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Criminalized Representations of the Black Body and How they Impact Mass Incarceration

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Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction	3
Chapter 2: Literature Review	7
History of Racial Control in the United States	7
Mass Incarceration is a form of Social Control	9
The Criminalization of Black Bodies in the Media	10
The Sociological Impacts of Media	11
Criminalized Representations Influence Incarceration	13
Current Implications	16
Counteracting these Images: Black Media Practitioners	18
Methodology	20
Findings	22
The Birth of a Nation	22
The Planet of the Apes	32
Get Hard	44
Bushmen of the Kalahari	51
Les Maîtres Fous	57
Willie Horton Ad	64
LA riots coverage	67
Tucker Carlson – We’re watching civilization collapse in real time	76
Cops	85
Discussion	89
Conclusion	95
References	97

Criminalized Representations of the Black Body and how they Impact Mass Incarceration

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the [World Prison Brief](#), the United States has the highest incarceration rate in the entire world. A [report](#) done by The Sentencing Project informs us that Black Americans are incarcerated in state prisons at nearly 5 times the rate of white Americans, despite only making up about 13% of the population. Why is this? There are two lines of thought that can emerge from this issue. A growing minority argues that Black people commit more crimes because they are culturally more prone to violence, therefore the discrepancy is excused. The flip side to this is that there are a mix and variety of socioeconomic factors that have led to these racial disparities and a societal proclivity towards incarceration rather than rehabilitation. Some of these factors include schooling environments, home environments, economic class, and friend and family support systems. I am arguing for the latter of the two schools of thought.

I choose the institution of mass media as my factor to examine because of its past and future increasing prevalence within our society, especially in regards to technological advances that extend beyond our television screens. Criminalized and invisible representation is something that I have experienced and witnessed throughout my entire life. Past research has highlighted the impacts of these mediated images on our brains and life decisions. Despite this, I feel as if more research is needed to understand the direct link and connection between these criminalized and negative images and the rise in mass incarceration.

In addition, the prison landscape that exists in our country is one that was not created for the means of combating “crime,” but for social and racial control. The Prison Industrial Complex, which is the usage of the prison population as a profit model for businesses and companies, is carrying out this job very well.

Despite there being a variety of socioeconomic factors that have led to both the huge expansion of incarcerated individuals and the discrepancy of those incarcerated individuals being Black, the factor that I choose to analyze in this paper is criminalized images of Black people within the mass media. There is a multitude of groups of people, other than Black people, that are impacted by this system. However, my focus on the Black population stems from my own personal connection and encounters with the pervasiveness of this system, as well as the historical and specific anti-Black racism within our country that has been a factor in this corrupted system.

While I have never had a direct encounter with prisons, I have felt their impact within my own community. I come from a small, underfunded neighborhood named Montbello. The neighborhood is majority Black and Hispanic, and the institutions there are ignored by people in power. Peers and family members that I know have either died as a result of violence in our community or are currently or have been incarcerated in some capacity. Moreover, the research that I plan to conduct will analyze criminalized representations of Black people and culture within the media, which has had a direct impact on me and the ways in which I, my friends, and my family are perceived and shaped within society. So much of this has also impacted my own personal self-esteem and perception of myself and my ethnicity and has at times set me back socially from other people. The influence that these images have on society is immense. There is a constant catch-up that is required of people that are identified as Black within the United States. When an individual exceeds the barriers that are placed before them, they are regarded as exceptional. There is rarely ever an effort to critique the social structures that created such a disparity, to begin with.

Mass media is a social structure within our current environment. It is shaped by and has shaped so much of how we operate today. This includes a variety of technologies that we use to communicate and disseminate information. So many different forms and types of media have played into the same social structures that have subjugated groups of people since the formation of the United States. In order to understand the current problem of mass incarceration in the United States, which is the primary form of punishment for perceived crimes, and the disproportionate amount of Black people that have been enveloped in that system, it is important to understand the historical racial project that has defined the United States as well and how they are interlinked. "There have been different race projects associated with traditional racism, including Jim Crow and segregation." (Zamudio & Rios, pg. 486, 2006). Then, so much of why the United States would turn to such drastic and dehumanizing measures begins to make sense.

When I use the terms racial and social project, I refer to the ways in which the United States has systematically, whether through cultural standards or policies, set in place different forms of control that racialize and subjugate certain groups of people and cast them into a permanent state of under-privilege. These are defined as intentional efforts to racialize and reinforce meanings among arbitrary social and racial lines that have substantial impacts on those groups of people. Some of these iterations include the movement of Black bodies across the sea and exploitation of them in chattel slavery, the legal segregation of the Jim Crow south, and the lack of resources given to poor communities of color currently.

I want to analyze the phenomenon of mass incarceration and the criminalization of Black bodies in contemporary society. I will examine the feedback loop that is created by the criminalization of the Black body. This loop informs the perspective that audience members may develop and then feeds back into the images of criminality that continue to be recycled in the

media. In order to do this, I seek to explore the underpinnings of the racial formations that produce images of criminality. These formations have sprung from the need to justify the usage of Black bodies as a means of profit and social control. Understanding the social factors that led to the racial power imbalance that exists today will provide some important context and understanding for the ways in which the criminalization of the Black body is necessary for those in power. This also makes it all the more plausible that these criminalized representations are still embedded into our society. Media has been an important tool for disseminating these messages, so I want to explore these racial formations through the lens of the media.

In addition, I want to understand how Black media practitioners and artists have shaped their work around providing an alternative to these narratives and what this says about how representation should be. This connects to the issue of mass incarceration and media representation's linkage to it. A historical analysis will be important because of the historical implications of prior representations of people of color. They have impacted our modern understanding of and the creation of mediated images.

The overall question of this research project is whether or not, and to what degree, these criminalized representations of the past and present impact the current increase and sustainability of mass incarceration? The connecting question is how can we pull from positive, counteracting instances against these negative messages to create more productive, revolutionary images that negate these effects of mass incarceration and push us towards a more equal, afro-futuristic, and free society?

Chapter 2: Literature Review

History of Racial Control in the United States

In order to understand the basis of incarceration and criminalized images, we can start by looking at the ways in which the United States has a history of racial control for the purpose of its racial projects. Race has not always been a formally bound concept. The idea of race began to form alongside capitalistic economic growth as a way of justifying the exploitation of human bodies. “The deep interconnection between the development of the modern world system - of capitalism, seaborne empire, and slavery - and the exfoliation of a worldwide process of racialization is not in doubt” (Winant, pg. 170, 2000). Winant introduces the racial formation theory, which examines the meaning of race and the content of racial identities as unstable and politically contested. According to Winant, race is not biologically constructed but is rather socially constructed. There is no biological factor that can truly determine race. This essentially groups various ethnic groups around the world into racial hierarchies and groupings. The mass grouping of people into categorical races created the correlation between racism and capitalism and also exposes the ways in which those two systems and ideologies are interlinked.

During American slavery, white indentured servants and Black slaves began to notice their subjugated and dehumanized status. Revolts were attempted. The white, plantation colonizers of the time saw the need to establish more of a hierarchy in society in order to reduce the risks of revolutionary backlash from the masses. Thus, slavery became racialized. This has all played into a larger social project and has been embedded into the actual creation and formation of the United States. This racial project has been reconstructed within various time periods and decades in the United States. It has not gone away. It is evident when looking at the

beginning of America and examining the ways in which chattel slavery was turned into a racialized enterprise with Black people cast as less than and non-human. It shifted into the end of slavery and the reconstruction era, where Black development and progress were continuously stunted through various acts of violence codified by the law. The Jim Crow era came, and the legalized segregation and mistreatment of the entire population of Black people were seen as necessary. The lingering hatred that was the stains of America's troubling past with racialized slavery was evident then and still continues to be evident today.

“The race project of the post-Civil Rights era largely depends on promoting a ‘color-blind’ discourse to denounce the traditional racism of the past, on one hand, while denying that traditional racism continues in the modern era to affect structural inequality” (Zamudio & Rios, pg. 484, 2006). Many people see and believe that we have moved into a more colorblind era, but so much research says and shows the opposite. So many of the explicit racial commands and laws have simply become more hidden, and thus more perfected. “It is under the guise of supporting liberal principles of equality and merit that the most reprehensible stereotypes and dehumanizing ideologies about people of color are disseminated” (Zamudio & Rios, pg. 497, 2006). We are able to project ourselves as a democratic, free nation that respects all people while continuing to condemn thousands of people behind bars while profiting off of their labor.

The race project of the traditional era developed grotesque stereotypes of people of color that continue to underlie much of the discourse of the present in one form or another. Stereotypes about groups serve to erase individuality and ultimately dehumanize its victims. It is a form of othering and it is the outcome of hundreds of years of traditional racism. Stereotyping and the dehumanization it creates often precede violence. For example, in our society, we have often associated people of color with criminality. This stereotypical relationship has allowed a system of injustice to penalize people of color at far greater rates than whites. From racial profiling to the death penalty, people of color, particularly black and brown men, are at far greater risk than the general population to be victims of institutional violence. And despite the evidence, many continue to stereotype people of color in the most grotesque ways (Zamudio & Rios, pg. 491, 2006).

This is the exact same as we did in the days of slavery. All of this is a part of a larger racial project for social control and profit. Mass incarceration is one of the newest iterations of this centuries-long project.

Mass Incarceration is a form of Social Control

The incarceration model in our country is not one that is made for the actual betterment of society. People are kept in small cells, locked behind cages, and only let out when they adhere to the rules well enough. They must perform free or cheap labor in order to continue to provide for the economy that they cannot participate in. These are the unquestioned ways that criminality, revenge, and incarceration are shaped within the United States. So much of the labor that prison inmates perform is wrapped up in the economic system that all people use and benefit from today, from clothing brands to furniture brands and more. Prisons are a business. This is seen from the amount that inmates have to pay through phone services in order to call their families, through the commissary, and the money they have to pay in order to get some decent food and snacks while they are in jail. The ways in which prisons are created are remnants of the same form of social and capitalistic control that slavery was. Hence, mass incarceration is modern-day slavery.

The presence of chain gangs and black codes directly after the end of slavery signifies this. The black codes were laws created during reconstruction in order to specifically inhibit Black people's right to live freely and develop a socioeconomic standing in society. The ways in which Black people were immediately criminalized in order to maintain this same form of social control that kept them enslaved for profit was seen as a necessity for our country. It had been the basis of U.S. economic growth for so long. When looking at the different forms of prison in other

countries and their models that are based on rehabilitation rather than incarceration, this becomes very stark and apparent.

Upon reflection, it is relatively easy to understand how Americans come to deny the evils of mass incarceration. Denial is facilitated by persistent racial segregation in housing and schools, by political demagoguery, by racialized media imagery, and by the ease of changing one's perception of reality simply by changing television channels. There is little reason to doubt the prevailing 'common sense' that black and brown men have been locked up en masse merely in response to crime rates when one's sources of information are mainstream media outlets. In many respects, the reality of mass incarceration is easier to avoid knowing than the injustices and sufferings associated with slavery or Jim Crow. Those confined to prisons are out of sight and out of mind; once released, they are typically confined to ghettos. Most Americans only come to 'know' about the people cycling in and out of prisons through fictional police dramas, music videos, gangsta rap, and 'true' accounts of ghetto experience on evening news. These racialized narratives tend to confirm and reinforce the prevailing public consensus that we need not care about 'those people'; they deserve what they get. (Alexander, pg. 226-227, 2020).

All of this ties into the larger social project that has been undertaken throughout the history of the United States, and how mass incarceration is perfectly aligned with this racial project.

The Criminalization of Black Bodies in the Media

All of this past research on social and racial control ties into how and why mass media has been used as another tool for that control. Historically, within the media, Black bodies have been criminalized. These findings and analysis tie into the larger racial project that past researchers have unearthed. The Black body needs to be criminalized in order to justify its use in mass incarceration and the exploitation of the Black body for profit. We are able to see how the media has time and time again created a moral panic. Racial white victimhood is perpetrated and this has a societal impact. These criminalized messages can and have reshaped laws in society. There is a constant concentration on the duality between victims and villains. These criminalized

messages have been revitalized in new landscapes that continue to conceptualize Black bodies as sites of social control (King, 2015).

Through this constant duality of images and a constant need to depict Black bodies as evil and criminalized, the overrepresentation of them within prison landscapes can be justified within the mind of the everyday American. The media can be used as a tool for structural oppression. There is a constant dehumanizing portrayal of the Black family. This is a constant stigmatizing process that works within cycles of larger systemic oppression (Ogden, Fulambarker, & Haggerty, 2020).

These images are not created in a vacuum but are instead a part of a larger historical process of systemic oppression and constant criminal portrayals of Black people in order to justify their subjugation. These representations have meaning based on social, cultural, and economic contexts. Through a constructionist view, we can analyze how meaning, representation, and language operate within symbolic practices and processes, and how a wide availability creates a cultural product that constructs meaning into lives. This constant criminality of the Black body within media also ties into a representational paradigm, which is “a shared common perspective on representation among cultural producers who cluster together in a way that ensures the dominance of a certain paradigm as a form of representation.” This allows them to develop a common agenda of central themes that express a certain worldview (Smith & Huber, 2018).

The Sociological Impacts of Media

The way that an image is viewed impacts the perceptions that are created about those groups of people, and thus how they are treated. Theorists have highlighted how the mass media is the mass production of messages that reflect the structures and processes of the institutions

that shape them (Hall & Callanan, 2012). When connecting back to the history of racial control within our country, and how all of this has been shaped by those in power seeking more power and profit, then the claim can be made that these systems of control have been carried into the media that we consume today and impacts the messages that people view. The way that stories are told has a huge impact. They shape the connections that are made in the viewer's mind that are made about the world and others around them. Research has even shown that "... cognitive associations are so strong that simply exposure to a particular trait (e.g. criminality) may elicit thoughts about a particular racial group" (Pollock, Tapia, & Sibila, pg. 2, 2021). In addition, media is not just a social enterprise. Mass media has on its own become a commodification and a business model as well. Producers are always trying to create the most sensationalized and timely news and content, sometimes irrespective of the social impacts that their creations may have. Just like prisons, the media itself is a business as well that profits from these criminalized messages and representations.

Many social constructionists argue that in modern societies, the media are a major factor in defining social conditions as problems as well as influencing individuals' perceptions of reality. A big focal point that has been sometimes overlooked and missed is these images' impact on non-mainstream audiences and those whose image is being represented. There do tend to be different camps of thought on examining the degree of this impact, and whether social conditions shape the images that are created, or if images shape the social conditions. The resonance hypothesis claims that media messages are stronger when they have meshed with viewers' experiences and realities. These images impact fear and perception of crime within audience members' own neighborhoods, but can also tie into the environment that they are within, to begin with (Callanan, 2012).

