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The Impact of Negative Stereotypes &amp; Representations of African-Americans in the Media and African-American Incarceration

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The Impact of Negative Stereotypes & Representations of African-Americans in the Media and African-American Incarceration

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree Master of Arts in Afro-American Studies

by

Tamara Thérèse Johnson

2012
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Impact of Negative Stereotypes & Representations of African-Americans in the Media and African-American Incarceration

by

Tamara Thérèse Johnson

Master of Arts in Afro-American Studies

University of California, Los Angeles, 2012

Professor Brenda Stevenson, Chair

The purpose of this study was to investigate the sociological impact of public policies enacted during slavery in the United States. Another goal was to discover whether the negative stereotypes of African-Americans in film are related to the reinforcement of negative perceptions established during slavery. Finally, a review of the disparate outcomes produced by new discriminatory policies within the criminal justice system details the impact of current policies that disproportionately impact African-Americans. This thesis examined qualitative research (books and films) analyzing the impact of policies and stereotypes that engender disparate treatment of African-Americans and perpetuate racism in the United States. Research indicated that media reinforces negative stereotypes of African-Americans engendering false perceptions of African-Americans as deviants and criminals, thus causing disproportionate rates of incarceration among African-Americans. Research also illustrated that policies enacted to “combat” crime have a disparate impact on African-Americans because of the prevalence of harmful media (film) imagery.
The thesis of Tamara Thérèse Johnson is approved.

Darnell Hunt
Reynaldo F. Macías
Brenda Stevenson, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles
2012
Dedication Page

This work is dedicated to my wonderful and amazingly supportive family, relatives and friends. Specifically, I dedicate my thesis to my parents, John D. Johnson, Jr. and Louise Watson Johnson; my siblings John, Edward, Ashley, Charles and Onyx and my incredible nephews, Axé Julian Deacon, Amen Rey Clemente and Aleluiah Creek Iskander Johnson. This entire Master’s program and thesis writing experience would have been severely diminished without all of your love and support. I am blessed to have you in my life and so grateful for each of you.

I am also dedicating this work to my ancestors as their hard work and commitment made this particular adventure possible. Through my studies and research, I now have a greater understanding and appreciation for their personal struggles. It is with great appreciation that I commit to making this world a better place for my descendants and future generations as my ancestors did for me.
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Introduction

The discourse regarding African-Americans and the intersection of race, politics, law, gender, economics and sociology is diverse and compelling; however, there exists no real consensus on solving problems within African-American communities. Although African-Americans (as subjects) produce highly charged debates regarding African-Americans and society in the United States, existing research offers little in the way of actually resolving chronic sociological issues. Problems of poverty, underemployment/unemployment, lack of education, housing, incarceration, health, drug abuse and poor self images have created a perpetual cycle of what can only be described as “underachievement” among a substantial number of African-Americans. The questions raised by this cycle typically address the retroactive solutions aimed at stemming the flow of issues that are uniquely described as “black problems”. It is readily acknowledged that all ethnic groups face the same/similar problems; however, other ethnic groups often have a specific point of reference that identifies their assimilation within American society. This assimilation is usually the catalyst for significant relief from the historic discriminatory and racist practices endured by ethnic groups prior to their social acceptance.

The United States (U.S.) system of legal enslavement and oppression required complete distortion of ideals of equality and democracy. Its maintenance requires necessitated support from sociology, the arts and the legal systems. Likewise, the remediation of the psychological and social injury to the country’s African-American and White citizens must be equally comprehensive with support from the full range of cultural elements.

When reviewing the history of African-Americans within the context of social problems, it is clear that slavery played more than a significant role in defining the experiences unique to African-Americans. The fact of slavery is undeniable, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade lasted for centuries and forcibly enslaved and transported more than 20 million Africans between several
continents; yet, its history is not sufficiently retold given the innumerable “contributions” that slaves provided in every aspect of the developing nations that directly benefited from the intercontinental slave trade. Specifically, the rapid speed with which the British Colonies and eventual United States were developed as significant agricultural producers is unmistakably due to the energy and effort of its chattel slave population. But unfortunately, and quite probably with definite deliberation, the sheer magnitude of work performed by slaves to advantage this developing nation is also insufficiently reported.

Unfortunately, the legacy of African-American slaves is commonly reduced to the histories of a few “slave rebels” who fought against their abusers, instead of affirming that most slaves were often rebels who found ingenious methods of both quietly resisting and directly combating their slave “masters”. In *The Gift of Black Folk* (1924), W.E.B. Du Bois states that it has been “…estimated that every single slave finally landed upon a slave ship meant five corpses either left behind in Africa or lost through rebellion, suicide, sickness, and murder on the high seas. This which is so often looked upon as passive calamity was one of the most terrible and vindictive and unceasing struggles against misfortune that a group of human beings ever put forth.” He further approximates that “it cost Negro Africa perhaps sixty million souls to land 10 million slaves in America.” (Du Bois, 147) The remaining slaves ultimately established survival methods that lasted for generations and created unique systems for escaping captivity. Most importantly, the common misconception that slaves were unintelligent victims of a superior white majority has allowed many slave descendants to incorporate feelings of inferiority and victimization into their personal identity.

This thesis examines the emergence of African-American stereotypes established during slavery as well as policies that were enacted throughout slavery and post-emancipation.
Consequently, many negative images of African-Americans were reinforced in films that emerged at the inception of the film industry; these representations were further emphasized in subsequent movies throughout the 20th century. The goal of this research is to illustrate the significant sociological impact of racism (established during slavery) in the United States in reference to the formation of discriminatory policies and the emergent stereotypes that grew from the film industry. Do films that reinforce negative stereotypes of African-Americans engender false perceptions of African-Americans as deviants and criminals, causing disproportionate rates of incarceration among African-Americans? Do policies enacted to “combat” crime have a disparate impact on African-Americans because of the prevalence of harmful media (film) images?

There is ample evidence to support the strength and courage exhibited by African slaves and how slave masters tried to quell insurrections and resistance (of any kind) with legislation that granted wide latitude to masters and their enforcers in slave holding states. Du Bois discusses the laws that were enacted to guard against slave insurrections,

“Masters were everywhere given peremptory and unquestioned power to kill a slave…the Virginia law of 1680 said: ‘If any Negro…should absent himself from his master’s service and lie, hide and lurk in obscure places, committing injuries to the inhabitants, and shall resist any person or persons that shall by lawful authority be employed to apprehend and take the said Negro…it shall be lawful for such person or persons to kill the said Negro or slave so lying out and resisting.’” (Du Bois 147-148)

The anti-insurrection and slave rebellion legislation is indicative of the formal response to African slaves’ resistance. Slave masters’ attempts to subjugate slaves by force were only
reinforced by the creation of laws that punished or killed any slave who engaged in resistance. The creation of laws that allowed the recapture and/or murder of escaped African slaves informed whites that the enslaved were not granted the same rights and considerations of the rest of the population. During the following centuries, anti-insurrection legislation evolved and expanded with more laws that sanctioned abuse by whites toward the enslaved (and eventually freed) blacks, Du Bois notes “…those who saw the anomaly of slavery in the United States was based not only upon theoretical democracy but on force and fear of force as used by the degraded blacks, and on the reaction of that appeal on southern legislatures and northern mobs.” (Du Bois 161) It is critical to understand that whites feared black rebellion and attempted to constrict any avenues that would potentially lead to their freedom.

**Methodology**

This thesis strives to determine the significant impact of public policies that were implemented during slavery and whether legislation drafted post-emancipation has contributed to many of the sociological issues faced by the United States’ (slave descendant) African-American population. The goal of this thesis is to critically analyze African-American media representations and discuss existing public policies that continue to disparately impact African-Americans.

There are a number of contemporary sociological issues faced by African-Americans that include (but are not limited to) education, housing, employment and the disenfranchisement of African-Americans within the legal system. The implications of the damaging societal problems produced by racism in the United States will also be examined within the context of the media and its influence on the perpetuation of racial inequality.
Lastly, this paper will examine some of the films that depicted African-Americans with visual representations that often reinforce negative stereotypes established during slavery in the United States. The entertainment industry participated in the formation of racial construction as a vehicle for movies that often presented the initial derogatory images regarding African-Americans. The media’s influence on creating perceptions of African-Americans is important to analyze within the context how public policies could be potentially justified based upon the acceptance of negative stereotypes as factual representations.

This qualitative research paper explores various facets of the African-American experience within a sociological context and provides a comprehensive review of books and media (film) that examine discourse and visual representations of African-Americans.


Joy Degruy Leary’s *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome* (2005) discusses the impact of slavery as a trauma suffered by many members of the African-American population. Degruy Leary suggests that many stereotypes and characteristics ascribed specifically to African-Americans have historic roots in slavery as adapted behaviors that were necessary for survival. Isabel Wilkerson’s *The Warmth of Other Suns* (2010) details the “Great Migration” of millions
of African-Americans from the south to the west and northern states from 1915-1970.

Wilkerson’s extensive research involves more than a thousand interviewees who recounted their own or their family members’ experience during the mass exodus of African-Americans from the South.

_Stormy Weather_ (2009), the biography of Lena Horne reiterates the struggle of the African-American performer who grew up during segregation and experienced almost inescapable racism throughout her life and professional career. Langston Hughes, a prominent African-American writer and poet authored _The Big Sea_ (1963) and describes his experiences with racism both domestically and internationally. Each of Horne and Hughes’ life stories present compelling accounts of African-Americans who dealt with racism throughout their lives and who (in spite of their professional success) were not immune from racial prejudice and discrimination.

Tim Wise, an author and anti-racist activist, wrote _White Like Me_ (2005) to analyze the concepts of White privilege and entitlement. Duke University Professor Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s, _Racism Without Racists_ (2010) discusses the idea of racial inequality, colorblind racism and affirmative action. Wise and Bonilla-Silva provide a contemporary review of racism in the United States; they also evaluate attempts to diminish the importance of race and racial discrimination by individuals who claim the United States is now a post-racial and colorblind society.

Donald Bogle’s book, _Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies and Bucks_ performs a critical analysis of African-American films in the United States. Bogle’s work also serves as an encyclopedia of African-American films from the beginning of 1900s until the 1990s. Bogle explores five primary archetypes created in order to entertain white audiences by denigrating and
demeaning African-Americans; these archetypes were established during slavery, reinforced in traveling minstrel shows and later presented as visual representations in films in the United States. Bogle discusses the impact of the appearance of African-Americans in film as well as the societal perceptions generated by movies depicting African-American life.

Ed Guerrero authored *Framing Blackness: The African American Image in Film*; his book studies the construction of African-American inferiority and White superiority in films. Guerrero details the persistent negative imagery in the United States’ film industry by examining movies produced from early 20th century until the mid-1990s. Guerrero asserts that the historic misrepresentation of African-Americans in film has compelled many African-American filmmakers and artists to create new definitions of “blackness” as a rejection and form of protest to prevailing negative stereotypes.

*Birth of a Nation* (1915) was the United States’ first feature length film; the storyline was based upon Thomas Dixon’s novel, *The Clansman*. The director, D.W. Griffith depicted African-Americans in a variety of negative stereotypes that reinforced existing fears and erroneous beliefs held by Whites. In keeping with the trend of traveling minstrel shows, all of the African-American characters were portrayed by white actors in blackface. Griffith’s first major film created a template for African-American characters that was utilized by the filmmakers who followed in his footsteps. *Hallelujah* (1929) and *St. Louis Blues* (1929) were two of the earliest films about African-Americans that (unlike *Birth of a Nation*) used an all African-American cast. *Hallelujah* and *St. Louis Blues* told stories about the “African-American” experience as dramas. *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *Pinky* (1949) were two of the first stories with interracial casts and storylines that dealt with race. Although African-Americans were featured more prominently in these films, they were primarily relegated to sub-plots
alongside White actors; as a result, the movie audience was treated to a White American
interpretation and perspective on racial dynamics. While there were most assuredly differences
between the storylines and images depicted in Birth, there was not a significant departure from
the negative characterizations of African-Americans. These first portrayals of African-
Americans remained consistent for the earlier part of the 20th century and slowly evolved into
more expanded film roles.

Later films by (and about) African-Americans that were produced during and after the
Civil Rights Movement told a variety of stories that incorporated some of the social advances
experienced by African-Americans; however, the era of “blaxploitation” films told stories that
seemingly empowered African-Americans with depictions of sexually aggressive men and
women fighting their enemies and oppressors (usually Whites). Sweet Sweetback’s Badasss
Song (1971), Foxy Brown (1974), and The Spook Who Sat by the Door (1973) were created after
the peak of the Civil Rights Movement, a period often perceived as one of the greatest
demonstrations toward equality and democracy in the United States. Although there were new
illustrations of Black radicalism, these popular films reinforced and advanced already prevalent
and disturbing stereotypes within the United States and depicted by the film industry.

During the 1980s and 1990s, there was a new crop of African-American cinematic
productions that focused on movies that presented storylines from African-American
perspectives. A number of films released during the late 1980s and early 1990s challenged
existing stereotypes and purportedly empowered African-American audiences with plots that
focused on the “African-American point of view”; School Daze (1988), Do the Right Thing
(1989), New Jack City (1991) and Boyz N the Hood (1991) all offered new perspectives that
challenged long-held stereotypes of African-Americans. Yet, it can be argued that although
these movies had significant box-office success, they ultimately did little to improve upon existing stereotypes.

During the first decade after the new millennium, the United States film industry broadened the scope of its films; however, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes was still widely demonstrated. For example, the films *Monster’s Ball* (2001), *Training Day* (2001) and *Precious* (2009) received critical-acclaim, nominations and awards from various festivals and academies. Most of the lead actors in the films were nominated for awards as well. The movie storylines detailed extreme poverty, violence, dysfunction, abuse (sexual, physical and mental), criminal behavior and psychosis. In essence, African-Americans were portrayed in a variety of crises that support some of the oldest representations of negative African-American archetypal behavior. Denzel Washington and Halle Berry won their first *Best Actor Academy Awards* for their work in the films; the first ever Best Actor & Actress wins for African-Americans (in these categories) in the United States film industry. The fact that some of the foremost negative stereotypes in film were considered award-worthy should inspire reflection; many of these long-held archetypes have seeped into the consciousness of many people and thus, have been accepted as factually accurate.

**The Social Construction of Race During Slavery**
To understand self perceptions of contemporary African-Americans, it is important to explore slavery’s impact on societal consciousness. The perception of slaves was developed largely by slaveholders; both negative and positive observations shaped how slaves were purported to behave and act. The positive qualities attributed to slaves likely had roots in the the marketability and value a slave would bring to a plantation; whereas, the negative qualities could justify abuse and mistreatment of slaves. It is important to note that the creation of stereotypes about African slaves was dictated by slave owners, the identified traits were reported and often
perceived as factually accurate. The reinforcement of negative stereotypes provided the “proof” needed by White people to accept stereotypes as accurate; additionally, this reinforcement increased the probability that African slaves would internalize these negative stereotypes.

Robert Murphy’s work, *Cultural and Social Anthropology*, addresses the construction of individual and group perception “…not even our self-images, our private, treasured visions of who we are, are of our own devising; rather, our self-images are products of how we have been treated by society. Every individual’s self-esteem is the pawn of the respect he or she is accorded by others, for praise and approval are vital to the growth of pride, just as scorn and rejection can quickly destroy it” (Murphy, 38). The very nature of slavery discouraged the growth of pride among the enslaved; instead, slavery fostered insidious beliefs that encouraged the inhumane treatment of African-Americans throughout the era of slavery and long-after it was formally abolished.

Joy Degruy Leary attributes cognitive dissonance (the discomfort that occurs when a thought is discordant to an individual’s belief about themselves) experienced by Whites as justification for slavery as well as for the abuse inflicted upon the enslaved, “…in instances of particularly egregious negative acts like wars of aggression, enslavement and genocide the perpetrators have to so far to demonize and in the many cases, dehumanize their victims.” (Degruy Leary, 54) In order for the complete dominion of the slaveholder to be exercised, it was necessary (in their mind) to characterize African-Americans as less than human and deserving of none of the rights afforded to Whites Americans.

