1999

Shaping Realities: A Study of the Connection Between White Hegemony in Popular Culture and the Deprecatory Self-Image of African Americans

Rebecca Thornton
Colby College

Follow this and additional works at: http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses

Part of the American Studies Commons

Colby College theses are protected by copyright. They may be viewed or downloaded from this site for the purposes of research and scholarship. Reproduction or distribution for commercial purposes is prohibited without written permission of the author.

Recommended Citation
http://digitalcommons.colby.edu/honorstheses/342

This Honors Thesis (Open Access) is brought to you for free and open access by the Student Research at Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Honors Theses by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ Colby. For more information, please contact enrhodes@colby.edu.
Shaping Realities:
A Study of the Connection Between White Hegemony in Popular Culture and the Deprecatory Self-Image of African Americans

By Rebecca Thornton
May, 1999
Acknowledgements

This honors thesis reflects eighteen months of dedication of which I am very proud. But this paper would not have been possible without the help and support of a number of people, whom I would be remiss if I did not mention.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my family and friends, without whom, this long existing concept would never have become a reality. Without their respectful advice, constructive criticism, and undying support, this thesis would not have captured the passion and interest in the subject that I knew it deserved. Thank you all!

Next, I would like to thank Professor David Lubin for his sponsorship of this project. Despite both of our busy lives, he was always accessible and eager to help me focus my ideas better, lend inspiration or just chat about our lives, the American Studies major, or movies. Without his patience and support, this project would not have become the refined product it is today.

Third, I would like to extend my most sincere gratitude to all of the professors who have encouraged my academic interests. Among them, Margaret McFadden, Katharine Stubbs, and Catherine Besteman have fostered the interests most important to me, planting the seed for the research seen in this paper. Thank you all!

Finally I would like to thank Colby College for giving me the freedom to invest so much time and dedication to a project outside of the conventional curriculum. Doing this project taught me a lot about balancing my time, focusing my thoughts, and articulating myself more concisely. For having this opportunity, I am truly grateful! Thank you!
# Table of Contents

Author's Note .............................................. 1  
Introduction ............................................. 2  

Chapter One  
White Hegemony, White Perceptions ................. 4  
  How Racial Inferiority has Bred Negative  
  African American Self-Image  

Chapter Two  
Rodney King: The Making of a Martyr ............... 17  
  How the White Dominated Media Exploits  
  Race to Perpetuate Institutional Hegemony  

Chapter Three  
Coons, Toms, and Bucks .................................. 36  
  The Birth of African American Stereotypes  
  in Popular Culture  

Chapter Four  
SuperFly and Boyz N' the Hood ....................... 44  
  Case Studies of African American Stereotypes  

Conclusion .............................................. 84  

Author's Note:

In this paper, the following terms are used frequently and deserve some definition. I have chosen to use the term African American in this paper, as opposed to the many other synonyms that exist, because presently it is both the most popular and most socially acceptable term to define people of color.

In addition, the term media is used extensively throughout the text. The general assumption is that the term media alludes only to the news media. In this paper, I use the term to include all mass mediums: television sitcoms, film, and the news media. When necessary, I will differentiate between these mediums by specifically referring to the medium that I am alluding.
INTRODUCTION

The institutional racism that has plagued America since its establishment has persisted primarily because of America's dependence upon exclusionary practices, enforced by those in power, and exacted upon those powerless. In America, racial inequities have manifested through discrimination, which can be defined by these intentional deprivations of power. By limiting access to resources, limiting economic potential, and ultimately limiting any expectation of a better life, American policy makers and ideology shapers have indoctrinated negative classifications of the African American race\(^1\) into American society, which have then been mirrored in American popular culture. The willfully damaging depiction of African Americans has forever impaired the "positive identity and self-image . . . (that) are vital fundamentals for constructive self-esteem and cognitive development."\(^2\)

First, the author would like to note that she recognizes that stereotypes have been an accepted aspect of American society for decades. The degree to which African Americans have been castigated by the media however, remains to be justified on any level, and has been unrelenting. Because these stereotypes have instilled a pattern of constructed realities for so many audiences, the habitually negative representations of African Americans have

---


continued to be detrimental and condescending and have added to the institutional hegemony by Whites over African Americans.

The following paper will examine how the breakdown of politically motivated racism easily translated into popular culture. Defining African Americans only as stereotypes allowed for the hegemony that had kept African Americans inferior, to endure into a new era, one dominated almost wholly by popular culture. Divided into three chapters, this paper will systematically demonstrate how historically, politically, socially, and ideologically the African American race has been castigated and prostrated by those in power.

Chapter One prepares a historical overview of how African Americans have been mistreated, analyzing the psychological effects that long-term White ascendancy has had on the African American public.

Chapter Two uses the Rodney King beating, and the Los Angeles Riots to demonstrate how the media’s insistence on racialized news has helped shape a negative, illegitimate, and cursory image of African Americans.

Showing how White America has consistently controlled the image of African Americans, Chapter Three interprets the overwhelming dominance of negative African Americans images in mainstream popular culture as an extension of racism in the United States. Through a close examination of two current cinematic texts, it will be shown that despite movements to erase such depictions, power in Hollywood has remained White, perpetuating an institutional racism that has plagued America for centuries.
CHAPTER 1

Whether depicted as a “coon” in the vaudeville acts of the 1920s, as a complacent “ma’am” in the 1940s, as a “superfly” street-pimp in the 1970s, or as a gang banging member of the “Hood” film genre of the early 1990s, the image of African Americans in Hollywood has consistently been negative and consistently stereotypical. By examining the racial disparity of power that exists within the administrations of media conglomerates, as well as their unwitting exploitation of inner city turmoil to shape public perceptions of race, it will be shown how despite the laws and ideals that have long been in place to rat out such practices, racial prejudice has manifested within American popular culture under the veil of entertainment.

American ideology has long been predicated on race. Even today, decades after the Civil Rights Movement supposedly equalized the American population, America struggles to absolve itself of the racial irresponsibility that has plagued its history. Although great strides have been taken to reconcile the past harms done to minority Americans, and African Americans in particular, for serious internal change to occur, a shift of power must take place. Presently, the most powerful and most widely accessible vehicle that shapes public ideology and constructions of race, is the visual images seen on television and in motion pictures. The prevalence of television in American society has allowed for even the news to be extensively scrutinized for its stereotypical characterizations of race. Because minority media employees represent only 9% of all professionals in the
entertainment industry, and less than 2% when it comes to decisions of what
to air or produce are made⁴, it is easy to recognize how the lack of minority
control in the media has contributed to its "racialization". Certainly the
overwhelmingly polarized manner in which the media has reported on
violence in the inner city has greatly contributed to the condition of race
relations in the United States. But, is the news to blame for the way in which
African Americans have been stereotyped or is the news merely perpetuating
the indoctrinated racism that has long afflicted American society?

To fully understand the implications that a racially polarized society
has had on American popular culture, it is important to understand the
volatile background of African American-Caucasian relations. The following
section of this thesis will focus on the failure of policy makers to enact laws
that encourage a racially equivalent environment. Drawing upon the history
of race relations in America, using both the Constitution and landmark Civil
Rights cases, it will be shown how public perceptions of race have consistently
been negative.

Prior to the popularity of the television, which interestingly coincided
with the Civil Rights Movement, legislation had been the most powerful
medium through which ideology had been created and implemented.
Although literature, cinema, and even religion had inculcated specific social
ideologies on its audiences, public policy remained a static, influential, and

---

³ Charles Simmons, "The Los Angeles Rebellion: Class, Race, and Misinformation" Why L.A.
Happened: Implications of the '92 Los Angeles Rebellion, ed. Haki Madhubuti (Chicago: Third

5
constant medium for creating racial doctrine. Those in power, the policymakers, had had the authority to exact racist ideology on the country, furthering the installation of racism throughout America. Although the end of the Civil War brought an end to slavery, the discriminatory institution that slavery created continued for many years to come.

Certainly limited concessions were made in an attempt to equalize the status of racial liberties. The addition of the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution in 1868 conceded to an equalization of minority citizens’ rights:

All persons born or naturalized in the United States, and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States wherein they reside. No State shall make or enforce any law which shall abridge the privileges or immunities of citizens of the United States; nor shall any State deprive any person of life, liberty, or property without due process of law; nor deny any person within its jurisdiction the equal protection of laws.4

This Amendment should have given African Americans the respect and privileges that they had earned as American citizens. But discriminatory legislation, which satisfied the racist ideologies of a racist government, continued to generate ascendancy over African Americans. When discriminatory legislative practices were hampered with the landmark decision of Plessy vs. Ferguson (1896), which decried the need for "separate but equal" facilities for African Americans, some liberals believed that the discriminatory practices of the white, upper class American government would come to an end. But the inherent racism within the government

---

4 The Fourteenth Amendment to the Constitution of the United States of America, Section 1.
continued to keep the African Americans in a permanent state of economic and social inequality. Not until the landmark decision of *Brown vs. Topeka Kansas Board of Education* (1954), which federally desegregated the nation’s public school systems, were African Americans even given equal opportunity to succeed.

In *Brown*, a sociologist named Dr. Kenneth Clark made a profound and lasting impact on the Court by citing psychological testing that he had done on young children. Using both black and white subjects, Clark contended that the segregation of children in the public school system was having a dramatic effect upon issues of racial self-identity. Furthermore, the inequity of segregated schools had a tendency to impair both the skills and the education of black children. Using urban public school settings, Clark researched the children’s awareness of race and color by using dolls, the goal of which was to “pinpoint the nature and development that racism caused.” What Clark discovered through his testing would have an overwhelming impact on the Supreme Court justices and, ultimately, the country.

During the doll experiments, children ages three to seven would be shown four dolls; two black and two white. The purpose was to “test the children’s awareness of their negritude” by asking questions such as:

1.) ‘Give me the white doll.’ 2.) ‘Give me the colored doll.’ 3.) ‘Give me the Negro doll.’ 4.) ‘Give me the doll you like to play

---

with.’ 5.) ‘Give me the doll that is the nice doll.’ 6.) ‘Give me the doll that looks bad.’ 7.) ‘Give me the doll that is the nice color.’

The tests showed an “unmistakable preference for the white doll and a rejection of the brown doll.” To further prove his theory, that children had been severely “racialized”, by which I mean, overtly sensitive to racial color, by institutional racism, Clark turned to more extensive testing of children. Using sixteen black subjects from Claredon County, South Carolina, Clark studied the impact dolls had on juveniles between the ages of six and nine. Of those tested, a surprising sixty-nine percent claimed that the black doll “looked bad”, while nine of the children said that the white doll was the “nice one”. Interestingly, all of the children in the study recognized the difference between the white and black dolls, but few could identify their own racial color. Only nine could comprehend their own racial orientation; the other seven chose white as their color.

Clearly, the institution of racism had had a perverse effect on children growing up in segregated schools. The inference that Clark made was that if public schools, the entity most responsible for the establishment of knowledge and values were creating tarnished views of black children’s sense of race, then the cycle of racism could never be broken. If the pattern could not be broke, this cycle would continue to implant racist ideology in the future adults of America. In the years since Brown, the function to instill negative self-identity has been subjugated by popular culture.

---

6 Kluger 316-317.
7 Kluger, 330.
Dr. Kenneth Clark’s testimony established that the overt discrimination instituted by segregation had caused African American children to lose their sense of self as well as their comprehension of their color and the colors of other children their age. If children were unable to identify with their own race, they could certainly not participate normally in the culture celebrated by that race. Furthermore, if a person was not aware of his or her race, what are the potentially damaging impacts that that person would have on a society so dependent on race?

The *Brown* decision meant that the power to shape public perception was no longer in the hands of the government. Despite the growing public outcry for equality in the 1960s, a new vehicle for power emerged, one that would dramatically revise the ways in which Americans would regard race and ideology.

By default then, whichever medium could reach the most people then, was the one with the power to shape American racial doctrine. That medium was popular culture, and more specifically the visual image emitted from television and film. This, too, would prove to be as detrimental to the growth and self-image of young, and even old, African Americans as any law or inherently racist political doctrine.

While Dr. Clark’s studies illustrated how segregation had broken down American children’s racial awareness, causing inestimable damage, other social scientists, such as Camille Cosby, have since initiated studies of their own to identify the impact that socialized learning has had on self-identity. In
Cosby’s case, her study, (which, incidentally, Dr. Clarke collaborated on)
focused on how specific television images have impacted the self-perceptions
of African American young adults.

