

Why Black People Love Chicken:

Tracing African American Stereotypes in Popular Culture

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Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter One: Origins of Black Stereotypes	9
Chapter Two: Rap and Representation	26
Chapter Three: Blacks on Television	52
Conclusion	76
Figures	82
Bibliography	92

Figures List

- Figure 1: William Heath, *A Pair of Broad Bottom*, 1810.
- Figure 2: Richard Ansdell, *Hunted Slaves*, 1861.
- Figure 3: Marie Adrien Persac, *St. John, St. Martin Parish*, 1861.
- Figure 4: Nicolas De Largilliere, *Portrait of a Woman Perhaps Madam Claude Lamber de Thorigny*, 1696.
- Figure 5: Eastman Johnson, *The Freedom Ring*, 1860.
- Figure 6: Winslow Homer, *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, 1876.
- Figure 7: Mr. T Rice as the Original Jim Crow As seen in W.T Lhamon, Jr's, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the first Atlantic Popular Culture*, pg. 9
- Figure 8; Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose, 1940s-1950s.
- Figure 9: Black Collectible Postcard, 1930s-1950s.
- Figure 10: Rapper Nicki Minaj, 2015.
- Figure 11: Rapper Eminem, 2013.
- Figure 12: M. C. Hammer's Dancer, 1990.
- Figure 13: Runaway Slave Advertisement, 1840.
- Figure 14: William Mathew Prior, *Mrs. Nancy Wilson*, 1843.
- Figure 15: William Mathew Prior, *Mr. William Lawson*, 1843.
- Figure 16: Hattie McDaniel as Mammy on *Gone with the Wind*, 1939.
- Figure 17: Chandra Wilson as Miranda Bailey on *Grey's Anatomy*, 2005-.
- Figure 18: Anthony Howard Goldwyn as President Fitzgerald Grant and Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope on *Scandal*, 2012-.
- Figure 19: Tracee Ellies Ross as Joan Carol Clayton on *Girlfriends*, 2000-2008.

Introduction

What jumpstarted the idea of writing a thesis about stereotypes, more specifically ones targeting the black community, was a lecture on the depiction of enslaved Africans and African Americans. Professor Dana Bice described paintings and sculptures, primarily by white artists, who portrayed blacks as violent, lazy, inferior, and domesticated sub-humans. During the lecture the Professor asked if the class had seen any of the stereotypes of Africans or African Americans, described in the lecture, in today's society. My mind turned to the reality television show *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-). I had watched the show and, like many viewers, laughed at the women's irrational behavior without realizing what I was actually seeing. Before my eyes, in present-day television, I saw the same hypersexual black women depicted in many nineteenth-century artworks. From the television show I then began to consider stereotypes in rap, a musical genre mostly populated by black artists, where I noticed that many rap artists portray themselves as "thugs." The more I listened to rap music and watched black television shows, the more I spotted black stereotypes in contemporary society. Ultimately, this thesis attempts to identify early visual representations of black racial stereotypes and examine how these stereotypes appear in contemporary popular culture.

In "What is a Stereotype? What is Stereotyping?" Eric Beeghly, an Assistant Professor of Philosophy, and expert on stereotypes, defines stereotypes as "...a universal generalization about a social group" (Beeghly 676). In other words, a stereotype is a common trait or behavior that has been attached to a specific culture, gender, race, religion, age group, or sexuality. For example, one popular stereotype placed upon the

black community is their obsession with chicken. This stereotype is so widely accepted that even the famous black comedian Dave Chappelle addressed the topic in his 2000 comedy show “Killin’ Them Softly” in a section entitled “Chicken.” During the performance, Chappelle states that he was in a restaurant when he discovered that he was “genetically predisposed to liking chicken,” as the waiter automatically assumed Chappelle was going to order chicken before he had a chance to. As individuals, we all deal with stereotypes in our own way. Dave Chappelle’s comedy performance is an example of how some popular culture entertainers mock black stereotypes. Chappelle challenges the idea of black people’s obsession with chicken by making fun of the stereotypes. In doing so, the performer allows for the stereotype to seem just as ridiculous to his audience as it does to him. Chappelle’s waiter is then made into a fool for believing in something so absurd. In Chappelle’s performance, we can see a representation of two kinds of people. The waiter represents how stereotypes can manipulate our perceptions of one another, while Chappelle, as a black performer stands in for the black community, which frequently uses comedy as a way to deal with stereotypes. This skit offers a small glimpse into the ways in which stereotypes may appear small, but actually influence how people view one another and themselves.