Apologists argued slavery was justified because “negroes were an inferior animal-like breed of mankind unfit to be treated as equals by other people” (Drake xvii). This argument was used tirelessly throughout the annals of history to discredit and denigrate African-Americans.
Education, finance, health, employment, housing and other social programs are consistently targeted to keep African-Americans inadequately armed with necessary tools for survival in the United States.

After centuries (nearly half a millennium) of enslavement, the Africans were “freed”; however, they were left to contend with unending assaults upon their conscience, esteem, intelligence and success from their slaveholders and their slaveholders’ descendants. Most slaveholders believed (albeit incorrectly) that slaves were incapable of thinking independently. Isabel Wilkerson recounts statements by plantation owners who “…had trouble imagining the innate desires of the people they once had owned. ‘I find a worse state of things with the Negroes than I expected…Let any man offer them some little thing of no real value, but which looks a little more like freedom, and they catch at it with avidity, and would sacrifice their best friends without hesitation and without regret.’” Another planter asserted that former slaves “‘…will almost starve and go naked…before they will work for a white man, if they can get a patch of ground to live on and get from under his control.’” (Wilkerson, 37)

Wilkerson states, “For all its upheaval, the Civil War had left most blacks in the South no better off economically than they had been before. Sharecropping, slavery’s replacement, kept them in debt and still bound to whatever plantation they worked.” (Wilkerson, 37) Given the protracted history of slavery, it was inappropriate to pronounce freedom without developing effective, sustained solutions to the rampant racism, discrimination and inequality produced by slavery. Because reasonable policies were not appropriately established post-emancipation, much of the abuse suffered by African-Americans during slavery continues to this day.

W.E.B. Du Bois worked tirelessly to educate and empower African-Americans; he believed in (national and international) human equality. His interest was predicated on
witnessing and surviving racism and prejudice. Du Bois neither promoted nor encouraged the
elevation of African-Americans as a superior race; alternatively, he subscribed to the ideology
that all groups offered multicultural gifts to be shared and exchanged. He espoused freedom as a
necessary tool for all people:

   Freedom, too, the long-sought, we still seek,-the freedom of life and limb,
the freedom to work and think, the freedom to love and aspire. Work, culture,
liberty,-all these we need, not singly but together, not successively but together,
each growing and aiding each, and all striving toward that vaster ideal that swims
before the Negro people, the ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the
unifying ideal of Race; the ideal of fostering and developing the traits and talents
of the Negro, not in opposition to or contempt for other races, but rather in large
conformity to the greater ideals of the American Republic, in order that some day
on American soil two world-races may give each to each those characteristics
both so sadly lack. (Du Bois 8-9)

Without freedom to establish their own identity and authentically represent themselves, African-
Americans were subjected to the creation of a collective identity that was manufactured
externally. The characteristics ascribed to African-Americans were thrust upon the entire race
and labeled “culture”; this ascription created a division based upon false stereotypes that
denigrated African-Americans and justified White supremacy. These persistent images damage
the psyche of African-Americans and support disparate treatment.

**Cultural Representations, Stereotypes and Otherness**

   The concept of culture has several meanings that vary depending upon the context in
which it is used. In the book, *Representation: Cultural Representation and Signifying Practices*,
cultural theorist, Stuart Hall states that the traditional definition of culture “…is said to embody
the ‘best that has been thought and said’ in a society. It is the sum of the great ideas…” Hall describes the more modern use of the term, “…to refer to the widely distributed forms of popular music, publishing, art, design and literature, or the activities of leisure-time and entertainment, which make up the everyday lives of the majority of ‘ordinary people’.” Hall also defines the anthropological or social science context of culture as “…used to refer to whatever is distinctive about the ‘way of life’ of a people, community, nation or social group. Alternatively, the word can be used to describe the ‘shared values’ of a group or of society…” (Hall, 2003, 2) By examining the various aspects of culture and its contextual meanings, there can be a better understanding of the significance that culture has in society. For the purposes of this thesis, references to culture (unless otherwise articulated) will be within the anthropological context.

The concept of culture becomes slightly more complicated when culture becomes racialized. Hall asserts the difference between “culture” and “nature” as it pertains to the black/white binary, “…the rich distinctions which cluster around the supposed link…between the white ‘races’ and intellectual development – refinement, learning and knowledge, a belief in reason, the presence of developed institutions, formal government and law, and a ‘civilized restraint’ in their emotional, sexual and civil life, all of which are associated with ‘Culture’…” (Hall, 243) The attributes of culture ascribed to White people promote shared values that could be perceived as the “best” characteristics within the group. Alternatively, there is “…the link between the black ‘races’ and whatever is instinctual – the open expression of emotion and feeling rather than intellect, a lack of ‘civilized refinement’ in sexual and social life, a reliance on custom and ritual, and the lack of developed civil institutions, all of which are linked to ‘Nature’.” (Hall, 243) The contrasted traits of the two races were often used to justify the subjugation of Blacks by Whites via slavery; it was “necessary” to maintain control over Blacks.
because (if they were left to their own devices), they would succumb to their instinctual nature. There was a general acceptance by slave owners that “the Negro…found happiness only when under the tutelage of a white master. His/her essential characteristics were fixed forever – ‘eternally’ – in Nature. Evidence from slave insurrections and the slave revolt in Haiti (1791) has persuaded whites of the instability of the Negro character.” Many Whites believed that “a degree of civilization…had rubbed off on the ‘domesticated’ slave, but underneath slaves remained by nature savage brutes; and long buried passions, once loosed, would result in ‘the wild frenzy of revenge, and the savage lust for blood.’” (Hall, 243) These fears helped cement the traits that White people assigned to African-Americans.

Hall recognized two primary premises representing racial differences during slavery, “first was the subordinate status and ‘innate laziness’ of blacks – ‘naturally’ born to, and fitted only for, servitude but, at the same time, stubbornly unwilling to labour in ways appropriate to their nature and profitable for their masters.” The second premise was projected as Blacks’ “…innate ‘primitivism’, simplicity and lack of culture, which made them genetically incapable of ‘civilized’ refinements.” (Hall, 224) Slave-holders’ assertions that Blacks were lazy and primitive by nature furthered their arguments that Blacks were incapable of anything other than servitude. Hall acknowledged the success in alleging distinctions between Blacks and Whites as natural versus cultural, “if the differences between black and white people are ‘cultural’, then they are open to modification and change. But if they are ‘natural’ – as the slave-holders believed – then they are beyond history, permanent and fixed. ‘Naturalization’ is therefore a representational strategy designed to fix ‘difference’, and thus secure it forever.” (Hall, 245) Degruy Leary reminds readers that “…American slavery was exclusively based on the notion of racial inferiority…African were considered to be ‘presumed’ or ‘natural slaves’ based on their
skin color. They were also referred to as ‘thinking property’ and inherently ‘rightless persons.’” (Degruy Leary, 51) The argument that slavery was necessary because it maintained “natural order” made it possible for “…the institution of chattel slavery to be intrinsically linked with violence, and it was through violence, aggression and dehumanization that the institution of slavery was enacted, legislated and perpetuated by Europeans.” (Degruy Leary, 51)

The concerted effort to normalize slavery and justify the inhumane treatment endured by slaves was commonplace and widely accepted, “…representations of daily life under slavery, ownership and servitude are shown as so ‘natural’ that they require no comment. It was part of the natural order of things that white men should sit and slaves should stand; that white women rode and slave men ran after them shading them from the Louisiana sun with an umbrella…” these images illustrated the hierarchy established by the institution of slavery. The more degrading images of slavery were also widespread; it was accepted “…that white overseers should inspect slave women like prize animals, or punish runaway slaves with casual forms of torture (like branding them or urinating in their mouths), and that fugitives should kneel to receive their punishment.” (Hall, 245) Slaves endured humiliation that was later romanticized, “these are the ‘noble savages’ [contrasted] to the ‘debased servants’…the endless representations of the ‘good’ Christian black slave, like Uncle Tom…or the ever-faithful domestic slave, Mammy.” This group also included the “…‘happy natives’ – black entertainers, minstrels and banjo-players who seemed not to have a brain in their head but sang, danced and cracked jokes all day long, to entertain white folks; or the ‘tricksters’ who were admired for their crafty ways of avoiding hard work, and their tall tales, like Uncle Remus.” (Hall, 245) Claims that Blacks were primitive and that their culture was fixed/permanent (as opposed to Whites who were able to modify aspects of their culture) were reinforced as complete representations, “not only were
blacks represented in terms of their essential characteristics. They were reduced to their essence.

Laziness, simple fidelity, mindless ‘cooning’, trickery, childishness belonged to blacks as a race, as a species.” This reduction perpetuated the idea that “there was nothing else to the kneeling slave but his servitude; nothing to Mammy but her fidelity to the white household…” These representations were the foundation for the creation of negative stereotypes routinely associated with African-Americans.

In order to have a more complete picture of the impact of stereotypes, Hall distinguishes three points in defining stereotypes and how they are utilized, first “…stereotyping reduces, essentializes, naturalizes and fixes ‘difference’. Secondly, stereotyping deploys a strategy of ‘splitting’. It divides the normal and the acceptable from the abnormal and the unacceptable…” This division creates an “otherness” that reinforces the perceived separation and accentuates Hall’s final point, “…stereotyping tends to occur where there are gross inequalities of power. Power is usually directed against the subordinate or excluded group.” (Hall, 258)

The persistent nature of stereotypes is rooted in power and evidenced by representations that encourage promoting differences. The stereotypes established during slavery “defined” African-Americans as a group from an external (White) perspective, the negative and unflattering perspectives thrust upon African-Americans were mythical; yet, they were widely accepted as factually based.

Hall recognizes the distinction between types of power and how it is used to physically control or symbolically influence others. There are “…broader cultural or symbolic terms, including the power to represent someone or something in a certain way – within a certain ‘regime of representation’. It includes the exercise of symbolic power through representational practices. Stereotyping is a key element in this exercise of symbolic violence.” (Hall, 259) The
power to control others in representation transitions the ownership of an identity from individual/group possession to outside authority. This right to authentic representation was stripped from African-Americans during enslavement and Whites constructed negative stereotypes that were reinforced in a variety of images and elaborate story-telling. These images have empowered White supremacy and subverted African-American identity; thus, privileging whiteness and disadvantaging blackness.

**Whiteness as Privilege**

Accounts detailing the disproportionate treatment of African-Americans note the varying degrees to which racism preferences White people over people of color. In 1927, the “Great Mississippi Flood” occurred and demolished entire towns. Langston Hughes compared the treatment of the flood victims:

The white refugees were brought down the river to the city in steamers with cabins and covered decks to protect them from the elements, while the Negroes were transported on open flatboats, exposed to the wind and weather.

In Baton Rouge, the Red Cross had housed the whites in a group of tree-shaded buildings that were former government barracks, I believe. The Negroes were housed in an open field in small tents, where the mud was ankle deep when it rained…

The Negroes…had horrifying tales to tell of forced labor at the point of a gun on levees that finally gave way; of terrified whites fleeing in all the available boats and leaving their black workers to find the way to safety as best they could…(Hughes, 288)
Throughout United States history, victims of natural disasters have recounted disparate treatment they have received from the government or emergency response organizations. In 2005, thousands of African-Americans were stranded after the levees broke and the city of New Orleans was flooded in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. While there was great diversity among the hurricane victims, many of those who were unable to be rescued were African-Americans and of those who were stuck in the city of New Orleans, their last resort for refuge was the New Orleans Superdome (a venue for sporting and concert events). The Superdome quickly became inhospitable and dangerous for the already traumatized hurricane refugees. The common denominator for the hurricane survivors was their race and economic situation. In the more than six years since Hurricane Katrina, many of the displaced are still unable to return home.

One of the most egregious responses to Hurricane Katrina occurred almost a week after the hurricane touched down when several officers from the New Orleans Police Department opened fire on unarmed residents as they crossed a bridge. A subsequent cover-up by multiple officers enveloped an already beleaguered city with greater illustrations of the racism in the community.

It is an oversimplification to assert that instances of racial disparity are more pronounced in situations where natural disasters have occurred. Some of the most troubling racism is far more commonplace and less inflammatory. Tim Wise, an anti-racist author, and educator discusses the concept of white privilege in his book, *White Like Me*. Wise details his life as having benefited from his race and contrasts his experience with that of African-Americans. Wise provides several examples of how certain institutions have promulgated discrimination by providing advantages to white people that were often denied to blacks. Wise grew up in Nashville, Tennessee and attended Tulane University; he recounts that the university traveled
several hundred miles to pursue him as a prospective student, but for many years Tulane recruiters had not traveled three hundred yards from the university to recruit from a local, all-black high school. Wise’s discussion of student experiences suggest that nearly all aspects of education are influenced by white privilege, “whether it was the racialized placement of students into advanced or remedial tracks totally irrespective of actual ability, or the way in which extracurricular opportunities, like drama or debate, were such ‘white spaces’, with very little opportunity in practical terms for nonwhites to participate…” (Wise, 15) these incidents continue to create unequal situations that ultimately discourage success among blacks.

Wise also shares some of his exploits as an undergraduate who used copious amounts of illegal drugs, ran a fake identification card business and routinely challenged police who stopped him. In each of these events, Wise was both fearless and comfortable with his choices. He recognized that his lack of concern was afforded by privilege and yet, black students were not provided that same security. More often than not, identical actions by individuals of color are met with harsh penalties and the probability of a permanent criminal record. Ultimately, one of Wise’s conclusions is that there are “…emotional and psychological costs, which involve the way privilege reshapes the mental structure of the privileged and warps our mindsets, perceptions of reality, and even our values. Some are collective costs and involve the way privilege can set up entire communities for a fall, creating a false sense of security and entitlement that is nothing if not dysfunctional.” (Wise, 121)

The White American response to the concept of white privilege is often incredulous; many White Americans enjoy advantages based upon family legacies and this “birthright” is rarely contested or rejected. The privilege of “whiteness” contributes to the black-white paradigm, a model that routinely promotes Whites as “superior” and “normative”. Historically,
Blacks have been subjugated under this racial paradigm and formally denied access to opportunities that were designated for Whites only. These instances of sanctioned discrimination prohibited African-Americans from accessing many of the rights of supposedly “guaranteed” by United States citizenship. Compulsory ignorance, Jim Crow, a lack of civil rights and segregation were all instruments of subjugation and oppression, a means to prevent the full inclusion of African-Americans into “normative” United States culture. Eventually, as society made faltering attempts to recognize and address historic wrongs, programs and policies were established to realize the promises of equal opportunity for African-Americans and other ethnic minorities.

Eduardo Bonilla-Silva’s *Racism Without Racists*, introduces “new racism” as “practices that are subtle, institutional, and apparently nonracial”. (Bonilla-Silva, 3) Bonilla-Silva examines the context of colorblindness (a gift of perception that allows one to be impervious to recognizing color/race) and existing, persistent inequalities. Much of this work surrounding colorblindness embraces the notion that racial discourse is passé and irrelevant to the United States. According to the new paradigm, the issue of race and racism in America have been hard fought and won. “New racism” discourages Affirmative Action programs because (in a colorblind and race neutral society) these programs are no longer appropriate or necessary. This perspective (conveniently or ignorantly) denies the original intent of Affirmative Action: to compensate or remediate past *de jure* discrimination in the areas where such discrimination utilized.