According to L. Reddick, whose essay “In Black Films and Filmmakers:
A Comprehensive Anthology from Stereotype to Superhero” became the
backbone for Cosby’s study, the following classifications describe the characters
which are most frequently generated in popular culture:

Savage African, Happy slave, Devoted servant, Corrupt
politician, Irresponsible citizen, Petty thief, Social delinquent,
Vicious criminal, Sexual superman, Unhappy non-White,
Natural-born cook, Perfect entertainer, Superstitious churchgoer,
Chicken and watermelon eater, Razor and knife “toter”,
Uninhibited expressionist, Mentally inferior, Natural-born
musician. 8

While these stereotypes set the standard for how African Americans would be
characterized in popular culture, Cosby’s study aimed to analyze how much
had changed since 1975, the year Riddick’s study was done.

Using subjects between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five, Cosby’s
study outlined and answered the following questions: First, “What specific
aspects of self are addressed by particular television imageries of African
Americans?” Second, “What possible influences do particular television
imageries have on self-perceptions of selected young African Americans?”
Third, “Did the interviewees perceive episodes to be positive or negative
relative to their self-perceptions of African Americans?” Fourth, “What were
the positive and negative influences of the episodes as reported by the

10

To compound Riddick’s findings, Cosby’s study discovered that there was an overwhelming tendency of sitcoms to degrade, debase, and subordinate the African American image. The stereotypical depictions of African Americans, as defined by the subjects of Cosby’s study, were:

- Dangerous and beast-like African American men
- Dirty and repulsive African American poor people
- African Americans engaging in gross behavior, like spitting and fighting
- African Americans disrespecting other African Americans, such as men striking women, cursing, etc.
- Animalistic, sub-human African American men
- African American men who are buffonish clowns
- African American women as nosy, gossipy, hens

---

9 Cosby, 41-46.
Cosby's findings conclusively determined that the images of African Americans in contemporary American popular culture were in fact negative, and having a dramatic effect on the self-perceptions and self-identity of African Americans.

In determining the effect that the aforementioned sitcoms could have on self-identity, the study indicated strong concert among the subjects. All of those interviewed believed that some of the episodes did in fact promote negative African American stereotypes. Of the ten subjects, eight people found more of the episodes to have negative influences than positive, while an overwhelming nine members perceived some episodes to be both positive and negative, known as hybrids.  

The problem with hybrids is when a person is given contradictory messages, (in this case, both positive and negative images of African Americans), they are still being socialized to a negative depiction, and that negative depiction tends to eliminate any positive representations that exist. This study showed that whether sitcoms are perceived as positive, negative, 

---

10 Cosby, 128.
11 Cosby, 129.
or hybrid representations of race, contemporary American sitcoms are reinforcing disparaging characteristics of African Americans.

Cosby's study established three important conclusions about the effects that these representations had on African American self-identity. First, she noticed that one's beliefs are unequivocally connected to perceptions. The relentless exclusion of positive African American images on television has made African Americans more vulnerable than Whites to the indoctrination caused by stereotypes. Because African American young adults have difficulty differentiating between the depictions of self on television and the depiction of self in reality, the limited number of positive representations in popular culture has forced African Americans to accept these depictions as a social reality. As Cosby notes:

> What humans see, what they interpret, and what they sense become the largest sensory, cognitive body of information humans deal with. The cognitive process is imbedded in how humans see it, how humans imitate it; if one sees it, one's perceptions of it may be one's reality.  

Perceptions, she states, produce serious results that correspond with the individual's behavior, meaning that what one sees, one perceives oneself to be and will act out those perceptions.

Second, Cosby found that television has in fact been used as a vehicle for negative imagery marketing. Relying both on her own findings as well as those of noted social scientist P.E. Sutton, Cosby concluded that the television

---

12 Cosby, 8.
imagery are "repetitive and clearly commonly stereotypically negative."  
This finding illustrates the tendency for the powerful media elites to perhaps  
purposefully, perhaps subconsciously, construct negative and stereotypical  
realities of African Americans.

The third conclusion of Cosby's study was that "the more a person sees  
a portrayal, the more the person may believe the portrayal. Frequent  
stereotypical depictions are cultural dissonants that may create cognitive  
dissonances amongst African Americans. If so, these cognitive dissonances  
may be equated with negative African American imageries"  
What this means is that negative perceptions of self are connected to the negative  
images on television and on film. Although this study provides no real  
solution to the way that African Americans have been stigmatized in the  
media, Cosby's work has helped students like myself, academics, and perhaps  
even Hollywood begin to address the prevalence of stereotyping in  
Hollywood.

"In television, as in all forms of media, most African Americans do not  
control the content, the acting, nor the productions of their work."  
Because the "hegemonic strata", (i.e. the producers, directors, media executives) are  
responsible for the depictions of race in the media, in Hollywood, African

---

13 P.E. Sutton, "Minority Ownership as a Method of Increasing Diversity in Programming"  
Presentation to the U.S. Senate Communications Subcommittee, 15 September, 1989.  
14 Cosby, 9.  
15 Cosby, 4.  
16 Jannette Lakes Dates, "Commercial Television"  
American identity and culture are being defined by others. This critical exclusion of positive African American images in the media has restricted African Americans from their ability to "self-define". As Cosby asserts, "If African Americans do not self-define, then they are being described too often by 'others' through 'others' perceptions. Being described only by 'others' can be ubiquitously destructive for African Americans or any people." With their history and culture being largely defined by a popular culture dominated by the white upper class, gross distortions and misrepresentations of both race and culture have propagated in American popular culture.

As bell hooks suggests in her book, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, to combat such practices, African Americans must produce "counter-hegemonic art" to defeat the negative classifications emitted by the media. Although Hip-Hop culture has provided the counter-hegemonic outlet which hooks describes, the cinematic outgrowth of Hip Hop culture has perpetuated a genre which does not altogether quiet the negative characterizations of African Americans that has progenated in Hollywood. Hip Hop has glorified gang violence, drug use, sexual promiscuity, and misogyny in its rap lyrics and its cinematic spin-offs. These are the same motifs that have created a negative image of African Americans since vaudeville.

---

17 Cosby, 4.
18 Cosby, 2.
Though these stereotypes have been reborn through blaxploitation films, the overall image of African Americans in mainstream popular culture remains largely negative. Presently, only limited counter-hegemonic examples exist in contemporary American popular culture, and those that do exist have difficulty finding a widespread audience. The limited exposure that these African American artists have had in Hollywood is at best, discretely discriminatory, and at worst, a mere extension of the discrimination that has plagued America since its birth.

In September, 1991, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, (N.A.A.C.P), published a report on the exclusion of African Americans in Hollywood. Charging the film industry with "nepotism, croneyism, and racial discrimination," the report found that African Americans were both under-represented and mis-represented in each and every aspect of the industry."

While this report opened many people's eyes to the problem, finding a solution has proven to be the biggest challenge. As many, including Benjamin Hooks, the president of the N.A.A.C.P, have said, the best solution to the problem is creating African American popular culture made for African Americans, by African Americans.
CHAPTER 2

When considering how the media gained the power it did, the significance of the inventions of the television and radio cannot be underestimated. As a cultural icon, the television had the dubious task of both entertaining and informing the general public. Because ninety-eight percent of American homes have television sets, to own a television means that one belongs to mainstream American society and participates in conventional political and social discourse. As J.J. O'Connor recognized in a 1991 New York Times article, "No Laugh Track, No Deal":

Television is a business and must be concerned with turning a profit. But television is no ordinary business. Its very prevalence in the lives of most citizens makes the medium the dominant force of society.

Therefore, those who can control the airwaves can likewise control how races, events, and society are perceived. With prejudices and ideology being shaped by whites, the cycle of institutional racism could never end. The responsibility of such educational venues to promote more racially unbiased reports remains a very delicate issue even today. Because the news media is a business and is concerned with turning a profit, facts have been blurred at times in order to promote a more attractive story to the public.

Perhaps the most tragic example of the media's power to shape public perceptions has been in its universally negative depiction of the inner city.

---

20 Cosby, 3.
Poverty and crime have undoubtedly beleaguered the inner city, but the inference made by the exclusion of non-crime stories about inner city life is that the only news worth reporting about the inner city is crime related. By ignoring the populations of people that habitate the inner city, (primarily minorities), these people have had difficulty relating to the stories that dominate the news. If an African American consistently sees one way of classifying their race, they are going to begin to believe that that is the only way they are being depicted because it is reality. As asserted in Chapter One, Camille Cosby's work attests to the damage that popular culture can do to the African American image. The following section of this paper will argue that the news media is as much a vehicle for ideology as any other popular culture medium. Because of the public's trust of the news media, the damage that this medium has done to the African American image is perhaps the most detrimental, most intentional and most reprehensible.

Though the irresponsibility of the media has become an increasingly controversial issue in the years following the Rodney King trial and subsequent Los Angeles riots, the media had long been scrutinized for its seemingly racist motivations. Perhaps in an effort to appear more sensitive to the racial unrest in the inner city, or perhaps to create a more attractive story to the public, the media knowingly promoted a deceptive version of events. The failure of the news media to accurately depict the events of March 3 undeniably led to the outward demonstration of anguish that was the Los Angeles Riots. Today, the Rodney King beating, trial, and riots serves as one
of the most powerful examples of how the media shapes racial perceptions. Critics have been long aware of the media’s power to create ideology, but never before had it manifested itself with such drastic and malevolent effects.

The overwhelmingly racialized manner in which the media has reported on violence in the inner city has greatly contributed to the condition of race relations in the United States for four main reasons. First, when it comes to issues involving race, the media has failed to report thoroughly the external factors for inner city violence, such as the incessant social oppression and/or the historical contexts of the violence. Second, the lack of minorities in the top management positions at media companies has largely contributed to the racialization of the media. “Racialization” refers to the media’s inclination to report on media stories in a racial manner. The way that newsanchors refer to criminals on the basis of race, for example a criminal isn’t a white armed robber, but an African American armed robber is noted as such, is just one example of how the media has been racialized. The decisions of which stories to investigate also illustrates the tendency of the news to racially report the news. This tendency to Third, crisis reporting has dominated news coverage of minority communities, resulting in the perpetuation of specific stereotypes. Finally, the growing insufficiency of the “in-depth reporting” of controversial issues such as urban violence, has added to the inaccurate manner in which the news has consistently been reported. By examining these four justifications for the racialization of the

---

22 Simmons, 143.
news media, it will be shown how the media turned the Rodney King trial into a sensational, racial, news event to bolster ratings and interest. Furthermore, it will be shown how the media’s exploitation of racial conflict as a marketable rationalization for inner city violence has encouraged violent public outrage like the Los Angeles riots.

Before examining the racialization of inner city violence, it is essential to have a basic understanding of the events that sparked intense debate over the reliability of the media. On April 29, 1992 a Simi Valley, California jury in a primarily white, middle class neighborhood north of Los Angeles, acquitted four white, Los Angeles Police Department officers on ten of eleven counts of severely beating an African American motorist, Rodney King, while trying to arrest him for a traffic violation on March 3, 1991. The beating, captured on videotape by an eyewitness, provoked a national debate in the United States about the misuse of force by police and later, brought into question the prevalence of racism in America’s police force. The publicity that Rodney King’s beating received led to an outcry for justice. When justice failed to be as impartial as the public would have assumed it would be, the response was loud and powerful. The acquittal of these police officers sparked the most disastrous urban violence experienced in the United States since the Watts riots in 1965.

These riots, broadcast nationwide by live video, brought the reality of inner city violence into every American’s living room, from mid-Western suburbanites to upper class Manhattanites. By the time the riots were brought
under control, with the assistance of the National Guard, fifty-three people were dead and over twenty four hundred injured. Property damage, mostly from looting and arson in the already devastated inner city, was estimated to exceed well over one billion dollars.

Perhaps one of the most credible rationales that explain why African Americans have been depicted negatively in the media is America’s history. Certainly it has been difficult to ignore the implications of America’s racist past. Although Americans, and American popular culture has recently become more sensitive to “political correctness”, America’s insistence on being politically correct has in fact, injured the healing process. More and more Americans now shy away from participating in discourse on racial issues, out of fear of appearing racist. As Americans have shied away from dealing with its racial problems, so has the media, creating a false sense of racial harmony in America.