In this thesis, I will examine a selection of black stereotypes that originated under slavery and are disseminated or enforced through contemporary popular culture. They are: the hypersexualized black male and female, the angry or masculine black woman, the criminal, and the servant. This thesis will look at these specific black stereotypes in order to understand their origin. I will then critique how images, music lyrics, and television programs perpetuate these stereotypes today. In each case, I will question whether these

musical artists and actors are resisting, criticizing, or integrating these stereotypes into their art. In each case, these artists assist in perpetuating stereotypes about the black community. Because music and television have a dramatic influence on the way stereotypes are represented in society, this thesis will consider late-twentieth-century rap artists and twenty-first-century black television shows in order to demonstrate how popular culture exploits, confirms, or contradicts black stereotypes.

Chapter one entitled, “Origins of Stereotypes,” investigates where many of these black stereotypes originated. For instance, in *Black Demons: The Media’s Depiction of the African American Male Criminal Stereotype*, Dennis Rome offers a detailed explanation of where black stereotypes of inferiority originated and how they are shaped by today’s society. According to Rome, stereotypes leave no room for individuality and are enforced through visual depictions broadcast by the media. Once stereotyped, no matter how idiosyncratic an action may be, an individual will be judged the same as everyone else in that particular group based upon that stereotype. As Rome points out, Africans arrived in America as slaves and were forced to endure harsh treatment. Quoting James M. Washington, Rome writes that during slavery:

...the masters felt that they had to implant in the bondsman a consciousness of personal inferiority. This sense of inferiority was deliberately extended to his past. The slave owners were convinced that in order to control the Negroes, the slaves ‘had to feel that African ancestry tainted them, that their color was a badge of degradation’ (Rome 15).

As explained in this quotation, slavery was as equally a form of mental control as it was a physical one. In fact, in certain cases it was not that slaves were incapable of running away, but rather they were so brainwashed through fear and feelings of inadequacy that it crippled their will for freedom. Chapter one will address the origins of specific

stereotypes and then identify these stereotypes represented in paintings and portraits of Africans and African Americans, created both before and after emancipation. I will also consider minstrel performances, caricatures, and black collectibles in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in order to demonstrate the various ways in which stereotypes were disseminated to the public. This chapter will present the origins of such stereotypes and the ways in which they have continuously made their way into popular culture.

Following the historical examination of black stereotypes, chapter two, “Rap and Representation,” focuses on the top selling musical genre “Gangster Rap” and its portrayal of violent and criminal black male stereotypes. In "From Jay-Z to Dead Prez: Examining Representations of Black Masculinity in Mainstream versus Underground Hip-Hop Music," Crystal Belle explains that the true nature of rap music has been overshadowed by the artists who allow their music to perform and be altered by stereotypes. Rap artists enforce black stereotypes, which originated under slavery, by incorporating these stereotypes into their lyrics and visual representation. Leaving their own individuality behind, rap artists adopt stereotypical personas which then become a part of popular culture. Belle argues that “underground music” is authentic rap music because it has not been altered by the media, but is also not widely known to the public. So, on the one hand, underground artists are able to express and depict themselves the way they want, but it is also a financial limitation, as their music is not as widely recognized as that of mainstream artists. This thesis is interested in the ways that stereotypes are manipulated and represented in mainstream culture. Chapter two will focus on the ways in which mainstream rap artists of the 1980s and 1990s have utilized black stereotypes for their own personal gain.