Sometimes, however, these images can fill in the void for the lack of experience or exposure that audience members may have with the identifier of the image. The media may be a primary source of information for viewers regarding unfamiliar people, cultures, and norms. This influences audiences' cognitive, emotional and behavioral tendencies (Stamps, 2020). A study conducted by Holt and Carnahan revealed how the identity of the group may also impact what type of news they decide to consume. From their study, they analyzed that groups tended to prefer examining bad news from their own racial group, and this can align with the Group Vitality theory or the ways in which a group may assess their status, support, and influence within society and how they view their own racial group. This can impact their decision to seek out and admonish negative representations of behavior coming from their own group in order to distance themselves from that behavior.

Overall, the images that are displayed in the mass media have long-lasting effects on society. “Media exposure has been determined to play a meaningful role in matters ranging from the construction and maintenance of racial/ethnic cognitions (and emotions) to expectations about intergroup relations to policy decision-making to perceptions of self and identity” (Mastro, pg. 2, 2015).

Criminalized Representations Influence Incarceration

Researchers have highlighted how this criminalization can be a direct link to the rise in mass incarceration and not just a coincidence. These criminalized messages are reproduced in new landscapes that continue to contextualize Black bodies as sites of social control, and they do so in a particular politico-discursive terrain (King, 2015). Society is very saturated by the media. There is not really a way to avoid its influence. These criminalized messages have been so imprinted into the media, that they start to become natural and second nature to audiences. They

start to become unquestioned. These images occur over and over again. This constant feeding of negative images can make it difficult for an audience to think anything else of the Black body when they are constantly told that the Black body is a criminal body, an alien body, subhuman, less than, prone to violence and that they only exist within ghettoized environments.

Current research has also investigated the impact that public punitiveness has on mass incarceration. From this research, there seems to be a link. The question that then arises is, what impacts public punitiveness? What changed in our environment that has caused us to develop more of this “tough on crime” mindset? One possibility is the criminalized mediated messages, because of how prevalent they also conveniently became during this time. Crime content is a pronounced feature of mass media and distorts the reality of crime by disproportionately focusing on random violent crimes (Callanan, 2012). Watching an image over and over has an impact on the psyche of the human mind. This has real, tangible, and sociological impacts on our world. I argue that one of those sociological impacts has been the increase in prisons and incarceration within our country.

By looking historically at the repeated instances of the criminalized representation of the Black body, and understanding the sociological impact of media and images in general, then it must be clear that these messages have had a large social impact. Mass incarceration has been and is a huge problem in our society and in our country. Criminality is the denominator that makes one “deserving” of being put in prison and placed behind bars. When looking at the amounts of these criminalized images in the media at the time of the rise in mass incarceration, and with the literal impact that these images have had on the public, it starts to become very plausible that these criminalized representations have led to the increase in mass incarceration.

By connecting the dots of history, it becomes clear that the prison industrial complex is the United State's newest and most updated form of social and racial control.

The lack of attention geared toward an intersectional approach to these criminalized representations and the impacts of mass incarceration, specifically on women of color, deserves discussion as well. Black women within these contexts are also criminalized in very specific and dehumanizing ways. Within these criminalized images, there is a prevalence of "... traditional gender roles in which men are powerful and dominant, whereas women are weak and submissive" (Pollock, Tapia, & Sibila, pg. 4, 2021). From negative and sexualized representations such as the Jezebel to the Mammy, Black women in addition to femme and queer bodies are placed within a particular category within this carceral context of both racism and sexism.

...from slavery forward, black women's sexuality forms that painful site where battles over agency take place. Even while female slaves were configured as property entirely subject to the will of their respective 'owners', black women have also paradoxically been seen as sexual predators, asserting their (sexual) agency to seduce and consume the white master. This sexual will, where no agency theoretically existed, was read as 'primitive', as uncontrolled, and as deviant (Young, pg. 378, 2005).

These representations have had negative impacts on the prison system as well. "Indeed, since 2010 women have been the fastest-growing fraction of the US prison population, rising by an average of 3.4% annually, even as the number of incarcerated men was undergoing a modest decline" (De Giorgi, pg. 6, 2015). Black women and femme bodies aren't just subject to the same criminalized treatment as Black cis-male bodies, but they are also continuously ignored and made invisible within these discourses.

...the high rates of black female incarceration suggest that public discourse only recognizes black women in their criminality, a direct legacy of slavery in which blacks were without agency except when that agency was criminalized. The prison, as a mechanism to control a society's alleged abject and its aberrant, naturalizes and continually reinvents the relationship between black agency and criminality that was

established during slavery” (Young, pg. 378, 2005).

As evident, these carceral contexts are not declining but are only getting worse. As more groups continue to be marginalized and dehumanized it, is important to not only analyze this as a problem of the past but something that is still very apparent and problematic within current structures today as well.

Current Implications

There are still contemporary iterations and crumbs of these past criminalized representations that still stand to be corrected. A [report](#) conducted by Color of Change analyzed mediated messages (in the form of crime-based TV shows primarily) to examine the representations of race and representations of criminal procedure, the normativity of the behavior, and the diversity of the writers behind these various television shows. This study examined Criminal Justice Professional Characters (CJP) within these television shows and calculated the number of times they committed a wrongful action. The study found that the “Good Guy” CJP characters committed more wrongful acts than the “Bad Guy” CJP characters, which makes it appear as if a person that works within the law committing a wrongful act is forgivable and doing it out of necessity. On top of that, the study found that 64% of depictions of wrongful behavior came from a person of color or women-identified character, and they seemed to use people of color characters as validators of wrongful behavior. Many of these series continue to misconstrue the realities of the criminal justice system and render racism invisible, the study found. People of color and women are also continuously excluded behind the camera. Due to this, it is evident that there are still problematic and criminalized representations of Black people within modern-day popular media today, even if it has been rebranded.

The old criminalized representations of the past have not gone away. They have simply been reinscribed into the various forms of media that people consume today. “In spite of social advances, there remains within the TV and film industry a practice of presenting negative stereotype images of Black people scripted from early characters predicated on the racial inferiority of Blacks” (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, pg. 368, 2014). Unless deep and radical change within these institutions is created, there will never be a true erasure and eradication of these criminalized representations. The stains will always linger.

Shows cloak traditional stereotypes in contemporary characters by using modern colloquial language, clothing, gadgets, and in some cases surrounding Black characters with multicultural casts. As such, the media racial socialization of negative Black stereotypes persists across generations as older shows are retained, longstanding stereotypical characters are not modified despite contemporary contexts and frames, and no counter-socialization strategies are presented in contemporary shows to debate the negative portrayals of these stereotypes (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, pg. 372, 2014)

With the reproduction of these images in contemporary contexts, there has also been a rise in “reality-based” crime-drama shows, which also have implications for this problem. One can find a surplus amount of content on various mediums that either claim to produce real-life accounts of crime-fighting or “reality-based” crime-drama shows based in realistic locations. “...genres that feature more ‘realistic’ representations (e.g., news, reality-based police shows) are the most problematic types of programming in terms of racially-biased portrayals, and particularly so in terms of bias toward African American men” (Oliver, pg. 5, 2003)

Additionally, the criminalization of the Black body is beginning to extend into other technological advancements, which further highlights the intent behind it. One of these forms of technology that are being produced is predictive policing. Predictive policing claims to be a more “unbiased” and “objective” way of tracking and stopping crime, however, the racist and classist histories that are enveloped in our sense of crime continue to be unaddressed, even in the making

of a seemingly objective algorithm. “In doing so, it rationalizes the lie that black, brown, queer, and poor people and the places where they live are intrinsically threatening to the broader public” (Benjamin & Scannell, pg. 111, 2019). Once again, false rhetoric claims that advancements are being made that allow stakeholders and people who hold power to be more fair and unbiased. The problem is that the horrific histories that uphold this country continue to go unaddressed, so actual progress can’t be made. These “progressive policies” continue to have the same implications on Black people and communities as they did during the days of chattel slavery. Those in power have simply gotten better at hiding their intentions.

In addition, future work needs to continue to be situated with the interaction between media and the impact it has on an audience consuming it. This ties into the potential for resistance within the media, and how these images can be counteracted. Mass media is a powerful force in our society. Instead of being used to disseminate negative messages, its potential needs to instead be used to revolutionize the negative parts of our society.

Counteracting these Images: Black Media Practitioners

Despite centuries of systemic and racial oppression, and the media being used as a tool for that oppression, these subjects that are depicted so negatively can still create counterinsurgent images. By focusing more on positive life with ordinary, future-oriented expectations we can lessen the focus on the negative aspects of a group of people. Efforts can also be merged with grassroots organizing in order to ensure that the image being created is in the pursuit of change for the people. There also needs to be more of an understanding that criminality spans beyond prisons. It has been embedded into our landscape. The thinking around what constitutes a prison, or even a criminal, needs to continue to be pushed. Carceral representations must be depicted as

something other than perpetrators and victims. The representations that are created to critique these negative representations can create alternative discourses to punishment. (Brown, 2014).

Despite the overwhelming amount of evidence that points to the negative societal impacts of the media, this form of art also has the ability to generate powerful and positive social change. It is also important to acknowledge that "...positive Black media images also exist. Unfortunately, the frequency of the appearance of these images in mainstream media is low compared with the appearance of negative stereotype characters" (Adams-Bass, Stevenson, & Kotzin, pg. 373, 2014). It is important to seek these images out and pull inspiration from them so that they can continue to become more normalized.

There are tactics and efforts that can be made to reduce and mitigate these effects. In addition to counteracting these negative messages within the media, there is a form of education known as media literacy that informs the audience of these negative representations and messages, why they are incorrect, and how to counter them. "...there is a promise for education efforts addressing the media's role in stereotyping to mitigate the effects of exposure to negative or narrow media depictions of social groups and possibly even enhance the positive media influence of exposure to nonstereotypical and favorable media depictions" (Scharrer & Ramasubramanian, pg. 172, 2015). Scharrer and Ramasubramanian inform us of a huge aspect of media literacy, which entails a

...combination of audience-centered and message-centered approaches ... audience-centered strategies take a more motivational approach by developing media literacy and critical viewing and thinking skills among audiences, with an example being a scenario in which an expert (such as a media literacy facilitator) explicitly encourages a negative view of stereotyping by appealing to audiences' cognitive processing. In contrast, message-centered strategies such as exposure to counter stereotypes (e.g., a media example featuring a depiction that runs directly counter to a common stereotype used as an experimental stimulus) may offer a more proactive alternative to achieve similar goals, which are easier to manipulate and require less mental effort than motivational strategies. (pg. 175, 2015).

The undoing of this vast social problem will not be quick or easy, and can not be reversed by only changing the content of the media. However, this can be a positive step in the right direction towards a truly just future. These calls for change are echoed by other researchers.

This evidence obviously calls for greater responsibility on the part of media producers to alleviate the types of biased portrayals that are unfortunately a common occurrence ... viewers' selective perception and interpretation of media content suggest that equitable media portrayals of race in crime-related programming may not be sufficient to address the concerns presented here ... future researchers must address additional steps such as counter-stereotyping and greater attention to media literacy (Oliver, pg. 16, 2003).

Ultimately, work and efforts have been created to counteract and reduce the impacts of these criminalized messages and representations within the media. These efforts need to be highlighted and multiplied.

Methodology

This paper examines the representation of the Black body within the mass media and the ways in which it has perpetuated the image of criminality. For this project, I examined a select number of feature and documentary films, along with broadcast news reports and a true-crime reality television show. I did a select case study with these particular forms of media because of the ways in which I perceived their impact to be on the larger society and how they had an impact on the increase in a punitive mindset within the United States against the Black body.

I conducted an analysis of the media through the selection of various scenes in comparison to the overall piece and how it connects to my thesis question, which is: How has the phenomenon of mass incarceration and the criminalization of the Black body manifested itself through the media. The pieces of media are selected based on their inclusion of themes surrounding the lack of inclusion and representation of the Black body, a connection of the Black body to violence, enslavement, or mass incarceration, the construction of the White body in

juxtaposition with the Black body, and a critique on social relations and their prevalence to race and crime. By examining the historical racial project that our country has undertaken for the means of profit, I can use this to investigate how the media has been used as a tool for this racial project, which can inform why the dehumanization and criminalization of Black bodies were pertinent, why mass incarceration was a byproduct of it, and how these tie into a bigger picture for the project of racial control for monetary gain. The media and film are key tools in the project of mass incarceration and are therefore a useful lens through which to evaluate how this racial project has been so successful. There is also a second part to my project that I hope to explore.

Creative media approaches to this topic have debated the display of incarceration and carcerality within their media and whether it works to combat or reproduce stereotypes. Regardless, the importance of creating counterinsurgent images, whether through directly showing the audience these negative images and the hypocrisy behind them or by instead providing alternative images is highlighted through various forms of more contemporary media. Many of these counterinsurgent images provide an insistence on the positive life and potential of their Black subjects, rather than the overplayed negative and trauma-based situations that many Black characters and subjects have fulfilled within the media. Also, some creative media approaches that critique these negative images include working with other grassroots movements that work to counteract this criminality that is embedded within our social institutions. This approach is also something that allows the creative media approaches that I am examining to stand out. These approaches go beyond the mirage of race and examine the classist and capitalistic components of this problem as well, which allows us to critique it from a more radical and collective perspective.

I will use my creative project, a short film/documentary about the impact of these criminalized messages on mass incarceration and how this can be critiqued, to explore and highlight for others this issue. I will also use it to further examine the specific link between mass incarceration and carceral media images, and also how modern media and Black media practitioners have critiqued this. By looking at the research that has been conducted surrounding the racial projects within the history of the United States, the sociological impacts of negative media, and how media has been historically and currently used as a tool for this racial project, I will use my creative project to examine these historical and cultural occurrences within media, these implications for the problem of incarceration and ultimate surveillance, and what media should shift into in order for a better future within media to exist. My creative project will add to the examination of negative representations within the media, its specific contribution to our current iteration of a centuries-long racial project, and what a counterinsurgency of images would and should look like by drawing from other practitioners and subjects.

Findings

The Birth of a Nation

The Birth of a Nation, directed by D.W. Griffith, overall contains themes of racism, sexual predation, miscegenation, and war. The film was released in 1915. This was made 50 years after the civil war and the formal abolishment of slavery. During this time, the United States was beginning to undergo social change and technological advancement. Being freed from slavery for a few generations, former slaves and their descendants began to establish themselves within society and gain social power and increased freedoms. Angered by these changing social environments, avid racists found ways of terrorizing and reinstating the societal rules that kept Black bodies bound and controlled. I will be analyzing the impact that Griffith's film had on

these historical events through analysis of his scenes that perpetuate the criminalization and dehumanization of the Black body.

