members of these communities going to prison. Through Hodges and McGavin the film presents the audience with two mainstream sides of the national debate. Since national debate is seen as diametrically opposed, one left and one right, the audience seems to have a choice. While a choice to identify with two seemingly opposing sides may be there, those sides are essentially the same. This film underscores the reality that the national dialogue around policing and crime is limited.

This may be even clearer when, at the end of the film, the more liberal of the two police officers, Officer Hodges, is shot in the chest during an arrest. At the beginning of the scene, McGavin, Hodges and the CRASH unit sneak up behind a Latino gang on a hillside overlooking Los Angeles. To their surprise, one of the gang members pulls out a gun as he is about to be arrested and shoots Officer Hodges. Hodge’s death is not only central to one of the film’s themes because it upholds a notion that police officers have the difficult and dangerous job of policing violent inner cities (read black and brown neighborhoods), but also because the police enter this space as neutral. In other words, they are implicated neither in the history nor in the perpetuation of the current conditions engulfing these communities. Only simple explanations are left. These communities are violent and the police are there to help stop the violence. It is the notion that this space is pathologically violent that allows for the state (the police) to act as neutral eyewitnesses.

As Sherene Razack has assessed in her study of Canadian peacekeeping violence in Somalia, those considered more “civilized, modern and democratic” are implicated in the violence only when the violence is exceptional or the work of a few bad apples. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth. The violence endemic to nations like
Somalia, and thus to places like the ‘hood is directly related to imperialist First World nations like Canada and the U.S. In addition, part of the identity of a “white settler” nation like Canada and thus Canadian soldiers, is that race is going to shape all interactions. While this point may seem obvious, it is often overlooked. Race shapes the way we are taught to imagine places and people. Not surprisingly, violence is naturalized when it occurs outside of ‘peaceful’ and ‘democratic’ nations like Canada or the police in the case of the U.S.

In reference to the police officers, both agree that the community they police is inherently violent and ‘do good’ police bear the brunt of ungrateful community members. The murder of Hodges indicates this fact as his death is privileged over all of the other deaths in the film. Officer Hodges’ murder is worth agonizing and mourning over. While Black and Brown bodies have been dying continually throughout the film, they lay the backdrop to the community’s already miserable landscape. Hodges’ death becomes a symbol of the trauma only police can feel. That pain and violence that is endemic to these communities can only be felt by an outsider like Officer Hodges. Those who are imagined to live in lawless and vigilante spaces should invite intervention and outsiders who can come in and save them from themselves. Correspondingly, those who go into those spaces should be allowed to act accordingly, given the hostile environment. Upon entering these spaces, the police remain well-intentioned bystanders of immoral wastelands. This mirrors real life as police get killed and there are state funerals, parades, and highways named after them. It is not because that police officer has somehow done something heroic, although most public accounts say that he/she has, what separates the police officer is the fact that they are the state. As Frederick Engels said in his
assessment of the state, the defining attribute of the state is the fact that it can have a monopoly on legitimate violence. I would like to extend that thinking to say it is the state that also shares a reciprocal monopoly on the possibility of feeling trauma and pain. Accordingly, the pain and trauma of historically disenfranchised and racially pathologized populations is denied because of this legitimacy the state claims.

The Role of the Police in Films

In an assessment of the role of police officers in mainstream movies, scholar Neil King centers his analysis of the cop action movie genre on the unmarked category of the police. The police officers, according to King, are often played by the white males, 80% of police officers are white and 40% of sidekicks are white males.\cite{King, Neal 1999/s13} The police officer is supposed to represent everyman, the universal, the moral, and the neutral.\cite{23 King, Neal 1999/s12} In this way, the police’s perspective is void of any critique. For King, the police officer in movies is part of a larger conversation around what he calls the political culture of losing ground, which revolves around the idea that the straight white male is losing his status in a multiracial America. In an era of multiculturalism, monopoly capitalism and the changing conditions for the working class, the police officer fights as a “blue collar guardian of justice.”\cite{23 King, Neal 1999/s31} Interestingly, King centers the police officer as a metaphor, yet does not speak about him/her being a literal category of critique concerning law enforcement and its function as an appendage of the state. While King brings up important points about how the police officer represents a larger conversation on white angst and fear, he does not critique the character of the police officer for having the
audience passively identify with the state and passively legitimizing a criminal justice build up. King also does not critique the police officer for legitimating state violence implicitly or explicitly. In other words, the police officer’s neutrality is not questioned in complicated ways. How does their role in movies neglect the effect that they have on spaces and bodies that are not considered neutral, but in fact are seen as untamed, immoral, pathological, and lawless? Further, how does the story of the police officer trying to “do good” by going into the “bad neighborhood” allow them to be the only ones who experience trauma?

