

Blackness and the american cultural hegemony



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Blackness and the American Cultural Hegemony: The Dynamics of Racial Socialization and Representation, and its Role in the Systematic Devaluation of Black Lives.

The Republic: Race and Identity in the Modern World

Introduction

Till date, Black civil rights movements are still actively battling against some of the primary issues that similar liberation movements in the past addressed: the apparent expendability of Black flesh and the representation of Black people as criminals. ^[1] Although significant progress has been made in relation to the racial discourse in America, there are certain elements that have either remained constant overtime or evolved to take on new forms more practicable in modern society.

There has been a noticeable increase in, if I daresay, the “ legal lynching” of African Americans in recent years at the hands of white law enforcement officials nationwide. This coupled with the usual attack on victims’ characters and subsequent representation of them as delinquents, violent, etc. has unfortunately become commonplace. If the reverse was the case and white citizens were being targeted, the issue will not have lasted this long. This goes to show that Black people are yet to attain the long sought after equality not only in American society but also in any area of the world with mixed racial populations and continue to be racially oppressed and will likely be for years to come if adequate reforms are not put in place.

It is this realization after studying certain critical race literature and through observation in daily interactions and in the media that has inspired this paper which aims to explore Blackness and the American Cultural Hegemony in relation to the dynamics of racial socialization and representation in the United States, and to analyze the way this has contributed to the systematic devaluation of black lives. This will be done through engagement with relevant literature which give context of the origin of these issues, have made pertinent contributions and raised key points which provoke further lines of inquiry.

At The Dark End of the Street: Black Women, Rape, and Resistance: A New History of the Civil Rights Movement from Rosa Parks to the Rise of Black Power – Danielle McGuire

Danielle McGuire does a phenomenal job with her book *At the Dark End of the Street*, which aims to serve as an exposé of the role of African American women as catalysts and the unsung heroes that ensured the success of the American Civil Rights movement. She makes the patriarchy surrounding the racial discourse evident, so much so that it cannot be denied or overlooked even by the staunchest anti-feminist critic. The dominance of male figures and the relegation of the women who initiated the movement to less vocal roles behind the scene characterized the crusade. According to McGuire, she recognized the need to tell this story when she "...figured out that black women had been enduring, resisting and testifying about interracial sexual violence for years and that these crucial and revealing moments had never made their way into the history of the civil rights movement." [2]

Her work helped further highlight the reality of “ intersectionality” especially as it applies to women of color as originally defined by Kimberle Crenshaw. The term was developed in an attempt to explain the multiple facets of oppression African-American women face. The term is now at the forefront of national conversations about racial justice, identity politics, and policing—and over the years has helped shape legal discussions. Not only was the black woman’s body public property available to white men for their pleasure, it was also regularly subjected to a highly politicized and patriarchal justice system whenever a victim attempted to seek redress.

In an attempt to “ reclaim” their bodies, coloured women utilized their voices as weapons, to create awareness of the injustice they had faced for decades. This was seen in the case of Fannie Lou Hamer, who spoke out and became an activist after she was sterilized without her consent and physically assaulted in a police station in June 1963. ^[3] Respectability politics however, defined by Frances White as “ attempts by marginalized groups to police their own members and show their social values as being continuous and compatible with mainstream values rather than challenging the mainstream for what they see as its failure to accept difference” ^[4] ; greatly determined the extent to which these women and the African American community as a whole could fight their cause. Notwithstanding, McGuire draws our attention to the fact that as time went on there was a change in attitude from a focus on the politics of respectability to the newfound thirst for equality and justice, regardless of personal history as was exemplified in Joan Little’s case. This development among others such as the organization and execution of the Bus Boycott of 1955/56 signalled the development of a

sense of “somebodiness” and community among black people as they battled against the “thingification” of their humanity. ^[5] Prior to this and still existing in our society to some extent today, Black people felt the need to constantly prove themselves to White people before they could be integrated into society. This has stemmed from a predominantly white ruling class domination of a racially diverse society coupled with their imposing of their worldviews as the accepted social norms. In actuality, these worldviews and ideologies are merely social constructs developed to serve the ruling class and control power relations.