One 1980's rap group that mastered the art of deception was N.W.A. (Niggaz With Attitude). In *Black Demons*, Rome describes the group as "...high school drop outs who pretended to be racist gangsters, dope dealers, cop killers, rapists, and murderous thugs" (Rome 105). N.W.A. was a group of men who saw a financial opportunity and went after it. Their personal lives conflicted with the songs they created, but because the black community found their lyrics relatable, this false image or trend of "unauthenticity" became widely accepted. Another rapper who successfully adopted the stereotypical role of a violent black man was actually a white man. In "Close to the Edge: The Representational Tactics of Eminem," Marcia Dawkins states that "...Eminem's representational tactics create the locations in popular culture from which his image is adopted, manipulated, and deployed." (Dawkins 465). In other words, similar to N.W.A., Eminem perfected a certain persona in order to be accepted into the rap world. The rapper carefully integrated himself into the black community, which allowed him to catch the eye of his target audience. While Eminem was, perhaps, acting the part to find success, there were successful rappers who used a life of violence and crime in order to achieve money and fame. The rap world's most infamous publicity stunt involved two successful rappers, Biggie Smalls and Tupac Shakur, whose relationship was presented by the media as a feud. The rivalry became so popular that it was no longer just between two men, but divided the nation in an East versus West Coast rivalry.

However controversial the rap world was in the 1980s and 1990s, a few rappers brought individuality into mainstream rap music. The Atlanta-based rap group Outkast and the upbeat duo DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince were two forces in the rap world that became successful, while at the same time challenging stereotypes in the black

community. In their desperate attempts for originality they became a success story and allowed black men to be seen as playful and comical. Evidence of Outkast's cheerful nature can be found in their 2003 "The Love Below" album, where their number one hit "Hey Ya" proved to be a multicultural success. In the video, the rappers are not shown with guns or drugs, but instead playfully dance onstage. Finally, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince took a huge risk by making lighthearted rap songs. Their music ran counter to the violent and sexual images and lyrics of the rap world.

Unfortunately, while Will Smith was able to transfer his playful rap persona from music into television with "The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air" (1990-96), other television shows such as *Empire* (2015-), *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-), and *Black-ish* (2014-), represent entrenched stereotypes of blackness. Chapter Three, "Blacks on Television," examines the stereotypical roles that African American women are frequently cast in. While these stereotypes originated from blackface minstrel performances, stereotypical black female roles such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and Tragic Mulatta are represented in contemporary television shows. The third chapter will consider how black actresses represent these stereotypes today. I will then demonstrate how popular black television shows are either resisting, integrating, or criticizing black stereotypes. For example, the hit comedy series *Black-ish* (2014-) presents a black family in a positive way, without reference to drugs, alcohol, or crime. However, the show's title references the idea that education and manners are exclusive to the white race. The title also indicates that the characters in the show, who are a successful working middle-class family, are not fully black or even half black, but "black-ish." This implies that those who resemble characteristics similar to the white race are not only more successful than full

“blacks,” but also obtain a higher level of respect. Respect, money, and status, are also the main themes of *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008-), which depicts a group of black women as nothing more than gold diggers. Although it is meant to be humorous, in actuality, it showcases irrational, and materialistic behavior as common within the black female community.

The last two television shows that will be discussed in this thesis demonstrate how stereotypes, such as the angry black woman, affect women of color in the workforce. In the popular hit show *Empire* (2015-), the mother, Cookie, takes on the role of an angry black woman. She is constantly at war with and disrespected by her ex-husband and sons as they battle over ownership of the family record company. This show’s popularity indicates that, although the stereotype represented is offensive to the black community, it has been repeated so many times that it no longer seems offensive, but becomes familiar to its audiences. In contrast, the HBO series *Insecure* (2016-), criticizes the stereotypes placed on black women in a humorous, but, at the same time, relatable way. Written and produced by black writer Issa Rae, *Insecure* addresses the difficulties faced by black women in the work force and showcases the ways that they are forced to play different roles in their lives.

In conclusion, by examining earlier representations of Africans and African Americans, this thesis will trace the origins of black stereotypes, such as the hypersexual black male and female, the angry or masculine black woman, the criminal, and the servant, in order to consider how rap music and black television represent these stereotypes today. One important factor in discovering how stereotypes have been able to “stand the test of time” is through the idea of agency. Slaves had no control over their

own bodies, let alone their own images, and were subject to degrading treatment and misrepresentation. In contrast, 1980s and 1990s rap artists and twenty-first-century black actresses do have a say in how they are portrayed; however, many allow themselves to be represented as stereotypes. While some artists reject black stereotypes, many embrace them. Because stereotypes are deeply entrenched and represented via popular culture, black artists who take on stereotypical roles allow these ideas to remain prevalent in contemporary society. Music and television publicize stereotypes worldwide and showcase them. As previously stated, none of the stereotypes examined in this thesis are new; they have only been transformed and neatly disguised to meet the needs of contemporary life. The purpose of this thesis is to consider how such stereotypes have been resisted, criticized, or integrated into contemporary popular culture via rap and television and examine the ways in which black history continues to haunt society today.