Part of the power of a movie, a film genre, or any ideology for that matter, is its ability to exist without question, making it merely common sense. King does not address the taken for granted notions that police simply go into communities to stop crime or to stop violence. It is their seemingly well-intentioned purpose that exonerates the violence in which they participate and the state violence in which they are implicated by enforcing harsh public policies. It is not enough to simply understand the police officer as representing white fear, but to locate the police officer in films as a purposeful public identification with and endorsement of state violence. Whether intended or not, that identification with the police officer is rarely questioned in these films. This further connects back to foreign policy in that the US and other first world forces are not just peacekeeping; they are setting up democracies—because people of color are incapable of governing themselves.

---

13 The police officer is still seen as neutral even though there may be a bad cop character. The bad cop scenario still reassures the audience that he/she is just a bad seed.
The Erasure of White Racism: Representations of Blackness as Having Material Effects.

While *Colors* erases state violence, it adopts the prevailing common sense at the time (and currently) concerning race: that there was no racism, just immoral individuals fighting each other. Recall that, in the 1980’s, we first witnessed the phenomenon in which ideas about a colorblind society and multiculturalism made racism obscure and, at times, even taboo to talk about.\(^\text{14}\) In the trailer for *Colors*, it is clear that this movie is not going to engage in a conversation about race, but rather about “colors.” Apparently the film *Colors* has to do with gangs that wear different colors. Welcome to a world void of rationality, a place where men fight over what they are wearing. This is the world that is painted in the trailer for *Colors*. Spliced through the first part of the trailer are two cops who seem to be finishing each other’s sentences.

They got oozies, they got shotguns –Cop 1
Were outnumbered, were outgunned –Cop 2
They got access to any kind of weapon they want within 24 hours.. –Cop 1
People are dying over red and blue –Cop 2
Bleeding from open wounds –Cop 1
People are dying over colors… –Cop 2\{159 Anonymous; }\}

The next very telling part is at the end of the trailer when the narrator says,

The debts men owe, the price they pay, the bonds that hold us together, the conflicts that tear them apart…Its not about black and white, its about a shade of difference, a tone of meaning, a clash of colors.\{159 Anonymous; }\}

The trailer makes it clear that this movie is not about white racism or conditions that have produced the deindustrialized ghetto; it is simply about different colors. The irony here is

---

\(^{14}\) There are few books that signify this change in how race appeared including but not limited to Dinesh D’Souza’s *End of Racism* and William Julius Wilson’s *The Declining Significance of Race*. 
that (skin) color has always played a part in who is more at-risk of dying, but instead we see color being deployed in a different way.\textsuperscript{15} Since it is clear that the film will avoid any substantive dialogue on race/racism from the very beginning, it can now tell a story of violence and mass murder.

Implicit in this exchange is an outmatched police force, the violence of the gangs, and the war zone that the police are about to enter; communities of color. While police forces like the LAPD have some of the most technologically advanced weaponry, they are still positioned as outgunned underdogs. Framing a situation like this favors intervention, violence if necessary, which is by no means a neutral starting point for a movie. Why would a movie simplify and perhaps misrepresent the violence going on as simply related to colors? If a community is seen as perpetuating irrational violence over the color of one’s clothes or headband, then those entering these spaces as forces of intervention, “help,” “support,” or “liberation” are the rational and civil citizens whose presence should not be questioned. Instead it becomes common sense that any

\textsuperscript{15} I am not saying this to be facetious. The rate of incarceration as well as murder rate has risen enormously particularly in poor black communities since the end of civil rights moment, the beginning of deindustrialization, the height of the War on Drugs and the law and order crime buildup that we are still in. Manning Marable has pointed out that during what he calls the second reconstruction (1976-1982), the black male homicide rate was 600-900 percent higher than whites in the late 1970’s. By 1980, 50\% of American homicides were black males killing black males. I cautiously use these statistics to suggest that there are huge discrepancies between one’s race and the likelihood of premature death, not to blame black men for high rates of homicide. The trend during this time is not without context. This is a moment where there is a huge split between the black middle-upper class and black working class. This is also a moment when low-skilled jobs are being whisked away (deindustrialization and unemployment) and crime is publicly reinscribed as the biggest problem facing U.S. society, contributing to the prison buildup’s legitimacy. See *Race, Reform and Rebellion*, Manning Marable (154-156) This trend continues as the murder rate in 1998 clearly shows. In 1998, the number of murders and non-negligent manslaughters of white females was 2.2 per 100,000, for white males it was 6.1 per 100,000, for Black women it was 8.6 per 100,000 and for Black men it was 42.1 per 100,000. This discrepancy among race and gender is both shocking and disturbing. See *The Prison Index: Taking the Pulse of the Crime Control Industry*, 2004.
intervention is and should be welcomed.  