Bonilla-Silva cautions the promotion of race neutrality because it may evolve into the racial stratification that occurs in Latin American countries, what he describes as “Latin Americanization”. This stratification embraces class differences as opposed to race due to
prejudice, bigotry or racial inequities; those are perceived as issues of the past. Bonilla-Silva recognizes the distinction between class and racial disparities. He asserts the subsequent problems that may persist when colorblindness/race neutrality is promoted, “…the elimination of race-based social policy is, among other things, predicated on the notion that race no longer affects the life chances of Americans…we may eliminate race by decree and maintain—or even see an increase in—the degree of racial inequality.” (Bonilla-Silva, 185)

White privilege affords many people with the misperception that equal opportunity has either always existed or is far more prevalent than it actually is in the United States. Historically, many (if not most) White Americans resisted African-American efforts to achieve racial equality for a variety of reasons including (but, not limited to) pseudo-science, ignorance, racism and prejudice; yet, this critical information is largely forgotten when the question of racial equality is raised. Bonilla-Silva discusses an important aspect of white resistance to both equal opportunity (of the Civil Rights Movements) and modern efforts toward affirmative action policies, “…the principal of equal opportunity…is invoked by whites today to oppose affirmative-action policies because they supposedly represent the ‘preferential treatment’ of certain groups. This claim necessitates ignoring the fact that people of color are severely underrepresented in most good jobs, schools, and universities and hence, it is an abstract utilization of the idea of ‘equal opportunity’.” (Bonilla-Silva 28) Ignoring the widespread racial disparities that existed for centuries is crucial to maintaining opposition to affirmative action policies. Due to the conscious reinterpretation of American history, the fight for equal opportunity continues to be an uphill battle that many Americans are reluctant to engage. The current shift toward colorblindness disregards the most compelling arguments for moving toward realized equal opportunity and further encourages sentiments promoting white privilege.
As a group, White Americans tend to distance themselves from the United States’ history of racial discrimination and contend that they did not specifically engage in slavery or oppression and are therefore exempt from needing to participate in repairing racial inequality. While this may be correct on the individual level, this assertion does not acknowledge the benefits awarded to the entire group based upon the disenfranchisement of African-Americans, “although specific whites may not have participated directly in the overt discriminatory practices that injured blacks…they all have received unearned privileges by virtue of being regarded as ‘white’ and have benefitted from the various incarnations of white supremacy in the United States.” (Bonilla-Silva, 81-82) Whiteness as privilege has been a source of social currency and access to opportunities that were regularly denied to others.

Race and racialization have had a tremendous impact on perceptions of African-Americans since slavery; yet, racial discourse appears to have stalled. The considerable effort to substitute discussions on race with concepts of colorblindness disadvantage African-Americans by continuing to grant representational control to Whites who have determined that racial issues are no longer valid. The power for African-Americans to author their own racial histories must be recognized; otherwise, the negative stereotyping that occurred during slavery will persist and carry forward false representations that begin and end with White perspectives.

If colorblindness is to successfully replace the black-white racial paradigm, a concerted effort must be made (at minimum) to acknowledge the United State’s history of racial oppression; equal opportunity programs may be the most viable means to that end. In order to truly overcome racism in the United States, the country would be better served to acknowledge the existence of persistent inequality that is often equated with White privilege. If the reality of racism continues to be denied and the discourse on race is supplanted by assertions that the
United States is now a post-racial and colorblind society, the problems created by racism will continue.

**Media Portrayals of African-Americans**

Since the inception of motion pictures, African-American women and men (with few exceptions) are negatively portrayed as idiotic, classless, child-like, unsophisticated, ignorant, violent, sexually aggressive, depraved and morally bankrupt characters.

Donald Bogle describes five archetypes used to depict African-American characters in live performances and films; these archetypes consisted of the “Tom”, “Coon”, “Tragic Mulatto”, “Mammy” and “Brutal Black Buck”. Prior to the advent of feature-length films, African-American characters were portrayed by White actors wearing “blackface”, these actors entertained White audiences with storylines that caricatured African-Americans in “…stereotypes that had existed since the days of slavery and were already popularized in American life and arts.” (Bogle, 2001, 4) The five archetypes used to represent African-Americans established templates that provided limited character profiles; as Bogle describes, the “…tom was the first in a long line of socially acceptable Good Negro characters. Always as toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, enslaved, and insulted, they keep the faith, n’er [sic] turn against their white massas [sic] and remain hearty, submissive, stoic, generous, selfless and oh-so-very-kind. Thus, they endear themselves to white audiences and emerge as heroes of sorts.” (Bogle, 4-6) This character’s attractiveness was largely motivated by the concept of African-American docility and obedient submissiveness to Whites, an important component is maintaining the established order of White supremacy in the United States.

The “Coon” was designed to be the source of amusement and humor for White audiences, this character provided comic relief via buffoonery and idiocy. Bogle refers to this representation as the “most blatantly degrading of all black stereotypes”; he identifies the
emergence of the “pure coons…as no account niggers, those unreliable, crazy, lazy, subhuman creatures good for nothing more than eating watermelons, stealing chickens, shooting crap, or butchering the English language.” (Bogle, 8) Coons were unintelligent and dull-witted beings without basic common sense, their inability to grasp simple concepts supported the idea that African-Americans lacked intelligence and were incapable of formulating their own thoughts. This was additional reinforcement of the idea that African-Americans needed guidance and direction from Whites (as they had during slavery) in order to survive; otherwise, they could be harmed by their own stupidity.

There were two variations of the coon: the “pickaninny” and “uncle remus”. As Bogle describes, “the pickaninny was the first of the coon types to make its screen debut. It gave the Negro child actor his place in the black pantheon. Generally, he was a harmless, little screwball creation whose eyes popped, whose hair stood on end with the least excitement, and whose antics were pleasant and diverting.” (Bogle, 7) The pickaninny created a genre for African-American children who (as descendants/offspring of coons) were also dense, but cute and fun-loving. The pickaninny’s harmless and non-threatening antics offered a consistent source of hilarity; the appearance of this archetype on film assisted in reaffirming the perspective that African-American children were simple-minded and that their only concern was to be a consistent source of entertainment.

“Uncle Remus” was the second variation of the coon, “harmless and congenial, he is a first cousin to the tom, yet he distinguishes himself by his quaint, naïve, and comic philosophizing…Remus’s mirth, like tom’s contentment and the coon’s antics, has always been used to indicate the black man’s satisfaction with the system and his place in it.” (Bogle, 8) Each of the “coon” identities was immersed in ignorance and a commitment to providing comedy to
their respective audiences. There were no greater expressions of thought or personal identity expressed; the “coon” characters were another indication that White Americans expected complete servitude from African-American. Whereas service had previously been provided in the form of slavery, it was now expected as entertainment.

The “tragic mulatto” presented a new and intriguing intellectual struggle for White audiences because this archetype intimated (often in a circuitous route) the sexual relationships that occurred between Whites and African-Americans. Bogle discusses storylines about fair-skinned African-Americans attempting to “pass” for white or Whites who discover (through some catastrophe within the plot) that their “whiteness” is either questionable or rendered illegitimate because of the existence of African-American parentage/lineage. Bogle referred to the tragic mulatto as a “moviemaker’s darling…usually the mulatto is made likable-even sympathetic (because of her white blood, no doubt)-and the audience believes that the girl’s life could have been productive and happy had she not been a ‘victim of divided racial inheritance’.” (Bogle, 9) It is important to note that the majority of tragic mulatto storylines focused upon the stories of female characters and their “secret/undiscovered mixed race” parentage; there are very few stories of mulatto males struggling with interracial identities. Interestingly, a character’s gender appears to be a major factor in whether the story resonated with Whites. The story of the tragic mulatto was successful because it elicited a sympathetic and compassionate response from White audiences who perceived the presence of African-American blood as a negative mark upon (what would otherwise be considered impeccable) White heritage. The circuitous nature of the tragic mulatto stories did not address the perspectives of African-Americans who might have had a different interpretation of the existence of White heritage within their family tree. These
stories relied upon a presumption of African-American inferiority and an assumed desire of African-Americans to be considered or aligned with whiteness.

“Mammy”, the obese and ornery (often older) woman, provided another element of comic relief (similar to that of the coon). Maternal, militant and forceful, “Mammy is distinguished…by her sex and her fierce independence. She is usually big, fat and cantankerous… [her] offshoot is the aunt jemima…blessed with religion or mammies who wedge themselves into the dominant white culture. Generally, they are sweet, jolly, and good-tempered-a bit more polite than mammy and certainly never as headstrong.” (Bogle, 9) The creation of Mammy presented an asexual, nurturing and yet, unhealthy picture of the African-American woman as an aggressive social interloper unconcerned with personal boundaries. Mammy’s construction is centered on her care for others’ well-being (specifically White people); her robust size and her physical & emotional strength endear her to Whites in a manner that allowed them to ignore/dismiss her brusque and outspoken nature. Again, the Mammy’s inability to fully comprehend social dynamics was accepted by Whites because African-Americans were considered inferior and unsophisticated.

Bogle’s final archetype was the Brutal Black Buck; this character is divided into two groups: “black brutes” and “black bucks”. Bogle detailed the subtle contrasts between the two characters, “the black brute was a barbaric black out to raise havoc…his physical violence served as an outlet for a man who was sexually repressed…Bucks are always big, baadded [sic] niggers, oversexed and savage, violent and frenzied as they lust for white flesh.” (Bogle, 14) The images of African-American males as hyper-violent and hyper-sexual individuals contributed to the “…great white fear that every black man longs for a white woman…[as well as] the assumption that the white woman was the ultimate in female desirability, herself a symbol of white pride,
power, and beauty.” (Bogle, 14) The portrayal of African-American men as individuals with predilections for violence and sex is sharply contrasted with White women’s inherent purity and beauty; this mythical illustration of “good versus evil” reinforced a perception of African-American men who were unable to control their baser urges when presented with White women as objects of desire (either due to sexual repression or hyper-sexuality).

Each of Bogle’s archetypes established a restrictive perception about the African-American identity and promoted the reinforcement of prevalent, negative stereotypes. The compliant, acquiescing tom was personally bound in servitude by devotion to his master and a strong commitment to the master’s happiness; tom was humble as well as deferential and he appeared nostalgic for the days of slavery. The buffoonery demonstrated by the coon indicated a desire to serve through entertainment and providing comedic relief without regard or concern for appearing moronic, ignorant or foolish. Additionally, coon roles were extended to children as pickaninnies who existed only as easily excitable youngsters and the complacent uncle remus who was satisfied with the status quo had no aspirations for a better situation/life experience. Tragic mulattos illustrated the dire social consequences that young women faced when it was revealed that they the products of interracial/mixed race coupling. This particular archetype was typically portrayed by attractive (phenotypically White) women whose entire lives would suffer as a result of the “tainted blood” that ran in their veins. Alternatively, the overweight and over-bearing Mammy interjected herself into the White American family with loving care and nurturing in an aggressive and bullish manner; her counterpart was Aunt Jemima, a less robust and softer version, but with the same commitment to servile devotion in caring for Whites. The Black Buck presented African-American men as either vicious brutes suffering from sexual repression or sexually charged bucks constantly lusting after White women. The above
archetypes reinforced negative perceptions of African-Americans that were formulated during slavery in the United States; unfortunately, these images structured a mythical monolithic experience for African-Americans that have been extremely unflattering.

The initial presentations of African-American archetypes were made during live performances in local theatres and traveling shows; however, the inception of motion pictures made it possible for the film experience (the projection, message and story) to be shared by a larger audience. For the time in United States history, the African-American population was depicted in visual images; each of the five archetypes was presented and expanded on in the nation’s foremost large-scale film production.

The very first motion picture in the United States was D.W. Griffith’s, *Birth of a Nation*. This silent film is rarely screened in theatres and if by some miracle it is in a theatre listing, there is a thunderous public outcry denouncing the film as racist. Consequently, the film is often removed and re-shelved until there is another (often failed) attempt to screen it again. Factually, *Birth of a Nation* is a deplorable film and its message is entirely anti-African-American. The movie was inspired by a book on the formation of the Ku Klux Klan; although, Griffith persisted that his film was not racist (asserting it as art), it is difficult to argue the film’s cinematic value. During this time period, White men and women performed in traveling minstrel shows throughout the United States, they dressed in “blackface” portraying slaves and freedmen, “…Thomas Dartmouth Rice, a New York-born itinerant white actor, popularized a song-and-dance routine called ‘the Jim Crow’ in minstrel shows across the country. He wore blackface and ragged clothes and performed a jouncy, palsied imitation of a handicapped black stable hand…” (Wilkerson 40-41). The traveling minstrel shows evolved into the earliest motion
pictures continuing to depict images of African-Americans (in effect, Whites wearing blackface); ultimately, the first feature-length film, D.W. Griffith’s *Birth of a Nation.*

Griffith’s film is a disturbing interpretative fantasy about the effects of granting African-Americans freedom from slavery. Not only does this movie promote pure hate and propaganda; it was constructed to play upon every fear that ignorant Whites could have about African-Americans. Unfortunately, the film’s effect was so profound that it served to reinforce negative stereotypes that persist to this day.

In order to recognize the power of media and its influences, it is critical to examine our personal understanding of race and its social construction. *Birth of a Nation* depicted slaves as lazy, childlike, immoral, overly sexualized and unintelligent. Whites were gifted with piety, morality, intelligence, love for God, and humanity. There is no contrast allowing for the slaves to go beyond negative stereotypes and for Whites to perceive themselves negatively as slaveholders. This three hour long epic was well-received during its initial release; however, most contemporary viewers find it repulsive. Not surprisingly, the consistency between the country’s first film stereotypes of African-Americans and present-day images is usually negated. However, a simple review of the United States first cinematic productions provides additional insight when compared to contemporary films. The negative portrayals have evolved to be sure, but significant progress has yet to be made in presenting more consistent and positive portrayals of African-Americans.

The image of African-American/Black women is derisive and offensive. The myth of the “Black whore” is prevalent in media; characterizations of African-American women as “loose” hedonists contribute to negative stereotyping of African-American females. Films including, *Birth of a Nation, Hallelujah, St. Louis Blues, Pinky, Foxy Brown, Monster’s Ball* and *Precious*
perpetuate negative stereotyping by the film industry. These films influence public/social perceptions of African-American women as dysfunctional, oversexed and sexually predatory (the consummate Eve to every Adam) and manufacture erroneous beliefs about African-American women.

The Black Buck/Brute has reinforced the myth of Black male aggression and sexual prowess and this perception is firmly entrenched in the United States consciousness. This misperception was generated in slavery and furthered by minstrel shows and eventually presented in Griffith’s work. The view of the Black male as the aggressive, violent, sexually frustrated, hyper-masculine, overtly sexual, alpha-male has existed as a prevailing perception. *The Spook Who Sat By the Door, Sweet Sweetback’s Badasss Song, Boyz N the Hood,* and *Training Day* provide a variety of representations of the above African-American male archetypes. It is interesting to note that while films have presented visual representations of African-American stereotypes, contemporary music has translated these same stereotypes into the language of hip-hop and rap music, transmuted via lyrics and graphic music videos.

Negative African-American archetypes are so widely accepted that there is a prevailing idea that those who operate outside the prescribed stereotypes are exceptional and not normative. The supposition that racial stereotypes are factual is entrenched in power; the ability to construct and control the identity of others assists the hegemonic structure. Stuart Hall suggests that stereotyping “…is a particular type of power—a hegemonic and discursive form of power, which operates as much through culture, the production of knowledge, imagery and representations, as through other means…it is circular: it implicates the ‘subjects’ of power as well as those who are ‘subjected to it’.” (Hall, 263) In order to break from these erroneous perceptions it is crucial that individuals begin holding themselves and others accountable in the articulation of race and
racial stereotypes. For purposes of this discussion, the focus is upon the Black/White paradigm; however, the issue of race extends beyond these two groups and encompasses all ethnic and cultural groups. At this moment, my only suggestion is that diligence and consciousness be exercised when ascribing characterizations to individuals. It is socially palatable to structure individuals into groups as it makes people more comfortable in evaluating situations and people. Unfortunately, this practice of grouping tends to generalize vastly different people and force a monolithic reality upon unique life experience.