Chapter One: Origins of Stereotypes

Introduction:

This chapter examines American visual and material culture, from the seventeenth to twentieth centuries, in order to understand where stereotypes of Africans and African Americans originated. As to terminology, as this thesis moves chronologically to the present day, the terminology I will use to refer to black people will change as well. When slaves were first brought to America in the seventeenth century, they were primarily referred to as Africans. However, after the emancipation of American slaves (1862), the term African American will be used, as most of these newly freed slaves were born in the United States. Finally, I will use the term “black” in reference to people of African, Caribbean, and West Indian descent, especially in reference to recent migration to America. The general use of terminology, or lack thereof, to describe one race of people is an example of how people who are culturally, economically, and politically different, are easily grouped into one community and stereotyped. For the purpose of this thesis, which does not seek to examine racial terminology, but rather searches for visual stereotypes, I will use the terms African, African American, and black as fit.

Explaining Slavery:

Historian Eric Foner, in *Forever Free: The Story of Emancipation and Reconstruction*, explains that, “Slavery and ideas about innate racial differences developed in seventeenth-century America,” and, as the need for slaves increased due to farm production, slavery became rooted in “an ideology based on belief that some races are inherently superior to others and entitled to rule over them” (Foner 8). In other words,

as slaves became a necessity, they were no longer viewed as human beings, but as property that produced free labor. As Foner explains, slaves did not hold any legal rights. Their lives were strictly based on fulfilling the needs of their masters. Slaves could not harbor any weapons to defend themselves and could be purchased or sold just like any household object. Slave-owners even protected their rights over slave children, as laws were passed stating that the condition of the child was based off of the mother. This law revoked all rights of the children from the father and prevented slave owners from losing their property. The slave's body was not their own, but their master's. Foner describes the case of a slave girl named Celia, who was put to death after she murdered her master during an attempted rape. However, because Celia was pregnant at the time of sentencing, she was not executed until after the birth of her baby, so that this property could be inherited by the master's family. As for slave families, it was difficult for slaves to maintain a "normal" family structure, as they were constantly being sold and sent to various plantations. Families were often broken apart and, in some cases, never seen again. It was even hard for families who lived on the same plantation to maintain structure, as their own lives were not their number one priority. Slave men and women, as Foner writes, "experienced the same kind of powerlessness" (Foner18). Women did not have the time to care for their families and men could not provide for or defend them.

The slave's body was also used as a form of torment. On President James K. Polk's plantation, Foner reveals that the treatment of slaves was so harsh, that very few made it to their fifteenth birthday. Slaves were not equal to whites and their lives in bondage proved this to be true. Slaves were not only treated as property, but as domestic animals in need of training. Slaves were not allowed to go anywhere or do anything

without their master's approval. Slave owners went to extreme measures to have complete control over the slave's body. Some of these methods are explained in *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*, where author Marcus Woods reveals that: "The iron mask and gag, [was] placed upon runaways and slaves who tried to commit suicide by eating dirt..." (Woods 225). This iron mask is similar to that of a muzzle used for dogs. The slave's tongue was held in place so that not even their saliva could be swallowed, forcing them to drool like an animal. Given the hot conditions slaves worked in, if the mask was left on for a long period of time, it could burn the slave's face, leaving them with an unflattering deformity. Woods describes a case with a female slave named Anastasia, who died in an iron mask because she did not allow her master to sexually abuse her.

Picturing Slavery:

The harsh conditions of slavery, especially the sexual exploitation of the female slave's body, were not only documented through text, but evident in visual reputations as well. For example, in relation to the sexualization of black women, Woods describes how "...the white male, modest and perplexed, is threatened by rapacious black women... [as a result of] ...a branch of scientific racism which ascribed over-developed and primitive sexual organs to black women" (Woods 164-165). We see this in William Heath's 1810 British caricature *A Pair of Broad Bottom* (fig. 1), where the African woman Saartjie Baartman is depicted holding a staff and wearing a tribal headband. Her back side is exaggerated. By illustrating Baartman and her large posterior, viewers can see black women as "others," not equals. Not only is she minimally dressed in comparison to the two men, Richard Sheridan and Lord Greenville, but also she is viewed as something to

be mocked. The woman stands completely still as the two men talk amongst themselves. They do not take her feelings or opinions into account; she is there to be ridiculed and judged.