Given that these communities are framed as irrational and lawless, it is understandable when the state uses force to reprimand or manage them, because, according to these portrayals, that is all “they” seem to understand. This kind of thinking about space and race can be seen as justification for draconian policy, incarceration, harsh policing or state violence. In fact, one can alleviate themselves from an engagement on race if the space is seen as such. In this sense, Colors reflects justifications for more police and the locking up of a ‘crime-ridden’ population.

This logic runs through one of the first scenes of the film. The written introduction at the beginning of the film describes the “war” that police officer’s face. Through this introduction, the audience is caught in an onslaught of statistically frightening numbers; gangs seem to pervade the greater Los Angeles area and the number of police seems to be scrawny in comparison:

The Los Angeles Police department and the Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department each has a gang crime division. The police department’s division is called C.R.A.S.H (Community Resources Against Street Hoodlums) and the Sheriff’s division is called O.S.S (Operation Safe Streets). The combined anti-gang force numbers 250 men and women. In the greater Los Angeles Area there are over 600 street gangs with almost 70,000 members. Last year there were over 387 gang-related killings.

---

16 I think this notion can manifest itself in many ways. If you create a picture of the world outside as being out of control, then you can justify almost anything in these spaces. This goes for foreign intervention in Columbia, Iraq, Vietnam, Korea or El Salvador. It also plays itself out in other miniscule ways, like when college kids cross the US/Mexican border and act in a way they would not in America. This is even clearer in light of what happened during the rescue efforts for Hurricane Katrina. Since the black community of New Orleans was reported in the media as “stealing” and “looting,” “raping” and “beating” each other in the street, than the little federal aid they received in the midst of that crisis was justified. As Slavok Zizeck says these “reports were not merely words, they were words that had precise material effects.” The racial fantasies were deemed violent, the real bodies, the black bodies were treated as such. This meant that their inability to receive aid was a necessary measure. See The Subject Supposed to Loot and Rape: Reality and fantasy in New Orleans by: Slavoj Zizeck.
Here, the audience receives statistics, presumably true, that seem to affect everyone living in L.A. The film presents the audience with the argument that the police are outnumbered and, without a proper gang task force to intervene, the greater L.A. metropolitan area is in significant danger. This logic sets up a faceless enemy, but one that is clearly a youth, gang affiliated (which, in police profiles could mean anything from wearing baggy pants to a sports cap), presumably black or brown, and probably male. The inherent problem in a historical-realist film is that it has the ability to contextualize or decontextualize historical events, current events and even statistics.

Film scholars Shohat and Stam use the term “the burden of representation” to describe the way that certain stereotypes or representations of groups have real life effects on those groups, where as dominant groups are seen as naturally diverse.{{31 Shohat,Ella 1994/s182-183;}} This dynamic produces detrimental effects on underrepresented groups. This is an important distinction between Mafia films such as The Godfather and films representing African Americans such as Colors, Boyz N the Hood, or Menace II Society. The pathology inscribed on the ghetto and blackness is what gives these latter films their material affects. The portrayals are somehow more real in accounts of the ghetto, where as The Godfather is simply a fictional account of organized crime. As author-comedian Dick Gregory writes,

You ever heard of a cop whoopin’ a Mafia’s ass? Huh? What because they’re not doing nothing? No…They know if they whoop them, they’ll get blown away. But if they come in my neighborhood and kill black folks and beat us up, nothin’ will happen. And I don’t blame the cops, because there are thousands of black cops in America. But you ain’t never turn on the news and heard a white family crying that some black cop shot their loved one in the back because they thought their cell phone was a gun. You think black cops are more spiritual? Nah! They know that
white folks ain’t gonna tolerate that. {161 Gibson (III), Thomas 2005/s28:55;}

While comical on one level, Dick Gregory’s comments speak to a number of problems concerning the burden of representation. For example, the material realities of films concerning content about whites (Italian Americans) versus Blacks or people of color, and a hierarchy of life concerning the way one’s race effects life worth. If one were to watch Godfather or The Sopranos and believe that there was any inkling of truth to them, Italians may be policed with greater surveillance. Compared to the Italian/White body, the Black body is deemed more threatening and can be killed with impunity. This also speaks to a hierarchy of life that is almost never acknowledged but apparent when certain people are killed. How is it that some bodies are expendable and others are not? To revisit Joy James and her assessment of the body in understanding racial state violence we have to ask why certain populations are policed with much more violence while others are allowed to be self-policed. Joy James makes an incredibly keen observation with respect to the body,

Nonobservance and nonconformity are often understood as biologically determined….Physical appearance…can be considered an expression of either conformity or rebellion. Because some bodies fail to conform physiologically, different bodies are expected and are therefore required to behave differently under state or police gaze. Greater obedience is demanded from those whose physical difference marks them as aberrational, offensive, or threatening. Conversely, some bodies appear more docile than others because of their conformity in appearance to idealized models of class, color, and sex; their bodies are allowed greater leeway to be self-policed or policed without physical force. {32 James, Joy 1996/s25-26;}

This is not a new phenomenon, but it is glaringly apparent as state violence disproportionately affects bodies of color. It is public knowledge that there are
organizations that still engage in organized crime, but somehow that is not as threatening as the street crime in communities of color. What is really the crime then? The crime is not the act of breaking the law itself, but rather the crime is the presence of bodies perceived as threatening. The public is sold the idea that the Mafia is not the enemy, but street level crime of black and brown youth in inner cities is the real danger.