Because race has become among the most scrutinized issues in popular culture, it has been a consistently ignored facet of popular culture, and the news media in particular. Afraid of drawing criticism for being racially insensitive, or even worse, a racist, the media has opted to just ignore issues of race. The news media recognizes its culpability in sparking debate and controversy. Out of fear of recreating as racially volatile climate as the 1960s, the news media has ignored racial issues or represented them in a false or misleading light.
This fear is, in my opinion, what fueled the irresponsibility seen in handling the spectacle that was Rodney King. When the Los Angeles Police brutally beat a motorist, who happens to be African American, detailing the story must be done with the most sensitivity possible. Out of fear of sparking the type of response seen in the Watts Riots of 1964, the news media immediately blamed the LAPD with careless abandon for the facts. While their intentions were good and their sensitivity well-placed, the irresponsibility with which they handled this “racial” event, has been perceived by some to have sparked the Los Angeles Riots.

The only way which people learned of the Rodney King beating and trial was through the news, mainly the television news. Very few people, whether journalists or just normal people had the tools or the venues to prescribe a view different from the one prescribed by the news media. Out of fear of being perceived as a racist, many people kept quiet about the true facts of the case, preferring to stay silent than spark the type of violent reaction seen in Watts. The damage that this silence caused, namely the damage to the relationship between Whites and African Americans and the damage to Los Angeles itself, will likely never be forgotten. But because this event revitalized discussion on the racial tension in America, a phoenix has risen from the ashes, allowing Los Angeles to rebuild and racial tensions to heal.
The "theatricality" of news, as Stanley Cavell calls it, helps to explain the tendency of the media to exploit popular attitudes and political interests in order to create a popular story. Whether appealing to the heart strings of mothers, the bank accounts of the upper class, or the lifestyles of the general American public, the media is well aware of how, and to whom, specific stories will appeal. News stories that could be potentially harmful or offensive to the upper class elites or the suburban middle class, (those people that provide economic support to the budgets of these media conglomerates), are often ignored. Issues like inner city poverty, the minority communities, and gang violence have been among the most ignored topics on the nightly news: As one journalist aptly noted: "we haven't told the story of young, angry, poor Americans who happen to be black." One story, more than any other, has significantly scrutinized the traditional rules of the media; that story was Rodney King.

"When an event becomes news, it acquires the aura of the 'extraordinary', and with this aura comes a public fascination with the event, only vaguely delineating between the fantasy of the event, and its reality:

25 Gooding-Williams, 1.
(The Rodney King) event was as significant as it was because it was a media event; that is, it was an event mediated around the nation and the world, and an event whose reality lay, in part, in their mediation. It was an event characteristic of a postmodern world, for in it there was no clear and obvious distinction between electronic mediation and physical happenings, or between media figures and real people... We live in a world of media events (which construct) media realities.  

The racial angle by which the media chose to deliver this story ultimately created the way that Americans evaluated racial tensions; if the news said that there were racial tensions, people believed that there were. Although racial tensions at the onslaught of the Rodney King beating were certainly not as severe as they had been at the time of Watts, Americans' perceptions of race relations following the trial became more disparate. Perhaps the controversy raised by the media about racism in the United States caused the public to challenge the constructions and origins of racism in America. Whatever the reason, the media's portrayal of minorities in the news and entertainment media certainly has not helped to encourage more accurate depictions of American minorities.

Examining the prevalence of racism in America forced the public to consider that if the federal institution of law enforcement, the very entity that was designed to protect Americans from violence, had been inclined to racially violent behavior, then perhaps all whites, all Americans, were inherently racist. The media's decision to flash the race card, to encourage a racial bent to the story, when clearly other issues were at work, forced the

entire country to adopt the media's perception of race relations in the United States.

Never before had police brutality been such a national media event and, to this day, it remains unclear exactly why. Whether it was the eighty-one seconds and fifty-six blows of video taped brutality (which caused "nine skull fractures, a shattered eye socket, a broken leg, a fractured cheek bone, a concussion, nerve injuries that left part of his face paralyzed and burns from a Tasar electric stun gun,"\(^{27}\) or the racial undertones of that violence, this event received more national attention than nearly any trial before it. The media’s implication that the violence had been racially motivated gives insight perhaps as to why this trial received so much attention. Once racism had been introduced as a possible source of the violence, the event took on an entirely different form; it became the media spectacle that Americans have come to know, love, and thrive on.

Rodney King’s beating did not begin as the top story on the national news. Initially, Rodney King himself had said that he did not believe that the beating had been racially motivated\(^{28}\), but as both the media and his prosecution team recognized the marketability of race in this instance, King promptly changed his position. Stating that race had in fact been the motivating factor for his beating, and having the scars and the video tape to

---

prove it, lent the Rodney King trial the sympathy it needed to be brought to the forefront of a news media that had previously ignored minority causes. Despite his six foot three inch frame, two hundred and thirty five pounds, and his past criminal record for armed robbery, Rodney King was portrayed in the media as a passive, cooperative motorist, who on the night of March 3, 1991, was an innocent victim of racially motivated violence.

Though America's preoccupation with race has evolved historically, the media has certainly done little to discourage the pervasiveness of racism.

In Milwaukee, Wisconsin and Boston, Massachusetts, white men accused Black men of killing their wives, and in both cases the media hurriedly published stories about the behavior of savage animals and such. In both cases, the white men were eventually charged with murder. However the damage had been done; Blacks had been severely castigated throughout the local and national media continuously for several months. This caused the community extreme anger about the media’s irresponsibility which severely damaged the Black image.

Irresponsible though it is, the racialization of the news has long been a successful and profitable means of gaining viewer-ship. Because "the figures who play the key roles in these events literally embody the ‘politicocultural’ meanings and the struggles over them about which America is most uncertain, most anxious, and therefore, most divided," Rodney King has served as one of the more effective figures in the history of the media. King fit the profile of a martyr, embodying the racial frustrations of the country through one, overwhelmingly brutal incident. Recognizing the “lucrivity” of

---

29 Gollner, ibid.
30 Simmons, 145.
race as an issue of importance to the public, the media immediately
capitalized on the racial undertones of this event, exploiting both the subject
matter and the people involved, as though pawns in a game to gain viewer-
ship.

"Although racism and elitism have existed in the media long before
this era of global corporate domination, media organizations are more profit
oriented than ever, requiring them to concentrate almost exclusively on
wealthy advertisers and upscale clients who live in almost total isolation
from the working classes and people of color in the inner cities."32 The stories
that have been covered on the news then, are stories that appeal to a very
specific audience: the upper class elites. The lack of stories on gang violence in
the inner city is a direct effect of the lack of interest. White elites want to hear
about issues that pertain to their lives, not those issues that pertain to the
inner city.

The media's "overwhelming fail(ure) to incorporate sufficient
information about the social context or historical development of issues,"33
when it comes to stories about race, has helped expose the media's general
assumption that racism is the underlying factor of most inner city violence.
The Rodney King beating is one of the most significant examples of how
exploiting race as a rationalization for violence can have catastrophic effects
on the future of race relations in the United States.

31John Fiske, xv.
32Simmons, 150.
33Simmons, 143.
The media quickly and carelessly adopted the publicly recognized motive of racism by overlooking important issues that could have provided insight into King’s beating. The long standing, embittered relations between the police and inner city poor, how the economic recession in the early 1990s added to inner city tensions, the increasing instances of crime, and of course Mr. King’s less than exemplary police record were just three of the issues not satisfactorily considered by the media as integral to the case. Because the mainstream media viewed these elements as insignificant in comparison to the power of racially motivated police brutality, these external, non-racial factors were largely ignored. Had the media truly been the impartial agency that it has claimed to be, perhaps the media should have dug deeper into all of the causes for the beating.

The media’s manipulation of Rodney King’s video taped beating serves as perhaps the most irresponsible example of the media’s failure to objectively, and equivalently examine both sides of this case: “As the trial began the electronic media aired the tape with excerpts from the prosecution’s case. Nowhere however, was the public exposed to the defendant’s side.”

Editing the video at designated points, leaving out parts of the tape that would have given the public more insight into why the police used such excessive force, is still one of the most disturbing questions left unanswered. As one disturbed citizen, Robert Freggiaro, contends, “Anyone who has seen the beginning of the tape, the part the networks never show, would know

---

that King appeared violent and out of control. He needed to be subdued, somehow.\textsuperscript{35} But the majority of the public was witness only to the one-sided, racialization of the event.

The limited ways in which minorities are represented in the media either as victims or assailants is due to the existence of an overwhelmingly white, upper class dominance of the media. "Crisis reports dominate the coverage of Black, Brown, poor, and blue-collar communities,"\textsuperscript{36} perpetuating the stereotype that all minorities are violent. Due to the racialized standard of news media reports, many minorities feel poorly represented or outright ignored by the world of the media. Before the Rodney King beating, the media had never before taken such interest in any story of any African American. The media's careful construction of Rodney King's image, the images of the four police officers, and the motives for the beating, was an absolute anomaly. The media had previously ignored minorities when they were victims of white racialized violence, instead choosing to highlight events that would perpetuate minority stereotypes. As Barbara Rogers, a KPIX-TV anchor in San Francisco states, "I can suggest stories about black communities, but nobody in the news management cares about it until somebody burns something down."\textsuperscript{37} Gang violence or any other inter racial conflict has not traditionally

\textsuperscript{36} Simmons, 143.
\textsuperscript{37} Chung, A7.
been newsworthy because these issues do not correspond with issues that are important to the upper class elites that determine the programming.

Due to the fact that "key decision makers are still white and determine the type and focus of stories through their own perspectives,"38, the stories that will continue to be shown will be based on white, middle class, suburban ideologies. The media's inability to allot equal coverage to issues that appeal to minorities as well as whites has, and will continue to send a destructive message to the minority public.

Following the first Rodney King trial, Derrick Hutchinson, a thirty-year old inner city male felt that, "If you condone violence on one level, then all violence is condoned. What they showed us with that verdict is that white violence is OK"39, and what was proven by the Los Angeles riots was that black violence was not.

The government appointed Kerner Commission Report, issued in the aftermath of Watts, delivered an unprecedented criticism of the media. Claiming that the domination of the media "by white males, (who were) completely out of touch with life on the streets,"40 Kerner established that the negative racial opinions created by the media had ignited the outward violence of Watts. Perhaps the media then recognized the power it had in constructing perceptions of race and class, even today, events fail to be equally broadcasted; white interest continues to dominate the news. Certainly the Los

---

38 Ibid.

30
Angeles riots, too, were provoked by the absence of appropriate representation in the media. Even today, little has been done "deracialize" the media; presently less than ten percent of all journalists are minorities. Equal representation in the media must begin behind the cameras and computers of the news before it can adequately be addressed publicly. Because the minority media employees who produce the news make up only 9% of all professionals, and less than 2% when publishing decisions are made, it is easy to recognize how the lack of minority control in the media has largely contributed to the racialization of the news. What author J.L. Dates calls the "hegemonic strata" in his essay, "Commercial Television", can also be defined as a hierarchy which resists racial equality. This hierarchy has forever flawed our society though because the fewer the minorities that are in decision making power, the fewer the stories that will be aired that appeal to a minority audience. The news then, is predisposed to be, not racist, but racial; geared towards depicting a very precise view of African Americans.

Because African Americans and other minorities are an ignored population in the United States both in the media management, and the media itself, the policy elite or, in this case, the media moguls, are able to overwhelmingly exploit race relations as a gimmick to attract viewership. Despite the fact that minorities account for about one fourth of the nation's

---

40 Chung, A7.
42 Simmons, 148.
population\textsuperscript{43}, the nightly news has traditionally been aimed towards the white middle class values, biases, and ideologies. The omission of all non-White interest stories, remains one of the most dehumanizing and culturally demeaning ways that the news media, and the cultural elite control public ideology. Only recently, as more and more minority groups have begun to recognize the inherent lack of stories that apply to their lives, have more and more urban communities begun creating their own media. Whether it is Latino news from a Latino perspective or African American news from an African American perspective, these newscasts have offered more pertinent topics and a more welcomed alternative to the mass media that had long since forgotten them.