The Birth of a Nation was a foundational film for me to review and analyze because of its contemporary impact on Hollywood today and innovative (at the time) way of creating the film. For one, this film utilized many new filmic aspects of the time that continue to play a huge role in the art of filmmaking to this day. It has been regarded as a hallmark of cinematic realism, which is meant to display a relationship between representation and reality. The recreation of war scenes and the ability to depict emotion and drama was revolutionary for its time. However, I argue that the problematic representation of the Black body that is ingrained into this film also continues to have as much impact, if not more, on our society today.

The Birth of a Nation generated its plotline on the demonization of the Black body, something that is increasingly linked to the criminalization of the Black body in today's society. In addition, many mediated artifacts today continue to base their representation of the Black body on the version portrayed in this film, even if in subtle ways. It is important to closely examine the messages that this film conveys about the Black body and the social significance that this has.

Academics profess the filmic importance of *The Birth of a Nation* due to its editing and scene creation which were new and revolutionary for its time. While it is true that the technical and production quality of *The Birth of a Nation* is one to be discussed and called for, this film also has played a huge part in inspiring the current representations of the Black Body that continue to be created and reproduced within mediated contexts today. This film arguably creates a foundation that many artists and media makers refer to, even if unconsciously, when introducing the notion of "Blackness" into their films.

This film tells the story of two families, one an abolitionist Northern family, the Stonemans, and the other a Southern family, the Camerons. The audience watches the impact of the civil war on these two families. D.W. Griffith, the director, divides the film into two parts. The first part of the film focuses on the events leading up to the Civil War and Reconstruction. The Northern abolitionists are depicted as mischievous, while the Southern plantation owners are depicted as virtuous and brave. With both of these families being white, Griffith still imposes a sense of loss from the civil war on the part of both families. The second part illustrates the attempt of newly freed Black slaves to terrorize the innocent White families, and the rise of the Ku Klux Klan as a result.

Discussions of the aesthetics of *The Birth of a Nation* are problematic if they do not address the historical relevance that it has in our contemporary context. It is very clear and evident that this film perpetuates negative stereotypes and representations of the Black body. In order to justify this, Griffith poses his film as a historically accurate and objective film. Any depiction of the Black body as violent excludes the historical implications of violence directed against them. Griffith and other filmmakers and scholars have attempted to make the claim that it is simply a historical and groundbreakingly aesthetic film. However, Griffith's film promotes the idea of White resistance to Black oppression. He does this by casting Black people as primitive and morally deficient Others. Due to these implications, discussions cannot be made about the cinematic narrative technique without addressing these problematic representations (Howe). Discussions of cinematic techniques need to address problematic representations as well. Griffith knowingly produced the image of Blacks as inferior, violent, criminal, and needing to be controlled and criminalized. While certain elements of this film aligned with historical happenings, he used this to his advantage to shape an image of the Black body that he had within

his mind. This caricature of the Black body did not at the time mirror reality, nor did it simply exist within this film and disappear.

There are many specific and apparent instances of this racialization, criminalization, and incarceration of the Black body within this film. From the offset, Griffith included docile slaves depicted in chains. This is meant to represent the ways in which slavery served as a necessary social control for the Black body. According to this image, slaves were happy under the rules of slavery, and to not be feared but regulated. In order to provide societal use, the Black body must be chained.



The Birth of a Nation, Screen capture 3:13



The Birth of a Nation, Screen capture 16:19

This depiction of a Black person that is incoherent to their social conditions and only knows that they are happy, jovial, and carefree can be characterized as the Sambo. A Sambo typically refers to a Black man that is happy, lazy, and irresponsible. Thus, they are more prone to criminality. The representation of the Black man in this light has continued to permeate much of mass media and the images that are created about what a Black person is and does in the minds of the American public.

The Birth of a Nation also includes messaging around the evils of race-mixing, which works to cast the Black race as Other and inferior to that of the White race, and something that is not worthy of approaching Whiteness. He casts White and Black in a dichotomy, as separate races and beings. When they come together, as in the case of mixed-race people, they are an abomination, and even more evil and conniving than any Black person can be. This is because, according to Griffith, they contain the wit of the White race, but are still bound by the evil tendencies of the Black race. This is seen within the character of Silas Lynch, played by George Siegmann. Lynch, an actor in Blackface, is framed to be an evil mulatto that leads the Black men toward evil, destruction, and chaos. He attempts to convince them to help him overthrow the White race and build up their own Black empire. Putting all of this power in the hands of Lynch is someone that is identified as a race traitor to the White race, Austin Stoneman, who is played by Ralph Lewis. This also works to highlight the hierarchy of Whiteness and one's proximity to it, and how intelligent this makes an individual. Out of all of the Black people that are seen within this film terrorizing White citizens, Lynch, a man that is not fully Black, is the one leading them. And leading and providing the power and space to Lynch is a White man. This generates the idea that Black people themselves aren't capable of actually creating change and making decisions for themselves. They are reliant on the White man to guide them. However, it

must be the “right” White man, one that is on the side of justice for the White race. Stoneman, in this case, was a flawed version of this ideal of the White man, and thus a race traitor.

The scenes of Lynch scheming also include many actors representing the Black body as groveling and grimacing. As Lynch comes to speak with them, they throw their work down to go and dance and forget about their work and responsibilities. While in the legislature, they sit with their feet on the desks and don’t take the matter of voting seriously. They even push for “moral abominations”, such as demanding mixed marriages (Wallace). These combinations of images work together to create this image of the Black body in the audience’s mind. They paint a picture of who the Black body is, inside and out. When the Black body is incarcerated, they are happy and carefree because they don’t have the capacity to realize that they are incarcerated. However, when they are given power, they only know how to destroy and wreak havoc. This is the image that Griffith purports in this film, and this is the image that continues to permeate the minds of Americans that see the incarceration of Black bodies as necessary for the survival of the United States.



The Birth of a Nation, Screen capture 2:00:30

Overall, the Black body is made into a shiftless criminal. They are in need of quick and thoughtless work for the White masters and elite that are meant to own them. Without this

constant control and supervision, the Black body is a deadbeat, in need of welfare, and constantly reaching out their hands for free charity. They are reckless and criminal no matter where they are, and their actions undermine democracy. They are capable of raiding, burning, killing, and stomping on other human bodies in order to achieve what they want. And what they want is never for a good cause. Within this film, the Black body is cast as violent and immoral for all of the wrong reasons. The minute that they get a taste of freedom, they become savages. Thus, they must be controlled, locked up, in chains, or incarcerated in some way. When a Black person has the audacity to attempt to stand up to a White man and claim to be equal to humans, it is portrayed as ridiculous and absurd.

A sexual element is also brought into this potent image. The Black man is cast as overly sexual and deviant. He is a predator that lusts after and wants the White woman, who is cast as always pure and innocent. This also connects to the evils of race-mixing and miscegenation, and the abomination of lusting after the opposite race. According to Griffith, the Black man is the cause of these evils through their uncontrollable lust. This is seen within the character Gus, who is played by the actor Walter Long. Gus is characterized as a predatory Black man that lusts after Flora, the daughter of the Cameron family and played by Mae Marsh. As Gus chases Flora through the woods, it results in her eventual death as she decides to jump off a cliff rather than be caught in the grasp of the ravenous Gus. “Gus, in *The Birth of a Nation*, moves in some respects like an animal when he pursues Flora Cameron to her death” (Stokes, p. 94). This image turns Gus, a White actor in Black face portraying a Black man, into an animal. This casts the Black body as less than human, and as incapable of having or creating rational thoughts. Just as animals in a zoo are caged or killed if they act out too violently, the same must be done to the Black body. Gus is not the only example of the Black body being a site of sexual predation. Griffith

includes Silas Lynch in this representation. Towards the end of the film, Lynch attempts to force one of the Stoneman's daughters to marry him after lusting after her throughout the film.

By 1915, with *The Birth of a Nation*, three variations of a new, anti-Tom, stereotype had emerged – all of which sexualized warnings of the dangers of a racial amalgamation that had already been accomplished through the exercise of the *droit de seigneur* of former masters: Silas Lynch, the mulatto who lusts after Elsie Stoneman; Lydia Brown, the mulatta who holds sexual sway over Austin Stoneman; and Gus, the renegade Union soldier who lusts after the 'little Sister.' All three refuted the humanity of the Christian slave (Williams, p. 151).

The placement of the characters in *Blackface* in direct correlation to violent actions, and having multiple characters carrying out these violent and sexualized actions seeks to demean the Black body. There are no variations in any of the characters, nor a chance for redemption for them.

There is no historical or political explanation given to explain the violent actions of the Black bodies within this film. They are portrayed as being evil simply because that is just who they are.

The racism embedded in this film also takes an intersectional approach. Lydia Brown, a mulatta played by the White actor Mary Alden, also exemplifies uncontrollable sexual desires and violent tendencies when she attempts to seduce all of the White men in her vicinity. These images have not only been created for Black men, but for Black women as well and those who do not adhere to the heteronormative or masculine standards. This is seen in the characterization of Brown, who appears to be angry and throws a tantrum when she doesn't get what she wants. Griffith's racist caricatures expand across gender and sexual lines and paint all members of the Black race as evil and criminal.



The Birth of a Nation, Screen capture 21:38

Brown is characterized as especially conniving and deceitful, which is an especially sinister accusation due to the history of sexual violence against Black women slaves on the part of their White masters.

This film uses this evil portrayal of the Black man to scare the White, dominant audience away from a potential change in the power dynamics. Griffith inverts this power structure that White men, in particular, have historically held and places it in the hands of violent Black people as a means of scaring the audience into believing these stereotypes. For the viewers, the alternative becomes a life or death situation if Black people were to gain power in society, so they grow to believe these images and stereotypes in order to mitigate their fears.

Along with the apparent images of the Black body as evil and needing to be controlled and imprisoned for social harmony to ensue, the portrayal of the White body as pure and innocent, and of White men in particular as the brave heroes that will eventually save the day, further perpetuates this negative image of the Black body. Griffith introduces the Ku Klux Klan as noble and necessary to deal with the criminality of the Black race. He erases the most intense moments of terror that they have historically enacted on the Black body. The murder of Gus is seen as honorable. It is carried out as a direct result of Gus's uncontrollable lust that resulted in

the death of a White woman, which further serves to highlight this dichotomy between Black as evil and white as good. The KKK is not portrayed as the terroristic hate group that they truly are, but instead as a necessary result of the new freedoms and subsequent criminality of the Black race. When the Black bodies are laboring, the spaces are organized as neat and well ordered because they are being controlled by White paternalism. However, the film demonstrates this falling apart as the racial order of slavery changes. The spatial reordering of Blackness becomes defined by criminality and chaos (Wall). Due to this dichotomy, the KKK is able to ride in at the end of the film and save the day from the mass of criminal Black bodies. They ride onto the screen as a sea of White bodies driving the evil Blackness off of the screen and back to the edges of society as they are deemed to belong. This casts the Black man in direct opposition to what is meant to be good and heroic. The White man is cast as the savior, and as the moral and righteous leader of society.



The Birth of a Nation, Screen capture 3:05:55

This is an especially important film to analyze and to use as a basis for my continued analysis because it has set a foundation from which the model of Hollywood, countless films, and modern representations are pulled when crafting an image of the Black body. Various films within the media and popular culture continuously draw from them. Through the creation and

compilation of the images presented in the film, the Black body is constituted as evil, criminal, predatory, and in need of control and incarceration in some form in order to reduce the threat that it may pose. While insinuating that Black people are unintelligent, it makes the claim that when Black people get an ounce of power, they become hungry for that power and wreak chaos on society. This perpetuates the idea that the Black body needs to be returned to a place where it is once again controlled and shackled so that it can be placed into a docile context. While this may be an early version of the criminalization of the Black body through the depiction of a loss of social control, this continued in films towards the end of the 20th century as well.

The Planet of the Apes

The Planet of the Apes, directed by Franklin J. Schaffner, deals with themes of race, war, evolution and devolution, and disruption of societal and political climates. This original film was released in 1968. During this time in history, the United States was involved in national and global politics, along with war and the fears that came from that. Black people and other marginalized groups grew more and more active in the fight for racial equality, and began to grow disillusioned with fighting for a country that wouldn't even grant them equal human rights. Thus, tensions were heavy at this time both nationally and abroad. I will be analyzing the message that *Planet of the Apes* perpetrates in response to this.

Planet of the Apes is a film that tells the story of a future where humans, and specifically White, male humans, are no longer on top of the social hierarchy. It presented some filmic similarities to *The Birth of a Nation*, in interesting yet more subtle ways. Overall, this film seemed to be telling a cautionary tale. Schaffner attempts to instill fear and wonder into the audience about what the world would be like if the power structures of the time and that still continue to exist today were suddenly flipped upside down. Using a historical nuclear bomb that

altered the state of apes and humans to tell this story, Schaffner uses the political affairs of the time to warn the audience against unnecessary war if they want to keep their power structures intact, much the same way *The Birth of a Nation* criticized the Civil War for its unnecessary deaths and the political results that did not align with Griffith's beliefs. I decided to analyze this film because of its relevance and connection to historical events of its time, and the sudden shift towards an incarceration-heavy mindset that the United States began to develop around this time. I argue that the racial fears subtly propagated in this film near the time of an increase in Black people starting to fight for a change in social structures is not a coincidence, nor was the start of the era of mass incarceration shortly after. In addition, an entire film franchise was generated after the premiere of this movie, demonstrating the long-lasting impact it continues to have in the media today.

George Taylor, played by Charlton Heston, plays the main character that exemplifies the White, male hero that is prevalent within most of American cinematic history. He is commanding a crew that originally had the intentions of landing on and exploring a new planet. When their spaceship unexpectedly crashes, they find themselves in a strange land where apes are suddenly dominating a seemingly devolved species of humans. These futuristic humans are all White, which exemplifies a complete and total uproot and flip of the social order that has allowed White humans to be on top of all other humans and animals historically. At the end of the film, Taylor discovers that he had been on Planet Earth all along, and the life that he knew is truly over, which brings this film even closer to home.

Throughout the film, there are small references to nationalist and colonialist themes. For example, Landon, played by Robert Gunner, sticks an American flag into the dirt soil of the "new world" that they have landed on. Ominous laughter can be heard from Taylor as the film

transitions into the next scene. This represents the White, human ability to lay claim anywhere that they please, but also proves to be satirical with the discovery at the end that they already are on American soil.



Planet of the Apes, Screen capture 15:09

Upon running into the futuristic humans, Taylor immediately displays a desire to control and colonize by stating, “If this is the best they’ve got around here, in six months we’ll be running this planet.” These iterations of colonialism and nationalism that are apparent very early in the film display the innate desire and tendency of these White, male protagonists that are predominantly seen as leading and controlling.