The point of analyzing *Colors* is not to prove a cause and effect dynamic between the film and mass incarceration, but rather locating it as a site that reflects the limits of a popular national dialogue. The ability of the larger society to stifle a conversation or, even worse, to explain with little or no history why so many black and brown people are going to prison becomes the danger in a film like *Colors*. First, there is crime and then the police react is an insufficient explanation when representing this moment of the War on Drugs. The racial fantasies that the public has to measure against are recuperated in a film like *Colors*.

**Post-Colors (1988): Tell It Like it Is (Not)…**

In some of the post-*Colors* films like *Clockers* (1995), *Menace II Society* (1993), and *Boyz in The Hood* (1991), the filmmakers are speaking against the narrow portrayals of the ghetto featured in earlier films and other media portrayals. Once again the moment of the late 1980’s to early 1990’s reveals a saturation of images of crime, gangs, drugs, and poverty. These films are in conversation with other visual discourses, whether they want to be or not. How do they speak to what is happening in communities that are losing (community) members to stiffer prison sentences, a drug economy, and high unemployment? While each of these films is unique, for the present purpose I only wish
to focus on a few relevant points: 1) how the films advocated a narrative of escaping the
ghetto, 2) how the films decontextualized current conditions (at that time) in turn
advocating a neo-conservative position of individual choices, and 3) how film’s
presentation of lead male characters staged an erasure of gender domination in that it
ignored the fastest growing prison population, Black women.

In *Menace II Society* the audience follows the life of Caine, a young black man
raised in Watts, Los Angeles. We see his upbringing being shaped by a drug addict
mother and drug dealing father. It is in his formative years that we see Caine exposed to
drugs, guns and violence. In order to gauge why Caine is in the position he is in, the
audience is given a couple of possible units of analysis; the family, the drugs that
surround him, and poverty. Much like its predecessor, *Colors*, there is not a complex
dialogue about the conditions that have birthed the modern day urban ghetto. Our
understanding of Caine’s struggle ends up either blaming the family, which has the
potential of spiraling into cultural explanations like those presented in the Moynihan
Report, instead of structural arguments like those offered in the Kerner Commission’s
report. The other telling part of Caine’s struggle is the presence of drugs. Not only does
Caine sell drugs, which is a ‘crime,’ but the devastation of his (normative) family is the
result of drug use. The other variable--poverty--must immediately be questioned. How
is poverty understood in this film? The poverty and drugs that we see in the film and that
Caine talks about date back to the Watts Riots. According to Caine, after the Watts Riots
of 1965, things took a major turn for the worse. His first narration begins after a
presentation of real documentary footage of the Watts Riots in 1965. Caine says, “When
the riots stopped, the drugs started. My father sold dope and my mother was a heroin
addict.”{[59 Williams,Tyger 1993; ]} This is the only explanation for the emergence of the drug economy. How else can the audience examine contemporary poverty? This is deeply confusing because, although the 1965 Riots have everything to do with poverty, they have more to do with condemning wretched conditions and police violence. The police violence that occurred that day provoked the riot, but the riot was a by-product of the conditions that were already present. As scholar Ruth Gilmore points out, all riots until the 1960’s were instigated by whites, white vigilantes or white police against organized workers of color.{{3 Gilmore,Ruth Wilson 1999/s175;}} The Watts Riots reversed those trends and became a way to publicly hold court condemning police violence, economic exploitation, social injustice and the empty promise of civil rights.{{3 Gilmore,Ruth Wilson 1999/s175;}} However, the response to the Watts Riots may be the most interesting and telling part of history. In order to understand and acknowledge the contemporary poverty and lack of opportunities as to not naturalize it, one has to look at the reaction to the riots.