The images projected on-screen became visual representations in the minds of movie viewers – the perspective regarding African-Americans and Whites either introduced new ideas or reinforced old beliefs. The fact that Birth of a Nation’s story derived from a book detailing the inception of the Ku Klux Klan (a White supremacist group that terrorized Blacks across the nation) belies Griffith’s insistence that his film is art. Griffith’s assertion that his film was art appears at once naïve, and (if he believed what he said, at best) disingenuous; the possibility that derogatory images of Blacks (or any racial/ethnic group) as artful seem to exist only in the mind of inherently racist individuals. Irrespective of Griffith’s intent, the reinforcement of negative stereotypes about Blacks and the accompanying visual representations were some of the many by-products of his film.

**African-American Women in Film**

While Griffith’s depiction of Blacks was repulsive, his depiction of the Black woman as a sexually aggressive nymphomaniac was detrimental to perceptions of African-American women.

Clearly, Griffith’s impact is visible in early films produced after Birth of a Nation. Repeatedly, the use of the African-American woman as sexually depraved counterparts to pious, White men instilled beliefs about Black women’s sexual typology and created a myth. This myth suggests that, but for the Black woman’s supernatural ability to seduce and overpower the
White male’s sense of decency and propriety, the White man would not succumb to his baser urges. The myth also suggests that Black women (unlike White heroines) hold no generic sense of propriety. Laying the responsibility for sexual behavior at the door of Black women entirely negates the historical context of sexual domination by White men over Black women. To be fair, these images are not solely relegated to White males; Black males also suffer the advances of the sexually over-stimulated African-American women. However, the projection of these images began with Griffith in *Birth of a Nation*; for example, a female house slave is a caricature of the sex starved nymphomaniac, constantly overexerted, eyes bulging, bosom heaving in a near delirious state of sexual excitement. This slave appears to be completely devoted to her master and yet, she nearly fondles one of the master’s many male guests in her “excited” state. While Griffith attempts humor with these scenes, he inadvertently plants the seed that Black women are perpetually attracted to White men (especially men in power).

This idea allows for the dismissal of years of abuse suffered by Black women from their White masters because it suggests that Black women were “asking for it” or desirous of sexual assault in order to fulfill latent or overt sexual urges. It also allows the use of rape by slaveholders (as a tool of power and subjugation) to somehow be perceived as having been caused by the allure of the Black woman; thereby, blaming the victim.

While Griffith generates erroneous and completely inaccurate perceptions, he by no means is the sole perpetrator of racist sexism in the film industry. In *Hallelujah*, King Vidor examines the Black family dynamic and the consequences of straying from the “spiritual path”. While the evolution of Blacks in film industry is commendable, it is not truly progressive unless negative stereotypical images are equally balanced. While this film elevates the stories and roles
played by Black actors in the industry, it does little to improve upon established stereotypes about Blacks.

In *Hallelujah*, the sexual voracity of Chick (played by Nina Mae McKinney), the Black cabaret dancer who lures Zeke, a good young Black man, away from his path of spiritual righteousness, “executing sensuous bumps and grinds…Nina Mae McKinney was the movies’ first black whore.” (Bogle, 31) Vidor directed this musical spectacle and advanced the perpetuation of negative stereotypes in his story about “real Negro folk culture” (Bogle, 28). *Hallelujah* portrays the Black woman, Chick as the antagonist to the protagonist, Zeke, “In McKinney’s hands and hips, Chick represented the black woman as exotic sex object, half woman, half child.” (Bogle, 31-32) Chick’s character continues to thrust the hyper sexual Black woman as the crux of man’s struggle; however, unlike *Birth of a Nation*, *Hallelujah* reinforces the Black woman’s sexual domination of Black men as well. Without the historical context of slavery to perpetuate the myth of Black inferiority and justify their enslavement and any subsequent mistreatment, this film suggests that Black women without religious or spiritual values will destroy themselves as well as the most stalwart and pious men.

Missy Rose is Zeke’s true love; she is the constant spiritual beacon to which he returns after his foray into debauchery with Chick. Zeke’s murder of Chick in a passion-filled moment appears acceptable as Zeke is able to return to his family and resume a staid life with his parents and the woman he loves. It may be understood that the life of the Negro family maintains two extreme women to exist; the pious, religious, sexually repressed and steadfast young woman or the sexy, attractive, sexually uninhibited, dancer, with no medium between the two spectrums.

The images of Black women in film may expand with more character development; however, the evolution creates characters that further negative stereotypes. In *St. Louis Blues*,

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the audience is introduced to another archetypal Black woman, the long suffering love interest. Bessie Smith portrays the Black woman perpetually mistreated by Jimmy, her pimp boyfriend. Bessie’s character fights for her man and “runs rampant on a girl who has an eye for him.” (Bogle, 34) This unfounded loyalty never provides Bessie with a “happily ever after” romance with her reformed rogue; instead, she is left deserted and discontent.

This new character study created a new stereotype for Black women that still persists in contemporary society. The battle between the upstanding/good woman for the affections of a “ne’er do well” Black man. This fantasy not only portrays itself in films, but is often featured in today’s news media. All too often, women combat each other (often with disastrous results) to seek the attention of men who do nothing redeemable to earn their affection. Unfortunately, the idea of women fighting over a man is entertainment fodder; it is considered humorous and trivial. Alternatively, two men (regardless of race) fighting over a woman is honorable and typically, the objectified woman is an upstanding and remarkable character. This particular story line exposes an unfortunate societal double-standard.

In St. Louis Blues, the male object of desire is not the most accomplished and ideal man in the community. Jimmy, the Pimp is the consummate “bad boy”; the man who cares only for himself and his pleasures. One only has to look at the newest crop of rap artists and music videos to witness the profitability of the bad boy archetype. Rarely, if ever, are there images of women competing or fighting for the most upstanding men. While battling over a man is not encouraged, it is more palatable to witness the object of the fight as a remarkable and noteworthy man of character; however, this plotline typically appears in comedic films.

In the same vein of Birth of a Nation and Hallelujah, St. Louis Blues exposes the audience to Hollywood’s portrait of African-Americans in the United States. In the context of
entertainment, these films provided a modicum of enjoyment for largely White audiences and introduced Black actors and stories to Black and White audiences. However, any positive gains from entry into the film world seem inherently negated by images that reflect the worst aspects of the human condition. Most of these films’ negative social impact upon Black women and men make these films all the more offensive.

The tragic mulatto was depicted in the films *Imitation of Life* (1934) and *Pinky* (1949); a remake of *Imitation of Life* was released in 1959. Both films were adapted from novels and each presented stories that placed African-American women at the center of internal racial and societal conflicts. Additionally, both films presented strong, dutiful female (Mammy/Aunt Jemima) characters and the tragic mulatto characters (Mammy’s offspring/ grandchildren) dealt with young women (the tragic mulatto) who attempted to pass for white. Throughout the film, the hardships between African-Americans and Whites were contrasted in cinematography and additional (or often periphery) storylines.

The first version of *Imitation of Life* details the life-long friendship between two widows, Miss Bea (played by Claudette Colbert) and Aunt Delilah (played by Louise Beavers), struggling to raise their daughters independently; ultimately, their individual hardships compel them to work together and form a rather one-sided business partnership based upon Aunt Delilah’s family pancake recipe. When Miss Bea informs her that their business will allow Aunt Delilah to purchase her own car and house, Aunt Delilah rejects the idea of her independence and replies, “‘my own house? You gonna send me away, Miss Bea? I can’t live with you? Oh honey chile, please don’t send me away.’” Aunt Delilah affirms her devotion to Miss Bea and her daughter when she asks, “‘how I gonna take care of your and Miss Jessie if I ain’t here…I se your cook and I want to stay your cook.’” (Bogle, 57) Aunt Delilah’s commitment to Miss Bea is
prioritized over her light-skinned daughter, Peola, who is struggling with her racial identity as an African-American. Throughout the story, Peola preferences “whiteness” and makes several attempts to pass for White; repeatedly, Aunt Delilah’s presence sabotages Peola’s plans. Miss Bea’s problems with her own daughter (Jessie) deal with the growing pains of amateurish behavior and a schoolgirl on one of her mother’s suitors. The problems of race are only peripheral to Miss Bea; although, the two women share a house and life’s hardships, Miss Bea and Aunt Delilah live in two different worlds. Aunt Delilah makes several sacrifices in order to serve as Miss Bea’s housekeeper in their “partnership”; additionally, she compromises Peola’s happiness and well-being while forfeiting any chance of personal or romantic success. The film concludes with Aunt Delilah’s death; after rejecting her mother and running off in order to pass herself off as White, Peola returns to attend her mother’s grand funeral. This tragic story does not afford Aunt Delilah and Peola (after their continued struggle) the opportunity for reconciliation.

_Pinky_ offers a variation of the tragic mulatto; although, the film still incorporates the persistent theme of a light-skinned African-American woman denying her race in order to advance herself socially and professionally. Interestingly, the character “Pinky” was played by Jeanne Crain (a White woman); her character traveled north to attend nursing school and upon her return to the south, she is forced to assume her true identity as an African-American. Pinky’s story is resistance and frustration, she desires to return to the north in order to marry her White fiancé and live free from the inherent struggles and racism she experiences in the south as a woman of color. Pinky’s grandmother, “Granny/Aunt Dicey” was portrayed by Ethel Waters in role departing from the traditional completely servile Mammy, “Ethel Waters’ character is not the old tomt trying to ingratiate in order to save his position. Rather she is a strong woman
concerned with all humanity and dedicated to her own sense of truth and loyalty. Yet, her character can explode and revel in righteous anger.” (Bogle, 154) Granny was more complex than the one-dimensional Mammy typified in film; Ethel Waters’ performance encompassed more than abject servitude, she broke away from the long-held stereotype and presented audiences with an evolved African-American female character.

Even though Granny performed an atypical Mammy role, she still remained loyal to an aging White neighbor, “Miss Em”; the relationship between Granny and Miss Em is an unlikely friendship. Upon learning of Miss Em’s failing health, Granny obliges Pinky to work as her nurse; when Pinky refuses, Granny tells her “I worked hard to give you an education. If they done educated the heart out of you, then all I did was wrong. Now go up to there to Miss Em or I’m going to whip the living daylights out of you.” (Bogle, 154) Pinky quickly relents and (resentfully) begins to work for Miss Em, their relation is testy, but they grudgingly respect each other. After Miss Em’s death, it is revealed that she has willed her property to Pinky. The true test of Pinky’s character becomes evident when Miss Em’s greedy relatives challenge the will and attempt to invalidate Pinky’s claim to the property. A court battle ensues and the trial illustrates the pervasive nature of racism in the town portraying Whites who work together (deceitfully) to prevent Pinky from receiving the property; however, the story culminates in Pinky’s triumph.

_Pinky_ “was the first feature to deal with an interracial romance” (Bogle, 150) and although both Pinky and her fiancé “Tom” were played by White actors, the concept of an interracial couple had not been presented to audiences. Ultimately, Tom encourages Pinky to abandon the south (and her fight for Miss Em’s property) and travel north in order for them to be married. Pinky declines Tom’s proposal and opts to stay in the south; she elects to turn Miss
Em’s home into a nursing hospital where she continues to work as a nurse. Pinky’s “tragedy” is that she denies herself the happiness that she sought throughout the story; in the end, she chooses work and community instead of matrimony with Tom. The tragic mulatto character’s was rarely afforded happiness and fulfillment in her story; ultimately, the mulatto suffered when she attempted to pass for white (and was caught) or she endured hardship by deciding to live authentically as an African-American woman.

The film industry saw a variety of films during the decades between the 1930s-1960; these new films often reinforced existing negative stereotypes and allowed for little expansion of character developments. There was a dramatic shift in the late 1960s and 1970s with the popularization of blaxploitation and Black Power films; the storylines offered representations of empowered African-Americans who took charge and operated under the credo “by any means necessary”. While the new stories indicated power and personal power, they continued to reinforce the stereotypes created during slavery. Whereas African-Americans were servile, obedient, jocular, sexually repressed or sexually aggressive, the new representations went to extremes to be what would be considered the “antithesis of Blackness”. The blaxploitation films used service and complacency as a means to stealthily overcome White oppression; they also used sex and seduction to overpower Whites in addition to achieving necessary personal sexual gratification. Blaxploitation permitted criminal behavior as a means to an end, but it continued to suggest that African-Americans had inherent criminal tendencies (even if it was only manifested as they crusaded against “evil/evil doers”).

During the 1970s *Foxy Brown* (and most Pam Grier movies) encompassed all of the necessary components for a true blaxploitation film. *Foxy Brown* was the Black women’s counterpart to the Black men’s *Shaft*. Pam Grier stars as the Black superwoman, the luscious
and statuesque Foxy Brown. Bogle describes the phenomenon in female blaxploitation films, “these macho goddesses answered a multitude of needs and were a hybrid of stereotypes, part buck/part mammy/part mulatto. On the one hand, each was a high-flung male fantasy: beautiful, alluring, glamorous [sic] voluptuaries, as ready and anxious for sex and mayhem as any man.” (Bogle, 251) If properly executed this film could serve as an empowerment tool for all women, but specifically Black women. Unfortunately, gratuitous sex and nudity are utilized relentlessly to subordinate women and assert their sexuality as the only weapon to combat evils of the world. While Grier is clearly intelligent, her attractiveness is superior to her intellect. After her lover is killed through an act of her brother’s betrayal, Foxy Brown vows revenge upon her lover’s killers. Her foray into espionage is short-lived and perhaps short-sighted in her quest for vengeance; she is soon caught by the same killers she attempted to ensnare.

There is a subtle message that while Foxy is smart and beautiful, her looks exceed her intelligence; for example, Foxy is caught almost immediately after her plan backfires, this either illustrates her nemeses’ superior ability or her ineptitude as the avenger. Foxy’s plan to disrupt the “bad guys”’ operation fails and the killers ultimately catch her, then sexually assault and brutalize her. Stoically and formidably, Foxy overcomes her captors and kills them. She then seeks the help of Black male revolutionaries in order to take down the killers’ organization. Heretofore, Foxy has enlisted the assistance of one other woman and instead of seeking out additional female allies, she relies on the assistance of her Black brothers who aid her (albeit reluctantly at first and then enthusiastically).

Foxy’s determination to overcome her antagonists is remarkable; however, the portrayal of the highly independent and sexualized Foxy relegates her character to intellectual inferiority to all her adversaries. Ultimately, Foxy is a victim because she is a Black woman; consequently,
this disempowers the original image of Foxy as a “take no prisoners”, strong, independent, intelligent and secure Black female character.

The Foxy Brown character introduced another concept of powerful Black women in film; however, the continual lack of development beyond stereotypes, gratuitous sex and nudity undermine the message of Black women’s empowerment. The black superwomen characters “lived in fantasy worlds-of violence, blood, guns, and gore-which pleased rather than threatened, male audiences.” (Bogle 251). These films essentially alienated black women audiences, who “could find little in their adolescent-male-fantasy-oriented roles to identify with.” (Guerro, 99)

These films prospered during the 1970s and seemed to lose their appeal due to public outcry regarding the negative stereotyping. Unfortunately, the death of these films did not give way to new cinema and the Black woman. The aftermath of blaxploitation films created a void that was filled with films recycling old stereotypes and reinforcing erroneous and derogatory beliefs.

Thirty years after the introduction of blaxploitation movies, the film industry continues to perpetuate negative images of African-American men and women. In 2001, Halle Berry starred in Monster’s Ball, the film details the story of a light-skinned African-American “Leticia” woman whose husband “Lawrence” (played by Sean “Puffy” Combs) is executed as a murderer on death row. Leticia’s also loses her son, Tyrell when he his killed in an automobile accident. Leticia’s double-tragedy is compounded poverty, she loses her car and is threatened with eviction; she begins work as a waitress in a local diner in an attempt to stave off her financial problems. While working as a waitress, she meets “Hank” played by Billy Bob Thornton and shortly they begin a (primarily sexual) relationship. The love scenes between Hank and Leticia were passionate; yet, they produced some controversy for what many audiences found as
gratuitous sex and nudity. Hank’s character and his son, “Sonny” (portrayed by Heath Ledger) were the prison guards who oversaw Lawrence’s execution; however, this information is not revealed until later in the film after Leticia has been evicted and moved in with Hank.