As the film progresses and Taylor is eventually captured by the apes, a dichotomy is created to show the victimization of Taylor from the apes and his subsequent heroism. In accordance with the blatant flip of power between the apes and humans, I analyzed this film to be a more modern and subtle iteration of *The Birth of a Nation*. The fears and beliefs that had been and continue to be prevalent about the Black body as non-human are now placed onto the White body. This can be read as a counter-strategy of turning these inhumane methods back onto the people that have historically carried them out. However, the film seems to represent this in a way to spook the audience into being fearful rather than critical of this power structure. In addition, there appears to be an apparent dichotomy between the whiteness of Taylor and the

blackness of the apes. “...the most effective kind of image with which to highlight the visual construction of racial whiteness is one in which many people of one race are juxtaposed with a single person of another. Planet of the Apes offers a similar setup, repeatedly framing Taylor in the grasp of a mob of black gorillas” (McHugh, p. 44). Taylor’s White, male dominance is continuously challenged by the treatment and dehumanization of the apes. He is constantly being harassed and thrown around by these vicious black bodies.



Planet of the Apes, Screen capture 35:29

The characterization of humans as “natural-born thieves” takes the racial fears that have been cast onto the Black body and place it on the White bodies of the futuristic humans. Despite the control that the apes attempt to exert over Taylor, he still proves that he is far more intelligent and advanced than the apes throughout the film. He continues to outsmart and escape them and is especially adept at fighting multiple apes at once. This connects to a particular scene within *The Birth of a Nation*, where an angry White character enters the cabin full of Black men where Gus went to hide and single-handedly fights all of them before dying a heroic death.

The way that the Black body was being treated during this specific time in history is repeatedly cast onto the white body in this film as well. The apes can be seen spraying down the humans with a large hose, the same way that cops would do to Black people who were protesting during the height of the Civil Rights Movement.



Planet of the Apes, Screen capture 1:00:47



May 3, 1963, Birmingham, Alabama, Bill Hudson, Associated Press.

The apes within the film continue to emphasize that Taylor has no rights under ape law because he is a man. During their council meeting, they discuss his humanity right before his face and deliberate on what should be done with him. “Is he a man, is he deviant, or is he a freak of nature?”



Planet of the Apes, Screen capture 1:05:17

These connect to how the Black body has historically been seen only as property and sub-human, something to be picked at and prodded. Their humanity would be discussed before their eyes as they were placed on auction blocks or showcased to be examined like a spectacle. Black people have had to fight just to be seen as human due to these historical events. Rather than critically analyzing this, the film appears to place all of this historical trauma onto the White body as a way of scaring the White audience into grabbing ahold of the reins of their societal control even tighter.

The evilness and backwardness of the Black body are not only represented through the rupture of the existing power structure, but also through the ways in which this backward world is contrasted and displayed against the Whiteness and heroic nature of Taylor. Throughout the film, there are instances alluding to his engulfment into this world and a crack in the social fabric that separates the apes from the humans, but he still maintains the embodiment of the typical western, White hero.

When their spaceship first crashes and the astronauts must cross the empty desert in search of a sign of life, this signifies the first instance where Taylor's status is challenged. This seems to almost be a western in some sense, as the audience understands that Taylor is now embarking on a mission into a new and unknown land.

The stark, desert landscape of the conversation, suggesting desperation, sterility, and futility, amplifies its gist, namely that they are no longer in the world they once knew and that they have little hope of survival. Taylor's expressions of cowboy machismo and cynical reasoning in this instance squash his fellow Caucasian astronaut's egocentric idealism, yet they outline no alternative way of thinking about their altered historical and cultural states. Desolation, failure, and homeless characterize this arrival sequence, contributing to an overwhelming sense that Taylor loses his white, American, male chokehold on social order (McHugh, p. 45).

It is a given within this film that Taylor is the embodiment of this “white, American, male chokehold on social order”. The filmmaker and the audience know the historical context of white, male domination. Thus, they examine its disembodiment in this film at the hands of a “lesser species”. I analyze this as a message to the audience about the horrors of a loss of the status of “whiteness”, which aligns with the message that *The Birth of a Nation* also meant to instill in order to set off a moral panic.

Schaffner also incorporates aspects that allude to how the Black body was treated during their formal enslavement and places this onto the white body in this film. When the humans are captured, the chimpanzee scientists take them into their laboratories and perform experiments on them in a similar fashion to the ways in which unethical experiments were carried out on Black bodies that were seen as property.



Planet of the Apes, Screen capture 37:28



This 1952 painting by Robert Thom is the only known representation of Lucy, Anarcha and Betsey. Pearson Museum, Southern Illinois University School of Medicine

They are captured and forced into cages. This is justified by the futuristic humans' lack of ability to speak and their act of stealing some of the food that the apes grow. The sexual partners of the humans are picked out and assigned to them, and they are bred by the apes. This is highlighted when the chimpanzee Zira, played by Kim Hunter, assures Taylor that his sexual mate was picked out in his favor. This selection of their mates highlights how the reproduction process is still ultimately controlled by apes, which undermines Taylor's authority through hetero-normative machismo (McHugh). The treatment of these white humans by the Black chimpanzees reflects the treatment of the Black body during the times of slavery, yet it is flipped to allow the White audience to feel and embody this victimization in a futuristic time. “In this respect, the situation of the animalized humans informs and reflects that of African American slaves: the control of their sexuality and reproduction, carefully guarded by their overseers, compromises the ability to claim paternal authority” (McHugh, p. 46).

In addition to stoking racial fear through a drastic and violent severance of the social systems that place whiteness at the top of the hierarchy, *Planet of the Apes* also uses species difference to connote this racial difference as well. Through this, the same stereotypes of the Black body as violent and needing to be controlled are perpetrated. This is apparent when

examining the ways that the apes within this society also seem to exist among a hierarchy of apes depending on whether they are orangutans, chimpanzees, or gorillas.

Orange/tan-cloaked ‘orangutans’ with light skin and blond hair are the politicians who preside over bookish, green-robed ‘chimpanzees’, the scientists and intellectuals whose dark hair and light skin indicates their socially ‘in-between’-status. Both orangutans and chimpanzees give orders to thug-like, black-wearing ‘gorillas’ with dark hair and dark skin who serve as laborers and military enforcers. Equally consistent ape clothing reinforces the collusion of species, class, and racial divisions among apes, reflecting the skin-color of the masks as well as contributing to the social stratification among ape species (McHugh, p. 51).

This is apparent throughout the entirety of the film. While the film seeks to invert the social formations, they are still apparent within the futuristic society of the apes. This seems to highlight that these social hierarchies are inevitable. Even if they are not embedded into human society, they will be in ape society. This film perpetuates the idea that, by default, the lighter-skinned are intellectually superior, and the darker-skinned are better suited for physical labor and in need of control. The dark-skinned apes are made into workers and militants. The lighter-skinned apes are a part of an intellectual meritocracy of social privilege and power (McHugh). From the onset of the film, the Black gorillas are used to hunt and capture the humans because that is what they are best suited for. They subdue the humans back into submission when they act out, they cage them and act as bodyguards, and they even kill when they have to. The sequences that highlight this capturing of the “animal humans” mirror that of the capturing of Black bodies for enslavement.

Our first sight of apes in the film, gorillas on horseback hunting humans, identifies them particularly with popular nineteenth-century U.S. images of runaway-slave hunters, who similarly employed the technologies of guns and domesticated horses to exert dominance over people termed ‘animal’ in relation to themselves. In the sequence introducing the space/time-travelling men to apes of the future, gorillas play the part of slave traders who exploit their technological advances to round up ‘human animals.’ (McHugh, p. 58)

Thus, the Black body is represented through the aggressive acts of the apes against the white humans that are victimized. Historical notions of slavery, incarceration, and revolt are represented in this film but are instead used as tactics to exemplify this violence being turned and used against the white body as a form of revenge from the Black body. When examining the film from this analysis, it is hard to not compare it to the methods used within *The Birth of a Nation* to scare the white audience into criminalizing and caging the Black body, which is perceived to be violent.

Once again, these scenes represent how the world will be if the power that white people have historically yielded gets into the “wrong hands”. Despite being a futuristic society that mirrors that of human society, there are instances within the film that highlight the inability of apes to truly be as advanced as the “true humans”. As Taylor assists in inspecting the cave for a missing link between humans and apes, he provides information that the apes still have yet to master and understand, which stuns all of them standing in the cave with him.

Additionally, the tactics that the Black gorillas in particular use when capturing the humans mirror the terroristic tactics of White people historically against those deemed as “Other” or subhuman. This links the machinery that the apes use to historical whiteness. For example, there is a scene where gorillas stop to take a picture near a pile of dead humans, which connects to a historical “great white hunter” pose. This also connects to the post-Reconstruction phenomenon of White people photographing themselves next to the corpses of their lynched victims (McHugh).

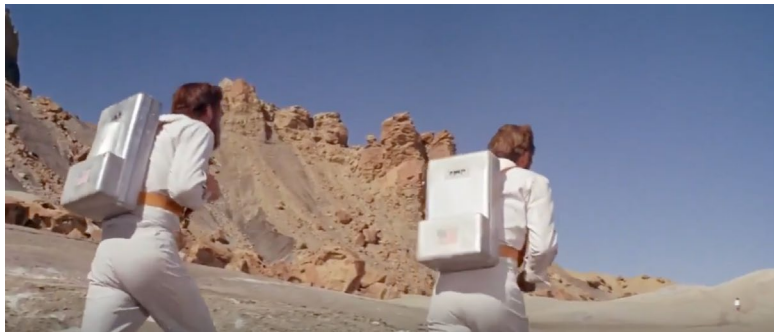


Planet of the Apes, Screen capture 35:53

This violence being carried out against the scared and defenseless futuristic white human depicts the white body as undeserving victims of violence at the hands of revenge-hungry Black gorillas. Rather than critically examine this historical violence on the Black body, the film erases social responsibility for addressing this treatment and instead poses a world where society has veered too far to the other side, where those who are historically marginalized now have free range to enact violence against the White body. Within this film, there is also an underlying tone about the critique of war, and the disillusionment of young people during a time when the United States was deeply engulfed in overseas and at-home conflicts. While this might lend it more towards a critical look at unfair power structures, it seems to be examining war as something which may disrupt ongoing power structures. In this way, it excuses the structures that continue to marginalize people of color by highlighting a rupture in them in such a negative light.

Despite these coded representations of the Black body in the form of species difference, there is one Black, male human that can be seen within this film, albeit not for very long. This character's name is Dodge, and he is played by the actor Jeff Burton. He dies early in the film. I analyzed his presence in the film as one that referenced the archetype of a "faithful soul", one that has assimilated into the White culture and follows the directions placed before him. This is seen at the beginning of the film when their spaceship is beginning to sink into the water, and Taylor demands that Dodge go and open the hatch, and he immediately does. While this might

simply be just because Taylor is cast as the captain of the Spaceship, putting this into alignment with the rest of the film highlights the commanding and dominating nature of Taylor, whether it is a Black human body or a Black ape body. Dodge's early death and silence when he is visually shown in the film throw him into contrast with the White, male protagonist. This is emblematic of the perceptions surrounding how the Black body should position itself, and how even they may suffer at the hands of a "backward world" overrun by subhumans. "His exclusion from this discussion aligns Dodge with the chimpanzees as a bearer of liberal tolerance, a transitional figure who benefits immediately from inclusion in the system but who loses in the long run as his difference becomes obliterated" (McHugh, p. 61). This exclusion from the discussion refers to a scene early on when Taylor and Landon are walking through the desert, discussing their situation and what led them to be on the mission, to begin with. Dodge walks out of the screen and becomes irrelevant to this conversation. This erasure of Dodge even while he is still alive connects to the historical erasure of Blackness in the media and film.



Screen capture 20:38

I disagree with some of the viewpoints posited by McHugh in her analysis of this film. While she also analyzed the usage of species difference to point toward racial difference, McHugh seemed to examine this as a means of breaking down and critiquing the concept of individuality from the perspective of the western, white male. "...animal racial masking emerges throughout this film as a form of marking explicitly employed to combat notions of cinematic

whiteness as the hallmark of singularly unmarked human agency and to foster instead socially centered concepts of agency.” (McHugh, p. 42). While this very much may have been the intention, the parallel themes of a rupture within the existing hierarchy that threatens white bodies and places Black bodies in positions to threaten the social order seem to ring throughout this movie for me. It makes the humans involved – the majority of them White – appear victimized and brutalized by angry apes. Most of the apes that carry out the physically brutal acts are Black gorillas, while the ones pulling the strings are the lighter-skinned orangutans. This once again posits the Black body as violent, aggressive, and needing to be put to use for a particular reason in order to contain their violence. The White man is contrasted with this image and portrayed as always more developed and heroic. The messages embedded in this film seem to invoke this idea of a messed-up power balance, just more subtly. McHugh concludes with,

...because the material history attached to the idea of race in twentieth-century U.S. contexts puts enormous weight on invocations of species difference as a method of dividing humans, conceptualizing racial difference as a method of dividing humans, conceptualizing racial difference in terms of species may be the only way to counteract the ‘whitening,’ naturalizing, and denationalizing power of the human in contemporary American culture (p. 66).

However, this representation within the film, and the way that it is perpetuated, only seems to further appropriate this criminalization of the Black body by situating the White body as threatened due to a power imbalance between the two groups that need to be fixed.

Get Hard

Get Hard, directed by Etan Cohen and starring Kevin Hart and Will Ferrell as the main characters, contains themes of racial stereotyping, criminality, and redemption. This film is the most recent of the feature films that I analyzed, being released in 2015. This is a time period characterized by the age of colorblindness, with the tendency of people to claim that racism is over and people are no longer systemically impacted by their racial categories. However, this is

also a time period where more attention began to be garnered towards police violence against Black communities. This characterized the end of the 2-term presidency of Barack Obama, the first president with Black ancestry in the United States. Despite the depiction of racial progress, racial inequalities within Black communities and the overrepresentation of Black people incarcerated still persisted, along with the boiling of racial fears and animosities among groups which led to the nomination of President Donald J. Trump in 2016. I want to analyze the impact that a comedic and satirical film such as *Get Hard* may have in a time that claims that we have overcome racism while still continuing to deal with these racial inequalities and problems.

A part of my thesis is to also explore how this continues to play in contemporary media. I want to analyze this film, made more recently, to explore any potential connections that may exist between older forms of explicit racism, such as *Birth of a Nation*, and how they are still embedded into the media that people continue to enjoy today. With this film being more recent and being coated with comedy, it seems that there has not been much critical analysis to explore how it may still be a continuation of the criminalization of the Black body. Created in the era of colorblindness, the problems addressed in this film may be seen as irrelevant and not necessary for discussion. I argue that these same depictions of the past continue to be inscribed, just in different ways. In addition, with a Black actor being one of the main characters, I also argue that the Black body can also be capable of reproducing these harmful stereotypes, which makes it even more important to address and explore how we may all still continue to perpetuate this problem.