For decades the minority populations of the United States had been conditioned to believe that their lives, their communities were somehow less important than those of their white counterparts. This social ignorance of minorities ultimately helped fuel the Los Angeles riots. If the judicial system could not succeed in making minorities visible to the American community, then perhaps overt, public violence could.

The riots brought public attention to the tensions of the ignored inner city youths, the ignored minorities, and even the working class whites, who also had long been forgotten. The public violence captured on video in the days following the Rodney King verdict was an inevitable reaction to decades of ignorance and racism on the part of the media, and more importantly,

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid.
society. Certainly other issues came into play, such as the murder of a black girl at the hands of a Korean store-owner, who was then dismissed with only community service\textsuperscript{44} and the apparent racism that imprisoned Mike Tyson. Both these issues sparked intense public debate about the racial injustice of the judicial system. Los Angeles, and the urban communities surrounding, it had been waiting for a reason to riot. As one looter put it, "those people on the jury united us and have given us a common enemy."\textsuperscript{45}

The growing insufficiency of "in-depth" reporting on issues of race has added to the inaccurate manner in which the news has consistently been reported. When it comes to issues of race or issues considered controversial, such as abortion clinic bombings or gang violence, only a limited amount is done to gain a complete understanding of the events that transpired. When an event concerns a sex scandal in the White House, however, it is amazing how quickly a journalist will research even the smallest lead. As the media has become a more commercialized agency, it has discouraged the in depth reporting of controversial subjects. The media's limited reporting on minority interests will continue to perpetuate stereotypes about minorities. By racializing the news, the media can control how race is perceived in the United States. The media's irresponsible exploitation of only the most sensational events involving race could ultimately lead to another urban uprising, which, no doubt, would be bigger, more violent, and more

\textsuperscript{44} Lynch and Moore, A16.
\textsuperscript{45} Ibid.
expressive of just how damaging the social ignorance of an entire community can be.

"Only a few news events, including the Challenger shuttle explosion and Jack Ruby's shooting of Lee Harvey Oswald, have been replayed so often with such precise imagery"46 as the Rodney King beating, and only few stories, such as the O.J. Simpson trial, have received such overwhelming media attention. Although "our legal system is based on fundamental principles concerning the rights of defendants and the advocacy of both sides of the issue, the trial by mass media violated these fundamental principles. No other result than the terrible loss of life and destruction of property we experienced"47 in the Los Angeles riots could have proceeded the terrible injustice of the media.

Although the power of the video tape, "which proved what King's word alone could never confirm,"48 made the story more marketable and a more permanent fixture in history, some would argue that the media's irresponsible manipulation of race fueled this country's fascination with the case. Resorting to racialized reporting was certainly a more lucrative and appealing news story for the media to capitalize on, but the implications of a racially-minded media have proven to have disastrous effects on both the legitimacy of the media and the future of race relations in the United States.

47 Nogee, Section 4.
Even “in the aftermath of the verdict and the rioting, the mass media’s failure to recognize its culpability or attempt to rectify the situation continues. The airwaves are filled with images of destruction in Los Angeles and reports of incidents around the country”⁴⁹. Although even today, inner city violence is somewhat ignored by the media, the Rodney King trial and riots gave urban minorities the voice, albeit a provisional one, that they had been waiting for. Shedding light on the power of the media to shape perceptions of events, this voice remains the most significant stepping stone available to African Americans in creating one, universally accepted news medium. By sparking discourse on the status of race relations in America, the Rodney King beating and following riots catalyzed America, bringing institutional racism to the forefront of the nation’s consciousness.

If the media, an apparently neutral agency, has the power to create and exploit the visual image to serve a more calculated agenda, what can be said for the numerous other popular mediums by which Americans seek knowledge and ideology? If the news has the power to shape our perceptions of events, what can be said for the numerous other mediums which are much more premeditated and whose messages are much more conscious?

⁴⁹ Nogee, Section 4.
CHAPTER 3

Despite the Civil Rights Movement and the subsequent rejection of mainstream racist ideology, exploitation through popular culture has remained a huge component of social hegemony. To finally achieve the kind of creative freedom few African American filmmakers presently find themselves achieving, (with the interest and capital to produce more accurate and positive films), one must first understand how the African American image has been debased and exploited for decades. The following section of this paper will develop how, historically, popular culture has been prone to abuse the image of African Americans. Focusing on contemporary American films of the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s, while alluding to cinematic and pre-cinematic depictions of color, the following section of this paper will trace the origins of African American stereotypes in film, while addressing the present day challenges facing African Americans in the "hegemonic strata".

Mass producing, through any medium, the negative stereotypes that dehumanize African Americans and their culture, "perpetuate the subjugation of dark skinned people in mainstream Hollywood films." Because African Americans have had neither the power nor the resources to promote more realistic self-depictions, they have been forced to accept stereotypical and compromising depictions of race. Though African American cinematic history hit a turning point in the 1970s with successful movies like

---

50 Dates, Ibid.
51 Hutchinson, 142.
Shaft, Superfly, and Foxy Brown, these films merely reinvented the negative caricatures of African Americans that had been introduced by vaudeville.

Minstrelsy, during the vaudevillian era of 1910s and 1920s, was the first vehicle which white dramatizations of blackness took, turning African Americans into figures of mockery and ridicule. Author Susan Gubar, in her book, RACECHANGES, claims that the white impersonation of African Americans “refuses black people intellectual agency or cognitive capacity” and for that reason overtly demeans the characterization of African Americans. As we have seen from Camille Cosby’s study, and as Gubar reasserts, the repetition of false or negative depictions of race has caused African Americans to feel ostracized and isolated from society by inferring that “you cannot, should not, do not exist.” In 1920s America, race, culture, and quality of life could only be expressed in popular culture by the white power system that had consistently made African Americans inferior. Because of the overwhelming dominance of white dominated popular culture, African Americans were not capable of creating the counter-hegemonic art which could have salvaged their image.

One of the best examples of this type of racial degradation can be seen in the notorious vaudeville radio program, Amos n’ Andy. Produced from 1925-1932, Amos n’ Andy became the cultural icon that it did because, although it perpetuated the same negative representations of race as stage

---

53 Gubar, 43.
minstrelsy had, being broadcast on the radio meant that these stereotypes were cast to a much wider, more impressionable audience.

In the early 1950s, the N.A.A.C.P characterized the show as one that "strengthens the conclusion among uninformed and prejudiced people that Negroes are inferior, lazy, dumb, and dishonest,"54 pressuring the studio to suspend production of an upcoming television version of the radio program. Apparently the N.A.A.C.P recognized the overwhelming power that such stereotypes, coupled with the influence of the visual image of television, would have on American society and African American self-image.

The personification of race that Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll brought to radio as Amos n' Andy were as caricatures. Because at this time there were no other representations of African Americans in popular culture, Amos and Andy, depicted as "inferior, lazy, dumb, dishonest, and loud,"55 became the archetype for how African Americans were perceived.

The cast of characters that such programming introduced held a variety of negative implications, dependent on the individual character. The following definitions come from Camille Cosby's book Television's Imageable Influences, and have been taken from Bogle's book, Toms, Coons, Mulattos, Mammies, and Bucks.56 I will note, as Cosby did, that Bogle's word choice in

55 Cosby, 37.
the following section, (i.e Negro, colored, and black), have been used within
the context of the times these characters were promoted.

The Tom is a socially acceptable Good Negro character. Toms are chased, harassed, hounded, flogged, insulted, never turned against their White massas, and remained submissive, generous, and kind. Thus, they endear themselves to White audiences.

The Coon is a Black buffoon who lacks the single-mindedness of the Tom. There are three types of Coons: the pickaninny, the pure Coon, and the Uncle Remus.

The "pickaninny" is a harmless Negro child whose eyes pop and whose hair stands on end with the least excitement. (A good example of which would be Buckwheat from Our Gang).

Later the "pure Coon" was developed. This character is unreliable, crazy, lazy, a subhuman creature who does nothing but eat watermelons, steal chickens, and butchers the English language. The pure Coon was blatantly the most degrading of Black stereotypes.

"Uncle Remus" is harmless, congenial, quaint, and naive. He is satisfied with the system and his place in it.

The mulatto is likable and sympathetic only because she is half white. The audience is led to believe that the mulatto's life could have been productive and happy if she were not a victim of a divided racial inheritance.

The mammy closely relates to the comic Coons; however, the mammy is distinguished by her sex and fierce independence. She is usually big, fat, and cantankerous.

The buck was often represented as the brutal Black buck. The Black bucks are always big, bad, oversexed, savage, violent, and frenzied, as they lust for White flesh.

One of the most infamous cinematic texts, (and one of the most financially successful), Birth of a Nation (1915), grossly exaggerated African American identity through deliberate use of Toms, Coons, and Bucks. Written, directed, and produced by D.W. Griffith, the clear message sent by this text was that "things were in order only when Whites were in control.

\[\text{Cosby, 31-34.}\]
and when the American Negro was kept in his place." Birth of a Nation was an extension, as Amos n’ Andy was, of the minstrelsy of vaudeville. This film had, however, the visuals that radio had lacked, and for that reason, an overwhelming power to establish the foundations of the African American image.

Walter Long, in blackface as the archetypal buck, Gus, is the Big Bad Wolf to Flora Cameron’s, (played by Mae March) Little Red Riding Hood. As Richard Schickel argues about the portrayals of Gus, Lydia Brown, and Lynch (who are two other marginalized mulatto/mammy/Tom/coon characterizations of color in the film) by whites in blackface, "cannot and does not fully transform’ (Griffith’s) white actors into Negroes, (and therefore) mitigate(s) the films racism." Though these images will forever haunt the legacy of African American representation in American popular culture, the failure of the portrayal to promote more believable depictions of African Americans, the ridiculousness of the depictions to present day audiences, has helped breakdown the stereotyping in post-vaudevillian entertainment. To contemporary viewers, the gratuitous commodification of the African American image undercuts the racist ideology that the film aims to promote.

As influential and detrimental as the Griffith blacks were for later generations, these representations were not wholly embraced by American...
audiences, both White and African American. The N.A.A.C.P. picketed and tried to have the film banned yet the power of the Ku Klux Klan, whose interests were documented in the film, overpowered any political movement initiated by African Americans. Because no widespread depictions of African Americans had previously existed in popular culture, and because African Americans did not have the voice necessary to fight these misleading depictions, the stigmatizing characterizations of African Americans seen in *Birth* set a precedent that even today, continues.

For just this reason, some African Americans in Hollywood confirm that *Birth of A Nation* was an important catalyst in bringing African American filmmakers to the mainstream. Actress Sheryl Lee Ralph asserts, “Oscar Michaeux was the original black filmmaker. After *The Birth of a Nation* came out, he decided, No, there has to be more to my image than ‘The Birth of a Nation’, and he stated doing his own films.” Four years after *The Birth of a Nation*, in 1919, Michaeux produced *The Homesteader*, followed a year later by *Within Our Gates*.

Michaeux has remained one of few “forefathers” of African American cinema due to his to revolutionary challenging of the institutionally racist ideologies that had damaged the African American image. Although Michaeux’s films initiated the fight against hegemonic art, vaudeville’s legacy

---


had been dominated more with films like *Birth of a Nation* than films like *The Homesteader*.

Counter-hegemonic art, like Michaeux’s, remains the only weapon filmmakers have against the stereotypes that have been promoted by the dominant, White culture. Although contemporary African American filmmakers have been “nagging at the heels of (the negative) imagery (created by films like *Birth of a Nation* and *Gone With the Wind*) in order to bring about a change in the ‘horizon of expectations,’ (or) the audiences’ anticipation of what black characters were supposed to be,” the image of the African American remains damaged by popular culture.

The success or failure of contemporary African American filmmakers to breakdown the legacy of pejorative stereotypes will ultimately shape the self-identity of Generation Y African Americans. Yet despite movements against it, the consistency with which the African American race has been made an inferior, subservient race, in popular culture, however, has made it difficult for filmmakers to wholly eliminate the conventional stereotypes instituted by vaudeville. Because the financial backing of films has consistently been controlled by whites, the cycle of negative imagery in film has continued. Fortunately, the social and political climate that had long restricted the artistic freedom of African Americans, has submitted to the

---

more liberal influences of the Civil Rights Movement, ultimately yielding less deprecative depictions of African Americans.
CHAPTER 4

The contribution that vaudeville's disparaging image of African Americans made really can only be appraised through a comparison with more present day cinematic perversions of the African American image. The following section of this paper will argue that vaudeville's legacy in shaping the perceptions and stereotypes of African Americans, has left such a lasting impression on American popular culture that contemporary depictions of African Americans are mere reinventions of the "minstrelized" coons and mammies of the vaudeville era.