The issues of race and racism are largely developed by Hank’s racist father, “Buck”, a sickly man portrayed by Peter Boyle. Leticia’s character is played tragically, she is unable to overcome her terrible life circumstances until she develops a relationship with Hank. Although Hank has his own problems and he aided in the death of Leticia’s husband, he is the savior of the film. *Monster’s Ball* tells an intriguing story that reinforces representations of African-American ignorance, criminality and child-like qualities. Leticia is not an educated woman, her husband is a criminal and her son is unable to survive past childhood; while it could be argued that Hank and Leticia “save each other”, Leticia loses everything as means to being saved by Hank. The film concludes somewhat ambiguously, after Leticia discovers (on her own) that Hank played a part in her husband’s execution; the final scene shows Leticia and Hank eating ice cream cones on Hank’s porch.

Halle Berry earned an Academy Award for her acting, she was the first African-American actress to win an Oscar for *Best Actress*. Berry’s award reminds audiences of the strength of African-American stereotypes; she successfully portrayed an attractive, but poor under-educated woman who was married to a murderer. Her character also depicted a victimized and hyper-sexual woman who easily fell into bed with a customer from her diner. The subtler message appears to be that reinforcement of negative African-American stereotypes will be rewarded because the representations are truly compelling, even if they are completely unfounded.
Gabourey Sidibe portrayed “Claireece/Precious” in the film *Precious* (2009), also received critical-acclaim for her portrayal of a poor, teenage mother who has been sexually abused by her father in addition to receiving persistent physical, sexual and mental abuse from her deranged mother, “Mary”, played by Mo’Nique. *Precious* is the story of a young, morbidly obese teenager’s never-ending life struggles. Precious’ family is completely dysfunctional; all of the characters have to deal with poverty, violence, mental instability and criminal behavior. The film represents the African-American family as completely unhinged and the character Precious is uneducated, sexually victimized, abused and illiterate. There are a number of saviors in the film; her teacher, “Blu Rain” played by Paula Patton, a social worker “Ms. Weiss” portrayed by Mariah Carey and a nurse, “John” acted by Lenny Kravitz – each of these characters provide emotional support and relief for Precious’ heartbreaking story.

*Precious* revisits many of the negative representations depicted throughout film’s history, but this film appears to have taken the absolute worst stereotypes of African-Americans and grouped them together in a single movie. Mary is an aggressive and abusive interpretation of Mammy, a mother who terrorizes her daughter; her commitment to servitude appears to be channeled toward her psychological instability, Mary is a slave to her mental demons. Precious’ father, “Carl” played by Rodney Jackson is the sexually repressed and hyper-sexual father who committed incest with his daughter. Precious is the consummate perpetual child, she is uneducated, victimized and incapable of achieving adulthood because she lacks the mental capacity to grow up. The film ends with Precious receiving the news that Carl had AIDS and that she is HIV positive; her second child (also fathered by Carl) is HIV negative. Mary attempts to convince Ms. Weiss to allow Precious to return to her care and she is refused. Precious
commits to taking her high school equivalency exam and taking care of her children and she
permanently distances herself from Mary.

The limited release of the film did not guarantee box office success; however, it received
wide acclaim in film festivals around the world. Even though this film was not widely
distributed in theatres it garnered significant attention due to its complicated storyline and
difficult subject matter. *Precious* was adapted from the novel, *Push*, by Sapphire and it
illustrates several complex relationships between parents, children and professional service
providers (teachers, social workers and nurses) in situations of miserable poverty, violence and
abuse. Ms. Weiss, Blu Rain and John are all light-skinned advocates for Precious; yet, she is not
able to strive for their success. Precious’ “success” is “phenomenal” given the tragedy of her life
circumstances; however, the storyline reduces her experience to being satisfied or complacent
with a “mediocre” life experience. Precious is not allowed to strive for greater accomplishments
than single motherhood and a high school diploma because her life experience is not pictured
beyond those achievements.

These images are due for more evolved representations; there is more depth and character
to a Black woman’s experience than her sexuality and more importantly, the life experiences of
Black women are not monolithic. The images of single mothers and young, single professionals
are a reality for many Black women in addition to the illustrations of wealth, poverty, middle-
class, suburban, urban and rural stories (nationally and internationally). While it is convenient
(and accurate) to lay blame upon the media and film industry, it is also the responsibility of all
members of society to take a proactive approach in demanding improvements from all media
industries. The entertainment value of large-scale films is subordinate to capitalism and except
for a few instances of independent filmmakers, the focus tends to center on marketability to
predominantly White audiences. It seems appropriate to begin elevating the discourse on films by providing more intelligent film making. Currently, there is not a definitive answer to eliminating the problems of negative stereotyping Black women in film. Yet, there are several approaches to implement that may be effective: an active boycott of movie theatres and film companies might influence the type of movies screened and produced; the creation of a network of smaller film companies to provide competition for audience members and the commitment to “pool” resources for large scale film distribution and to provide a steady barrage of media (articles, books, news stories) that details the specific nature of this problem within the movie industry.

The evolution of Black women in film began almost a century ago; yet, there is minimal advancement in the entertainment industry for African-American actresses when compared to White American actresses. It is appropriate in the 21st century to transcend the baser sociological misperceptions about people of color and provide realism in entertainment. The original archetypes in motion pictures limited African-American women to images rooted in slavery; these representations (although inaccurate and misleading) were widely accepted as fact. Although, African-American characters have incorporated slightly more expansive interpretations, it could be argued that simply replacing/enlarging current Black women’s typology is insufficient in order to improve social conditions and perspectives. However, it is imperative that an attempt to ameliorate current conditions be made in order to exclude all justifiable rationale in discrimination and racism against Black women.

**African-American Men in Film**

*The Spook Who Sat By the Door, Sweet Sweetback’s Badass Song, Boyz N the Hood* and *Training Day* exemplify diversity among storylines that focus on illustrations of African-American male archetypes. Each of these films incorporates the historic stereotypes and
demonstrates the slight twist/expansion/deviation that occurs in the presentation of the archetypes.

*The Spook Who Sat by the Door* was directed by Ivan Dixon, it can be described as a political film detailing the story of a Black Central Intelligence Agency officer who utilizes his training to develop an urban guerilla military organization; this movie is based upon the book of the same name. This film could be perceived as an empowerment tool for the Black community; however, the male-dominated plot relegates women to periphery roles - this suggests that Dixon either intended to focus on a largely male audience for the film or he anticipated that female audience members would be attracted as supportive girlfriends/wives in a show of solidarity.

The main character, Dan Freeman infiltrates the CIA and upon completing rigorous testing and training he is selected as the first Black agent. Freeman’s training illustrates the racism of the CIA organization in addition to intra-racial struggles with other competing Black officers who perceive him as the eager to please and complacent “Uncle Tom” or “sellout” committed to maintaining the *status quo* as a subservient Black agent in the organization. After Freeman is hired his work as a CIA operative is limited to administrative tasks; it becomes clear that his hiring and employment at the CIA is designed to counter the agency’s image as a racist organization. The movie features Freeman’s diligent work as a humble operative determined to prove his worth to his superiors; he is also depicted studying relentlessly. Freeman leaves the CIA after five years and returns to Chicago in order to develop his urban military organization.

Freeman’s uneventful departure from the CIA provides no preview of his intention to develop a paramilitary organization comprised of young African-American men; the group organizes in secret and begins to engage in planned acts of non-violent and violent resistance. Freeman’s actions subscribe to the stereotypical black brute; violent and aggressive, he recruits
men (like himself) to fight and overcome racial inequality and oppression. While this storyline empowered the African-American male, it also reinforced the archetypal image of anger and violent rage lying dormant in African-American. As stereotypes suggested in earlier films and images, African-Americans were violent by nature and would eventually attack White Americans when they least expected it.

Throughout the film, Freeman is romantically involved with two women, his girlfriend and a prostitute. Freeman maintains a relationship with his girlfriend while developing a liaison with a prostitute in his role as a CIA candidate. His character is a confirmed bachelor whose girlfriend eventually breaks up with him in order to marry another. Freeman’s girlfriend returns to him as a dissatisfied, married woman and they resume their relationship. The two primary Black women in the film leave much to be desired as film characters. The perpetuation of the Black whore archetype is the only contribution Black women offer this film.

The negative portrayal of women continued throughout the films during the 1960s-1970s as filmmakers attempted to redefine and reform old stereotypes. The presentation of women and men were are often illustrated with new versions of old themes.

Melvin Van Peebles’ *Sweet Sweetback’s Badasss Song* ushers in the era of Blaxploitation films during the 1970s. This film was composed, written, directed and starred in by Van Peebles. The story behind the movie’s making is far more interesting and relevant to history than the actual film. Sweetback’s tale (the consummate brutal black buck) recounts his evasion of the law after beating two White officers intent on killing an innocent, young Black man. Most of this film is without dialogue and comprised of scenes depicting Sweetback running to evade capture by law enforcement. Other sub-plots involve actual sex between actresses and Van Peebles. Sweetback’s sex scenes appear irrelevant to the story’s development and gratuitous at
best. The movie’s introductory scene depicts a young Sweetback living in the brothel (where he is raised) and losing his virginity in an act of pedophilia committed by a Black prostitute. The sexual prowess of the prostitute neither validates nor justifies the necessity of the sexual act between the adult woman and the child (played by Van Peebles’ son, Mario). The prostitute’s statutory rape of young Sweetback is yet another example of deplorable images of Black women in film. This view of Sweetback’s early life sets the tone for the film; however, it unfortunately does not expand or offer greater depth to Sweetback’s character.

Minutes after the introductory scene, an older Sweetback participates in an orgy witnessed by a racially diverse group of onlookers and participants; however, the orgy’s participants are African-American. To the delight and pleasure of witnesses, two women perform sex while one of them is disguised as a man wearing a strap-on dildo. Upon completion of their act, Sweetback enters the room as the main attraction of the orgy. His performance delights members of the audience and piques the interest of a White female onlooker who desires a sexual experience with Sweetback. Her request is rebuffed by the “management” who struggles between pleasing the clientele and the necessity of satisfying two White male officers who are present. These officers represent the racist social hierarchy intolerant of interracial sex transpiring between Sweetback and the White woman; however, they hypocritically witness the sex acts between all Black performers as content voyeurs.

Throughout Sweetback the Black women are completely nude and yet, Sweetback as the main character does not expose himself to the audience. This preservation of modesty is baffling given the continuous gratuitous sex throughout the film. It is difficult to comprehend the nudity and justify the raw nature of the sexual acts as they reinforce the myth of Black female sexuality and the prowess of Black men.
The main characters are prostitutes/whores with no redeeming qualities with which to identify. Sweetback appears simpleminded throughout the film and this is probably designed to elicit compassion for his plight. Sweetback’s naivety and lack of sophistication give the impression that he has little choice in his actions or lifestyle. However, it is unclear whether Van Peebles intended his character to assume the qualities of a simpleton. The lack of Sweetback’s character development cannot overcome the movie’s deplorable images even if Van Peebles attempted to portray Sweetback as a sympathetic and misunderstood character.

The sexuality and violence in Van Peebles’ movie raise the question of his motive in creating *Sweetback*. Van Peebles worked extraordinarily hard to finance and produce this film; unsurprisingly, he circumvented the traditional Hollywood production route, “working under the pretense of making a porno, Van Peebles used a nonunion crew (blacks and whites and shot the picture in nineteen days, all on a budget of $500,000. At one point, Bill Cosby loaned him $50,000. After most distributors refused to touch the film, Cinemation picked it up. Within a few months, *Sweetback* grossed $10 million.” (Bogle, 238) Van Peebles’ claimed his film was revolutionary; however, the name “Sweetback quickly became popular in the black community, not to mark a brother’s revolutionary consciousness, but as the emblem of his sexual bravado.” (Guerro, 96) The opportunity was present for Van Peebles to generate an artistic piece about a Black man seeking his own form of justice against “The Man”. Yet, Van Peebles generated a misogynistic portrait degrading Black women as whores and sexual objects. Because Van Peebles elected a less conscientious and more devastating portrayal of Black women, he facilitated the perpetuation of Black women’s sexual typology. While the myth of Black women’s aggressive sexuality was produced long before *Sweetback*, its in comprehensible
reinforcement definitely exacerbates the problem of negative and derogatory stereotyping of Black women.

It is important to acknowledge that the interpretation of *Sweetback* has been largely debated; the film created controversy within African-American audiences (as well as among White audiences) who found it both revolutionary and offensive. Much of the debate raised questions as to the entertainment value of the film and whether it helped (or hurt) the existing societal and civil rights issues of the time. Huey P. Newton dedicated an issue of the Black Panther Party newsletter to Van Peebles’ film; by contrast, Lerone Bennett criticized the movie is an *Ebony* magazine article. Newton argued that “the film demonstrates the importance of unity and love between Black men and women’ as demonstrated ‘in the scene where the woman makes love to the young boy but in fact baptizes him into his true manhood’”. (Guerrero, 88) However, Bennett asserted that the film was “‘neither revolutionary, nor black’ because it presents the spectator with sterile daydreams and a superhero who is ahistorical, selfishly individualist with no revolutionary program who acts out of panic and desperation…Bennett views Sweetback’s sexual initiation at ten years old, not as an ‘act of love’ between a black man and woman, but as the ‘rape of a child by a 40-year-old prostitute.’”(Guerrero, 89)

The discourse surrounding *Sweetback* indicated class differences rooted in challenging the perception of African-American stereotypes. While some viewed the reinforcement of archetypes as a method of empowerment, that belief was contested by those viewed who saw negative African-American images as damaging to all African-Americans. Bennett asserts that “…before the 1965 Watts rebellion, middle-class ‘Negroes’ tried to become the opposite of what whites stereotyped them as…the black bourgeoisie aspired to a conformist, striving image of the ‘Noble Negro’ that mimicked the values of middle-class whites…” departing from what was
considered lower-class African-Americans. (Guerrero, 88) Yet, after the Watts riot “…the great mass of urban lower-class blacks, awakening to their own agenda, started to define themselves as ‘counter-counter-contrast conceptions, as the opposite…of what Negroes said Negroes were’…lower-class blacks…started to identify the black experience with the defiant images and culture of the ‘ghetto’ and its hustling street life.” (Guerrero, 89) Bennett refers to the divergent ideologies in the formation of African-Americans representations as black “image confusion”. This image confusion would appear in subsequent films that were arguably empowering or harmful in their depictions of African-Americans.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, there was an emergence of films that supposedly authenticated the African-American experience; a number of movies were releases that presented stories that were perceived reflections on “Blackness”. *Boyz N the Hood* and *Training Day* provided storylines that focused primarily on Black men; issues of gangs, drugs, violence, sex and corruption were prominent themes told from the “Black perspective”. In presenting these films as authentic representations of the African-American experience, these movies perpetuated negative stereotypes that were readily accepted as accurate because they were created and endorsed by African-American filmmakers and actors. Each of the stories was highly creative and provided multidimensional, complicated characters who addressed problems that were considered unique to the Black community.

Director, John Singleton’s *Boyz N the Hood* was an inner-city tale of life in South Central Los Angeles. Young “Tre Styles” was sent by his mother, “Reva” (portrayed by Angela Bassett) to live with his father “Furious Styles” played by Laurence Fishburne. The audience encounters older Tre, played by Cuba Gooding, Jr. as he develops into manhood under his father’s tutelage. It is evident that Tre’s move to his father’s house immersed him an unfamiliar world of
neighborhood violence. Tre and his friends Ricky (Morris Chestnut) and Doughboy (Ice Cube) are faced with issues of police brutality, gang violence, drugs and sex. Singleton’s storyline challenges the traditional negative stereotypes of complacency and servitude, illustrating the depth and ambitions of some of his characters. Tre’s struggle to identify with Ricky and Doughboy indicate the significance of his being raised in an “urban” community versus the suburbs. Tre’s parents are both educated and that clearly separates them from Ricky and Doughboy’s mother, “Brenda” played by Tyra Ferrell. Both Ricky and Doughboy’s fathers are absent from the film. Furious is a strong father-figure; he is contrasted with the absentee fathers of the neighborhood, he provides council, guidance and support for his son and his friends. Alternatively, Ricky and Doughboy are raised by a loud, aggressive Brenda who clearly prefers Ricky. Tre aspires to attend college, Ricky is a high school football star and Doughboy is a high school dropout involved in gangs.