Get Hard tells the story of rich hedge fund manager James King, played by Will Ferrell, being convicted of fraud and facing 10 years in prison. He seeks the help of Black businessman Darnell Lewis, played by Kevin Hart, who has hopes of expanding his business and moving his

family out of the hood. After James mistakes Darnell for having been to prison, Darnell takes on this persona to show James how to survive in prison in exchange for money.

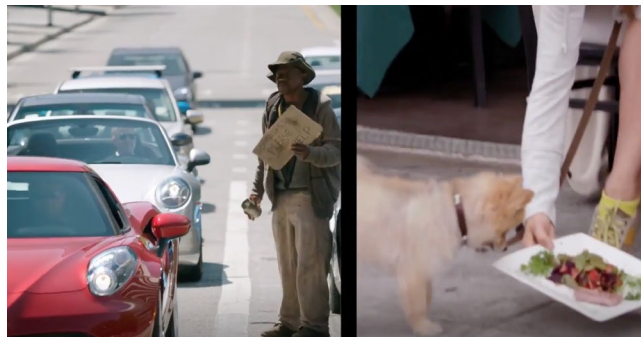
This film attempts to highlight the absurdity of racial beliefs and fears that people may have about the Black body. However, I analyze that this film still, even if unknowingly, contributes to the overwhelming record of the criminalization and dehumanization of the Black body. This is due to the filmmaker's inability to critique his own place in the production of the film and how it situates him politically and historically. *Get Hard* posits the problems that the Black body face in this film as the butt of a joke, without any real critical evaluation of the real impacts of these problems and the exploitation of them for a movie. All of the worlds that Black people appear to inhabit in this world are still that of violence and criminality, aside from Darnell, who strives to assimilate into White society. Blackness is tied to being criminal, and the film makes no attempt to dissect what this means but instead treats it as if it is a problem of the past and something to be played with. While Cohen means to poke fun at these racial stereotypes, it ultimately stays in the world of comedic relief, and something for White audiences to enjoy and allow for the social realities they believe to exist to continue uninterrupted, without any need for critical questioning or understanding. The social realities that make this a reality for a lot of people aren't addressed, which can make this more sinister because it approaches the problem as if it is something to be joked about but not seriously discussed.

The worlds that the White body inhabits and that the Black body inhabits are continuously displayed as separate as if they don't interact or aren't impacted by each other. James is pictured in the beginning in his large home and receiving immense respect from his job, while Darnell is pictured attempting to negotiate a good house so that his daughter can attend a better school. We then see him drop his daughter off at a run-down and violent school with metal

detectors and arrive at his job to a bunch of employees that are lounging around and careless, most of who are people of color. While this might be a way to show the inequalities between these two communities, this representation also sits at a surface level and makes Black communities appear as if they are just innately in states of despair. The two worlds are cast as separate. This places the Black body and the Black community in this space of despair and carelessness and removes the impact the White world has had on this despair.



Get Hard, Screen capture 4:23



Get Hard, Screen capture 8:02

James' naivety and innocence are put on display when he first interacts with Darnell. He immediately confuses him as a criminal due to his Blackness.



Get Hard, Screen capture 12:48



Get Hard, Screen capture 12:53

When James engages in a discussion with Darnell about helping him learn how to survive in prison, he bases this on an assumption that Darnell has already been to prison and uses statistics to back up his assumptions. Including this specific dialogue without ever providing any further critical analysis points to the issue at hand. This scene creates a joke out of this very real statistic as if to point to its irrationality when the Black body has in fact been associated with criminality historically, and this has resulted in a higher proportion of Black people being incarcerated today. Once again, it does not further challenge this notion or allow the audience to evaluate or understand the historical connection between the two. This is just presented as an absurdity without addressing its real implications in society and allows the audience to laugh this moment away without taking any further steps to actually challenge this notion.

There's a good satirical premise here in the way James immediately assumes that the diminutive Darnell (Kevin Hart) is a former hardened criminal: the scene in which he uses statistical analysis about the racial makeup of America's

incarcerated population to back up his suspicions is touchy and uncomfortable in a way that resonates beyond the space of the film (Nayman).

Due to this assumption, Darnell is depicted as attempting to put on a mask of “criminal Blackness” in order to fool James in exchange for monetary compensation, which in some way allows Darnell to actually fall into this category of deviance. Throughout the film, Darnell and his family strive to be White, and are the characterization of “not all Black people”. However, any other mention and representation of the Black body and its environment are replete with overly-exaggerated criminal representations of the Black body. Why must a film that is trying to challenge these stereotypes still rely on them so heavily in a way that eventually punches down and ignores the severity of the problem?

Darnell eventually shows James what the “actual world of Blackness” is when he takes him to his cousin’s house, who is the stereotypical image of the gangster surrounded by a mass of other deviant-looking Black bodies. The people that James encounters in the neighborhood are not welcoming of him, and James is very apparently intimidated and scared.



Get Hard, Screen capture 1:08:00

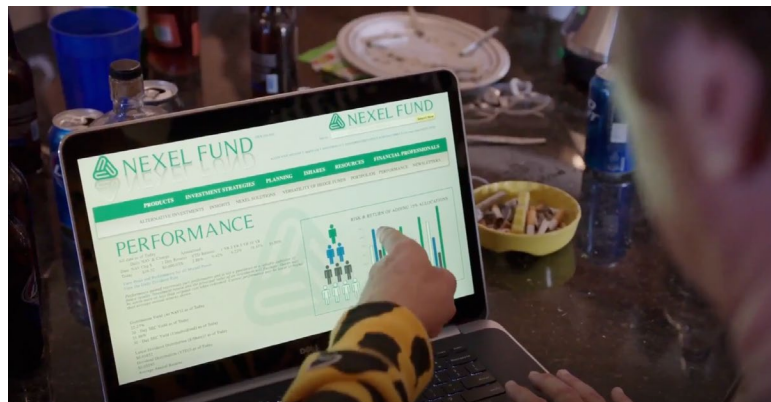


Get Hard, Screen capture 1:10:19

When James does interact with these Black characters, he attempts to act Black in order to fit in and not be intimidated, but he eventually introduces them to the world of stocks and bonds, almost hinting toward a white savior role.



Get Hard, Screen capture 1:10:40



Get Hard, Screen capture 1:10:46

Throughout the film, James becomes closer and closer to these characters and gets closer to emulating this Blackness, but never quite reaches it because he is still deemed as too innocent to enter this world. For Darnell, when he and his cousin first talk, it is apparent that Darnell is meant to be an anomaly as someone that strives to be White and is not acting Black. This places James as the “not all Black people” Black character, but he is still innately tied to criminality due to his status as a Black man. However, he puts on a show in order to situate himself within the White world.

Firm pokes at racial stereotypes suggest that we can easily move past these assumptions. A joke is made out of racism and the criminality of the Black body while it still continues to perpetuate it on the same screen without actually pushing the audience to think or do anything about it. “It's not that Get Hard is 'un-PC' -- which is often the best thing a comedy can be -- so much as that it's lazy: it doesn't challenge its audience or itself” (Nayman). I analyze this film as a form of virtue signaling in order to make the filmmakers and audience feel better about understanding the jokes. At the end of the day, the problems in the film are solved by friendship and the generosity of the White body. The events in this film add to the list of historical media that have cast the Black body in a dangerous and criminal environment with no explanation as to why, and the White body as incapable of assimilating into this world. On the other hand, the Black body is cast as either fulfilling these stereotypes or striving to assimilate into the White world.

Bushmen of the Kalahari

Bushmen of the Kalahari, directed by Robert M. Young and John Marshall, explores themes of culture, evolution, technological change, adaptation, and colonialism. Some of the specific themes that I analyzed in relation to my film are the casting of Black bodies as primitive,

white saviorism, and the effects of colonialism on Black and Indigenous bodies. This film was released in 1975, which also aligns with the era of tense national and global change in the United States and abroad, and an increase in the awareness and problem of racial inequalities. This film is an ethnographic film, which situates itself in the realm of media differently than fictional films. Ethnographic films take a more research-based and objective approach to filming and telling stories about the world, and are done so in a way to attempt to expand human understanding. I want to explore how an ethnographic documentary that claims to be objective, such as this one, may also have an impact on the overall ideology of the Black body as a criminal even if claiming to be objective and empirical.

Ethnographic documentaries that purport to show the Black body in its natural state have also added to the swath of media that creates this criminalized stereotype of the Black body. This is because they have still been approached from a place and position of power, and many times the filmmaker goes into this space with preconceived notions in their heads that they only reinforce through their choice of what to film and how they edit the film, along with how they interpret it. I specifically analyzed *Bushmen of the Kalahari* because of its fascination with the ways of the past that the Bushmen people engaged in. Many of the images that people have of Bushmen today, along with general ideas of the diasporic Black body, stem from ethnographic documentaries such as this one. In addition, many of the ideas about the Black body that permeate this film have been the basis and foundational thought for racist notions, to begin with.

Bushmen of the Kalahari is an ethnographic film that documents the lives of the San (Bushmen) people living in the Kalahari Desert, neighboring Botswana and Namibia. This film specifically focuses on their dangerous journey across the Desert as they attempt to travel back to their old village in hopes of having a fixed water pump. Essentially, this film highlights the

effects of colonialism on a group of people historically relegated to the margins of society. John Marshall, one of the directors of the film and the main interviewer that can be heard as a voice-over throughout the film, has a historical relationship with the San people in this region. He began traveling, studying, and filming with them when he went to that region with his parents for their own research purposes. Most of his work involves the Bushmen people, and a track of growth and way of thinking and filming can be seen throughout his career. I am specifically examining *Bushmen of the Kalahari* because of its place in the timeline of his career filming them and the complex questions that it produces.

Bushmen of the Kalahari attempts to provide a more nuanced and realistic portrayal of the Black body, particularly in a historical hunter-gatherer society in South Africa. However, there are always implications to be considered when a White filmmaker, and especially a crew, travels to a part of the world that has been severely impacted by colonialism and imperialism in order to study and film them. No matter how critical they attempt to be of the social conditions that the people they are observing and filming live within, these still highlight the impacts of colonialism because of the power that one holds by being able to stand behind a camera and film someone in this way.

The film starts by introducing the successful hunting and gathering life that the Bushmen of the past, or at least Marshall's Bushmen of the past, used to live. It then picks back up when Marshall decides to go pay them a visit after a few decades. However, despite this film purporting to be about the life of the Bushmen and how they are impacted by industrialization, I analyze that it seems to be more about John Marshall, his liberal humanistic tendencies, and his journey to visit a culture in which he is enamored. Throughout the majority of the film, Marshall's voice is imposed and narrates everything that is shown. There are a few instances

where we can hear and learn from some of the Bushmen, but it is still translated by Marshall. His subjects don't ever have direct control or access to the camera. Instead, Marshall is cast as a western bearer of knowledge. He is the White body that has come from a "developed nation", and is now illustrated as someone who has come seeking to expand his knowledge. The life of the Black bodies displayed on this screen is something to be explored, probed, and studied.

Images of European life are at times contrasted with the seemingly desolate and difficult life of the Bushmen. Even if unintentionally, this epitomizes the world that the White bodies on the screen inhabit and casts the world that the Black bodies inhabit as underdeveloped.



Bushmen of the Kalahari, Screen capture 0:52 (reel 1)



Bushmen of the Kalahari, Screen capture 2:12 (reel 1)

When Marshall comes back to visit the Bushmen, he has them all sit around to examine some of the past footage that he recorded with them. This might hint at Marshall's drive to allow

his work to be participatory with his subjects. However, there seemed to be a lot of focus on the amusement of the Bushmen as they reviewed these images through this technology.



Bushmen of the Kalahari, Screen capture 15:52 (reel 1)

This connects to a particular scene within the well-known ethnography *Nanook of the North*, where Flaherty brought a gramophone for his subjects to examine and recorded their amusement and confusion with this technology that has become so common sense for us. This exacerbates the idea that they are not up to par with these technological advances and that they should be, which casts them as underdeveloped.

Additionally, the White gaze appears to examine the Black body, whether through Marshall being there and interacting with the people and showing himself in this way, or when the anthropologists are in their office examining the images of the Black body through a screen.



Bushmen of the Kalahari, Screen capture 3:15 (reel 1)



Bushmen of the Kalahari, Screen capture 3:21 (reel 1)

Marshall justifies this by showcasing his efforts to help the Bushmen people. He ventures into their world and casts them as in need of intervention from the White body. Marshall becomes the White savior that not only saves them from dying of dehydration but is also still critical of them living within these social conditions and the unfairness of it. That is what complicates this film, and ethnographic documentaries that align with this form in particular. Within the film, there does appear to be a critique of some of the power structures and social conditions. However, rather than collaborating with the people that are being filmed to tell this story, Marshall casts the Bushmen as unable to do that and places himself in the position to be the White body that does this. Even without explicitly demonizing and criminalizing the Black body, this portrayal of it as incapable and underdeveloped, and of the White body as intelligent and benevolent, is what allowed the criminalization of the Black body to spur to begin with. More than anything, this points to the foundations of the ideology that allows for the criminalization of the Black body and how it is still perpetuated today.



Bushmen of the Kalahari, Screen capture 22:55 (reel 2)

The Black body had to first be cast as subhuman and in need of intervention and control from the Western world in order to justify the exploitation of their image, as in the case of many ethnographic documentaries, or for its use in slavery and the ongoing racial projects. Marshall himself does not intentionally propagate the Black body as deviant and criminal, or as subhuman. However, his portrayal of himself as a benevolent character amidst a mass of Black bodies that need his intervention works to add to this historical archive of the dehumanization and criminalization of the Black body. He, and the filmmaking crew, turn this entire ordeal into an adventurous journey that they are embarking on out of the kindness of their hearts because the Black bodies in this film need them to. He uses the privilege and power conferred to him through the history of colonialism and imperialism to help them in exchange for the usage, and eventual exploitation, of their image.

Les Maîtres Fous

Les Maîtres Fous, directed by Jean Rouch, explores the themes of colonialism and cultural practices and was released in 1955. This film is interesting in that it is from more of a global perspective, yet it still connects to the overall topic of criminality and the representation of the Black body. During this time, Ghana had been under imperial and colonial control by the British Colonial Government. Due to this, the Huaka movement was born as a form of resistance

against colonialism. I want to explore whether the images portrayed in *Les Maîtres Fous* accurately display and portray this resistance, or if it unintentionally perpetuates the idea of the violent and primitive Black body by not including enough historical and political context.

Rouch, in this film, documents a possession ritual of the Songhay people in Accra, Ghana, who originally are from Niger. This ritual, from the Hauka movement, was practiced in response to the colonial rule of the fifties in Ghana. From the approach of an ethnographic and observational film, Rouch films and narrates the ritual from start to finish, with intercuts of ordinary city life and references to the colonial powers that they were seeking to mimic during this ritual.