Responding to both the Civil Rights Movement and the burgeoning Vietnam War, the early 1970s grappled with the tensions of America's past and future. In an attempt to rectify America's racist past, the Civil Rights Era exposed a social and political climate that was as revolutionary as it was volatile. Though this intense political and social atmosphere yielded changes in how African Americans were represented in popular culture, these depictions remained exploitative and stereotypical. As author Todd Boyd asserts about blaxploitation films:

It was as if the loosening of societal restrictions gained during the Civil Rights Movement permitted exploitation of the (African American) community through control of underworld vices, though the actual control was in the hands of manipulative outsiders, who used the Black gangster as their foil.  

---

The black gangster that had been celebrated throughout popular culture, generally as cartoonish and aggressive, gained renewed notoriety in blaxploitation films. Certainly the stereotypes that this genre was re-inventing had existed since vaudeville, but the impression that blaxploitation left indicated that even the Civil Rights Movement could not change the negative way that the African American image would be depicted.

Concurrent with the Civil Rights Movement for equality, came an equally notable movement known as Black Power, which was initiated by the Student National Coordinating Committee, (SNCC). Defined as "the political and economic power, and cultural independence of black people to determine their destiny, (both) individually and collectively, (and both) in and out of their own communities,"65 Black Power gave African Americans the tools necessary to reject the American society that had ignored them, and create an internal society devoid of the hegemonic accessories that had kept them inferior.

By the mid 1960s, the N.A.A.C.P and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) which was led by Martin Luther King, Jr., had lost the loyalty of many young African Americans who had abandoned his cause to adopt the ideals promoted by SNCC.66 The African names and African dress adopted by members of SNCC reaffirmed the

existence of an identity that had long since been lost through decades of hegemonic art.

Despite the growing strength of the SNCC community, the disparate messages sent by the SNCC and the SCLC caused great confusion in the African American community. While one side of the community yearned for peaceful coexistence with Whites, the more combative SNCC championed isolationist ideals, prescribing segregation from white society. Because many African Americans felt torn between these competing messages, the tension these messages introduced not only "factionized" the African American community, but left African Americans without the solutions necessary to solve the problem. Instead these incongruent messages left the African American community confused, castigated, and disunited; their silence made them even more vulnerable to perpetuating the negative image constructed by white society.

While the African American community grappled with these varying messages, Hollywood, too, struggled with the inconsistent messages emitted by the Civil Rights Movement. Films impressed a more sympathetic, politically correct depiction of African Americans, but their insistence on stereotyping their characterizations of people of race illustrated that Civil Rights Movement had left Americans with many questions still unanswered. For this reason, many blaxploitation films maintained dubious, equivocal messages concerning the African American image. In fact, the success of these blaxploitation films depended heavily on the ambiguity of their storyline.
Initially it was believed that these blaxploitation films were intended for an African American audience. However, when the success of films like *Sweet Sweeetback's Badassss Song* identified a new, more mainstream audience that positively responded to the films, Hollywood recognized the "lucrativity" such a genre could generate.

The duality of blaxploitation films was that they both gave African Americans something in popular culture that was their own, while at the same time mocking or caricaturing these representations of race in order to provide a punch-line for white audiences. Unfortunately, the films were inherently racist because the white audience, when it laughs, laughs at a dramatic depiction of life in the inner city, thereby trivializing the message the film attempts to send.

Certainly the most significant problem with African American gangster films such as *SuperFly* is that, in the 1970s, no other storyline was available to African American actors. African Americans were either cast as a gangster or a sexually omnipotent police officer, a passive wife or a complacent maid—no constructive representations of African Americans existed in mainstream popular culture. If no depictions were available to counteract the messages sent by blaxploitation films, then white audiences were never given a storyline or characters to dispel the notions set forth by blaxploitation films.

The inherent problem then, was not blaxploitation films themselves, but the fact that they were the only African American popular culture vehicles available to white audiences. While blaxploitation films gave
African Americans exposure in Hollywood, on a more negative and devious level, these films also fed white audiences more stereotypical representations of race to internalize, thereby once again reinforcing the inferior position that African Americans had been forced to accept in society. White audiences were laughing all the way to the theaters, while at the same time, many African Americans felt that blaxploitation would offer the necessary exposure to ultimately force African Americans into the mainstream. But at what cost?

Gordon Parks, Jr.'s blaxploitation era gangster flick, *Super Fly* (1972), is a complex example of blaxploitation films, because on one hand, it encourages the negative stereotyping introduced by Hollywood, but on the other, indicts the institution of social hierarchy that has restricted African Americans' access to mainstream society's values. *SuperFly* 's legacy celebrates the successful shattering of the blaxploitation formulas that had had an even more devastating impact on the African American image.

Some, like Harriet Margolis, in her essay entitled, "Who's the Sucka When Self-Depicted Stereotypes Cross-Over?" suggest that the exaggerated, caricatures of African Americans, (by African American directors in blaxploitation films), brilliantly undercut African American stereotypes by exaggerating them. The danger in such claims, however, is that it limits the public's awareness to the psychological damage that these stereotypes can cause. As we have seen, Camille Cosby's work articulates the damage that repetitiously negative characterizations can have on African American self-
image in her study. Her research, and social history contends that contemporary film then, can only succeed in undercutting stereotypes by breaking them, not re-enforcing them as blaxploitation films have.

*SuperFly* opens with a high angle crane shot, zooming in on two loitering heroin addicts. The camera alights, as Curtis Mayfield’s song, "Little Child Running Wild", captures the ghetto experience. The duo walk by a dilapidated sign which advertises the Harlem Street Mural Project, an allusion to the dilapidation of Harlem. Here the urban decay is so pervasive that no one can even bother to keep the sign clean, let alone participate in a program to beautify Harlem. Mayfield’s lyrics: “Little child/ Running wild/ Watch a while/ To see he never smiles/ Broken home/ Father gone/ Mamma tired/ His soul is all alone,” refer to the quality of life in the inner city ghettos in a subliminal way, the power of which would be lost in dialogue.

The opening immediately introduces the tension that characterizes the remainder of the film, and by extension the plight of African Americans in general: “Faced with dismal opportunities for advancement in a racist society, the film’s main character, the stylish Youngblood Priest, actively participates in ‘the life,’ as the underworld environment of hustling is colloquially referred to.” Priest, and his sidekick, Eddie, struggle to choose between fighting the institutional racism that has forced them into hustling, or to

---

68 Boyd, 89.
leave "the life" and try to participate in mainstream systems and values. The following scene between Priest and his girlfriend, Georgia, captures this struggle particularly well:

Priest: What would I do? With my record I can't even work civil service or join the damn army. If I quit now then I took all this chance for nothing. And I go back to being nothing. Work at some jive job for chump change day after day. If that is all I am supposed to do then they are going to have to kill me because that isn't enough.

Georgia: What are you going to do when you get out?

Priest: I don't know. Not so much we can do, its having the choice be able to decide what it is I want. Not just to be forced into a thing because that's the way it is. Gonna buy me some time, baby, some time that isn't all fucked up with the things we gotta do. Just to be free.

Georgia: Will that make you happy?

Priest: I don't know. I don't know. I just know I can't be happy the way it is now, and it ever was.69

And even if they could walk away, the frustration at the life open to them by conventional social systems, the life that would restrict their freedoms in every way, would force them back into that life:

Eddie: (to Priest) 'Baby, if we can make a million in four months, imagine what we can make it four years! I went along with the whole thing of yours about getting out because I had nothing else. When I get out (of "the life") what am I gonna do? I know nothing else but dope, baby. Taking it. Selling it. Bank rolling

some small time pusher. You know you got this fantasy in your head about getting out of 'the life' and setting that other world on its ear. What the fuck are you gonna do except hustle? Besides pimpin' . . . and you really ain't got the stomach for that ( . . . ) I'm just trying to make it real baby, like it is. Maybe this is what you are supposed to do baby, this is what you growing to. Think about it. Don't throw it out, just think about it.

Priest: You know what I am thinking about. . . Thirty keys (of cocaine). 70

What these dialogues demonstrate is that no matter what Priest tries to do, he will always be trapped by his street life. Conventional education has failed to provide him with the necessary tools to integrate into society, but hustling has provided him with the only tools he needs to survive in the underworld; money and power. The streets have given him a degree of wealth that even an education could not provide for any African American in 1972.

His recognition of society's failures, and commitment to overcome them, makes Priest the only powerful and sympathetic character in Super Fly. Although he never gives in ('Priest not only insults the white police captain responsible for controlling the drug trade in the best of the Black signifying tradition, but he also walks away unharmed with all the money to boot,' 71) Priest's triumph over social dominance is limited by his solitude at the end of the film. Because he has no other African American males with who to share this freedom suggests that his mixed heritage has given him a loop-hole not available to his African American counterparts.

70 SuperFly, Ibid.
Eddie though, Priest’s companion throughout the film, resorts to society’s expectations by remaining complacent about his fate in life, just as the audience would expect. Eddie rejects the freedom for which Priest yearns by saying, “I’m gonna live like a prince, like a fucking black prince. Yeah this is the life. I could be nothing nowhere else”. Eddie’s submission to the society hegemony, embodied in the corrupt ring of white police in the film, illustrates the importance of characters like Eddie to fight against the system that overpowers them. In order to succeed in life, as Eddie sees it, you have to team up with “the Man”, the very entity that can, and will, keep you inferior, while Priest chooses to reject it and succeed by his own rules.

Aside from the complex social messages sent by *Super Fly*, this blaxploitation film is exactly that: an exploitation of the African American image. Although one could argue that just being represented in popular film was helping break stereotyping in Hollywood, I would argue that the reinforcement of negative stereotypes in blaxploitation films has done more harm than good to the health of African American identity.

While the characters in *Super Fly* do not exactly mirror vaudeville’s coons and Toms, the stereotypes left by these characters have provided the blueprints to how African Americans have been portrayed in contemporary American film. As jive-talking, zoot suit wearing drug dealers, Priest and his “family” of gangsters embody every pejorative characterization of African Americans that has ever existed in society, and by extension, film history. By

---

71 Boyd, 90.
neglecting to include any positive or realistic African American character to foil against the dominant, stereotypical ones, Gordon Parks, Jr., (an African American himself and the son of a Civil Rights photographer) is, in effect, endorsing Hollywood's indictment of African Americans in his film _SuperFly_.

Why would an African American male knowingly promote negative depictions of his race? Is it because Parks resents the already negative depictions that proliferate in Hollywood, and, as Harriet Margolis suggests, his films aim to undermine the stereotypes that are already in place? If so, the brilliance of this tactic fails to achieve total attainment because whites are still being socialized to believe that these depictions are not only accurate, but are the only identities that African Americans can have. Or perhaps, the reason that Parks yielded to these socialized definitions was because he had neither the power, the money, nor the voice to fight the white powers that be. It is no secret that financial backing by white media moguls remains one of the most compelling rationales for the pejorative way that African Americans have been depicted in film.

Priest, the protagonist of the film, remains the only character in _SuperFly_ who escapes the overt, pejorative stereotyping. Priest's ambiguous ethnicity is, no doubt, the cause for the more generous characterization. Appearing to be a cross between an African American and a Caucasian or Latino, Priest grapples with his own social and racial identity. Torn between his heritages, the light-skinned side of Priest wants to rejects the stereotypical
life he has been forced to accept, and enter conventional society. The dark-skinned side of his psyche, however, is addicted to life on the streets. His only chance to escape "the life" depends on one last get-rich-quick scheme, which will then give him the freedom he so desperately desires. Priest ultimately rises above the stereotypes which limit his potential, plays by his own rules, and triumphs over the man.

As a mulatto, Priest escaped many of the stereotypes that plagued both Eddie and Fat Freddy, the distinctly African American characters. But Priest does not entirely evade negative characterizations. Through language, drug use, vocabulary, and sexuality, which have remained consistent props in shaping both positive and negative stereotypes in contemporary film, director Gordon Parks, Jr. further disparages perceptions of African Americans. In blaxploitation films like *SuperFly*, these devices foster a negative connotation to race, depicting members as ignorant, deviant, and unable, unwilling, and uninterested in mainstream American social values.