Tre encounters a series of events that challenge his determination to stay above the gang wars and violence within the community. Both he and his girlfriend Brandi (actress Nia Long) decide to abstain from sex; in contrast, Ricky already has an infant with his high school girlfriend. *Boyz N the Hood* was an original work by Singleton and he definitely offered moviegoers with a greater variety of characters than traditional stereotypes. However, Singleton’s work largely reinforced many of the perceptions of violence and crime in urban communities. The absentee fathers are reminders of the overt and hyper-sexual African-American male who is incapable of commitment. The aggressive, angry (and single) mother presents a revised version of Mammy who is brusque, but rarely nurturing. The Black Brute violence of African-American young men is present directed toward other African-American males in the form of gang violence. The Pickaninnies are represented as the uneducated young
men within the community; they are a population of youth who will not ascend beyond childhood.

*Boyz* culminates in violence; Ricky is murdered by Doughboy’s rival gang members and Doughboy seeks vengeance upon his killers. Tre is tempted to pursue revenge as well, but he in a tense cinematic moment, he walks away. The epilogue states that Doughboy is killed shortly after Ricky’s funeral; Brandi and Tre travel to their respective Historic Black Colleges (Morehouse and Spelman). Singleton’s opening credits foreshadow the film’s violence, “One out of every twenty-one black American males will be murdered in their lifetime…most will die at the hands of another black male.” (Bogle, 344) While Singleton does provide updated and expanded stereotypes, it appears that he still relied on the original archetypes in order to present his storyline.

In 2001, *Training* featured Denzel Washington as a corrupt Los Angeles detective, “Alonzo” performing an assessment of rookie officer “Jake” (Ethan Hawke) as possible addition to Alonzo’s narcotics detail. The storyline covers the unfolding of entire day between the two officers, early in the film it is evident that Alonzo is a shady character who operates outside the boundaries of the LAPD. Although Jake recognizes that there are certain advantages in joining Alonzo in his corrupt activities, his character struggles to remain exempt from criminal behavior.

Alonzo is completely immersed and indebted to drug dealers and gangsters; the storyline follows his movements throughout the city as he attempts to prevent all of his illegal dealings from imploding. Alonzo has a mistress, “Sara” (Eva Mendes) who lives with their young son in a Los Angeles community called, “The Jungle”. By contrast, Jake is married to “Lisa” (Charlotte Ayanna) with whom he has a daughter. Throughout the film, Washington plays an aggressive, subtly enraged and overconfident “dirty cop” who appears to believe that his criminal
behavior will never be discovered. He is the archetypal Black Brute, both violent and criminal. In due course, Alonzo’s criminal behavior catches up to him and he is assassinated by Russian mobsters. Jake’s character survives the many ordeals he was forced to endure and the audience is able to draw its own conclusions as to whether he remains a “good” cop.

Washington won the Best Actor Academy Award for his work in Training Day; it was the first time the Best Actor was granted to an African-American male. The film’s storyline explores an interesting dynamic of a dishonest police detective who encounters a younger, idealistic officer. Nevertheless, the film recycles the traditional stereotypes of African-American males. Washington portrays an officer (a man sworn to uphold and enforce the law), but he is corrupt; he is sadistic and cruel toward Jake as a means of compelling him to participate in his illegal activities. No one is exempt from Alonzo’s abuse of power because he appears to have no conscious. As with Halle Berry, Washington received an award for acting as an African-American man stereotype. His character was thoroughly committed to criminal behavior and Alonzo appeared to be without redeeming characteristics. Audience members could either support his criminal behavior by “rooting” for him to get away with his crimes or they could cheer on his comeuppance and demise.

The traditional and long-held stereotypes of African-Americans suggest a predilection for criminality, domineering behavior, complacency, lower standards, deviant behavior and a host of additional destructive characteristics. Degruy Leary describes the problems connected to allowing White people to dictate the representations of African-Americans, “when African Americans accept the deprecating accounts and images portrayed by the media, literature, music and the arts as a true mirror of themselves, we are actually allowing ourselves to be socialized by a racist society.” (Degruy Leary, 180) She details the consequences, “evidence of racist
socialization can be readily seen when African American children limit their aspirations, seeking out careers as nurses and paralegals rather than as doctors and lawyers…in deifying whiteness and denouncing everything that is black. The ultimate result of this socialization is that all that is white becomes synonymous with power and that which is black is equated with impotence.” (Degruy Leary, 180)

The United States film industry has largely relied upon the perpetuation of the original stereotypes in order to “entertain” audiences domestically and abroad. While there have been a variety of movies released since the early 1900s and the first feature-length films, the diversity of African-American characters is largely absent. There are plenty of films that reinterpret the prevailing stereotypes and provide interesting “twists” to the dimension of the film personas; however, those subtle changes still limit the availability of authentic roles to perceptions that were originated by Whites. A growing number of films have increasingly used sex, crime and deviant behavior in urban communities to present narratives as entertainment vehicles. Unfortunately, many of these films are “substantiated” as factual because African-Americans have participated in the development and productions of the story. The increased numbers of films depicting violence, drugs, abuse and criminality reinforce false perceptions of African-Americans as criminally and sexually abnormal. These perceptions have justified African-American exclusion from opportunity and access in a variety of fields; ironically, the lack of African-American presence lends support to the belief that they are incapable of success in those very fields.

**Racism in Entertainment**

While an examination of Black films provides evidence of the perpetuation of negative stereotypes presented in films, many African-American performers recount telling examples of
discrimination as barriers to their professional success. Lena Horne’s biography, *Stormy Weather*, details her experiences as a young woman in New York growing up with segregation, racism and class issues shaping her perception. Although she successfully elevated her economic status, her career and life were continually frustrated by racism and bigotry within the film industry in addition to segregation policies throughout United States society. Lena Horne’s career began as a showgirl in cabaret and lounge clubs in segregated “Whites only” venues in New York. While her work as a performer was steady, she desired to further her career as an actress in the film industry. Given the racism of the time, she was unable to obtain movie roles with the same consistency as her White female contemporaries. Although, she was able to obtain regular singing jobs; Horne was continuously dismayed by the lack of film opportunities available to her. She signed a multiyear deal with Metro-Goldwyn Mayer, but was unable to star in feature films as anything other than maids or other positions of servitude. Many of her roles would often relegate her to playing cameos as herself, instead of portraying characters that were either written or selected with her in mind. During the inception of Horne’s career, “race movies” were prominent within the movie industry; these films were created in direct response to movies that featured blacks in negative character portrayals. Race movies were conceived by “socially conscious, forward-thinking blacks…most of these films aimed to present positive, nonstereotypical images of blacks; some were merely mindless fluff to divert viewers from the hostile world outside. Tedious, illogical plots, bad acting, and technical chaos were common.” (Gavin, 65) While race movies developed an antidote to the predominantly negative black images, they were not able to overcome the disparity between blacks and whites within the film industry. The lasting effects of the unequal portrayals of black and white characters are still evident in contemporary film and television media images.
Horne felt that she was plagued by movie roles that maintained subservient (Mammy) female stereotypes. And although Horne’s career spanned several decades she never enjoyed the numerous diverse roles offered to white female actresses. Horne perceived her success as limited, “it brought her little comfort to hear how many blacks saw her as victorious. ‘Being a successful Negro artist is an unenviable position to be in…I’ll never forget how frightened I was for Jackie Robinson—because we knew that if he made the normal mistakes that any ballplayer made it would be a reflection on his race…you can never forget you’re a Negro. You’re reminded of it at every turn. I want to think as an artist. Jackie wants to think as a baseball player—not as a Negro artist, Negro ballplayer. It’s our burden.” (Gavin, 209) Horne’s work was not limited to stage, film or singing performances; she also was encouraged to work as a civil rights activist, speaking at rallies and working with organizations to make substantive social changes in order to promote social equality. In spite of this work, Horne may have been marginalized in her career because she spoke out against the obvious lack of opportunities afforded to Black performers. Horne has grown up with a modicum of privilege afforded by her lighter complexion and she realized that her skin color provided her many benefits that darker-skinned blacks were unable to enjoy. While her skin tone allowed for greater “social acceptance” among whites as a performer, she still experienced discrimination in access to housing and was regularly banned from residing in many of the hotels where she headlined as a performer.

The combination of Horne’s proactive efforts to propel her career and her repeated disappointment in being limited in her performance offers created a sense of frustration and discontent. She often felt unappreciated in her personal and professional life; these feelings increased the friction in nearly all of her relationships. Consequently, Horne was often regarded
as closed, reclusive or “difficult”. Later in Horne’s life, she acknowledged feeling insecure and unworthy throughout her life; her feelings were directly correlated to the internalization of all of the trials she suffered as a black woman attempting to break the racial barriers as a performer. Her low sense of self-worth was described in her biography, “…the fact that she couldn’t interact with whites on camera made her feel second class. ‘The feelings of isolation were in her marrow…no matter what, she was always gonna [sic] be black. That was heavy-duty, even if she was being treated like a goddess.’” (Gavin, 227) Much of Horne’s life typified many African-Americans’ experiences throughout the nation and even though she enjoyed celebrity and financial success, she was not not exempt from the same social ills that racism perpetuated.

Langston Hughes was a preeminent African-American author and poet in the early 1920s. Hughes’ autobiography, The Big Sea, detailed his life as he grew up with the racism and discrimination of the time. Irrespective of where Hughes lived with his family (multiple cities, states and Mexico), racism permeated most of the events in his life. For example, Hughes described the housing problems he and his family encountered in Cleveland; Blacks paid higher rents (often twice or triple the normal rents paid by whites) in crowded dwellings, “An eight-room house with one bath would be cut into apartments and five or six families crowded into it, each two-room kitchenette apartment renting for what the whole house had rented for before.” (Hughes, 27) In the great migration from the southern states, Black families sought refuge, hope and new opportunities in northern states. Their quest was unappreciated by Whites who begrudged the presence of Blacks in their “Whites-Only” communities, “Sheds and garages and store fronts were turned into living quarters. As always, the white neighborhoods resented Negroes moving closer…most of the colored people’s wages went for rent. The landlords and the banks made it difficult for them to buy houses, so they had to pay the exorbitant rents

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Although equality was promised to African-Americans, there were no safeguards to ensure that discriminatory practices were not implemented by whites who would benefit financially from *de facto* racist policies. It was common for African-Americans to seek prospects outside the United States. Accordingly, Hughes’ father, James Nathaniel Hughes, eventually moved to Mexico where he was admitted to the bar and able to practice law. Even though the elder Hughes had legal training while living in the South, he would not be admitted to the bar; alternatively, in Mexico Hughes practiced law, owned several businesses and property and was financially secure.

A major casualty of racism in the United States is self-esteem; the absence of self-worth was often a powerful influence on African-Americans’ self-perception. Langston Hughes described his father’s hatred for other ethnicities, but especially blacks, “My father hated Negroes. I think he hated himself, too, for being a Negro. He disliked all of his family because they were Negroes and remained in the United States, where none of them had a chance to be much of anything but servants-like my mother, who started out with a good education at the University of Kansas…but had sunk to working in a restaurant…” (Hughes, 40). The self-hatred expressed by Hughes’ father was unsurprising given that there were few perceived advantages of being black; yet, Langston’s career was largely spent writing about identifying the beauty in blackness and describing the injustices that the color barriers promoted. Langston’s relationship with his father was never able to survive the feelings of ethnic self-hatred that James experienced; as a result, Langston spent much of his life estranged from his father. One of Langston’s most memorable poems, “The Negro Speaks of Rivers”, was inspired during his train travel to visit his father in Mexico. As Hughes pondered his father’s disturbing self-hatred, he mused about his own love for his race and some of his favorite moments with other African-
Americans. As his train rolled south, Langston’s reflections gave way to a sobering
acknowledgement of how the various rivers of the world impacted African-Americans, “…the
old Mississippi, had meant to Negroes in the past-how to be sold down the river was the worst
fate that could overtake a slave in times of bondage…then I began to think about other rivers in
our past-the Congo, and the Niger, and the Nile in Africa…” (Hughes, 55) Langston chose to
identify with the best aspects of his race instead of finding fault with his ethnicity as his father
did. This choice would essentially empower Langston to feel proud of his heritage and favorably
and honestly chronicle African-American history via his literary works.

Hughes’ senior year project at Lincoln University was a sociological survey of the all
black student campus; Hughes determined that the student body desired the addition of black
faculty to the all-white faculty. Hughes’ research provided disturbing conclusions which
indicated that the students preferred an all-white faculty and in fact, believed that the addition of
black faculty would be inferior to the existing teaching staff. Hughes described his experience,
“Over and over I heard many students agree that it was better so, that there was something
inherently superior in white teachers that Negro teachers did not have. I wanted to prove that the
students believing this were wrong, and that Lincoln was fostering-unwittingly, perhaps-an
inferiority complex in the very men it wished to train as leaders of the Negro race.” (Hughes,
307) Hughes’ research generated controversial responses from many of the universities; several
universities in the South asserted that they would not employ Lincoln graduates because they
believed themselves to be an inferior race. Hughes (perhaps due to his interactions with his
father) knew the insidious nature of self-hatred and the damage that Lincoln students who
believed themselves to be inferior would potentially inflict upon the black populations they could
influence as community leaders.
The work of Lena Horne, Langston Hughes and other performers paved the way for African-Americans to join the ranks of great American entertainers. Although the nation’s public largely benefited from the artistry exhibited by these artists, they were incapable of completely transcending the racism in America. While several arguments have been made that class and race are oft transposed, the inability of some of the greatest actors to obtain access to housing and (at times) gainful employment was not overcome by their higher economic status. Race continued to be one of the biggest factors in evaluating the potential for success for African-Americans.

**Media Representations and Crime Reports**

The problem of unequal opportunities in the United States is compounded by discriminatory policies that were deliberately established to disenfranchise traditionally ethnic minorities and an economic system that rewards higher socioeconomic classes with increased opportunities and benefits while “limiting access” to individuals with fewer financial resources. It is understandable that inevitable discrepancies between the wealthy and poor are certain to exist in a multi-ethnic, multi-cultural capitalistic system; however, under capitalism, the discrepancies and disadvantages should also be multi-ethnic and multi-cultural. The proliferation of the problems of racial and social inequality creates multiple social castes within the United States. The continued evolution of equal opportunity will determine the degree to which all citizens are able to access educational, economic and employment prospects.

Negative media representations have increasingly depicted African-Americans as criminals; as discussed in earlier sections, current representations are rooted in the foundation of slavery. For purposes of this discussion (unless otherwise specified), media includes film, television and news coverage. Degruy Leary acknowledges the strength of media coverage and
its ability to reach a vast audience, “the media has been a powerful tool in shaping public perceptions of individuals and specific groups…the media images of African Americans are seared into the mental frying pan of its citizenry, swallowed hole and eventually go unconsciously down the social ‘gut’ of America…what is ingested is rarely the truth.” (Degruy Leary, 149) By contrast, media representations (like the original stereotypes of African-Americans during slavery) are produced as instruments of power, usually inspiring fear or creating division between groups. Degruy Leary uses the example of the Rodney King incident and subsequent riots to illustrate the power of media representation. Rodney King was an African-American man who was beaten by several Los Angeles police officers in March 1991; the beating was captured on video and widely circulated. The officers were accused of police brutality and the case was tried in the predominantly White community of Simi Valley. The officers were acquitted in 1992 and the community outcry erupted in rioting throughout Los Angeles. In asking about the percentage of African-Americans who rioted, Degruy Leary was given estimates “…with numbers as high as 90%...understandable based on the news coverage because television and print media accounts largely presented it as an ‘African American riot’. In reality, more than half of those rioting were Hispanic and the remaining were a mix of Whites, Asians and African Americans.” (Degruy Leary, 149)

In Race to Incarcerate, Marc Mauer of the Sentencing Project discusses the influence of media images and distortions in the perceived crime rates. In an international study, “…the Dutch Ministry of Justice has been that there is a ‘lack of much relationship between anxiety and risks of street crime’…much of the level of fear of street crime may be determined by specific ‘cultural’ pressures such as media influences.” (Mauer, 2006, 191) In further illustrating the significant impact of media influences, a study conducted by UCLA political scientists “…had
subjects view television newscasts of crime stories. Some of the stories identified a perpetrator, and some did not. Even in instances in which no specific reference was made to a suspect, 42 percent of the viewers recalled seeing one. In two thirds of these cases, they recalled the suspect as being African American.” (Mauer, 191) The high percentage of people who “remember” African-Americans as suspects when none were presented should inspire a sense of concern about the pervasive nature of negative stereotypes and their prevalence of harmful media images.