Les Maîtres fous is one of the more complex films in relation to its contribution to the criminalization of the Black body. At first glance, this may seem like another film seeking to showcase the violent and dehumanized actions of the underdeveloped Black body. However, the people depicted in the film collaboratively sought to film this ritual with Rouch. And, this ritual in particular is one that is meant to mock and critique the violent tendencies of the colonial rulers during that time, which brings to light interesting questions about representation in this context.

Despite this complicated reading of the film, it appears that there has not been much critical thought given to its exploitative nature. Early critiques and the general public tend to view it with more distaste. However, film reviews seem to view this film, and much of Rouch's work, in a positive light. "If ethnography brought Rouch to the cinema, the cinema brought Rouch to the rest of the world. For as he tried to record as faithfully as possible and then transmit to others the world he saw around him, the ethnographer became a poet" (Blue, p. 82). This undermines the potential exploitative impact and nature of his work in the larger picture. Rouch is regarded as someone who is critical of colonials, which his work seems to allude to, along

with his own understanding of the world and what he does. He strives towards working to change the nature of ethnography and anthropology in a more noble direction. This is what complicates potential violent depictions and images of the Black body within his work, especially with his identity and social status in society in comparison to those that he films. All of these interactions that take place, however, even when recording simple observational documentaries, have a part to play in colonialism more broadly, and in the ongoing racial projects being carried out in the United States and the Western world.

While Rouch does attempt to make an anti-colonial film with this documentary, are the portrayals of the Black body engaging in these violent practices enough when there is no proper or significant explanation of the political and historical significance behind these actions? While a more sophisticated audience may have an easier time deciphering the coded messages within the film, it is clear that it does not impart these messages to a more broad audience. Rouch uses French text to explain at the beginning of the film that this is a ritual carried out by these colonized bodies. However, without the ability to interpret or decipher the text, the audience is left wondering what the intentions of the people on the screen are. For an audience that is bound to misunderstand these images, was Rouch responsible when not establishing this historical significance as clearly as possible? In a conversation with Ousmane Sembène, Rouch attempts to excuse his responsibility to properly contextualize the images that he captures in his films. He describes a situation where a person watched *Les Maîtres Fous* at an anthropological conference and immediately asked for a copy of the film because it justified her belief that “blacks were indeed savages”. Rouch then goes on to explain that such films should not be brought to audiences who are too ill-informed and without proper education. From this point, and in relation to the film and the depictions of the Black body that can be seen, I ask two questions: Is it a

proper use of his power to impose his presence into these communities impacted by colonialism, just to keep the discussion at the level of the elites? 2. Does the media really work that way? Is it possible for his work to truly not have an impact on the cultural and ideological level of the broad public? In addition to these questions, what are the implications of Rouch's identity within these contexts using the camera to record and explore the lives of those that have been deemed as other, especially in relation to the history of colonialism and the power relationship between those deemed White and those deemed Black? All of these questions point back to the ways that mediated images have contributed to the criminalization of the Black body because these questions point back to representation and how what is or is not represented perpetuates or fights against these representations.

Despite his having good intentions and a personal understanding of the political implications, there is still an interesting and conflicting relationship that takes place when a White filmmaker picks up a camera to study and record Black subjects. This can point towards and explain some of the immediate critiques of this documentary. It can be argued that, regardless of the intentions, someone from a position of power using their power to gaze at the Black body from an outsider's point of view continues to perpetuate these negative power structures. However, there are many mixed arguments and thoughts pertaining to this film. "African revolutionaries rejected the film as a racist denunciation of Africans as primitive savages. Western students reacted with nausea, shock, outrage, or analytic distance, whereas African students were impressed by the intrepid Hauka of the ritual as models of empowerment" (Meyer, 2). It is difficult to pinpoint an exact example of this within the film because Rouch remains behind the camera the whole time documenting the process and the possession ritual. This further proves to exacerbate his status as an "outsider", and as an observer peering in from

the outside. This can further work to otherize the Black bodies within this film and the actions that they partake in, as Rouch sets himself as separate from it based on his spectator role.

Additionally, his narration still casts him as an omniscient White voice. Even though he is trying to escape this traditional, anthropological role that has played a problematic role in the historical encounter with the Black body, he still circles back to it within this film. Even if the purpose is to critique the colonial rule that has a hold on the Black bodies portrayed, it still creates this dichotomy between the portrayal of a benevolent, White voice and a primitive, wild, Black body. At times, Rouch and his practice have been classified as capable of no wrong. “...Rouch is a *maitre fou*, a man of two worlds: erudite, intellectual, immensely informed, immensely articulate; but also spontaneous, innocent, an energetic improviser, half-possessed, near catharsis.” (Blue, p. 82). However, this points in some ways back to the formation of the White savior, and the impact that this also has on the criminalization of the Black body. By casting the ideal or an image of a powerful, intelligent and caring White man next to portrayals of destitute and impoverished Black bodies, this contrast between the White as good and the Black as evil is hinted at, even if there aren’t explicit connections between criminality and the Black body.

Rouch attempts to distance himself from traditional anthropologists or ethnographers that see themselves as empirical observers of primitive and pre-colonial cultures. There is a need to establish more of a reciprocal relationship between the groups. Rouch aims for this in his ethnographic and semi-fictional films, and particularly with this film, as he tries to show the subjection of Africans within this colonial society and how they respond to it. (Meyer). However, does Rouch actually accomplish this? I argue that *Les Maîtres Fous* is still a voyeuristic film for the White gaze.

Neither Rouch nor the Western spectator can really see through the eyes of the possessed in the ritual. 'We' look at the possessed in the act of their performance of 'us', or rather the spirits of the British colonizers – 'us in them', if taken with a grain of salt. The self-reflexive foregrounding of the documentary's production reveals the limits of the ethnographer and his gaze. Disorder, subjectivity, and mediality are rendered visible and audible by Rouch's use of the handheld camera, by abrupt cuts, and by a bare, mostly descriptive commentary (Meyer, 18).

No matter how hard Rouch tries to break down the barrier between observer and participant, there will still always be a dimension of disconnect because of the centuries of history that separate the two. Racial categories may be constructed, but ethnic and cultural differences are not. Moreover, physical realities have been situated as a result of the categorization of a hierarchy of races. This is not something that can be ignored in the process of filmmaking. Rouch tries to question this hierarchy within this film, however, I question if this is the best method to do so, regardless of the intentions.

Rouch includes close-up scenes of Black bodies frothing at the mouth or of them holding a dead dog after butchering it for their ritual. These scenes, without any context, can be reprehensible for people to watch.



Les Maîtres Fous, Screen capture 4:45



Les Maîtres Fous, Screen capture 21:40

They can walk away with negative perceptions if they never develop a critical analysis of the film and the cultural meaning behind the actions. This is exactly where the problem lies, with the fact that Rouch does not include enough historical background. It is up to the audience to figure out or to know enough about the history. While excluding some context may prompt them to further investigate this issue on their own terms, it can also further perpetuate negative stereotypes that the audience may already have in their head about the Black body. In tying back to the conversation between Ousmane Sembéne and Jean Rouch, Ousmane Sembéne told Rouch, “...in the domain of cinema, it is not enough to see, one must analyze. I am interested in what is before and after that which we see.” It becomes a problem when cognitive dissonance is produced that can potentially further perpetuate criminalized and savage images of the Black body to an unknowing audience. Especially with the history of the media being used as a tool to push these narratives. This can make it difficult for someone to decipher the deeper meaning and the objective reality behind films such as this when they are already surrounded by negative and subhuman depictions of the Black body.

This film is overall complex in terms of what it may or not perpetrate, and the appropriate way to critique it. However, when examining this film in relation to the overwhelming mass of media that criminalizes the Black body, I think ethnographic films such as this need to do more

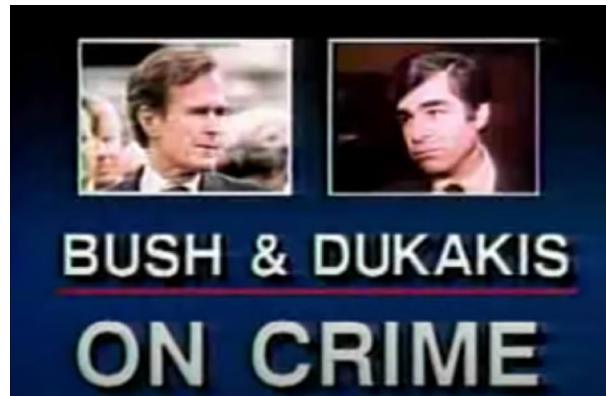
to contextualize their meaning so as not to fall into the same cycles of perpetuation. I don't think that this type of conversation should or even can stay at the academic and elite level. It needs to push into the conversations of everyday people and be produced in a way that they won't mistakenly cast the image alongside other stereotypical representations. "...the ambivalence of both the ritual and Rouch's commentary, because both are at once familiar and unfamiliar – the ritual in its strange mimicry of colonial work, and the English commentary with its strange French accent that highlights the problem of ethnographic authority in mediating between cultures" (Meyer, 33). Navigating the power relationships that exist between a White filmmaker filming bodies of color, especially in nonfiction ethnographic works, will always be difficult. This doesn't mean that it shouldn't be done, but it needs to be done with care and in a way that challenges the dominant ideology that continues to hold the Black body hostage.

Willie Horton Ad

I chose this particular short campaign ad because of the impact that it had on the rise in public punitiveness at this time, especially against the Black body. This was created during a very intense election, and helped bring in a President that was responsible for much of the policies today that continue to make mass incarceration such a large problem. This presidential campaign ad contains themes of criminality and violence and connects these themes to the image of the Black body. The ad premiered on TV in 1988. This was during a time when the United States began to crack down on an increase in drug usage and crime in the inner cities, where a lot of Black and Brown bodies resided. Advertisements like this aided in the policies that continued to police and incarcerate Black bodies, rather than finding long-term sustainable solutions to combat this deep-rooted, institutional problem.

This is a very short clip, with it only being about 30 seconds long. However, there is a lot packed into it that ties into older images of the Black body as violent and criminal, along with what a noble White man needs to do to combat this issue.

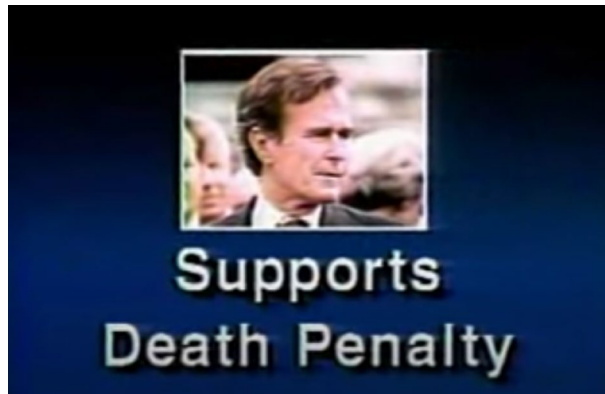
The ad starts by comparing Bush and Dukakis on crime, with these literal words placed under their images juxtaposed to one another.



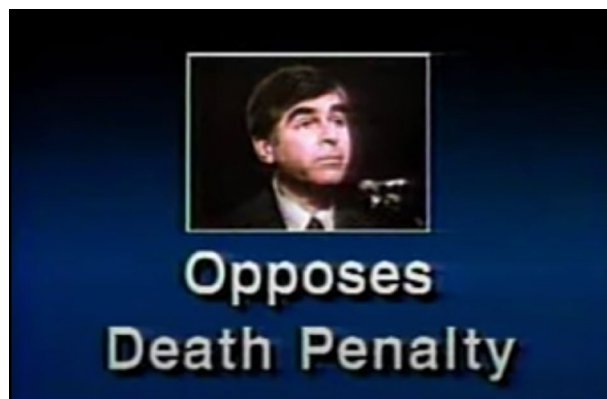
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9KMSSEZ0Y> Screen capture, 0:01

This idea of “crime” became a new way to describe the Black body in a colorblind society without directly addressing the Black body, especially the “uppity” and violent Blacks in a world that proclaims to give equal footing to all people. This connects to the messages portrayed within films such as *The Birth of a Nation* that casts the Black body as attempting to take unearned power in society by force and needing to be punished for it.

With the push to support the crudest modes of punishment, such as the death penalty, repeated messages such as this have allowed for the policies that criminalize the Black body to continue to stand. Being tough on crime began to be portrayed as good. The audience was being called to invoke their racial fears and fight against this surging Black violence. If they didn’t, their own homes and families were seen at risk of being attacked, in the same way that *The Birth of a Nation* portrayed the Black Body.

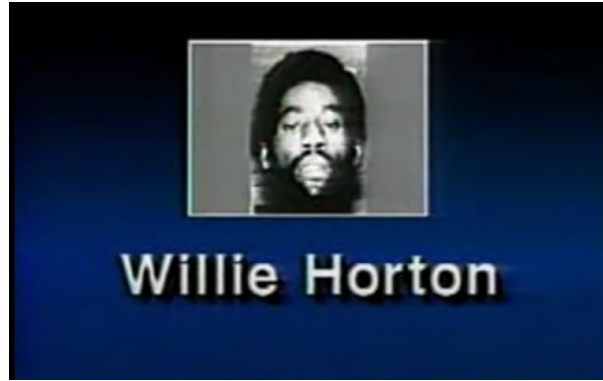


<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9KMSSEZ0Y> Screen capture 0:03



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9KMSSEZ0Y> Screen capture 0:07

Along with this, the image chosen to display Willie Horton made him appear as menacing as possible. It is a small and sinister-looking headshot. The description of his crime was very graphic in order to shock and scare the audience. Although there had been no specific mention of his race in connection to his crime, the overwhelming representation of Black bodies such as this in the media connected to crime worked to perpetuate this connection without it ever explicitly having to be stated.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Io9KMSSEZ0Y> Screen capture 0:13

While a problem surrounding showing the Black body in contexts of despair and misery still exists, there was an extreme problem during this specific time period in American history, around the 1970s, where the Black body only seemed to be placed within criminal contexts. This proliferation of the Black body within these contexts helped to further exacerbate this misrepresentation of the Black body and still connects with many of the media that are consumed by mainstream American audiences today.

LA riots coverage

The 1992 Los Angeles Riots were a series of riots and disturbances that took place after the beating of Rodney King. Rodney King was a Black man that had been beaten by LAPD officers after a high-speed chase due to him driving while intoxicated. When the officers were acquitted of their charges by an all-White jury, the city of Los Angeles erupted and rioted for a span of six days.