Similarly, the black male body was also depicted in a way that characterized him as sub-human, a bestial and sexually driven force. Many illustrations of the black male slave's body are found in news advertisements and paintings of runaway slaves. To a slave owner, a runaway slave was legally described as "a paradoxical self-theft," which illustrated the slave as "disempowered" (Woods 79). Because the slave does not govern his own body, but instead is the property of his master, by running away the slave steals himself from his owner. This act costs the slave owner a great amount of time and money, because, while the slave is on the run, energy is wasted trying to recapture them and less work is being done. Therefore, slave owners wanted to recapture slaves as quickly as possible, not only so that the slave can continue their work, but because "the runaway emerges as a metaphor for white failure" (Woods 82). The runaway slave's actions reflect more on the slave owner than on himself. For one, a runaway represented the potential lack of control the slave owner had over his plantation. The fact that a slave ran away under his watch put his reputation at a disadvantage. Second, the fact that slaves were running away proved the harsh realities of slavery itself. Abolitionists used runaway slave advertisements as a way to show the public that slaves could not be happy being in bondage, otherwise they would not risk their lives running away. However, Woods argues that pro-slavery advocates also used slave advertisements to their advantage. Pro-slavery advertisements depicted slaves either dying of starvation or committing suicide after they ran away in order to convey the message that running away

from slavery was worse than staying. In the same respect, pro-slavery painters pictured runaway slaves as an excuse to mutilate the black male body.

For instance, British painter Richard Ansdell's *The Hunted Slaves* (1861) illustrates a runaway male slave attempting to protect a slave woman from a pack of dogs (fig. 2). It was common for slave owners to use their dog's strong sense of smell to track down runaway slaves. However, Woods points out that in this image the slave owner is likely not far away and is coming to break up the fight between slave and dogs. Second, the fact the male slave is shirtless exposes his masculine nature. A masculine slave is usually a threatening figure not often depicted in art. However, in this painting the slave's lack of clothing puts him on the same level as the animals. In other words, this is not a painting about a man fighting off dogs, but a "...battle of ferocious beasts" (Woods 96). The black man is illustrated as violent and primitive. His strength in fighting off the dogs is not praised, but instead his bestial nature is highlighted. News advertisements and paintings, such as this one, depicted the black male runaway slave as a brutish being, one who should not want to fight for his own freedom.

Slave rebellions were highly threatening to slave owners and the entire system of slavery. Rebellions were often hushed or used to show how dangerous Africans were. However, in *The Slumbering Volcano: American Slave Ship Revolts and the Production of Rebellious Masculinity*, author Maggie Montesinos Sale argues that the American Revolution made "the willingness to die in cause of liberty [became] the mark of being American" (Sale 12). In other words, Sale identifies the hypocrisy of Americans. Instead of sympathizing with slaves who risk their lives for freedom, pro-slavery advocates

punished and ridiculed slaves for doing exactly what Americans had done to the British.

According to Sale, what validates this contradiction is that a:

... revolution by African American men had a different meaning in the later period than in the earlier one. Their attempt to renovate and extend the inclusionary potential of liberal political theory was more explicitly and dangerously oppositional in the later context because they had more explicitly been created, recognized, and identified as other, and thereby more explicitly excluded from the national body (Sale 17).

Slaves were not entitled to natural rights. Their dark skin and primitive features characterized them as “other.” Therefore, while Americans were praised for fighting for their liberty, African men, because they were not seen as equals, were demonized for their attempts at freedom. One of the most popular ways in which Africans were ridiculed following rebellions was through the newspaper. Early American newspapers were public venues for opinion, often disguised as facts, which successfully influenced society’s views and opinions.