Blaxploitation films have consistently exploited language to promote an uneducated or uncivilized image of African Americans. Because language can dictate a character's intelligence, his/her social class, ethics, and/or morality, it can be one of the most powerful vehicles used in film to shape public opinion. *SuperFly*’s insistence on streetslang as the only means of communication, further castigates the African American image by re-enforcing the stereotypes that African Americans are ignorant, uneducated deviants. Certainly swearing in film has received a great deal of attention, but
the press has largely ignored the impact that unconventional language has had on the depiction of those using it.

Communicating through streetslang, as the characters do in *SuperFly*, makes both a political and social statement: Jive, or ebonics as it is presently known, alludes to the depressed inner city educational system that fails to adequately educate its students. Politically, street slang indicates a rejection of conventional language. Because street-wise people like Priest have been neglected from mainstream American society, street slang is one of the few ways that they are able to fight against the system that has betrayed them. Because street slang identifies members of a group, its use gives otherwise socially ostracized people a society of their own to belong to.

The overwhelming presence of drugs in this film further exploits the image of African Americans by suggesting that the generalization that all African Americans use drugs, is true. While the degree to which each character is addicted varies greatly, each character's life has been negatively impacted by the drug underworld which they inhabit. The failure of the filmmaker to offer an example of even one African American who does not use drugs, re-affirms the stereotypes that all African Americans use drugs. Suggesting that all African Americans are drug addicted hustlers who refer to women as "bitches" and "whores", and refer to one another as "niggers", *SuperFly* offers only negative characterizations of African Americans, leaving the audience with a conception that these depictions are both realistic and accurate representations.
The use of the term “nigger” in *Super Fly*, and other films of its genre, remains a controversial aspect of contemporary popular culture, and an aspect of this film which demands special attention. Critics vary in their stances on how its use in popular culture has affected the African American image; does the use of the term “nigger” in contemporary African American popular culture illustrate an acceptance of inferiority, or does it undermine social hegemony by diminishing the very implication of inferiority?

Author Tim Boyd contends that the term “nigger”, “remains a lingering example of the culture defined by slavery and the world that grew up in its aftermath.” Although recent African American popular culture has carefully delineated between the term “nigger” (an allusion to slave times) and “nigga” (a person who is “a product of the ghetto”), the existence of the term, nonetheless maintains a negative connotation.

In *Super Fly*, Priest and his “brothers” use the term “nigger” to refer to one another, though it remains in a context similar to how “nigga” has been used in today’s films. The fact that they clearly say “nigger” and not “nigga” detracts from Boyd’s analysis of African American slang because here, Gordon Parks perpetuates white hegemony and furthers the depths of these stereotypes. Moreover, the use of the term “Nigger” by white police officers in *SuperFly*, reinforces a pejorative connotation. This indicates that African Americans in this particular film, use it, not in an effort to undermine white

---

71 Boyd, 30.
72 Boyd, 31.
society's use of the word, because being a "nigger" is how they perceive themselves; they are inferior puppets to a racist society's hegemony.

The last convention used stereotypically in *Super Fly* is sexuality. Priest maintains his sexuality but escapes the characterization that he is the sexual predator that has been depicted in vaudeville. As seen in *Birth of a Nation*, the African American male was a terrifying creature; aggressive, sexually potent, and dangerous. In *SuperFly*, Priest controls his sexuality, but must have both a white mistress and an African American lover to satiate his sexual appetite. Alluding to his ethnic confusion and likewise his sexual appetite, Priest's inability to maintain conventional sexual politics promotes the ideal that he is a social deviant. On one side he wants to get married and start a life with Georgia, his African American lover. On the other hand, he wants to reject his African American lover, and by extension, his African American heritage, to carry on an affair with an upper-class Caucasian woman. Although there are no representations of rape in the film, Priest's sexual dominance clearly overwhelms even Georgia.

In an attempt to depose of any male African American representation that might depict them as appealing members of society, contemporary film has lampooned African American males' sexual prowess to instill fear in American society. Sexuality and male dominance in *Super Fly* is glorified to an extent that it ceases to be realistic. In a lengthy and gratuitous sex scene,
Priest's sexuality is so potent that Georgia, though at first reluctant, shortly succumbs to Priest's sexual powers.74

Films like Super Fly obviously had a dramatic impact on both Hollywood and the African American image in film. Sparking a film genre which would foster similarly negative representations of African Americans, the blaxploitation films of the 1970s set a precedent of how African Americans would be portrayed in future popular culture vehicles. Films like Super Fly accentuated the negative generalizations of African Americans, and dispelled, or altogether ignored, any positive representations that could have given African Americans a more realistic public image. SuperFly's unwitting, negative portrayals of African Americans laid the ground-work for how African Americans would be depicted in the popular culture of the 1980s and 1990s. Directors like John Singleton answered these stereotypes with gritty, realistic urban dramas that re-evaluated the ways in which African Americans were portrayed.

74 SuperFly, Ibid.
While the blaxploitation films of the 1970s responded to the Civil Rights Movement, the films of the 1980s and 1990s were a response to the negative and unrealistic depictions that had found a mainstay in contemporary Hollywood. While vaudeville clearly introduced such negative representations, blaxploitation films had done little to eliminate these disparaging characterizations. If anything, blaxploitation films fostered the deprecatory image of African Americans by creating, redefining, and reinforcing set stereotypes.

De-stereotyping the negative image of African Americans proved to be a daunting task. Although new genres of African American film emerged, the frequency with which African American films were classified as African American made it difficult for any of these films to cross-over. Though these genres allowed for more African American films to be made, they also unknowingly created a pigeonhole to which all African Americans actors/actresses would be held, thereby once again creating a stereotype.

The first of these new genres can be classified as Spike Lee films; controversial and eye-opening, these films challenged convention and have indicted White America for the status of race relations. The next genre, in what came to be known as the “Hood” genre of films, characterized a more realistic portrayal of inner city life. Films like Hoop Dreams, a documentary, middle-to-upper class women’s pictures like Waiting to Exhale (1996) or Soul Food (1997), or How Stella Got Her Groove Back (1998) which responded to
the sexualized women of blaxploitation films, have both contributed to the
more positive way African Americans are, more recently, being depicted in
popular culture. Additionally, crossover films, like the buddy films of Eddie
Murphy, helped bring more African American actors/actresses to the
forefront of American cinema. All of these burgeoning genres have helped
dispel the characterizations of African Americans reintroduced by
blaxploitation films, while at the same time creating a new version of the
African American public image.

In the early 1990s, as America witnessed a return to consciousness
following the racially ignorant Reagan administration, which had ignored
affirmative action and other racially liberal policies, racial politics became an
increasingly mediated issue. As Americans had begun to process the mixed
messages sent by the Civil Rights Movement, the Reagan administration, and
the burgeoning hip hop counter culture, a handful of African American
directors took action by capturing these tensions on film.

Director Spike Lee's controversial film, *Do the Right Thing* (1989) was
one of the films that most convincingly captured the difficulty in resolving
these anomalies. Between the Civil Rights Movement and the 1990s, little,
either politically or socially, had been done to rectify America's racist past.
Filmmakers like Lee have since introduced mainstream society to real
African American characters in more realistic environments. Although such
aggressive réalité cinema ultimately created a pigeonhole by which African
Americans could be stereotyped, directors like Lee and John Singleton, greatly advanced the success and impact of African American cinema.

Grappling with the mixed messages sent by Martin Luther King, Jr. and Malcolm X during the Civil Rights Movement, by the 1980s, Americans had still not yet settled on a solution to its racist past. Lee’s *Do the Right Thing* addressed the incongruities of Malcolm and Martin’s ideologies. Although the candidness with which Lee dealt with racism initiated controversy, the dialogue that it sparked in America, today, far outweighs the negative controversy surrounding the film.

*Do the Right Thing* marked a departure in the messages African American films sent. Illustrating a more positive characterization of the inner city, free from the drugs and gangs seen in *SuperFly*, the neighborhood of Bedford-Stuyvesant, New York was a microcosm of Black America. With a mixed bag of both educated and streetwise, those working and those on welfare, African American and White alike, the characters on this Brooklyn street were both stereotypical and anti-stereotypical. Because Lee introduced characters that foiled one another, showing as many anti-stereotypical characters as the so-called stereotypical characters lent credibility to his depiction of inner city America. Addressing the pitfalls of inner city life, namely the racial tensions between the police and the residents, allowed Lee to open White America’s eyes to the problems plaguing the Hood. By breaking the conventions of what, who, and how life was depicted in Black America, Lee encouraged a new generation of African American filmmakers
who would continue to break the chains which hegemony influenced popular culture had introduced.

Perhaps no other film than John Singleton’s *Boyz N’ the Hood* has so successfully challenged the stereotypes established by blaxploitation films. While critics like Jesse Algeron Rhines claims that *Boyz* “catered to the Blacks-as violent or criminal stereotypes like those dominant in the blaxploitation period,”75 I would argue that the balance with which Singleton approached the characterization of the African American male illustrates an increased conscientiousness to the influence of the African American image, marking a departure from past, more damaging depictions.

This symmetry, in Singleton’s representations of African Americans, is more significant when contrasted with the pattern of negativity set by vaudeville. As has been noted earlier, the consistency with which the African American image had been exploited in popular culture had left room for very few representations of African Americans at all, let alone positive ones. The more pervasive problem, however, the disproportion of negative characterizations of African Americans, had led to a belief that these depictions were mirroring reality. The permanent misconceptions left by the barrage of negative, deprecatory characters had continued to perpetuate a demeaning self-image. This damaged self-image had bred a “whole generation of black men (who don’t) respect themselves, which makes it

easier for them to shoot each other.” Singleton recognized the connection and committed to producing much more balanced, more realistic representations of the African American community. Because John Singleton’s first film, a part of the burgeoning “New Wave” of cinema aimed more towards capturing vérité than perpetuating the defamation of the African American image. *Boyz N’ the Hood*, through its “compelling, original script, social context, and adept marketing strategies, as well as its timely arrival at a turning point in the nation’s volatile racial predicament, has proven to be an extraordinary African American vision, taking up the racial discourse where *Do the Right Thing* left off.”

A coming of age film, set in the inner city neighborhood known as South Central Los Angeles, *Boyz N’ the Hood* identifies a key tension of inner city life; anger. Due to the inferiority with which African Americans have been treated throughout history, anger and hopelessness have become accepted emotions, consequences of being an ignored population of people for so many years. As discussed in Chapter One, the consistency with which African Americans have been socially castigated by popular and historical culture has lead to a damaged sense of self. Fueling the violence and economic depravity of the inner city, the anger and resentment felt by the African American, inner city communities, has been the most damaging way which African Americans have participated in the hegemony of their own race.

Social ignorance to the compulsion of inner city men to rectify their anger through violence has only perpetuated the problem. Inner city African American men have been socialized either by popular culture or social and political hegemony, to believe that “the life” is the only way that life can be. Singleton’s film gives those men hope by, for the first time, creating characters that both participate in the life as well as those who do not. Tre is committed to getting out of the Hood, not through sports or music as has been conventionally the case, but through perseverance, dedication, and education. Doughboy, on the other hand, has accepted that his future is fated; he will spend the remainder of his short life running from thugs, running from the law, all in a futile effort to buy time. Controlling and accepting this anger, as Singleton sees it, is the key to survival in the Hood. The difference between those men/boys who can control this anger and those who cannot, illustrates the key tension in the film.

Dispelling the stereotype of dysfunctional family life in the Hood, the protagonist, Tre Styles, has a strong, albeit divorced parental structure. Contrasting the stereotypical depiction of African American, inner city life, Furious and Reva Styles are “functioning” members of society; they each hold jobs, own homes, own cars, and are educated. The very characters of Furious and Reva go against the deprecatory pattern of stereotypes in Hollywood. But the fact that their progeny will grow up to be as centered illustrates a deviation from normal characterizations in mainstream Hollywood films.

---

Despite the multitude of factors against him, the patience and love of his family, especially the moral guidance of his father, give him the tools necessary to surviving ghetto-life.