I examined news coverage of this event from two different news stations, One titled “*Raw Footage of Los Angeles as the 1992 Riots Erupt Throughout the City*” from NBCLA, and another one titled, “*Rodney King riots in Los Angeles*” from Live KABC. I noticed some similar overall themes within both of these news reports, although some nuances existed between the

two. Within these news coverages, an emphasis on wanting to highlight and record the violence taking place in the city seems to be apparent. While there had been violent and extreme instances of protest and demonstration in these cities, there is not much mention or discussion of the political or systematic failures that led to these protests reaching such violent extremes, which once again touches back on the erasure of historical and political context when displaying something that is meant to invoke fear within the audience. The difference with this being more of a contemporary form of media is the way in which it takes a “colorblind” stance on the entire issue. Unlike in *The Birth of a Nation*, there is no specific mention of race when recording or describing people. Words instead become coded while our images still allow us to primarily see the Black body within these negative contexts. Through this lens, the producers are able to display racial and class fears that have escalated to the point of violence, which in turn invokes fear within the audience. Even if race is not specifically mentioned, it still serves to make the audience scared of the “inner-city” people depicted, which are predominantly people of color but can now include an even broader swath of “undesirable” people, such as poor people or people who fight against the status quo.

For one, the news broadcasts seem to attempt to overemphasize the violence that the people partake in. While it is obvious that the protestors do at times seek to purposefully carry out violent, illegal, and extreme acts, the news reporters seem to intentionally ask direct questions about this violence or intentionally seek it out. There are continuous mentions of the streets as a war zone and a dangerous place for people to be. For example, the news report from NBCLA makes a comment that what they are currently viewing reminds them of war. While this is true at times, it also separates the people in this city from the rest of humanity by cordoning off this specific place as dangerous and untouchable. There is also no critical effort to address the

violence on the part of the police that led to these riots. There is the constant repetition of the idea of uncontrolled violence. A specific comment made by the news reporter states that the fires looked like the “fire started by the Iraqis” and that it looked like “Kuwait during the Gulf War Days.”

The news reporters repeatedly mention the ways in which the rioters are damaging property. However, they consistently cease to acknowledge the beating of the Black man, Rodney King, that led up to these events. When a news reporter makes the comment that riots are a “huge drain on the insurance companies and taxpayers”, this flips the situation around and posits them as the real victims, and not the people who have been undergoing police brutality and have been continuously oppressed and criminalized within these inner-city neighborhoods. Another news reporter makes the comment, “Civil disobedience of the ugliest, worst source”, which makes the claim that there is a right way to fight for justice and that the people on the screen are doing it in the worst way possible, which casts them as deviant.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGRRpgOxMn8> Screen capture 1:02:38

The news report from KABC also emphasizes this violence on the part of the protestors and makes it appear as if these actions exist in a vacuum and arise from the nature of the people rather than the situations that they are within. The audience can hear the news reporter say, “They just keep storming the cops on every side” while images of loud and angry protestors can be seen engaging with a straight line of cops. The reporters continue to make comments about

how the crowd is growing more militant over time. The media seems to be bent on questioning whether violence will ensue and whether the news reporter there feels scared.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSeCpFCS32M> Screen capture 12:25



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSeCpFCS32M> Screen capture 16:03

Additionally, and specifically within the NBCLA coverage, there are a plethora of friendly, anti-riot Black bodies that are shown on the screen admonishing the riots and behavior of the people on the street. I made an analytical connection of this image within this news coverage to the “good souls” represented in *The Birth of a Nation* that knows and understands their place and also helps to reprimand the Black people that do step out of their place and act in a way that they aren’t supposed to. Especially within NBCLA, the only time that we are able to hear from a Black body is when they are a friendly, assimilated Black body that disagrees with the rioters on the streets. A Black minister can be heard saying the words, “Stay cool and stay calm”.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGRRpgOxMn8> Screen capture 23:22

This is something that is displayed throughout both of the news reports as if they are making an intentional effort to make Black people appear as if they don't actually agree. While this may have positive intentions, this also connects to the fact that there is a narrative that Black people are intentionally violent and dangerous.

The cops are always made to look as if they are in direct opposition to the people rioting and protesting. They are always shown as calm and collected, except for one instance in the KABC broadcast where an officer is seen yelling at the reporter to get the light off of their faces. Overall, the language that is used to speak of the police versus the crowds of mostly Black bodies is much different. The cops continue to be represented as good and peaceful, while the crowds continue to be described as rowdy, violent, and aggressive. At the beginning of the coverage, NBCLA describes the cops on the screen as "men and women getting ready to go out tonight".



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGRRpgOxMn8> Screen capture 9:44

While this is not inherently problematic, the dichotomy between good and heroic cops continues to be placed directly against the image of violent rioters that are angry about the beating of a Black man. They are purposefully humanized, while the rioters and the story of Rodney King continue to be demonized. The reporters intentionally show and describe images of the police standing off against the crowds of angry people.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGRRpgOxMn8> Screen capture 29:08

This can be compared to the ways in which the White body was situated as heroic and calm in *The Birth of a Nation*, while the Black body was constantly situated as violent and uncontrollable. The difference is that these images don't explicitly evoke color or race anymore. However, images like this primarily serve to invoke a moral panic in the audience and allow them to believe that these areas and the people that live within them are inherently violent. These are areas that are predominantly occupied by Black people, so these moral panics and fears continue to be placed onto the Black body.

KABC also perpetuates this idea. They strategically show and describe protestors fighting against the calm police. The news report makes the comment, "They've been taunting the police officer."



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSeCpFCS32M> Screen capture 5:41



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSeCpFCS32M> Screen capture 5:48



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSeCpFCS32M> Screen capture 12:34

The fact that this is a news report of a real event complicates this analysis. The problem does not lie in the news station choosing to cover this historical event. I analyze that there is a problem in the fact that there is no mention of this event's historical or political significance, nor of the circumstances that led up to people being this angry. They are simply posited as angry people being violent against calm and collected police officers. With the knowledge that these are

lower-income neighborhoods that house predominantly people of color, the idea of the Black body as angry and violent, especially against people that are meant to protect the “Law and Order” of our country, gets subliminally placed into the audience’s head as they take in these images.

The Black body as criminal and needing to be incarcerated is not only distantly alluded to within these news coverages. There are also explicit scenes of the Black body being put into handcuffs and carried away in a way that represents justice being carried out. This makes the Black body appear as the ultimate suspect, despite the other people of all different races that can be seen on the screen. Within these news reporters, the Black bodies are the ones that are seen being handcuffed and counted as suspects. I also analyzed this as connecting to the idea of justice being carried out within *The Birth of a Nation* when the Ku Klux Klan is able to fight back against the Black body, persecute them, and chase them from the screen. This idea of taking these Black bodies and holding them captive so that they can “learn from their lessons” trails over into the news broadcasts that we consume today.

NBCLA has an overabundance of these specific images. Within the broadcasts, a cop can be seen standing over a Black man that is handcuffed and laying on the floor.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGRRpgOxMn8> Screen Capture 29:13

The reporter can be heard saying, “They don’t know if these are the guys that fired the shots, but they’re not taking any chances.” This sentence on its own is troubling because it highlights how a Black body does not actually have to be seen committing criminal acts to be considered criminal. Because this person had been there, and they had matched the description of what being or looking criminal looks like, they were placed in handcuffs and forced to lay on the ground. Their presence there as Black people was enough to warrant this action being taken against them.

There is another scene of a Black man in handcuffs being carried away from a looting scene. Right after, another Black person can be seen lying down on the floor. A few minutes later, an officer can be seen frantically trying to arrest a Black man as he struggles and attempts to escape. The scene cuts to people standing inside a looted store. The reporter says, “There’s also a suspect” and the camera pans over to a Black man that is handcuffed and standing inside the store.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGRRpgOxMn8> Screen capture 35:35

It becomes apparent that the broadcast is depicting a hunt down of the criminals that caused the rioting and looting. They are tracking down the suspects and arresting them in order to punish them and demonstrate to the city that they have everything under control. However, despite the

diversity of people that we see protesting and rioting within other scenes, all of the suspects depicted being arrested are Black.

It appears that KABC attempts to humanize the issue a little bit more. They start the broadcast by actually talking to people on the ground and protesting, something that NBCLA never did. As the reporter is talking to one of the Black men at the protest, he states, “the media only wants to hype violence”.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bSeCpFCS32M> Screen capture 1:23

The reporter does go on to continue to ask him and the other people seen about potential violence and their intentions for being there, but this inclusion of this Black person sharing their feelings still allows this perspective to be thrown in the mix, whereas NBCLA completely excluded it. However, KABC does still show a Black man being arrested and taken away in handcuffs, which further highlights how pervasive this issue truly is.

Tucker Carlson – We’re watching civilization collapse in real time

Fox News is an American cable news channel. The channel was established in 1996 and still continues to run to this day. Tucker Carlson is a conservative political commentator with a segment on Fox News titled, “*Tucker Carlson Tonight*”, which began in 2016. He talks about political and controversial issues from a conservative stance. I analyzed a particular sequence of his from January 18, 2022, titled, “*We’re watching civilization collapse in real time*”. This news

clip contained elements and themes of a moral panic and much of what Carlson mentioned in this segment tied into rhetoric within *The Birth of a Nation*, but now through a more contemporary and colorblind lens. With this analysis, I wanted to argue that the same violence that was cast onto the Black body within old films such as *The Birth of a Nation* and the news broadcasts from the late 20th century still continued to be perpetuated to this day.

Carlson begins the segment by making the statement that, “public spaces are now homeless encampments.”



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 0:12

He claims that he is pointing out the obvious, and posits this as logical and objective. *The Birth of a Nation* also attempted to do the same thing, which entails persuading the audience and appealing to their ethos and logos by highlighting the “truth” of the images by presenting their form of media as historical and logical. While describing these public spaces becoming homeless encampments, a Black man is shown laying down on the floor. Carlson continues to explain that, “trash-filled tents [are] blotting out what were once green and tidy parks”. With this, he dehumanizes the people that are being shown on the screen and compares them to trash.

Carlson describes “vagrants drooling unconscious on the steps of train stations.” With this statement, he shows another Black unhoused man.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 0:22

The use of “vagrant” immediately evokes images of criminal behavior and allows the audience to associate that with the body being presented on the screen, even if the person being shown is doing nothing else other than not living inside of a home. Carlson also mentions “junkies smoking meth” and shows even more unhoused Black bodies.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 0:28

All of these images are shown within the first 30 seconds of the video. This goes to show the method of including a barrage of these images so that the audience begins to subconsciously associate the Black body with being a vagrant and criminal.

This news segment attempts to instill a moral panic into the viewers. Carlson makes claims that the people depicted are out ready to scare children and that their existence disrupts the social fabric. He brings the audience’s family into the situation in order for them to personally connect to it and be more compelled to take action. This connects to *The Birth of a Nation* and the ways in which a moral panic was instilled into the audience by making them feel

like their own lives and families were at stake if they did not choose to act. The segment continues to show the Black body within these conditions and scenes of depravity and poverty. Another scene is shown with a Black man sitting on the floor and leaning against a wall.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 0:34

Carlson then attempts to make the United States appear as if it is a superior country that is beyond what the audience is seeing on the screen. This continues to take away humanity from the people that are being presented, and make them appear as if they are less than because they are living in these types of conditions in a country that is supposed to be “better than this”. He states, “This is what we used to imagine India is like, but this is not Kolkata (Calcutta), this is New York, and San Francisco, and Austin Texas.” He puts people and places that he associates with poverty as being other and outside of the White, American middle class. He dehumanizes these other cultures and people and posits the idea that the United States can’t possibly have these problems.

More images of deviant Black people continue to be displayed, such as a Black man sleeping on the steps of a building, or a Black man that appears to be under the influence of a drug.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 0:41



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 0:44

He continues to place the blame on the individual and frames it as them simply wanting to do drugs and make bad decisions. Skid row seems to be the main focus of this broadcast, with no attempt to mention its historical significance or how this location that has a large population of unhoused people of color came to be. Carlson just repeatedly frames them as unworthy of receiving public support and pushes their identity as far away as possible from that of the other humans in what he deems civilization. Within the broadcast, he even calls the people on the screen, “the most least productive, antisocial parasites” and claims that Americans who work for a living are punished for unhoused people.

More images of Black people living on the street continue to be displayed. There is a Black man shown drinking from an alcohol bottle. He couples these images with his talk of how they are being aided in their deviance.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 5:05

This connected to my analysis of *The Birth of a Nation*, and the ways in which Griffith pushed the theme of bad-intentioned White radicals and mixed-race individuals inspiring the Black people in the film to act out and be violent. I compare this same theme to what is being perpetrated in this news broadcast. It infantilizes the Black body and makes it appear as if it cannot make decisions on its own without the help of a guiding force, and if the guiding force has bad intentions then the Black body will be used for bad. Thus, it needs to be guided to be productive, useful, and good.

Carlson then starts to tell the story of a man who was seemingly homeless stabbing a student to death. While this is of course a sad and disheartening story, Carlson weaponizes this story to continue to scare the audience and make them fearful of this “Other” that is being talked about in this news broadcast. This serves the same purpose as the intentions of *The Birth of a Nation*, to make people scared enough and fearful of their own lives that they will decide to act and do something. The fear is being placed onto poor bodies in this case, but many of the bodies displayed on the screen were Black, which hints at historical and subliminal messages of what the Black body has been made to be within past media. The action that continues to be perpetrated is the continued criminalization of these bodies, rather than systemic change that would actually help to improve their conditions.

Throughout the rest of the broadcast, there continues to be a barrage of images of the Black body being “vagrant”, which is considered criminal and places this deviant status onto the Black bodies displayed on the screen. The barrage of images includes a Black man sitting outside of his tent talking to himself, an older-looking Black man sitting outside and shaking, a Black woman bent over a bag, a Black person putting something into his mouth, a Black woman begging, a Black person sitting on the floor, a Black person sitting against a wall, a Black man shirtless and grinning at passersby, and a Black man sitting and eating.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 10:51



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:06



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:09



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:17



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:22



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:29



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:31



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:44



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DREmnsungVM> Screen capture 11:49

All of the people shown within this broadcast are simply existing and trying to survive their daily lives. However, because of their status as poor people, and their very obvious identity as Black people, their image is taken without their permission (from a camera that is obviously from a distance and trying to not be seen), and appropriated in order to continue to advance a certain

social agenda. This is the way in which the image of the Black body has been used all along. The fact that this news clip, made in 2022, still continues to use the image of the Black body in the same ways as in the past shows that these ideas of the Black body as criminals still continue to be embedded into our society.

Cops

Cops, a true-crime, reality TV show directed by Dale Dimmick and Gabriel Koura, has been criticized for the ways in which it has highlighted police violence and brutality and cast it as good, while over-representing crime and presenting people of color as violent and deviant. The show first aired in 1989. This was during the time that incarceration and a punitive mindset had been on the rise, so the television show fit right into the iteration of the racial project that was being played out in the United States. Fox Network canceled the show in 2013. It moved to Paramount Network following that but was eventually dropped from Paramount in 2020 as well after the Black Lives Matter protests. However, due to its long-standing run and popularity among American audiences, the impacts of this show and its representation still continue to linger.