The 1839 Amistad Affair is one example of how the black male body was used and manipulated for a political agenda. As Sale describes, the Amistad was a Spanish ship that had been taken over by African captives. While the original captain and cook were killed, other members of the crew escaped or were kept on the ship as captives. Once the ship was captured it was then sailed to New London, Connecticut. After being on trial for two years, the African men were released, as it was discovered that they were captured illegally after the African Slave Trade was abolished. What is interesting about The Amistad Affair is how the African men were depicted in the news during their trial. As Sale put it, this rebellion threatened the “natural hierarchy of races” (Sale 63). Newspapers, such as the “New York Sun,” and “Morning Herald,” depicted the African men as cannibals, savages, and pirates in order to reassure the white public that these men

were not like them and therefore not worthy of human rights (Sale 65). One example of how the men were represented as different was through their dialect. Because the Africans did not speak English, the press characterized their speech and intellect as primitive. The African men's physical features were also under attack as one report described them as: "the most horrible creature we ever saw in human shape, an object of terror to the very blacks, who said that he is a cannibal. His teeth projected at almost right angles from his mouth, while his eyes had a most savage and demonic expression" (Sale 70). Although Sale claims that by the time the African men were captured they were weak from starvation, the article implies that they are savage monsters. Similar to this quote, many other articles depicted the Africans as violent, evil beings who acted solely on impulse. Pro-slavery advocates suggested that, like these African men, slaves would abandon their masters for freedom when encouraged by abolitionists. Here, slavery supporters were killing two birds with one stone. While they demonstrated how uncontrolled and violent Africans were when freed, they also slighted Africans' intelligence by stating that slaves were not smart enough to envision their own freedom without the help of white abolitionists. Finally, physical features and lack of knowledge of the Amistad participants made them different. Linguist Joshua W. Gibbs studied the African's names, determined they were Mendenso, and suggested that their names came from aspects in nature. In turn, by relating the Africans to nature, they were not seen as civilized. Sale suggests that all of the "evidence and arguments were important not only to prove that the rebels were from Africa, but to construct a national identity for them" that was not American (Sale 114). The Mendenso men became a symbol for what it meant to be not just African, but a free African. They resembled everything pro-slavery

advocates feared, and so, in order to maintain power, images of Mendians had to be managed.

Rebels and runaways were not the only black images distorted for political power. Slaves on the plantation faced visual scrutiny as well, and many paintings of plantation life depict false images of how slaves lived. In *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, a collection of essays on various depictions of plantation life during slavery, Michael D. Harris writes that “The invention of the distorted representation of blacks applies to the perceptions of the plantation... [which is a] ...one sided story of life in the south” (Harris 156). During the ante-bellum period paintings of plantations were popular, as they were a symbol of wealth and power. It was the plantation owner who paid for the painting and therefore was in charge of what was shown. In these examples, the slave’s image is manipulated to their master’s will. As John Michael Vlach states “...painters of the plantation’s landscape were faced with the problem of how to portray a subject that included the beauty of nature and the brutality of forced captive labor” (Vlach 16). On one hand, painters had the privilege of capturing beautiful images of plantations, while at the same time pleasing their customers and painting often false images of slaves in the landscape. One way painters were able to fix this problem was to ignore slaves completely. Although by 1860 there were about four million slaves in the United States, Vlach suggests that, if any slaves were shown in plantation paintings at all, it was significantly less than the actual amount. Many images focused on owners rather than their slaves and supported the owner’s social and economic standing in society. This is seen in French-born painter Marie Adrien Persac’s *St. John, St. Martin Parish* (fig. 3), which focuses on the beauty of the Louisiana landscape and the owner’s home while

ignoring the harsh conditions of slavery. The slaves in the painting seem to be enjoying themselves and their surroundings, and there is no sign of unpleasant activities. Persac presents an Eden-like plantation. Pro-slavery advocates used blissful paintings like this one to promote a positive, tranquil image of slavery. What is missing from plantation paintings are what the painter chose to leave out.