Significant economic, political and social change over the years coupled with the increasing number of vocal victims put an end to the ability of white men to sexually assault black women without consequence. Of equal importance to note in this book is the “mammyfication” of the black woman. Black women were often subjected to tend to white families at the expense of their own children who had to grow up without a mother. As aptly put by Cydney Renee, mammyfication is “the stripping away of the many layers of black women, and making it a commodity of which black women contribute to entirely, but in no way benefit from without pushback from society”. ^[6]

Some of these key ideas in McGuire’s work presented a new dynamic in understanding a history that had become taken for granted, and makes one realize the need to be willing to go beyond the status quo, exploring unconventional lines of inquiry in the search for truth.

Democracy Abroad, Lynching at Home: Racial Violence in Florida – Tameka Bradley-Hobbs

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Bradley-Hobbs' book highlights an equally significant problem that pervaded U. S race relations; the lynching violence in Florida and other southern states and how it placed the nation in a precarious position, especially in relation to its stance on the world stage. Although lynching had once been a prominent act in the U. S up until the early 20th century, it reduced considerably in other parts of the nation but was still assiduously practiced in the South, largely due to the dominant ideology of the "black rapist beast".^[7] Hobbs points out that despite its persistence, the nature of lynching evolved overtime, as it served the broad social purpose of maintaining white supremacy in the economic, social and political spheres.^[8]

The failure of Florida state government to contain the situation made the state a national pariah, as it showcased America's double standard to other nations who were closely following these events and contradicted the nations democratic stance at a time where national image was of utmost importance. If not for the active intervention of the Federal Government in order to save face, the lynchings in Florida and other southern states would likely have continued for much longer. Despite this development, records show that none of the perpetrators of the lynching violence was penalized, but rather the communities and families of the victims have endured various forms of loss for generations. They are often still plagued by fear, loss of familial ties and were never economically compensated (p. 218). This has contributed to the "broken down" state of many black families today. Oral tradition is extremely important to African Americans, as this has been their way of keeping the truth alive for generations (p. 218).

In summary, *Democracy Abroad, Lynching at Home* successfully draws attention to the long lasting effects of lynching violence which transcends generations, and Bradley Hobbs points out the necessity to acknowledge and analyze the violence in order to better understand African Americans skeptical view of the justice system till date (p. 220).

From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime: The Making of Mass Incarceration in America – Elizabeth Hinton

Hinton in similar vein sheds light on the transformation of the American justice system overtime, and emphasizes the importance of understanding this transformation as it provides useful insight into the current state of the penal system and serves as evidence of the American cultural hegemony. The book's spotlight on the racial underpinnings of several policies developed over the years makes one understand why certain races are more prominent in prisons and other detention facilities. Hinton's observation of the role played by research "data" and flawed statistics in further propagating age old racial stereotypes and biased understandings of crime is instrumental as it shows that institutional racism is still rife till date. The policies developed during this period failed to prevent crime and public safety, but rather heightened it as many African Americans reacted to the injustice they were constantly subjected to by the very people and government that was supposed to protect them.

While some heads of state implemented policies detrimental to racial minorities out of ignorance, others like Nixon were more intentional and recognized the detrimental impact such policies would have on these

minority communities for generations to come. The policies, framed as being for the greater good of these minority populations, were actually designed to “keep them in their place” and to ensure a maintenance of the racial hierarchy while perpetuating socio economic problems. The inequalities that have come about as a result of these policies have created a fissure in the African American community which will take consistent and prolonged intentional effort to reverse.