According to several scholars the reactions to the riots produced a number of new laws and shifts in voter behavior, but the drug economy was an unrelated development.17

17 For Parenti, the Watts Riots reflected the need by police and congress to upgrade repressive practices, such as crushing rebellions and insurrection. As I mentioned earlier, there was a need to revamp police technology and communication because there was difficulty organizing the local police, sheriff’s department, and highway patrol during the riot. Their inability to communicate allowed for the Watts Riots to occur and spread internationally, at the time it did not look good for the United States to have five days of riots because they were trying to publicly promote both the economic viability and humanism of American capitalism and democracy. This was also a time when the U.S. was fighting the Soviet Union’s philosophy and economic system of socialism but also the so-called third world’s tendency towards social democracy. One of the results of the riots that Parenti sees is the advent of aggressive policing and thus an increase in surveillance, fueling what is today known as the prison industrial complex. Scholars Thomas and Mary Edsall locate the 1965 Watts Riots as a turning point in terms of the way much of the public would view the reality of black people. As they point out, five days after President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the Watts riots began. For much of the (white) public, this would be the catalyst to push them towards a lack of empathy concerning federal funding for poor blacks. The Watts Riots, the black power movement, the public association of blacks with crime, and the polarization in the
Drugs are a separate issue in the sense that the riots did not spawn their direct influx. The character of Caine and his limited options after high school constitute a reality for many of the people in his community. However, what separates Caine from his counterparts in his neighborhood is his recognition that he must leave Watts. His girl friend Ronnie is the first to suggest this to him, but it is his consciousness that reveals his willingness to escape the ghetto. I will return to why the narrative of escaping the ghetto is such an important part of these film’s themes.

In another film, *Boyz in the Hood*, we follow the story of Tre, a young African American male raised by his single father in a largely violent neighborhood. As a young kid, Tre and his friends contended with the reality of violence, the drowning monotonous sounds of police helicopters (a.k.a. ghetto birds) and the normal pressures of adolescence. Throughout Tre’s life we see him mature and grow into a man anxious to escape his environment. Tre’s life is a story about survival, but also about leaving the ghetto. *Boyz N the Hood* tries to tell an authentic story and give some critique of gentrification, single-mother/father experience, government neglect, and police violence, but it cannot escape the pathology that is inscribed on the black body. Even as John Singleton tries to tell an intricate and complicated story, the ‘hood is still inherently violent without much explanation, there is still police violence without much explanation, and still poverty without much explanation. As Reeves and Campbell note, one of Singleton’s flaws is his near blame of black single mothers for the failure of black children, adopting narratives that echo Senator Moynihan’s framework of cultural pathology. The narrative that the

---

U.S. North over busing and open housing would push many would be white liberals to the right. What does not happen as a result of the Watts riots though, is drugs. See *Lockdown America*. 
strong black father figure, Furious, Tre’s father a normative household is the variable for success comes dangerously close to explaining why some fail and some. {{8 Reeves, Jimmie Lynn 1994/s244-245;} } The point here is just because there is an authentic voice speaking of a ‘hood experience does not mean that it does not function the same way a movie like Colors does. It still mobilizes many of the notions that we have about black folks, crime and violence. Our understanding has not changed because now we have an authentic community member telling us the story.

Clockers--a Spike Lee film also of the ‘hood genre --begins with a dilemma for the main character, Strike. Strike is in a bind because in order to move up from his position as a drug runner, Rodney, the drug dealer, orders him to assassinate Darryl, another African American male. Darryl is Rodney’s enemy because he has been stealing drug money from him. When Rodney orders Darryl’s murder, Strike promises to deliver. Shortly after Darryl’s death, Strike’s brother, Victor, confesses to the murder. Police detectives however, are wary of Victor’s confession and believe that Strike is the guilty party. What unfolds is Strike trying to balance not getting picked up by the police and not getting killed by Rodney. There is a fine line between aligning himself with the state (the obvious enemy in his neighborhood) and succumbing to the inescapable conditions that have led him to his current occupation as a drug dealer. At the end of the film, Strike is able to escape the housing projects with the help of a detective and ride off into the sunset on a train. The audience does not know where Strike will end up, but they know he has left the ghetto.

While each of these films is unique, I only wish to draw out a few relevant points. In the characters of Strike (Clockers), Tre (Boyz in the Hood), and Caine (Menace II
Society), there is a recurring narrative of escaping the ghetto. By escaping the ghetto, each of these characters recognizes that their life hangs in the balance if they remain. Leaving their community becomes their ultimate goal. Each of these characters is different from their peers, their family and community because of this consciousness. Their survival or their self-preservation technique seems like the only viable option, but I want to critically examine this implicit narrative. It seems to me that by leaving their (non-normative) families and the pathological violence of the ghetto, each character is looking to attain some form of the American dream; a steady job, a normal household, and a life without the threat of violence. While this may seem neutral, it exonerates the state from the conditions it has produced, since, as the Kerner Commission reminds us, the ghetto is a creation of white racism. Since empathy is the function of the main characters in these films, the audience is allowed to disengage from a conversation about why there is a drug economy at all, why there are such high unemployment rates, and, instead, focus on saving the main character. It also enables the audience to stray away from their relationship to these conditions because, for many, this voyeur view has nothing to do with their life. They can see that these places are violent and for the main character’s own sake, the audience will advocate for more police and more prisons (too often the measuring sticks of safety) to tame the violent part of the ghetto and blackness. As the main character develops that consciousness they have signified that they have made the correct (individual) choice and now the audience can cheer them on towards their American dream. When the audience is empathizing and identifying with these characters, they are relieved of thinking about their position and the reasons communities may be impoverished. This narrative also falsely assumes that the black body is safe
when it is outside of the ghetto, but in some ways it is in even greater peril, because he
sticks out like a sore thumb, he is a target. He forgets that the black body embodies the
ghetto for many whites. As scholar George Lipsitz writes, it is not just that space is
racialized, it is also that race is spatialized, so these bodies are threats outside of the
ghetto space because they represent blackness and the ghetto no matter where they are.