In The Color of Justice: Race, Ethnicity and Crime in America, Samuel Walker, Cassia Spohn and Miriam Delone explore variations of race and ethnicity as they relate to the US criminal justice system. Walker et al address effects of highly publicized and sensationalized crimes, “we read about young African American or Hispanic males who sexually assault, rob, and murder whites, and we assume that these crimes are typical. We assume that the typical crime is a violent crime, that the typical victim is white, and that the typical offender is African American or Hispanic.” (Walker et al, 2012, 43)

Crime statistics contradict many of the long-held beliefs about race and crime; oftentimes, arrest rates are presumed to be accurate reflections of effective policing practices. However, the numbers are misleading. Walker et al affirm that “the crimes that receive the most attention—from the media, from politicians, and from criminal justice policy makers—are ‘street crimes’ such as murder, robbery and rape. These are precisely the crimes for which African Americans are arrested at a disproportionately high rate.” These crimes garner the most attention because they are the most aggressive and violent; arrest rates indicate that African-Americans are the most frequent suspects, “in 2008, for example, 50.1 percent of those arrested for murder, 546.7 percent of those arrested for robbery, and 32.2 percent of those arrested for rape were African-American…although violent crimes may be the crimes we fear most, they are not the
crimes that occur most frequently...moreover, arrest rates do not necessarily present an accurate picture of offending.” (Walker et al, 58).

Joel Dyer authored *The Perpetual Prisoner Machine*; he discusses the profitability of the US prison system. Misperceptions about crime encourage strict policies in order to “get tough” on criminals and curb illegal activities. Unfortunately, negative stereotypes are often internalized unconsciously (and consciously) by images that support them; thus, depictions of African-Americans as criminals in media reinforce stereotypes associating African-Americans with crime. Dyer discusses the impact of media on the subconscious, “…as far as our subconscious is concerned, mediated crime messages are all the same, regardless of whether we saw them on the news or in some forgettable late-night movies…to some degree the fictional character…cannibalizing criminal…becomes as much a conveyer of fear as the very real Jeffrey Dahmer.” (Dyer, 101) He further emphasizes the weight of media representations “when it comes to molding our attitudes as opposed to our beliefs, fictional crime messages are quite possibly as powerful as the nonfictional variety.” (Dyer, 101)

Dyer points out that “misconceptions about crime exist because news organizations and entertainment programming present a false image of the overall character and quantity of crime. In response to this constant and misleading crime message, the majority of Americans today have been persuaded they are living in a much more dangerous and crime-infested world…such an attitude is causing the nation to alters its behavior in a variety of ways.” (Dyer, 107) In this instance, the nation’s behavior has been modified to arrest and imprison individuals as proof that the nation’s crime problem is being successfully managed. The disproportionate number of African-Americans in prison is another indicator of the pervasive nature of stereotypes and the important role of image representations.
Actual crime statistics and victimization data detail a more complex picture of race and crime in the US. Research on homicides indicate that “…homicide is a more significant risk factor for African Americans than for whites…rates have decreased among all groups since the early 1990s, [yet] the homicide rate in 2002 indicated that African Americans were six times more likely to be murdered than whites (20.8 per 100,000 population compared to 3.3 per 100,000 population).” (Walker et al, 56) A review of homicide rates and gender show “…the rate for African American males was nearly 8 times the rate for white males and 24 times the rate for white females. The rate for African American females exceeded the rate for white females, approaching that of white males.” (Walker et al, 56) This data is not typically reflected in media representations on violence and victimization; African-Americans are usually depicted as offenders and Whites are more often presented as victims.

The examination of offending in crime contradicts the images and representations of crime, Walker et al found that the “…typical offender’…the offender who shows up most frequently in arrest statistics…for all crimes except murder and robbery…is white, not African American.” (Walker et al, 73) This data is rarely reflected in media representations, criminal behavior is typically overrepresented among African-Americans. Additional research reveals race and representation may be influenced by selection bias, “…victimization data suggest that African Americans may have higher offending rates for serious violent crime, but examinations of victim perception of offender with official arrest data reveal that some of the overrepresentation of African American offenders may be selection bias on the part of criminal justice officials…” (Walker et al, 73) The implication is that the disproportionate arrest rates of African-Americans may be further influenced by the victim’s perception. Victim perception in combination with (perhaps overzealous) criminal justice officials who are encouraged (and often
 pressured) to make arrests, prosecute and convict alleged criminals may unduly be swayed by personal bias. The impact of negative stereotypes and their power to influence perception is the predominant reason why it is imperative to accurately portray individuals and groups, especially as it pertains to race and crime.

**Race and Law**

As the United States enters a new era with an increased and even more diverse population, it appears evident that significant social changes are still necessary to accommodate the needs of the country’s global society. Throughout US history, hard fought legal battles have created opportunities to right historic legal, social and policy issues. As many modern activists engage the legal system as a means to combat the perpetual discrimination, the most appropriate course of action to address social inequality may be via the judicial system. However, it is important to note the seeming paradox of the United States’ legal system, which has often been an asset and a detriment to African-Americans: used at once for positive remedial legal recourse and often concurrently as an instrument of oppression employed to erect and maintain racial barriers. This process would be consistent with the historical Anglo-Saxon system of law and justice.

Professor and legal scholar, Charles Ogletree examines the convergence of race and law in his book, *The Presumption of Guilt*, describing the experiences of Black men and women in what has been described as “post-racial” America. Ogletree’s book was largely inspired by the incident that transpired between Harvard Professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr. and the Cambridge Police who arrested him after he was suspected of breaking into his own home. This event created a firestorm of controversy and reignited the debate regarding police misconduct pertaining to the harassment of African-Americans; it even provided an opportunity for America’s first African-American president to engage in a national discourse regarding race in
America (a topic which his administration had strenuously avoided addressing). Ogletree finds that “Gates’ arrest sadly reminded us that African-Americans still bear the burden of a presumption of guilt and are disproportionately subjected to an arbitrary use of police force and abuse of power, even when they are accomplished, law-abiding citizens.” (Ogletree, 65) The ideal America would have transcended race thereby creating a world where racism and policing would never collide. Ironically, the “ideal” America would still not have addressed the wrongs of history; it would simply rise above them.

Ogletree analyzes Gates’ experience, not as an isolated incident, but within the context of America’s history of racial inequality and discrimination as an extension of maintaining the status quo. His research offers several examples of police bias and the impact these highly publicized cases have had on the United States criminal justice system. Ogletree asserts, “…the arrest of one of the country’s most prominent scholars…was as egregious in the hearts and minds of some members of the African-American community as the blatant, brutal beating of [Rodney] King. It suggested that there was no place in America where African-Americans could receive what the law guarantees to its White citizens: a presumption of innocence.” (Ogletree, 65)

Within the judicial system, the presumption of innocence is allegedly one of the most important freedoms guaranteed to all citizens and yet, far too often, African-Americans present ample evidence that the presumption of guilt is their experience.

Ogletree’s research questions whether race is the central premise of the discrimination experienced by African-Americans as opposed to class. Commonly, within these discussions, race is circumvented by class and privilege; subsequently, denying racism’s existence. Specifically, when the question of racism is raised, it is suggested that the location (dress, car, time of day, socio-economics, etc.) created the problem and not racial bias. Professor Gates’
confrontation with the Cambridge police allowed many to raise questions as to privilege and it was proposed that Gates should have been recognized by the police department as both a prominent international figure and as one of the few African-Americans who could afford to live in his neighborhood, the implication was that he (of all people) “belonged” there. While that is an interesting, albeit naive perspective, it implies that those without Gates’ credentials do not belong and should be subject to police scrutiny. Ogletree questions this perspective on privilege, “should you be treated differently if you are Black and male and have a place on the Harvard faculty…or are looking for a job in a depressed economy and take the train from Roxbury to Harvard Square to interview for a job in a retail store?” (Ogletree, 96)

He further expands on this concept inquiring whether there is (or should) be a distinction between working-class African-Americans “…who are stopped, questioned, searched, or even arrested and, in some cases, prosecuted, convicted, and sentenced to death, based on an honest but mistaken identification, coerced confession, lying informant, or false report of a crime?” (Ogletree, 96) The construction of exceptionalism requires that American society designate certain African-Americans as superior to those without “privilege” (wealth, education, social capital). Even if this division is allowed, American society will not have progressed or transcended race, it will have simply found another method of racial oppression that will be attributable to something else. The implications for exceptionalism are not profound, but rather limiting by allowing this class-based separation to take root, it denies the unjust experiences of the millions of Black men who have been incarcerated without the benefit of due process. Ogletree demands whether these men “…deserve any deference, any respect, any opportunity to be treated fairly? Will we permit police to continue to employ the same tactics to assume the guilt of those who have not achieved these successes?” (Ogletree, 99) If America aspires to
realize its commitment to justice, American society can no longer accept unjust and unethical practices within the justice system. Current police and judicial practices disenfranchise African-Americans by ascribing a presumption of guilt that is the antithesis of the system’s function and design.

In acknowledging the harmful impact of insidious public policies, it is clear that the sociological consequences are frequently manifested by assigning criminal stereotypes that are unsupported. Police officers are not exempt from personal prejudices, which means that without taking specific measures to mitigate unconscious biases, the amalgamation of these biases and police power can prove to be an unfortunate combination. Ogletree recognizes that “…police power and the abuse of that power can deeply impact the lives of individuals and also damage the morale of a community…police officers without adequate training, and with presumptions about criminality based upon race, have made unfounded, unjustified and ultimately illegal stops, yet very few have been taken to task.” (Ogletree, 106) It is imperative that this society reform discriminatory practices that do not reflect the pledge of equality and more importantly, police officers must be required to maintain the highest standard of excellence in performing their civic duty. In appraising the current system of justice, it is naïve to assert that police interactions are limited solely to the traffic/patrol stop or arrest. The contact between a suspect and an officer can be a source of prejudice for jury members or judges; it can also impact the perception of attorneys charged with defending or prosecuting people in criminal courts. Therefore, it is essential that positive measures be taken to ensure that the presumption of innocence is protected and encouraged throughout the criminal justice process.

**Rehabilitation/Deterrence/Punishment**

Since its inception, the United States’ Criminal Justice system has vacillated between its experimental roots in retribution, punishment, deterrence, and rehabilitation. At each stage of
America’s legal development, there have been opportunities to advance the primitive responses to crime or alleged crimes. There has been tremendous growth in advancing the justice system; yet, many problems plague this structure. Foremost, America has been incapable of promoting a justice system that consistently works in favor of all of its citizens. In evaluating the most effective response to crime, rehabilitation would serve as the best model for not only addressing criminal acts as they occur. Rehabilitation, in response to crime, has been replaced by strict prison sentences that strip away individual civil rights. Whereas, the United States evolved from retribution to rehabilitation, it has cycled back to a strictly punitive system.

Ogletree describes the work of Brown University professor Glenn Loury who studies race and mass incarceration, “Loury mourns the fact that our sense of democratic values is undermined by the acceptance of mass incarceration as a tolerable condition in an enlightened society.” (Ogletree, 120) With the plethora of available alternatives to address criminal activity and behavior in the United States, mass incarceration appears to be the most expensive and least intelligent course of action. While removing people from society may be the best option for violent offenders, the long term or repeated incarceration of non-violent offenders perpetuates a cycle of recidivism that neither serves society nor is cost effective.

**Prison Industrial Complex/The New Slave Plantation**

The United States’ prison system alternates between operating as a punitive and rehabilitative system allowing alleged and convicted criminals the opportunity to either be penalized for their crimes or offer them opportunities to repay their debt to society and re-engage as productive citizens. Historically, long-term/life imprisonment was a disciplinary action of last resort, reserved for criminals who committed the most heinous crimes. Prisons were institutions that were to be occupied as temporary spaces, a place to serve out a sentence, seek redemption
and return to society having spent the designated incarceration time. Currently, prisons have become profitable institutions of permanence for many African-American men. The Prison-Industrial Complex has developed as financial incentive to maintain a robust prison population in the United States.

Marc Mauer, The Sentencing Project’s executive director, details three factors that contribute to the direct/indirect disproportionate incarceration rates. As Mauer cites, “the explosion of the U.S. prison population, the use of segregation tactics in controlling that population, and the ineffective use of the criminal justice system to address social issues have left communities, particularly Black communities, reeling.” (Ogletree, 111-112) The impact of the surge in African-American imprisonment has larger implications than a “war on crime”, the meta-message is one that associates race with crime and parallels African-Americans with criminal behavior. Mauer recognizes the prison system as a “continuing legacy of slavery [that] places far too many African Americans in jeopardy…[and] is seen in the increasing disparities in our society.” (Ogletree, 118) There is other evidence that slavery’s legacy has greater implications within our society.

The President of the Children’s Defense Fund, Marian Wright Edelman specifically references the impact of social inequities in her study “America’s Cradle to Prison Pipeline”. Edelman states that “disparities start early and continue throughout African Americans’ lives…[She] describes many instances in which children are pushed out of school, given no meaningful alternatives, and soon find themselves in the criminal justice system as adults.” (Ogletree, 118) The Cradle to Prison Pipeline captures a population of young people with extremely limited options for their future and the possibilities for success. With higher student drop-out rates among African-Americans (especially young males), the correlations between
education and personal achievement are too great to ignore. By adding the probability of prison into the equation of African-American children’s experiences, there is little hope that African-American children will be able to break the cycle of poverty, incarceration and underemployment.

**High Incarceration Rates of African-Amerians**

Degruy Leary clearly details the impact of incarceration in the United States, “since 1980 the number of incarcerated men and women in the United States has increased between 400% and 500%...as of June, 2003 the Federal Bureau of Justice reported there were 2,078,570 prisoners being held in federal and state prisons and local jails. Half were African American.” (Degruy Leary, 106) The high rates of incarceration appear disproportionate because “African Americans make up 12% of the general population, [yet] we continue to account for half of the prison populations…1 in 21 black men were in prison as were 1 in 56 men of Hispanic origin, while only 1 in 147 white men were behind bars.” (Degruy Leary, 107) These figures are alarming when the proportion of African-Americans relative to the general population is considered. Although, the number of incarcerated African-Americans does not provide a complete picture of criminal statistics, the figures do support assertions regarding the effectiveness of policing practices, combating crime and the success of the prison industry. Additionally, the incarceration rates lend support for the negative stereotypes about African-Americans.

Walker et al assert the impact of incarceration on African-American women, “the percentage of female inmates who identify themselves as African American indicates an overrepresentation of African American females in prison compared with the general population, but the proportion of this overrepresentation is different than the number for the African
American male population (32.3 percent compared with 40.1 percent).” (Walker et al, 407) Interestingly, the statistics vary dramatically once federal and state prison populations are compared; although it is critical to note that statistical data collection is difficult because both prison systems use different methods with regard to race and ethnicity. State prisons combine race and ethnicity into a single category; federal prisons divide race and ethnicity into separate categories. Walker et al note that “African Americans do not appear as severely overrepresented in the federal prison population as they do in the profile of state and federal prison populations combined…in federal prison, African Americans represent less than 40 percent of the population, whereas state and federal combined reveal roughly 46 percent are African American.” (Walker et al, 407) While difference between federal and state populations could be considered slightly “encouraging” news, the high numbers of incarcerated African-Americans is still disproportionate.