Also, the obvious decriminalization of white youth and portrayal of black youth as delinquents indicated a greater underlying problem. Although policy makers came to recognize incarceration as an ineffective crime prevention method, they still pushed for higher incarceration rates of certain groups of “offenders”. Of significant importance to note is the law enforcement’s increased and preemptive interactions with black youth, which led to the increase in the probability of being charged with a crime. As the reverse was and still is the case in wealthier white neighborhoods, white youth’s possibility of having a criminal record was considerably low.

The first attempt to work on socio economic problems in order to solve urban unrest was attributed to the Kerner Commission during the Johnson Administration. In March 1968, for the first time the commission identified white racism and not black anger as the primary cause of urban American turmoil. ^[9] Newsweek also carried out extensive research and came about with a similar conclusion, and offered possible solutions to racial inequality. ^[10] However, these more accurate findings and advice were overlooked by policymakers and the vicious cycle continued.

Hinton was successful in tracing the origins of the American prison problem to the Johnson administration as her historical analysis brought a lot of previously overlooked elements to light. Numerous African Americans support the Democratic party and believe that Conservatives are racist and propagate the racial strife apparent in society today. However, Hinton shows us that the mass incarceration actually started during a Liberal administration.

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As stated earlier, the line of inquiry in this paper aims to explore blackness in relation to American cultural hegemony by considering the dynamics of racial socialization and representation in the United States, and to analyze the way this has contributed to the systematic devaluation of black lives. The books highlighted above each make unique contributions and provide insight and context on this subject.

A common factor in the three books is the representation of black people. McGuire's book points to the fact that black men were given a permanent label in the South as "black beast rapists" who were constantly trying to have sexual relations with white women. Even civil rights activists were accused of fighting for "freedom" primarily because they wanted to intermarry with white women, and were often shut down and given the same label (p. 219). The same was the case in *Democracy Abroad, Lynching at Home*. Bradley Hobbs highlights the fact that nearly all lynchings that took place in the South involved some form of sexual accusation and had this notion at its foundation, even though these accusations were almost always false. This was seen in the case of Jesse Payne, who had an altercation with

his landlord but ended up almost paying for it with his life after the same narrative was wielded by his landlord to inspire blood lust in fellow men with similar ideologies (p. 162). As Hobbs aptly put it, these “white men who would carry out lynching lived in a constant fear of their own creation.” This construction of a beast rapist was used by the white perpetrators to justify murder, and the justice system often turned a blind eye to these events. However, in *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*, the narrative surrounding black men had evolved from that of the beast rapist to that of the uncontrollably violent criminal. Black pathology became the new order of the day as ignorance became backed with scientific “findings” which confirmed the inferiority of the black race and their natural disposition to violence. White Supremacy and the structural causes of the state of black families were overlooked and this new construction which was more familiar and suited white people’s assumptions of the black race was quickly accepted. According to Hinton, even the figures presented to highlight crime rates in the country were highly flawed for a number of reasons including the representation of names of black people who had been initially arrested but not indicted (p. 35). This led to the over representation of black people on criminal records and ultimately to the creation of further policies and programs detrimental to this group.

In addition to the black beast rapist narrative associated with black men, black women also had their own burden to bear as they had to live with the hypersexual/prostitute character imposed on them. This is seen in almost every case presented in *At The Dark End of the Street*, ranging from Recy Taylor to Joan Little. In contrast, white women were portrayed as pure beings

who constantly needed protection. On numerous occasions, black women were denied justice for this very reason with Little's case being an exception to the rule. However, the white men who perpetrated these dastardly sexual acts were never represented in a negative light, but rather often praised each other and went on these hunts together.

The concept of miscegenation, defined as “mixing that is perceived to negatively impact the purity of a particular race or culture”, was the basis on which white supremacists contested integration. ^[11] They strongly believed the black race to be genetically inferior, and even went as far as believing that black people are some kind of anomaly that didn't complete the evolution process. Yet, white men sought sexual relations with black women behind the scenes, perhaps in order to ride the proverbial white horse and explore this exoticized flesh.