A narrative operates to justify a practice, condition, or logic that upholds the
current system. In the 1980’s, many narratives in the news were grounded in a logic that
justified a massive prison expansion and an increasing a criminal justice buildup, while
evading critique of a failing Reaganomics economy. The importance of recognizing a
narrative in these Post-Colors films is to point out how they are mobilizing acquiescence
to mass incarceration and state violence. Intended or unintended, the narratives reiterated
throughout many of the films communicate a message that the ghetto is violent, is a space
in which “bad” cultural values are birthed and thrive, and where non-normative families
dwell. As a result, without providing any complexity in this story, the films fail to
provide a counter narrative or a resistant dialogue to dominant public representations in
the media. The films I have interrogated do not tell us anything particularly new. As
Robin D.G. Kelley has said, social scientific and anthropological studies of the ghetto
present the black inner city as a cultural monolith, a “reservoir of pathologies and bad
cultural values.”

While filmmakers certainly did
not produce these understandings of the ghetto, they are, by virtue of representation, in
conversation with the social scientist and other media outlets. The conversation still ends
up being “the ghetto is like this, not that,” while avoiding a more substantive critique of
the ways in which racism produces ghettoes in the first place. In the meantime, while the
writers are engaged in an empathetic plea, if they have not carefully thought about what they are going to say, they end up reproducing many common sense notions, where crime and poverty are unquestionably concentrated. That empathy that writers and directors are desperately trying to get the audience to identify with does not negate the pathology inscribed on blackness and the ghetto.

**Gender Empathy?**

If the expressions of empathy in the films are made for audiences to imagine struggles of young black men, then how does the experience of women, specifically black women, get compromised? The steady rise in female prison populations, coupled with the growth of women’s prisons, is often overlooked. Black women’s lives revolve around the criminal justice system not only as a population that has family members in prison, but as prisoners themselves. The kind of empathy exhibited in the aforementioned films establishes the prisons and the criminal justice system as a masculine/male space. While the overwhelming majority of prisoners are men (1,348 per 100,000), African American women are six times more likely to go to jail then their white female counterparts.18

In a brilliant and timely study of mostly poor black women, Beth Richie urges readers to see how gender and race play a significant role in the demographics of who goes to jail and prison. In her book, she lays out a theory called “the gender entrapment” that speaks to the overwhelming number of women in jail who, because they had been

18 The number of white female prisoners per 100,000 in 2000 was 76 and the number of African American female prisoners per 100,000 was 491. See the Prison Policy Website www.prisonpolicy.org/prisonindex/prisoners.shtml
battered or abused by husbands or boyfriends, were coerced or driven into crime. And, more to the point, their methods of surviving abusive relationships have been “increasingly criminalized.” Overall, the book points to the way in which women who engage in illegal activity are systemically driven to do so because of their “public and private subordination.” \footnote{Richie, Beth 1996/s4} The scant mention of low income black women in prisons is compounded by the domestic dimension of gender entrapment, because the profound—and justified--distrust of public services among black women reinforce simplistic ideas around their predisposition to criminality. For many of the women Richie interviewed, going to the police and using public services was a last resort. As one African American woman who had been beaten by her husband for 12 years and found herself in jail on prostitution charges stated, “Call the police? Never! Everyone I knew spent all of our time running from the police! The cops are the worst people to get involved in a family problem, probably because they beat up on women too!” \footnote{Richie, Beth 1996/s95} Another African American woman who was abused for 10 years and detained on a homicide said, “When I finally went for help they asked why I waited so long. There was no police record, no counselor to testify, and no family witness.” \footnote{Richie, Beth 1996/s96} While the overrepresentation of African American men in prison is largely publicized, Richie’s study points to part of the reason why prisons may not be imagined to be spaces women even inhabit.