Cops was a very voyeuristic show that made a spectacle out of police violence and brutality, especially in predominantly poor and Black and Brown neighborhoods. They constantly dehumanize and otherize the people depicted in the show, and don't provide any nuance to the situations that they may be in. The cops are usually depicted as successful and good, while the people who are brutalized and criminalized in the show are evil and violent, which justifies the brutalization against them. The specific episode that I analyzed was Season 4 Episode 17. This episode took place in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, and aired on December 21, 1991. This show follows police officers on their runs around the city throughout the day, and

allows the audience to watch the officers engage with people in the community caught “breaking the law”.

This episode began with a cop cruising around looking for something to investigate. The audience can hear him talk about making sure the “streets [are] going back to the community” as if the people committing these perceived crimes aren’t members of the community themselves. The representations within this show, and this particular episode, connect to the way in which criminality and deviance are described and mapped onto people within the news broadcast as well. Instead of connecting violence directly to the Black body, like older forms of violence could do more easily, this show instead demonstrates violence in a more coded way and more so through the constant barrage of images of Black and poor people committing crimes in a way that this representation of criminality gets imprinted into the minds of the audience. In this way, it continues this representation so that it fits into the narrative of the “colorblind” era. The first people that the police officers in the show interact with are Black people. The cop, who is also a Black man, which adds a complex layer and also connects to the colorblind discourse of our time and the “good souls” rhetoric, starts to question one of the suspects and asks him, “You ever go to school? Can you read?” This seems to come out of nowhere from my own analysis, and a statement based on stereotypes of Black youth and the Black body.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6PeEji_5-Q&t=85s Screen capture 2:46

The audience also continues to see Black bodies physically being reprimanded and handcuffed, which furthers this idea of the Black as criminal and justice being carried out with the act of incarcerating the Black body.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6PeEji_5-Q&t=85s Screen capture 3:08

Once again, similar to the Black bodies seen handcuffed within the news broadcast, people who are handcuffed are laid out on the ground and captured on camera for the world to analyze. The prevalence of this image implies that this is the image that the Black body is meant to be in, and normalizes this in the audience's mind. Black people in society, historically and contemporarily, are seen as needing to be, “in their place”. This is either through channeling their “violence” into fighting for the benefits of the United States or being enslaved and incarcerated in order to benefit the United States in another way.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6PeEji_5-Q&t=85s Screen capture 4:49

The dichotomy between the two types of Blackness is put on display in this episode. There is a particular scene where the Black officer yells at the Black youth lying on the ground after discovering that he had been carrying a gun. After yelling intensely at him, the officer aggressively pulls the youth up by his jacket and continues to lecture him. This is meant to be a tough teaching moment. However, the usage of this Black officer to aggressively teach this Black youth to not be violent touches on a deeper issue that I have been alluding to. The Black officer is seen as using his aggression for a good purpose in order to try and divert this deviance and crime, while the Black suspect is depicted as using his aggression and deviance for bad. Either way, aggression, and violence are seen as innate to the Black body in some way.



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6PeEji_5-Q&t=85s Screen capture 5:18



https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Q6PeEji_5-Q&t=85s Screen capture 5:27

There is a scene within this episode that depicts a White woman. However, this scene highlights her own negative and visceral reaction to the Black bodies surrounding her. After being served an eviction notice by the landlord and being surprised by the new tenants showing up ready to move in, the police officers are called and the audience hears about how she is afraid to leave and move stuff out of her apartment because she is scared of the angry Black men and that they will break into her apartment if she leaves it. This fear that is demonstrated and brushed over touches on a deeper historical problem of the sexual violence that has been cast on the Black body and the impacts that it continues to have today. This connects to the depiction of a Black man as a predator and as something that the White woman needs to be afraid of. So many racial problems and moral fears are based on this image of the Black man that continues to be perpetuated and upheld by media such as this TV show.

Discussion

A common theme that I noticed throughout all of the media was the ways in which Blackness and Whiteness were situated against each other. As they moved through different time frames and subject materials, the criminalization of the Black body became less apparent, but fragments of it could still be found in some way.

This image of the Black body that is created within *The Birth of a Nation* seems to, in some way, point to a deep-rooted understanding that American society has about the horrors that have been enacted upon the Black body. They know and are aware that these horrors have caused immense despair to the Black body. However, modern-day audiences that watch this film refuse to address and confront these historical problems and the film's impact on contemporary society. A big part of this lies in the social and material benefits that they receive from these

historical exploitations. Instead, White audience members and those in power fear what the oppressed may be willing to do to fight for their freedom back. They fear what this may mean for the benefits that they have accrued as a result of their Whiteness. Knowing this, the audience casts these fears and regrets onto the Black body and makes the Black body appear as one that is only capable of retribution and violence. This erases the significance behind these actions, which then only displays the brutality of these actions that the Black body is able and willing to carry out. This, in the audience's heads, not only justifies the horrific actions of the past that allowed for the brutalization and enslavement of the Black body but seeks to keep the Black body brutalized and incarcerated today.

These images have had sociological impacts. They permeate the minds of the audience that consumes these images and shape their views of the world around them. "From its first appearance, *Birth* inspired controversy and violent feelings in both its adherents and its detractors, and it continues to do so." (Wallace, p. 86). There are a plethora of violent images within *The Birth of a Nation*. These constant images that are subtly and not so subtly placed within this film in conjugation with the bravery of the White man stoke the inner fears of its consumers. This aligns with the historical impact of the media overall. Seeing as they have been produced in a society that has generated and perpetuated racism, it only makes sense that it has only continued to perpetuate these beliefs as well. In fact, the media has been a tool for this specific purpose. However, I don't believe that the media itself is not inherently bad. It is simply a powerful apparatus in our society, and it is one whose power has been leveraged for negative power relations. There are reduced and stereotyped meanings that are attached to the images audiences consume. Certain films become powerful enough to completely stain the social landscape that influences future iterations of media, art, and culture (Lesage, p. 233).

There have been slow and steady improvements from where these representations used to be, and how they were displayed. They aren't always as insidious or apparent. However, American society lives within a false notion of progress that is contradictory. There is the espousal of progress and inclusion while the remnants of these representations still continue to exist within other forms, and they still continue to have impacts on society. "These memorialized artifacts of popularized beliefs in the cultural marketplace of the early twentieth century framed debates about polygenetic notions of progress and posited the worldly order of things on biological, class, and cultural distinctions that endure to this day in the national psyche" (Martin, p. 3). A plethora of shows that feed off the criminalization of Black people, which has also expanded to poor people of all races, still can be seen within many artifacts of the media. Some of these include true crime films. These implicit yet problematic representations of the Black body can especially be seen from media created during the period of time when Black bodies were exponentially forced into prison and behind bars during the 1970s, also known as the era of mass incarceration. There is a current problem of over-policing and anti-Black police violence permeating Black communities. The label of criminal and deviant continues to be stamped onto the Black body to this day. This societal designation stems from what has been ingrained into the minds of the American people, and what allows them to justify these brutal actions. "In light of ongoing anti-black police violence, the continued denial of black Americans' rights to public space, and the systemic valuation of private property over black lives, the history of The Birth of a Nation is just as much a story about our present as it is of our past" (Caddoo, p. 43). Not only do these representations still impact the framing of the Black body that takes place in contemporary society, but there is also a constant denial of this existence in modern society. This

brings to light the contradictory nature of these institutions, which have existed since the onset and formation of the United States.

The media and politicians continue to avoid this institutional analysis and historical reference, even when faced with outrageous incidences of interpersonal racial violence. This racial violence today includes poor people's disenfranchisement, their lack of educational and employment opportunities, legal hostility to immigrants, inordinate imprisonment of people of color, and the legal murder of peaceful black men on the street (Lesage). So, due to its overtly and repetitive racialized and criminalized depictions of the Black body, *The Birth of a Nation*, in conjunction with the historical representations of the Black body that came before and those that resulted after, served to imprint this image of what a Black person is and does on the minds of the American public.

...because of its historical address and overt racism, *The Birth of a Nation* may seem to have fewer messages for activists today. But, in fact, it does teach an important structure underlying racist laws: the goal of white elites to control public space and the use of disenfranchisement in that process. It also shows how violence functions as a disciplinary admonition for both people of color and white women, especially in terms of 'knowing their place'. In addition, if viewers are taught to look for this, *The Birth of a Nation* provides much information about 'marking' – how characterization, body type, costume, and physical range of action connote much of the film's message about race – and thus delineates a precedent for what Cobb refers to as the discriminatory marking of blackness today (Lesage, p. 234).

The specific images that can be seen throughout this film paint this picture of the Black body in this way. Griffith was intentional and explicit with the creation of these images and the social message that he wanted to relay. Media throughout time has continued to pull from these representations, thus making it a part of the foundational base of the racism that permeates the film and media industry. However, these messages aren't always as explicit or distinct anymore. If Griffith's film had the power to influence society in the way that it did with obviously

demeaning messages, then what does this say about the power of messages that are subliminally and repeatedly enforced as mediated images within a consumer society?

This connects to the messages displayed in *Planet of the Apes*, which aligned with the projection of a society torn apart and flipped upside down, thus making it threatening to the white body. The messages have grown less explicit within this film and time period, but there is still the obvious and apparent characterization of the great white hero facing a mass of angry bodies. Species difference is cast as racial difference, which only makes the portrayals more insidious because of the characterization of the Black body as an animal when viewing it in this way. Historically, Black bodies have been dehumanized and connected to that of monkeys or apes, so there is a basis for an audience to connect to when examining this film. The continued sociological impact of this film is apparent when thinking about the sequels to the original film that spurred it, and the more modern remake franchise that was created as well. By hiding racial characterizations in a science-fiction franchise, these ideas have found more ways to embed themselves into the very cultural social fabric of America. Especially with this film being made during the height of the civil rights movement and the references throughout the film to how Black bodies were treated at this time being placed onto the White bodies in this film, it is difficult to not examine this film as a response to the conflict happening at this time. With these racial fears continuing to be promulgated in ways that the audience may not have even been aware of, attitudes towards the Black body began to shift at this time as the incarceration mindset began to grow, resulting in a huge influx of Black bodies being locked behind bars.

This moves into the film *Get Hard*, which places itself among the plethora of artifacts created during the era of colorblindness that pulls from old stereotypes of the Black body as criminal in order to treat it satirically. However, these issues still exist and poking fun at these

social issues without actually critically addressing them only further exacerbates the problem. This film directly points to the issue at hand with reference to incarceration and the imprisonment and perceived criminal nature of Black men. However, through repeated scenes of Black criminality and going to a prison associated with “becoming Black”, the film helps ingrain in cultural consciousness the conviction that criminality as Blackness is simply an inarguable fact and something to laugh about. Especially during a time when the culture of poverty as a theoretical argument continues to become more and more prevalent, it is especially important to challenge these notions in meaningful ways and not continue to make a punchline out of them. With this being a more recent film, it primarily situates itself within a historical frame of perpetrating old and repeated messages of the Black body. During the time period that the film was created, and with the recent increase in awareness of continued police brutality and over-policing within Black neighborhoods, it is clear that the ideas are still very much alive and ingrained into society. With the knowledge of the sociological impacts of media in our consumer society, the continuation of these messages on-screen without critical analysis only further adds to this problem.

Criminalized representations cross different forms of film as well, regardless of their identification as fiction or nonfiction. Within the ethnographic films discussed, *Bushmen of the Kalahari* and *Les Maîtres Fous*, and similar others, the Black body has still been cast as criminal. Both of these films were directed by White men, and they filmed a group of people directly impacted by colonialism, which uses dehumanizing and criminalizing messages to justify the horrors that are enacted against groups of people. By filming the Black body within these contexts of desperation or provocation without providing any necessary contextual explanations, and claiming their presence as benevolent and necessary, a dichotomy is created between the

filmmaker as a good, White body and the Black body as either violent or helpless and in need of intervention. This “scientific” mode of thinking about and filming the world claims to study people for a greater good without addressing the political elements that play a part in their way of life, especially in regards to who is controlling the image and the implications of a White filmmaker's presence. This is especially problematic when filming and observing a group of people affected by the impacts of colonialism without explaining the actual colonialism that took place. While not directly calling the Black body a criminal, as in films such as *The Birth of a Nation* or *Get Hard*, negative representations are still embedded into the foundation that allows for this criminalization and dehumanization of the Black body, to begin with. Criminalized representations of the Black body continue to permeate more contemporary forms of media as well, such as news broadcasts and true-crime reality shows. These shows use the idea of filming the real world as a violent place to scare the audience into thinking the world is more violent than it truly is. Black bodies and urban environments are disproportionately placed in these contexts, and it further pushes the notion that these people and these environments are dangerous. These historical and contemporary forms of media continue to pull from each other and inform each other, and they also have social and political impacts. All of these come together to justify the usage of the Black body as an object during chattel slavery, as a target of hate during reconstruction and the civil rights movement, and as a commodity for profit during the era of mass incarceration.

Conclusion

Through the placement of Black bodies with themes or allusions to violence or deviance, I analyzed that different forms of the media still continue to perpetuate the criminalization of the

Black body. I argue that this still continues to impact the widespread problem of mass incarceration today.

Continuing forward, more widespread analysis can continue to be conducted that includes a larger scale and variation of the media in order to examine how the institution overall connects to this problem. This study also had limitations through some of my own relationships with the subjects that I conducted interviews with. In order to explore a more wide-social scale of what Black artists, activists, and scholars think, more of a widespread and blind study can be conducted.

Additionally, more research can continue to specifically explore the relationship between incarceration and other increasing technologies, including predictive policing and artificial intelligence. These also continue to inform the information that circulates through society and how we structure ourselves and is an aspect of this problem that also needs attention. Moreover, the impact of these images on Black audience members and communities rather than primarily on white audience members and communities can be explored more as well, in order to center the experiences of Black folks and how this made contribute to the cycle that leads to incarceration.

By analyzing *The Birth of a Nation*, *Planet of the Apes*, *Get Hard*, *Bushmen of the Kalahari*, *Les Maîtres Fous*, along with various news broadcast segments and clips, and an episode of the TV show *Cops*, in collaboration with the voices and interviews of Black artists, scholars, and activists, I came to the conclusion that a few main themes stayed prevalent throughout various forms of media and throughout various time periods. This analysis was also shared by my interview subjects. The main themes that I found were: The incarceration of the Black body is necessary for the continuation of social order, The natural place of the Black body

is as docile (“Good Souls” depiction), Black people are underdeveloped and incoherent to these social conditions, the creation of a Black and white dichotomy, white society is at risk of the Black body attacking them, and the exploitative and voyeuristic nature of these pieces of media. Despite these prevailing images, counteracting images of the Black body have and can exist and continue to be created, and it is important for future artists, scholars, and activists to understand this as we move forward.

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