Most of these narratives about black people which white people have come to believe so strongly have no valid origins and are usually fears sparked by racial tension and ignorance. Yet, the belief in these narratives has had significant impact on the black community as was demonstrated in the lynchings of Cellos Harrison, Claude O'Neal among many others and the creation of detrimental policies as seen in *From the War on Poverty to the War on Crime*. Till date, some of these beliefs are still widely held and new generations are constantly taught to hold these ideologies as norms and truth.

This was demonstrated in the Betty Jean Owens case, in which a boy as young as 16 was involved in her rape and assault. McGuire notes that the

assailants failed to take the initial arrest seriously. This signified their confidence in the justice system to acquit them of any crime committed against an African American as this had been the precedence for decades. On a similar note in Hinton's book, law enforcement officials and policy makers belief that they needed to be wary of even black minors below thirteen years of age, coupled with their criminalization and detention in adult penal facilities goes to show that these foundational ideologies are still very relevant in the 21st century.

Furthermore, the portrayal of blacks as delinquents and of whites as troubled youth as highlighted by Hinton's book largely influenced the kinds of social welfare programs that were made available to both sects(p. 219). More crime control programs flooded urban black neighborhoods while rehabilitation facilities flooded white suburban neighborhoods and prevented white kids from ending up in the penal system (p. 232). The significance of the " dramatization of evil" or labelling theory as highlighted by Frank Tannenbaum, cannot be overemphasized as he identifies the social interaction involved in crime. ^[12] This continuous representation and stereotyping of black youth as criminals and delinquents ultimately leads them to believe in this notion and act on it. This leads to the re-perpetuation of a vicious cycle.

These widely propagated and accepted narratives; the black beast rapist men, the prostitutes and sexually uncontrollable women and the feeble minded and pathologically unfortunate race as a whole; have led to the systematic devaluation of black lives. Civil rights liberation movements today such as Black Lives Matter are engaged in a fight to reclaim this value

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(which their ancestors had prior to arriving in America, because the black race was denied dignity from the moment they were abducted from their motherland).

Black women as usual receive the shorter end of the stick. In addition to forced sterilization, there has been a noticeable trend of ignoring or carelessly handling black women's health related matters. ^[13] This devaluation of black women's lives has evolved overtime from the "fungibility" of their flesh as noted by Snorton, as chattel persons on their masters plantations, to the objects of sexual terror and debasement and now, as bodies undeserving of adequate medical and other forms of standard attention required to live a normal life.

Also, as highlighted by Conley, a Professor of Sociology, "wealth ownership is the socioeconomic measure that displays the single greatest racial disparity in America today". ^[14] Gross economic inequality has and still characterizes the American society today, as black people continue to be paid less than white people for executing the same job and this trend seems to be on the rise. ^[15] Conley puts this in better perspective by claiming; "while young African Americans may have the opportunity to obtain the same education, income, and wealth as whites, in actuality they are on a slippery slope, for the discrimination their parents faced in the housing and credit markets sets the stage for perpetual economic disadvantage." ^[16] In other words, African Americans will still experience this disadvantage perhaps for generations to come.

Not only are individual lives affected, but communal life is also affected. Neighborhoods from time immemorial have been deemed less valuable when they have high numbers of Black residents. Due to the decades of marginalization and oppression of black populations, their quality of life has been eroded and stripped of its full potential. According to the recently released Devaluation of Assets in Black Neighborhoods report, “homes in neighborhoods where the share of the population is 50 percent black are valued at roughly half the price as homes in neighborhoods with no black residents.”^[17] The problem the black residents who moved into Compton in the 1960s faced is still evident today.

It is therefore reasonable to say that racial socialization and the representation of black people overtime as a result of American cultural hegemony has led to a near irreversible devaluation of black lives and communities, and this devaluation will continue to be on an upward trajectory until the root matters are adequately attended to and mutually beneficial policies are implemented. This will ultimately have a ripple effect as the United States being a world power, sets precedents for less powerful states and thus is of immense importance.

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