Fully developing a Black female character with which audiences can identify or empathize with goes against how American films privilege a male gaze. Part of living in a patriarchal society allows the male gaze to take precedence, where audiences identify, more often than not, with heterosexual white males, often playing aggressive and active
However, when Black male characters are supposed to be the center of empathy, the formula has not necessarily changed. A male voice and experience still take precedence while the identification with women’s stories gets buried in unwritten scripts. The male gaze privileges looking at female characters, yet not identifying with them. Conversely, this does not assume that just because a woman is the main character, patriarchy is being challenged or that a woman in the role of the main character trumps existing gender ideologies.

The stories of Black women in prison and jail cannot be glamorized nor can they fit into a neatly devised script, easy for even a voyeur to digest. These real life stories are filled with pain, sexual violence, rape, mistrust, physical injuries and physical trauma. The story of so many women entering prison is complicated and multidimensional. In the films mentioned above the audience gets to be the voyeur, watching simple and easy to comprehend stories on screen, rarely placed in a position of discomfort or challenged intellectually. As authors Benshoff and Griffin write, voyeurism is closely related to viewing characters in a sexual way. Akin to a peeping Tom, the audience is allowed to watch the person without their knowledge, giving the audience a sense of power. This idea may give credence to the way women are not rewarded for their leadership roles, but rather praised for supporting roles and celebrated for their heterosexual femininity.

For all of popular film culture’s idiosyncrasies, it does at the very least make it common sense that men of color are overrepresented in prison. The fictitious films acknowledge one avenue to prison, that of Black males. However, Black women, whose
lives revolve in and around prison are rendered invisible in these films where crime, prison and poverty are central themes.

**Conclusion: The Predictability of the State: Ignoring Their Responsibility and Advocating Their Presence**

Part of this section argues that perceptions and representations of places and people have material effects. Through film, the production of narratives, myths, racial fantasies, and stereotypes espoused common understandings of the ghetto and its members (read as communities of color and more subtly black and brown bodies in general). *Colors* story as viewed through the eyes of the two police officers treats the population as a reservoir of crime. The violence that is witnessed invites state intervention only in the form of increasing the number of police officers, prisons and prisoners. The reviewers and even directors’ comments reflect a reality of the War on Drugs that is not historically situated. Further, subsequent films about the War on Drugs and the ‘hood center violence as a variable independent of any kind of context. Not surprisingly then, the response to violence in these communities was not and has not put greater attention on the conditions that produced the violence, but instead justify the increasing amount of laws and mandatory minimums passed during the 1980’s War on Drugs. Suffice it to say that there is a social function of simple explanations in films.
Conclusion

At this present moment, the U.S. houses more prisoners per capita, than any other country in the world. In order to understand the racist implications of this world record, the overwhelming number of African American people behind bars must be understood as part of the U.S. political, historic, economic, and cultural landscape. This is not the excess of the U.S. nation but a part of its very foundation and continual existence. In order for the U.S. to put down rebellion or potential rebellion it will ‘legally’ allow itself the ability to do so. In this sense, the U.S. must consume the potentially rebellious and highly expendable (capitalism’s detritus) populations. The direct result of the political rebellions and social change of the 1960’s was that Blacks became the bodily prototype of the domestic rebellion (despite other groups, including whites, Puerto Ricans, Chican@s, Pilipin@s, and Native American challenging U.S. policies of imperialism, land conquest, and patriarchal capitalism).¹

The Cultural and Political Impetus Behind Mass Incarceration

The policies and public acquiescence leading to massive incarceration are the result of a massive political and cultural campaign that has longstanding historical underpinnings. The 1980’s saw the introduction of an implicit and explicit public discourse around the need for massive incarceration. What I found is that legal policy was legitimized and performed through many mediums, including but not limited to the political rhetoric of Ronald Reagan and particular films that came out during the time.

¹ This is even more obvious in light of the reopening of the 30 plus year old case of the San Francisco 8 charged with killing a San Francisco police officer in 1971. See the article “San Francisco 8 strong in court appearance February 15” See the San Francisco Bayview article by Claude Marks and Cynthia Nelson http://cbs5.com/topstories/local_story_045160746.html
The Ronald Reagan presidency, in conjunction with his political rhetoric gave rise to the already ascending neo-conservative hegemony. Ronald Reagan was also able to symbolically appeal to white fears of Black crime, a perceived decline in white (middle class) privilege (i.e. affirmative action), and use white working class racism to split voters against their class interests. This manifested itself through state intervention in the form of more police to fight crime, more federal and state laws to stop the “drug menace” and more prisons to manage the inevitable outcome of the War on Drugs. In addition to the racial common sense that was deployed through the colorblind myth, its performance by Ronald Reagan created a different racialized and gendered discourse of the would-be criminal population. Black women became the quintessential image of the drain on state resources, black males embodied the “drug menace” as Nancy Reagan said and Latino immigrant men were seen as the ‘illegal’ potentially drug smuggling population that had to be regulated by controlling the porous border.