African and African American slaves were also occasionally depicted in portraits. Similar to plantation paintings, portraits of slaves were used to represent their master's social and economic standing. In *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw states that, "The origins of the marginalized black body in American portraiture has its roots in the French tradition of the *page noir*, in which a black page or servant is included as an accessory in an allegorized portrait of an identifiable French woman" (Shaw 18). An example of this is found in Nicolas De Largilliere's 1696 *Portrait of a Woman, Perhaps Madam Claude Lamber de Thorigny* (fig. 4). In this portrait, the slave child, like the audience, is focused on the woman in the painting. While the woman is a figure worthy of respect, the slave sits obediently awaiting their orders. The slave child not only implies the woman's wealth, but also provides several formal and symbolic layers to the painting. First, the position of the slave child in comparison to the woman implies that there is a hierarchy between them. Slave children are often shown sitting or kneeling in lower positions than their masters in order to show who has power and control over the other. Second, the slave child's dark complexion almost completely blends in with the background of the portrait, as if he is just another object in the room. While the slave child's complexion meshes with the background, in turn, it assists in amplifying the complexion and beauty

of the woman. Here, the black body is nothing more than an accessory for the white woman. Finally, the child wears a silver collar. Slave children are often shown in portraits with collars around their necks. The collar implies the child's status of a slave and the importance of slaves being "...physically controlled in order to be disciplined and domesticated" (Shaw 22). Like the Spaniel and parrot in the painting, the collar on the slave child depicts him as an obedient household pet.

Interracial slave children also became an important visual symbol of the sexual abuse of enslaved African and African American woman. According to Shaw, between 1860 and 1864 photographers and abolitionists used photographs of biracial slave girls to depict the sexual exploitation of slave women. Fundraisers, held by Reverend Henry Ward Beecher and others, brought awareness to the circumstances of these interracial children's birth and, on occasion, bought their freedom. As seen in Eastman Johnson's 1860 portrait *The Freedom Ring*, a young girl sits on the floor holding a ring that symbolizes her freedom (fig. 5). Although the young girl is of both black and white descent, she, as in many other portraits of mixed children, is so light she could pass for white. By purchasing mixed slave children out of slavery, Shaw points out that "the former enslaved children's body is still a commodity," prompting him to ask: "who is worth saving?" (Shaw 154-160). By purchasing mixed slave children and securing their freedom, abolitionists revealed a hierarchy in the American slave system based on skin color. Obviously, lighter skinned slaves were deemed worthy of saving and darker children were not. Finally, these activities negatively affected the black community by confirming that salvation lies in the color of your skin.

The objective of many ante-bellum paintings was to restore a belief in “The Old South,” a fictional time of peace and obedience, filled with happy Christian slaves who would never think of abandoning their masters (Vlach 22). Increasingly following the Civil War, the Old South became a slave owner’s utopia pictured in plantation paintings and shared amongst themselves and, more importantly, with Northerners. As Alexis L. Boylan describes in *Landscapes of Slavery*, “After the Civil War and Reconstruction the traditional ideas of the south were challenged with new realities of emancipation, urbanism, industrialization, immigration, internationalism, and westward expansion” (Boylan 115). Unlike during slavery, when the black image was all but ignored, after the Civil War, this tactic was impossible. Yet painters hesitated with how they should represent these new Americans. In 1876, artist Winslow Homer boldly represented the subject in *A Visit from the Old Mistress* (fig. 6). In this painting, black subjects are the focal point of the painting. The work does not focus on the master and his house, but instead represents former slaves in their home. What makes this painting interesting is the appearance of the former mistress. Now that the slaves are free, Boylan questions the reason for her visit. Nevertheless, what is clear in Homer’s painting is the confused and uncomfortable expressions on the women’s faces. Boylan states that, “Power, at least in the painting, has shifted, and it was the lack of an easy and readable relationship between blacks and whites that caused so much discomfort” (Boylan 120). The awkwardness between the mistress and her former slaves mirror the same feelings many southerners now faced. While many white southerners were discomfited by freed blacks occupying new physical and social spaces, for African Americans it meant new freedoms, even if they still faced hardships.