Breaking barriers previously in place, *Boyz N' the Hood* testified to how African American filmmakers could reject the standard, negative depictions of race and still make a lucrative and critically lauded product. Characterizing broken homes in both positive and negative lights, gang warfare in realistic terms, and inner city life in a balanced and fair way by showing both those in and out of “the life”, Singleton gave audiences both sides of the story and let them draw their own conclusions.

This signaled a great departure from African American representations in popular culture, for it gave the audience characters that foiled one another. As in life, not every one is bad, not every one is good, and most people are somewhere in the middle of bad and good. Singleton’s film gave the audience realistic people, put them in the inner city, and showed us that life’s greatest pleasures, sex, drugs, and, in this case, rap, have continued to be the backbone of teenage life, even in the Hood. The existence of these common teenage traits testifies to the commonalities of life and allows African American, White, upper class, lower class, educated and uneducated audiences to identify with Hood life.

The depth of visual textuality in the opening scenes of *Boyz N' the Hood* warrant close examination. Because the opening scenes of a film introduce the central characters, themes, and ideals to which the audience
should be most aware, those are the scenes that, I think, deserve the most attention. *Boyz* is no exception, for it profoundly captures the mood, tone, and tensions of the inner city.

*Boyz N' the Hood*'s opening immediately juxtaposes the tension between the residents and the police through a brilliant montage of sound and dialogue. As the title screen emerges, a group of male voices are heard preparing for a drive-by shooting. A profound statistic, which introduces the body of the film, foregrounds the tension of violence that dominates the *Boyz*: “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.” As the statistic roles, a female voice is heard on a police scanner, saying very conservatively, “Officer needs assistance. Possible 187. Corner of Crenshaw and...” as, in contrast, a little boy painfully screams, “They shot my brother! They shot my brother!” brother being an allusion both to a familial brotherhood as well as the cultural, African American brotherhood. The screen goes black for a moment and then opens in the South Central neighborhood where this film will take place.

The camera opens, panning in on a stop sign on an indescript street in South Central, Los Angeles. The dramatic effect which this stop sign has on the audience serves a cinematic duality: First, as an allusion to stopping the violence, the stop sign stands out as a recognizable image that dramatically alludes to the violence which plagues the neighborhood being depicted.
Symbolically, however, this stop sign intimates to the inability for people in this neighborhood to escape. Even if someone has been given the self-worth to yearn for something more from life, virtual stop signs exist at the end of every road leading out: Discrimination, lack of education, a lack of skills, a lack of acceptance, and the limitation of opportunity—all stand as deterrents to social class passing. This stunning duality introduces a struggle that presents itself throughout the film; predestination to failure and the cycle of afflictions which plague inner city families who can never get out alive.

Next the camera cuts to a young African American boy standing on a street corner underneath a sign which says “One Way”. Though this boy, waiting for his friends to walk to school with, will walk that One Way, the sign overwhelmingly incites comment about the status of social passing in the Hood. The irony is that this one way street leads Tre and his friends to school, but the message this image sends is that even school cannot save the soul from the depravation and depression of the Hood. Only one real way out of the Hood exists, and that way is through the moral guidance Tre receives from his father. One Way signs and Do Not Enter signs continue to textualize the theme of imprisonment in the Hood, which the relationships, settings, and events of the film bolster.

As the children walk to school, the conversation turns to shootings and dead bodies; not the normal conversation expected of children, but in the Hood, innocence is void. Drive-by shootings, fighting, dead bodies in the

---

78 *Boyz N’ the Hood*, dir. John Singleton, perf. Cuba Gooding, Jr., Larry Fishburne, Angela
street, and the expectation of chaos, have become a reality for these children, and slowly, they have been desensitized to it. As they discuss the shooting from the night before, one girl notes that her “Mama say a bullet don’t have no name on it” as one of the boys says, “I ain’t afraid to get shot. Both my brothers been shot and they still alive.” Tre’s response, “They’s lucky”, illustrates Tre’s understanding of Hood politics. While the nameless boy has become desensitized to the violence around him, Tre maintains the fear and discomfort that, for so many of his peers, has been softened by inner city violence.

The children’s clothing also lends a social context to the film. While the other, nameless boy wears typical street clothing, (a running suit and a black hat on backwards), Tre, who will be the central character of this film, wears clothing that is much more conservative. Foregrounding the relationship between Tre and his parents, Tre’s dress-shirt, dress pants, and preppy sweater, which were clearly picked out by his mother, dramatically delineate from the urban style that dominates the wardrobes of his peers. Due to his dress, the audience immediately recognizes Tre as different from his classmates.

As the children continue their walk to school, the unnamed boy initiates a journey to “see somethin’”. The children follow the one way sign, but against the warnings of both a Wrong Way and a Do Not Enter sign, (which, as mentioned above, symbolizes the hopelessness of their futures) the


68
children venture into a dangerous looking alley. As the camera cuts quickly three times, each time focusing more closely on Ronald Reagan campaign posters, we hear a single gunshot, and realize that Reagan’s face, too, wears the violence of the Hood; the posters are riddled with gunshot holes that appear intentionally inflicted. Filmmakers like Singleton have used seemingly obscure references, like this, to set up a binary opposition between the conservative policies of America and African American’s rejection of the discreet oppression set up by Reagan’s politics.79

The rich opening montage of scenes immediately establishes the juxtaposition of innocence and evil in the inner city. As the children approach the proposed surprise, the camera pans across to a scene scattered with bloodied newspapers and trash. Through the juxtaposition of the following characters, Singleton identifies the dichotomy that separates the Hood into “niggers” and African Americans. One of the girls naively says, “Is that blood? What happened?” while the nameless boy responds boastfully, “What do you think? Somebody got smoked! Look at the hole in the wall stupid.” Her retort, “Least I can tell my times tables” is telling of the difference in priorities for these youths. The contrast of the still innocent young girl, and the desensitized, angry young boy demonstrates the two tracks that are open to young, trapped, inner city African Americans; either you participate in the life, as the young boy will, or you fight it through education.

---

79 Boyd, 96.
Because *Boyz N' the Hood* is just that, a film about African American males in the inner city, the depictions of masculinity in the film deserve close examination. Singleton explores at least three ideological paths for young black men: Tre chooses academic achievement as the vehicle for his survival of the inner city. While having a job at the local mall gives Tre exposure to a world closed off to many of his South Central peers, the support from his family likely has been the reason for his survival. Doughboy, on the other hand, opts to reject the unattainable status set by the white middle class world, preferring gang banging and drug dealing to any productive role in society. Ricky, a talented athlete and Dough's half brother, bridges the worlds of Dough and Tre by trying to rise out of the ghetto but proving to have neither the dedication, intelligence, or tools to achieve it. Where Tre symbolizes hope for escaping the plight of the ghetto, and Dough symbolizes acceptance of the plight of the ghetto, Rick's future is uncertain. He could get a 710 on his SATs, go to USC, go pro, and be a hometown hero, or he could get gunned down in a drive by. Due to the determinism of the Hood, instead of becoming a celebrity, he becomes a statistic.

Because Rick's survival is unpredictable, he fits neither with the predestination of Dough's life or the dedication of Tre's. Rick's family is stereotypically broken. His mother, apparent from the fact that she has two sons by two different men, yearns for love and attention, but remains single because she has not found a man "man enough" to accept responsibility for

---

80 Guerrero, 184.
his actions. The only reminder Rick has of his father is a football, which he carries with him throughout the film, alluding both to his need for a father and his need for an escape. Rick becoming a young father, for example, is just one of the consequences of having an absentee father.

One of the largest problems facing men in the inner city is that there is nothing to fill their time, so invariably they end up participants in “the life”. Rick, however, has a routine that keeps him off of the streets. While Dough stoops and gawks at women, drinking, drugging, and thugging, Rick is going to football practice, which serves both as an emotional outlet and a potential escape from the Hood—football could earn him a scholarship to college. By avoiding the life that has forever plagued Doughboy, Rick has options open to him that are closed to most men in the ghetto. But Rick recognizes that his survival, his escape, depends on an element of luck. Even in the final sequence before his murder, Rick is seen scratching a lottery ticket; one last ditch effort to get out of the ghetto trap.

The difference between Rick and Doughboy is most visible through a comparison of their upbringing. Although Rick and Doughboy share a mother, (the only available parent), the way that she differentiates between them based on who their father is clearly affects their self-esteem. The first time that the audience is introduced to Mrs. Baker, we hear only her voice at first, which alludes to the vacance of presence that she has in Doughboy’s life.:
“You ain’t shit. You just like your daddy. You don’t do shit and you never gonna amount to shit. All you ever do is eat, sleep, and shit... Where you
going you little fat fuck? You ain’t got no job.” The exasperation with which she yells at Doughboy immediately introduces a tension between mother and son that will exist throughout the film. In direct contrast, Mrs. Baker says to Rick, later in the film, “I always knew you would amount to something.” The vastly different ways which Mrs. Baker treats her sons, in Singleton’s mind, determines their futures. Rick grows up thinking he can and will make something of his life; the love and support of his mother make him feel capable.

Doughboy lacks the love and attention that Rick receives throughout the film. For this reason his life is destined to fail. When one has been socialized to believe that, as Mrs. Baker claims, “You don’t do shit and you never gonna amount to shit”, one begins to believe it. Because no one respects Doughboy, Doughboy doesn’t respect himself and therefore searches for respect in thug life. But Doughboy is not a typical thug. He is smart, but doesn’t have the self-respect to go to school. He is loving, but has not been given the tools to love. He is aware of his present predicament and how it will ultimately claim him, but he does not have the skills necessary to avoid it. As he astutely points out, he recognizes the difference between himself and Tre:

Doughboy: Yo, cuz. I know why you got out of the car last night. You shouldn’t have been there in the first place. You don’t want that shit to come back to haunt you. I haven’t been up this early in a long time. I turned on the TV this morning. Had this shit on about living in a violent, a violent world. They showed all these foreign places where foreigners live and all. I started

---

81 Boyz N’ the Hood, ibid.
thinking. Either they don’t know, don’t show, or just don’t care about what’s going on in the Hood. They had all this foreign shit and they had shit on my brother. I ain’t got no brother. Got no mother either. She loved that fool more than she loved me.\footnote{Boyz N’ the Hood, Ibid.}

Throughout the film, as other characters participate in football, jobs and love, Doughboy stoops all day, drinking 40 oz. malt liquors, playing Nintendo, and cat-calling to women. Sadly, this is all he knows, and this is all he will ever know.

Tre, on the other hand, contrasts with Doughboy significantly. Because Tre has had a parental relationship with fostered love and encouragement, Tre has been able to access worlds and relationships which otherwise would have been closed off to him. Although his mother probably could have raised him into a young man like Rick, the presence of his strong father, Furious, has helped Tre become a man who does not need thug life to make him feel accepted. Because he gets love from his father and mother he can therefore, love Brandi. Because both of his parents work hard, he understands the benefits of a strong work ethic. Because he has been dedicated to getting out of the Hood, he recognizes the importance of education.

When put to the test, whether or not he will participate in the revengeful slaughter of Rick’s murderers, Tre knows he is different. Driving in that car, Tre has everything to lose, (his life, his father’s respect, his self-respect, and his integrity) while Doughboy, Monster, and Mad Dog have absolutely nothing to lose. This kind of behavior is what their families, their community, and their society expect of them. Tre has been given the love and
support that is necessary for African American males to survive the inner city. Without the dedication of his father, Tre would likely have become just one of the many characters in the Hood who have no future.

Singleton believes that without the patience and participation of an interested family structure, all inner city males are doomed to failure. Providing direction to directionless youth through mentoring is the only solution Singleton provides to avoiding the communicable disease of thug life. Characterizing morality as relative to the lessons taught by the parents, Singleton chooses two ideological paths for parents. Through the dichotomy of the Baker and Styles families, Singleton sheds light on how violence and depravity have perpetuated in the Hood.

For Singleton, whether these boys/men live or die depends on the absence/presence of fathers. As Guerrero asserts, “Beside the senseless violence that eventually claims both Ricky and Doughboy, and that, according to Tre’s father, only facilitates dominant society’s laissez-faire genocide of blacks, the guiding theme of Boyz has to do with black fathers taking responsibility for raising their sons into politicized, enterprising black men.”