On the other hand, the neo-conservative shift held that the state should not be present in the lives of individuals when it came to their social and economic welfare. This is very important to recognize both the changing role of the state as shifting towards policing the poor with greater surveillance and public backing from the state and away from the general well being of the public. Normalizing the state’s new role would take a public policy campaign made up of visually compelling images and convincing reasons to lock up potential criminals.

Film Narratives: What Does the Film Section do?
The other day I was having a conversation with a spoken word artist from San Diego. He was reminiscing about growing up in San Diego and the trouble he used to get into when he was a teenager. He talked about being part of a gang which at the time was half battling hip hop dance crew and half illegal activity. He then went on to talk about the shift that occurred when crack came in, the subsequent change in what gangs began to do. In the same breathe he went on to say, “And then Colors came out with Ice-T and it was on…” I thought about how interesting it was that the shift he mentioned in what gangs did was signified by a film like Colors. There are many different ways to interpret what he said. He could have felt that Colors was the first thing to reflect parts of his life, a film that gave him characters to identify with, or perhaps that it was just a portrayal of real life, albeit sensational. Whatever the case, it has been almost 20 years since the release of Colors and here is someone referring to it as a pivotal part of their life, their identity, and their teenage experience. It is hard to measure quantitatively the kind of influence movies and media images have on people’s lives, but this is a startling example of a consciousness that develops around images that are presented to the public.

When looking at the first hood movie, Colors (1988), it is important to see it as a starting point to talk about lives that revolve in and around prison. In this sense, these lives heavily revolved around police and state intervention. The film portrayed the fastest growing prison populations entering the system, Blacks and Latinos. The movies that came out after Colors provide evidence that images have real life affects on public narratives and vice versa. Colors is largely seen as an authentic and fair portrayal (Ice-T provides the authentic soundtrack as well) of life in the ‘hood. It was largely a reiteration of dominant narratives that already existed as was the case with director Dennis Hopper’s
understanding of single black mother households being the accessory to high crime rates, despite their relative absence from the storyline throughout the film. The image and narrative of single black parenthood still bore part of the problem with the out of control violence in the hood. The other dominate narrative that held in this film is that the violence was not the product of any historical housing segregation, a state sanctioned/imposed drug economy, or deindustrialization and high unemployment in many inner cities, it was just a natural fact. Moreover, the absence of any significant dialogue contributed to the assumption of outnumbered and outgunned police negates the history of the police after the political rebellions. The changing role of the police as an alternative internal domestic military is rarely acknowledged. These films provide visual background to the narratives that already existed around the War on Drugs, Reaganomics, and prison.

The films that come after *Colors* tried to provide counter narratives to the popular discourse around race, the War on Drugs, crime and prison. What they ended up doing however was providing fuel to the rhetoric of individual choices as each main character was focused on escaping the ghetto. It was their *choice* that separated them from the rest of their community to leave and start a better life somewhere else. This reiterates many of the larger narratives around social and economic livelihood, where individual choice and the anti-state state. Further, because the hood’ was seen as violent, contextualizing the inner city at that moment was abandoned. The other problem with these films is that they had audiences’ empathizing with a male centered experience of the War on Drugs. While this may seem harmless, it negated the experience of one of the largest growing
prison populations, Black women. Women in general have been voiceless in these portrayals or simply as supporting actors.

The ushering in of the War in Drugs and thus mass incarceration is a moment we are still living in. Deindustrialization is still here, unemployment still looms over the working class, not to mention the recent praises over Reagan’s legacy is very telling of the moment we continue to find ourselves in. As neoconservatives cling to the days of Reagan’s feel-good politics, when voter approval was high and white backlash served multiple purposes, it is imperative that we understand this moment being heavily influenced by those changes.
References

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EU-IBF8nwSY>.


Barbara Cottman Becnel. "Stanley 'Tookie' Williams the Crips Co-Founder Now Realizes Violence does Not Solve Anything." Los Angeles Times 1993, August 22, sec. p. 3:.


Image as a Tool to Shape Public Opinion., 2006.


Law School. September 2006


Murdock, Deroy. "Reagan, No Racist Racing through the record." <http://article.nationalreview.com/?q=NjNkZDZjMWU0YjgxZDFjMmJiZjIzMjg0MTg2NTd1Nzk>.


**Democratic Government Vs the State.,** 1996.


**On the Campaign Against Drug Abuse.,** September 14, 1986.


United States. Congress. Senate. Select Committee on Intelligence. Allegations of a CIA Connection to Crack Cocaine Epidemic: Hearings before the Select Committee on Intelligence of the United States Senate, One Hundred Fourth Congress, Second Session .,. Wednesday, October 23, 1996; Tuesday, November 26, 1996.