Young African-American males suffer the most from the current adjudication process. Disproportionate arrest rates and disparate sentencing for African-American men, illustrate the inequality that exists within the current legal system. Moritz College of Law professor Michelle Alexander authored a book entitled *The New Jim Crow* which conceptualizes the prison industrial complex as the new slave plantation.

According to Alexander, “more African American adults are under correctional control today-in prison or jail, on probation or parole-than were enslaved in 1850, a decade before the Civil War began.” There is an unnerving connection between mass incarceration and the demise of “intact” African-American families. Black children born into slavery had a greater likelihood of being raised by both their mother and father. (Alexander, 175)
Not surprisingly, African-American adults are not the sole receivers of the “special attention” provided by the correctional systems. Studies of racial bias among the arrest rates of African-American youth indicate that “youth of color are more likely to be arrested, detained, formally charged, transferred to adult court, and confined to secure residential facilities than their white counterparts…African Americans [youth] were more than six times as likely as whites to be sentenced to prison for identical crimes.” (Alexander, 115) Young men and women who enter the criminal justice system will likely experience repeated interactions with law enforcement as they grow into adulthood. There is a higher propensity for harassment from officers and negative self perception for young African Americans. These experiences add another unfortunate and unnecessary layer to the already complicated issues that young people endure.

Alexander challenges the perspective that United States society has transcended race or that the country has achieved a “colorblind” society. With exponential increases in the number of incarcerated African-American men, she details the United States’ history in the ineffective and unsuccessful “War on Drugs”. The history of Jim Crow segregation coupled with the evolution of the United States criminal justice and prison system presents an unflattering depiction of race and public policies in the U.S.

The United States’ War on Drugs is the primary catalyst for the shocking upsurge of the prison inmate population. The initial rumblings of the modern Drug War began in the 1960s, but the most significant policy changes and implementations occurred during the mid 1970s and early 1980s. The data is extremely distressing, state and federal prison populations experienced dramatic increases between the years, 1985-2000. In 1980, there was an estimated 41,100 individuals in prison or jail for drug offenses, this population skyrocketed to an estimated half a
million - an increase of 1,100%. More than 31 million men and women were arrested for drug offenses after the war on drugs began. Alexander emphasizes that there has been no greater contributor to the systematic mass incarceration of people of color in the United States than the drug war. (Alexander, 59)

The U.S. court system became one of the vehicles that removed some of the critical due process protections afforded to American citizens. As courts began to rule with greater latitude in favor of police and drug enforcement officers, existing judicial safeguards became thin veils allowing individual rights to be trampled under the guise of unbiased and impartial judiciaries.

Initially, law enforcement agencies exhibited reluctance to engage in the War on Drugs as departments recognized that their resources would be spread thin if they were to focus on drugs instead of the more pressing (and more violent) crimes typically encountered in police work. Consequently, Reagan’s administration incentivized the drug war & the creation of SWAT by offering funds, training opportunities and military equipment, “millions of dollars in federal aid have been offered to state and local law enforcement agencies…by the late 1990s, the overwhelming majority of state and local police forces in the country had availed themselves of the newly available resources and added a significant military component to buttress their drug-war operations.” (Alexander, 73) When police departments accepted the financial support from the federal government, waging the war on drugs became a cyclical necessity and disengaging from the “war” was problematic. The loss of budgetary support, employment and equipment would be the effect of either asserting that the war was won or acknowledging that the War on Drugs was unwinnable.

While some argue that the War on Drugs is colorblind and that disparities in arrests and prison sentencing merely reflect one population’s (African-American) drug use compared to
whites, there is ample support illustrating race is an important variable. Specifically, sentencing differences for possession of powder cocaine (expensive) versus crack cocaine (a cheaper alternative form) details a very different outcome for drug users when race is examined. Alexander utilizes Edward Clary, a first time drug offender with no prior criminal history, to demonstrate existing sentencing inequalities. Clary possessed less than two ounces of crack cocaine, but “was convicted in federal court and sentenced under federal laws that punish crack offenses one hundred times more severely than offenses involving powder cocaine. A conviction for the sale of five hundred grams of powder cocaine triggers a five-year mandatory sentence, while only five grams of crack triggers the same sentence.” (Alexander, 109) Although this was Clary’s first offense, he received the standard minimum ten year federal prison sentence. Clary and his attorneys appealed the sentencing and argued as to the constitutionality of the sentencing disparities for powder and crack cocaine. An African-American judge, Clyde Cahill, assigned to Clary’s case, supported his appeal and found that disproportionate drug sentencing was a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment. Cahill stated sentencing differences, “coupled with mandatory minimum sentencing provided by federal statute…created a situation that reeks with inhumanity and injustice…If young white males were being incarcerated at the same rate as young black males, the statute would have been amended long ago.” (Alexander, 111) Ultimately, Cahill imposed a four year sentence for Clary (the same sentence that would have been imposed if the drug were powder cocaine); however, Clary’s prosecutors found it necessary to appeal Judge Cahill’s ruling and the Eighth Circuit Court of Appeals overturned his decision. Even though Clary had served the four year prison term, he was forced to return to prison to complete the initial mandatory minimum ten year sentence.
Alexander reminds readers that a racial caste system does not require complete development as the system acts as a means of exerting control over African-Americans and confining them to the lowest rung of society. She states, “in the system of mass incarceration, a wide variety of laws, institutions and practices-ranging from racial profiling to biased sentencing policies, political disenfranchisement, and legalized employment discrimination-trap African Americans in a virtual (and literal) cage.” (Alexander, 179) The racial caste system and the cage of oppression ensnare African-Americans in a never-ending cycle of unjustifiable social inequities that have greater consequences for the entire society. Education, employment, housing, law and the criminal justice systems are all impacted by the existing racial caste system; enduring racism and prejudice act in concert with the above systems that generate tremendous societal gaps between African-Americans and Whites.

Negative perceptions that are often based upon the existing racial caste system account for disproportionate numbers of African-American participation within the criminal justice system. There are far fewer African-Americans participating as police officers, lawyers, judges and jury panelists than whites and the lack of representation positively correlates with high incarceration rates of African-Americans and those engaged in some aspect of the criminal justice system.

Alexander notes that racial discrimination on juries has historic roots in slavery, “until 1860, no black person had ever sat on a jury in the United States. During the Reconstruction era African Americans began to serve on juries in the South for the first time.” (Alexander, 117) Yet, without attribution, Alexander references the series of “convoluted” court rulings eventually led to the 1985 court holding in Batson v. Kentucky that prohibited prosecutors discriminating against potential jurors based upon race. The ruling was “hailed as an important safeguard
against all-white juries locking up African Americans based on racial biases and stereotypes. Prior to *Batson*, prosecutors had been allowed to strike blacks from juries, provided they did not *always* strike jurors.” (Alexander, 116-117) Although the court eventually recognized the propensity for discrimination among all White jurors, it occurred well after more than a century had passed. Between the years 1860-1985, untold numbers of African-Americans were presumably disenfranchised by racial discrimination in jury selections. Yet, in spite of the *Batson* ruling, prosecutors have little difficulty in evading the mandated colorblindness and presumption of innocence promised by the judicial system.

The controversial court cases of high-profile African-Americans further the debate regarding the existence of equity within the criminal justice system. The media reporting and coverage of these court trials offered the viewing public access to courtroom proceedings and access to specifics of the cases. Many argue that these trials are indicative of the systemic nature of inequality in the United States’ court system. This particular problem has plagued the outcomes for many trials concerning African-Americans and raised questions regarding whether justice truly prevailed; was blind and whether a jury of one’s peers was a reality for the defendants in many of these cases. Historically, the African-American experience within the U.S. legal system has been largely discriminatory. Research indicates that African-Americans endure a far greater number of police stops, illegal/unjust searches and seizures, inadequate legal representation, higher incarceration rates and disproportionate sentencing. Such imbalances of contact within the legal system implies that African-Americans have a greater likelihood and propensity toward engaging in criminal activity. The disparate numbers of African-Americans who are incarcerated and funneled through the criminal courts also persist in supporting negative
stereotypes about African-Americans. Because the “Black Brute” has been widely accepted as accurate, it follows that more Black males should be in prison.

In describing the criminal justice process, Alexander details the process of plea deals that are struck between attorneys and defendants. She asserts that the increasing number of plea deals directly correlate to the increased population of African-American males in prison. When defendants are encouraged to plead guilty in exchange for reduced sentences, the criminal trial process is circumvented and the accused agrees to serve time regardless of actual guilt or innocence. The pressure to accept plea deals has increased as legal professionals attempt to “reduce” gridlock in the court system. Unfortunately, the cost of lowering the congestion within the courts actually decreases the supposed effectiveness of an individual’s right to due process. All too often defendants are compelled to agree to plea deals when attorneys (defense and prosecution) assert that it is the best option when confronting 10-25 year sentences for (often relatively minor) crimes.

Many of the young African-Americans in prison are victims of the plea bargaining process despite the acknowledged fact that a significant number of them were not guilty of the alleged crimes. It is also disheartening to realize that the disparate sentencing occurs irrespective of whether the defendant accepts a plea deal or goes to trial and ultimately receives a conviction.

In examining the prison industrial complex, there are several predominant issues that need restructuring; however, addressing recidivism and the subsequent loss of civil rights after incarceration are principal concerns for ex-convicts. Alexander addresses re-entry for African-Americans, “because the drug war has been waged almost exclusively in poor communities of color, when drug offenders are released, they are generally returned to racially segregated ghetto communities.” (Alexander, 190) When African-American recidivism is compared to Whites’
“…even poor whites-are far less likely to be imprisoned for drug offenses. And when they are released from prison, they rarely find themselves in the ghetto…Because whites do not suffer racial segregation, the white poor are not relegated to racially defined areas of intense poverty.” (Alexander, 191)

African-American parolees return to neighborhoods that often lack the necessary infrastructure to offer opportunities to its formerly incarcerated population. Given the vast restrictions placed upon parolees and the high probability that they will encounter law enforcement as they return home, it is almost certain that some of these former prisoners will require additional support in order to reduce their chances for recidivism.

The current discourse on the loss of civil rights illuminates another set of insurmountable problems faced by African-American prisoners. Individual states mandate differing policies regarding the loss voting rights and political disenfranchisement following incarceration; some prisoners are required to pay restitution, fees and other costs associated with their incarceration in order to fully reinstate their rights. Other states restrict access to housing, public assistance, employment, and voting; thereby, limiting the possibility for successful re-entry to the community after serving their prison terms. The cycle of debt attached to incarceration, prison release, probation and parole costs indicate that although prisoners serve out their sentences, there is an expectation that they will never truly pay their debt to society.

The total economic and social costs of incarceration are nearly impossible to tally; the price of imprisonment includes social, economic, family and political expenditures that create ripple effects for the incarcerated, their families and the rest of society. As more research details prison life and the disparate treatment of those who are engaged in some aspect of the criminal justice system, it is more difficult to ignore the need for reforming the judicial and prison
Ending mass incarceration is imperative in order to remove institutional barriers that perpetuate racism and subjugate specific members of society.

The criminal justice and correctional systems in the United States generate tremendous cultural and social costs for the entire country. The financial expenditures connected to the upkeep and maintenance of prison and incarceration are responsible for a significant portion of the budget and economic debts in many communities. A heavy reliance on locking up individuals as opposed to any other form of rehabilitation and punishment seems to mandate that the current system to stay intact because there are no other “viable” alternatives. In examining the social, economic, familial and political consequences of the nation’s predilection for the cycle of arrests, construction of jails and prison infrastructure, there appears to be a misguided perception that African-Americans warrant greater representation in the criminal justice system. The awful irony is that the very system of justice charged with protecting the American citizenry’s civil rights continues to be a tool in oppressing its historically marginalized African-American population.

**Conclusion**

The sociological impact of slavery is vast and relatively complex; however, it is evident that the negative effects of slavery in the United States were not restricted to the period immediately following Emancipation. Just like the anti-insurrection legislation enacted during slavery, for decades after the Emancipation Proclamation, policies were implemented to prevent former slaves from accessing the fundamental rights of freedom and equality afforded in the Declaration of Independence and the United States Constitution. By examining the existing sociological issues that plague African-Americans in contemporary society it is possible to connect the policies of the past with current problems that have consistently distanced African-
Americans from realizing true equality in the United States. As the next generation of African-Americans begin to grow and create their own experiences, it is absolutely critical that these young people develop the fundamental confidence and esteem that existed (by birthright) for their non-African-American peers. The same sense of pride with which individuals assert their ancestry via the Mayflower, Ellis Island, the Holocaust, Japanese Internment Camps, White Women’s suffrage or as American settlers will be exercised by the descendants who acknowledge that their ancestors survived the passage to North America via slave ships and that their lineage survived grueling plantation life.

The United States’ creation of discriminatory policies against its African-American population has historic roots in slavery. During the country’s development, many policies were enacted to assist the growing United States in managing social welfare issues as they arose. Traditionally, these social concerns focused on the European/White population and neglected people of color and the impoverished. This practice was especially true in instances where people of color and the impoverished had been directly impacted by actions, behaviors and policies of the European/White population (i.e., slavery, indentured servitude, etc.).

The first premise of slavery was that a subservient class would bear the physical burden necessitated by the agricultural “revolution” which occurred on United States’ plantations. Africans were not brought to North America with the intent of including them in the populace as equal citizens in society. They were forcibly removed from the African continent for the purpose of enslavement. The second premise was that there was neither a foreseeable conclusion to the slave trade nor to the practice of slavery. It is evident that there was no strategy for the emancipation of the Africans after their arrival; and given the status of Africans as “three-fifths”
of a person within the Constitution there is scant proof that slaves would ever be considered completely “whole” human beings.

It is imperative that the above premises be considered and acknowledged in examining United States’ treatment of its African-American (slave descendant) population. The very foundation of African involvement in U.S. citizenry is predicated upon the initial relationship between slaves and their slave masters, a time period that lasted for centuries. Throughout the centuries long oppression, the persistent message was that Africans were summarily less than and subordinate to Whites, irrespective of age or economic status. Policies were employed to articulate this communication including Whites’ ability to own African peoples and their progeny; the power of slave masters to inflict corporal punishment (often resulting in death) at will; an inability of slaves to marry, associate or travel freely; compulsory ignorance laws and other policies that were instituted to enforce a social hierarchy.

To gloss over the initial factors that catalyzed inequity between Whites and African-Americans is to ignore the circumstances that allowed inequality to flourish. By minimizing the impact of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and its subsequent effects, America began to erect a social structure predicated upon race that rewarded whiteness and punished blackness. The construction of race implemented a new reality for non-whites that highlighted differences primarily based upon skin color and often included cultural dissimilarities.

It is imperative that our society account for the history of slavery and acknowledge its lasting effects in order to facilitate the healing process. These changes must be made within a universal framework. Once the society of the United States acknowledges and embraces the truth of its history (including both shameful and celebratory aspects), then the fracture of our
collective consciousness may begin to heal; it is critical that necessary policy reforms are undertaken to address any enduring discriminatory policies.

The laws and public policies that were implemented Post-Emancipation generated a wave of insidious rules that propagated segregation, discrimination and inequality for African-Americans. In order to fulfill the promises afforded by the founding fathers within the Constitution, it is critical that the appropriate elements of United States society begin to implement successful and legitimate affirmative policies that address the long-standing racial discrimination which has created the fracture of the United States’ consciousness. If the United States repairs the wounds of the past, it may finally be possible to fully appreciate the concept of living within a community of togetherness in lieu of separateness.
Bibliography

Books


**Films**