In fact, Boyz could be seen as a blueprint for successful child rearing. Furious dispenses advice on how to be a man, which in a poignant fishing scene Tre reviews: “Always look a person in the eye. Do that they’ll respect you better. Never be afraid to ask you for anything. Stealing isn’t necessary . . . Never respect anyone who doesn’t respect you back.” Regarding sex, which, in the

83 Guerrero, 185.
Hood as elsewhere, can be the easiest vehicle to ruining one’s life, Furious reminds Tre that “any fool with a dick can make a baby, buy only a real man can raise his children.” What saves Tre can best be summarized in a scene late in the film: After the Rick and Tre have just taken the SATs, Furious takes them to “show them something”. Once in Compton, another inner city neighborhood, the look on the boys faces illustrates that Compton is infinitely more dangerous than the neighborhood in which they live. Above the neighborhood, a large billboard states, “Cash for Homes”. Furious uses this opportunity to teach the boys about what has kept them an economically inferior race of people:

Furious: I’m talking about the message. What it stands for. It’s called gentrification. It’s what happens when the property value of a certain area is brought down. Huh? You listening? They bring the property value down. They can buy the land at a lower price. Then they move all of the people out, raise the property value then sell it at a profit. What we need to do is we need to everything in our neighbor, everything, black. Black owned with black money. Just like the Jews, the Italians, the Mexicans, and the Koreans do.

Old Man: Ain’t nobody from the outside bringing down the property value. It’s these folks, shooting each other and selling crack rock and shit.

Furious: How do you think the crack rock gets into the country? We don’t own any planes, we don’t own no ships. We are not the people flying and floating that shit in here. I know everytime you turn on the TV that’s what you see, black people selling the rock, pushing the rock, pushing the rock, yeah I know. But that wasn’t a problem as long as it was here. Wasn’t a problem until it was in Iowa and it showed up on Wall Street where there are hardly any black people. If you want to talk about guns, why is it that there is a gun shop on almost every corner in this community. Why? For the same reason that there is a liquor

84 Boyz N’ The Hood. Ibid.
store on almost every corner in the black community. Why? They want us to kill ourselves. You go out to Beverly Hills. You don’t see that shit. They want us to kill ourselves. The best way you can destroy a people is you take away their ability to reproduce themselves. Who is it that is dying out here on these streets everynight? Y’all. (To the crowd of Compton thugs) Young brothers like yourselves. You are doing exactly what they want you to do. You have to think young brother, about your future.

(Cut to Tre and Rick driving home)

Rick: My brother should have heard that. Could have done the little nigger some good.85

And it really could have. But Doughboy couldn’t be saved— his life has been predestined to fail from the very beginning. The only thing that society would have you believe could have possibly saved him would have been hearing Furious’ speech. Sadly, even if Doughboy had heard the speech, the damage that his upbringing had done would have made it nearly impossible to avoid the cycle of violence that had already trapped him.

In one of the film’s most crucial scenes, The Five Stairsteps’ song “Ooh Child”, plays on the radio as the camera captures Doughboy and Little Chris being arrested for shoplifting. The song’s lyrics, “Ooh Child, things are gonna get easier/Ooh Child, things will get brighter/ Someday, yeah, we’ll put it together and we’ll get it undone/Someday when your head is much lighter/Someday yeah we’ll walk in the rays of a beautiful sun/Someday when the world is much brighter,” put an ironic spin on the events before us:

As one set of children is being sent to prison, and the other has just been

85Boyz N’ the Hood, ibid.
saved from going to prison, the prospect of things getting easier, things getting better, are slim. Had Tre not gone fishing with his father, he likely would have been arrested with Dough and Chris, and his life would have been dramatically altered forever. The love, patience and interest that his father has for Tre, ultimately saves his life.

By providing his audience with binary characters within the same environment, Singleton’s depictions appear all the more realistic. Prior to *Boyz N' the Hood*, contemporary film had focused solely on perpetuating the image of African Americans as thugs. In *Boyz*, thugs do exist, but so do upstanding citizens like the Styles, who hold jobs, homes, and capitalistic ideals and are passing on those standards to their progeny. Because the Styles family is not the traditional family in the Hood, Singleton thoughtfully considered the inaccurate reality that such a depiction would encourage. The Bakers, then, provide the necessary contrast. Although Mrs. Baker could be a much worse parent, (evident by the inclusion of the crack-head Cheryl character that recurs throughout the film) Mrs. Baker’s preferential treatment of Rick, versus her contemptuous treatment of Doughboy, illustrates that she is capable of being a loving parent but just chooses not to be one. But by giving us both sides of the equation, both sides of what life is like in a neighborhood allows the audience to believe in the veracity of his depiction. If a director decided to make a film about life in West Virginia, he would be irresponsible if he only chose to illustrate rednecks or in-breds; while that
may or may not exist in West Virginia, certainly that is not the only type of person that lives there.

Singleton recognized the responsibility that filmmakers have in challenging the negative stereotypes that have subordinated African Americans. His daring look at inner city life opened eyes, opened hearts, and most importantly, opened wallets. Because real, upstanding African Americans had been ignored by mainstream popular culture for so long, to many white audiences, Boyz was an awakening. Because of its candid look at a problem which, even today, affects the country, for its unapologetic portrayal of ghetto life, and for challenging conventional stereotypes of African Americans, Boyz N' the Hood went on to make over $60 M,86 captured Oscar nominations, and sparked a new wave in African American film; the Hood genre.

Following the success of Boyz N' the Hood, an April 7, 1991 Sunday San Diego Union Tribune article highlighted the impact that contemporary African-American filmmakers have had on Hollywood. The headline, “African Americans' Film Impact Grows; Movies Not Just Blaxploitation” implies the conflicting messages given by African American films. The title suggests that African Americans have been perceived as incapable of non-blaxploitation films, while at the same time, glorifying the impact that blaxploitation films have had on society. Interestingly, the article continues to praise what author Jim Emerson characterizes as the “new black cinema

movement" by alluding to films like Robert Townsends' *Hollywood Shuffle*, and Keenan Ivory Wayans' *I'm Gonna Git You Sucka*, which were revisitations of the stereotyping which blaxploitation films revealed. Despite all the head way that African American directors like Spike Lee and John Singleton had made towards creating stereotype-breaking, African American films, a population of filmmakers, both white and African Americans, continued to produce the type of characterizations which had kept African Americans silent all those years.

Films like *Booty Call* (1995), *Woo* (1996), and even *Friday* (1996) reduced these negative stereotypes to a punch-line. While clearly progress has been made in the realm of popular culture, the re-emergence of negative stereotypes in film reminds us that there is much more progress which needs to be made. Contemporary revisitations of the coon, the Tom, and what we shall call the Priest, (a sexualized male whose primary interests are making fast cash and fast women), all have reappeared in mainstream popular culture.

While films like *Booty Call* have damaged the credibility of African American film, today, unlike during blaxploitation times, other African American film genres exist to counter act the damage done by these portrayals. Even so, Hollywood continues to produce more *House Party* movies than *Soul Food*. These very different examples of how ensemble, African American casts have been used, illustrates a kind of schizophrenia in

---

87Jim Emerson, “African Americans’ Film Impact Grows; Movies Not Just Blaxploitation,” *The*
Hollywood. While some directors like Lee and Singleton consistently develop projects which help the African American community, others like the Wayans’ Brothers continue to produce films which mock the African American community.

Although the popularity of *Boyz N’ the Hood* sparked a trend which eventually saturated the film market, the return of blaxploitation-type films established a feud which continues today: Those in Hollywood trying to recreate the success of *Boyz* while positively influencing society, versus those who would prefer to perpetuate the negative African American image. The tension between these two groups only has taken away from the goal of creating more counter-hegemonic art. If audiences continue to receive the messages of *Boyz*, but have them counteracted by films like *Booty Call*, any progress that has been made, could potentially be relinquished.

While I recognize the need for self-deprecatory spoofs, the overabundance of these types of films have contributed to, not deviated from, the institutional hegemony of African Americans. The solution to this problem is balance in the characterizations, the storylines, and messages of African American film.

The limited opportunities given to African Americans to portray non-stereotypical characters in film have done some good. Examples like Denzel Washington’s role in *Courage Under Fire* as Army Col. Nathaniel Serling, or Morgan Freeman as Red in *The Shawshank Redemption* illustrate that roles

---


80
do exist which do not necessarily perpetuate negative stereotypes of African Americans. Sure Serling is an alcoholic and Red is a convict, but their depictions are somewhat colorblind and offer compassionate, responsible portrayals. While these exceptions signify a changing mentality in Hollywood, the frequency with which these so-called "colorblind" roles are offered is minimal. The popularity and recognition of actors like Washington and Freeman have forced Hollywood to create such colorblind roles, but Hollywood has yet to create an ensemble cast of colorblind characters which captures a colorblind audience.

The inference made by the fact that many of these so-called "colorblind" characters are the only African Americans in the film indicates the resistance many Whites have to the idea of a group of strong African Americans characters. This "fear of Africa, fear of the United States becoming 'Africanized'"88, has contributed to the lack of African American ensemble films being produced. Because having only one African American in a group of whites remains a much less threatening concept to white audiences, the depictions of African Americans continue to be cursory and deprecatory.

Certainly, the success and popularity of characters like Serling have indicated a changing mentality in Hollywood. Although more African Americans are playing colorblind characters in more mainstream films, the reasons why remains somewhat dubious. On one hand, any depiction of an African American that characterizes them as getting a job, starting a family,

---

88 Rhines, 6.
and participating in mainstream American ideology must be positive. But the failure of these kinds of characterizations to infiltrate more ensemble pieces, highlights Hollywood’s resistance to wholly positive depictions of African Americans. Like Priest in *SuperFly* or Tré in *Boyz N' the Hood*, these survivors remain the most positive representations of African Americans in each of their perspective films. The remainder of the surviving characters, both in *Boyz* and *SuperFly* will continue to participate in the life, until they die.

While examples do exist in which African American actors have transcended racial boundaries to create characters, not African American characters, (like Serling and Red), the majority of roles that have been made available to African Americans have been as characters that advocate a racialized, stereotypical characterization of race. Though clearly this exhibits an accommodation of majority values and ideologies, current cinematic texts like *Boyz N' the Hood*, *Waiting to Exhale*, *Soul Food*, and *Crooklyn* have successfully challenged the conventions of racial ideology and pushed the boundaries of the African American image.

Combating the stigmatized generalizations that the Hood genre created, more contemporary films have given African Americans the voice they have never been granted, the voice that has never been heard, and the voice that has never been recognized. Finally, the stories of African Americans, as “hard”, as difficult, as joyful, as real as they are, are being heard. This voice will continue to provoke, encourage, and demand discourse on race relations.
in America, and for this reason, is the most powerful tool available today to break the racial barriers in society.
CONCLUSION

The connection between what we see in popular culture and one's self-image remains a heavily scrutinized debate. As a historically castigated race of people, African Americans have consistently been ignored, discriminated against, and kept inferior through both economic and political means. As more and more African Americans have successfully challenged these social barriers, more sensitive and responsible depictions of African Americans have emerged.

Although the television news media remains one of the most powerful vehicles for shaping public ideology, the Rodney King fiasco opened channels of dialogue about the power these mediums have to control racial, economic and gender biases. Despite the renewed consciousness which the Rodney King trial and Los Angeles Riots have brought to the news, more and more specialty news programs have emerged, bringing Latino news from a Latino perspective or African American news from an African American perspective. Certainly such efforts reinforce the assertion that the news does not maintain strictly objective intentions, but does testify to the need for informative newscasts which incorporate a number of different audiences' interests.

Although recently films have become more sensitive to how stereotypes affect audiences, sole characters as well as entire films, have committed to maintaining a skewed vision of African Americans. Despite movements by filmmakers like Spike Lee and John Singleton to erase the
damage done by vaudeville, the most lucrative forms of African American popular culture continue to be that which lampoon the African American image, culture, and lifestyle.

As long as African Americans continue to be castigated by the disparaging portrayals existent in Hollywood, the cycle of hegemony will continue. It is up to those in power, whether white, African American, urban or suburban, to recognize the culpability of the visual image, and make a change in how it is exploited. Without the counter-hegemonic art necessary to remedy the harms done by decades of racist popular culture, the voice of African Americans may remain silenced.
Works Cited


The Constitution of the United States of America. Fourteenth Amendment, Section 1.


Sutton, P.E. “Minority Ownership as a Method of Increasing Diversity in Programming” Presentation to the U.S. Senate Communications Subcommittee. 15 September, 1989.