The black body placed on display as a commodity was not only seen in portraits and paintings, but also in live performances, known as minstrel shows. In *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class*, Eric Lott explains that minstrel shows were based on the idea "...that slavery was amusing, right and natural. Although it arose from a white obsession with black (male) bodies which underlines white racial dread to our day, it ruthlessly disavowed its fleshly investments through ridicule and racists lampoon (Lott 3). In other words, the bodies of slaves and free African Americans were used as a form of entertainment in minstrel shows. While they were a successful investment, it was not slaves or free African Americans who profited from this business. For example, during the eighteenth and nineteenth century, white men donned blackface and performed in minstrel shows. Make-up to blacken their face and hands transformed them into black men and women. They wore "Negro costumes," which consisted of large pants and shoes to over-exaggerate the black body (Lott 5). This can be seen in the 1820 caricature "Mr. T. Rice as the Original Jim Crow" (fig. 7). As Lott explains minstrel shows used instruments such as the banjo, fiddle, and tambourine and were often broken into three sections with songs and narration from the South. In his book, Lott argues that many contemporary forms of entertainment, ranging from the circus and cartoons to Elvis Presley are all examples of blackface minstrelsy. Anytime a white performer adopts aspects of black culture, whether diction, posture, or attitude, and uses that performance for profit, Lott deems it an example of a minstrel performance.

Minstrel shows offered whites a way to ridicule the black image-, while still being able to control it. They are, as Lott described, "an outline of white fantasies about black behavior" (Lott 40). Minstrel performances were stereotyped representations of black

culture, which emphasized violence and overt sexual content and gave the audience the impression that this was truly how blacks lived. For instance, Lott explains that in minstrel performances actors constantly licked, punched, and spit on one another, and their disputes were usually over a woman. They represented the image of the violent black man, whose actions are not controlled by logic but by sexual desires. The black women, played by white men, were usually portrayed as overly large and unattractive with masculine features. These depictions presented the primitive black man and woman as an inferior being in contrast to the civilized whites in the audience. According to Lott “...the men who became blackface minstrels had many opportunities to engage the black practices to which they were drawn” and “occasionally the minstrel show becomes a narrative substitute for slavery” (Lott 51-59). Minstrel performers vicariously lived through the black body and performed acts that would seem tasteless anywhere else. However, once the black mask was washed off, these performers were expected to return to society as proper gentlemen, leaving the barbaric nature of the black man on the stage. Minstrel shows went to great lengths to depict the black man as a fool. Whether it was his broken speech or childish actions, the black image was always represented as less than. An example is what Lott describes as “the ‘castration’ scene,” where black men were figuratively, but also, in the case of the performance, literally castrated on stage (Lott 153). These acts were just another example of how the black body was disrespected and ridiculed for the audience’s entertainment. On a larger scale, minstrel performances helped to confirm and produce black stereotypes.

Another tactic that was used to reinforce black stereotypes were black collectibles. Kenneth W. Goings writes in, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles*

and American Stereotyping, that “objects produced following the death of slavery and the rise of Reconstruction were intended to denigrate African Americans, to make a now free and supposedly equal people seem ‘different’ and inferior” (Goings 20). Similar to minstrel performances, black collectibles were used as a way to keep African Americans in bondage. They were constant reminders to both the black and white community of the traditions of “The Old South.” Now that slavery was over, in order to keep these ideas and generalizations about African Americans relevant, black collectibles were introduced to the public and displayed in millions of households across the country. As Goings points out, the collectibles were cheaply made products intended for middle and upper class white buyers. These collectibles include salt holders, figurines, barrel covers, postcards, ashtrays, buttons, cookie jars, and so on. Aunt Jemima is the most famous female collectible, who was the always ready to serve (fig. 8). Although she is a symbol of the “happy slave,” Aunt Jemima is also a masculinized woman. As Goings notes, “Aunt Jemima was tough. She was part of an attempt to defeminize African American women” (Goings 37). Aunt Jemima’s skin is very dark, she is always smiling, and her clothes are never flattering, which accentuates her masculine figure. She has muscular arms and wears a wide skirt to exaggerate her weight. Aunt Jemima is not intended to be an attractive woman and her purpose is to imply that a black woman’s masculine features would only be useful in domestic settings. Another collectible that targeted black women as the “harlot” or “jezebel” (Goings 67). These were attractive, full figured women who had no moral or Christian standards, and were unmarried and sexually uninhibited. Usually on postcards, these representations were meant to discourage white men from marrying black women. There was nothing wrong with sexual liaisons, but to marry a

black woman meant that “the dominant white male would be transferring his status and property to his inferior partner, raising her status and resources” (Goings 67). Society wanted to maintain its oppression over the black female, and the only way she could move up in the social and economic ladder was to marry a white male. In order to prevent this from happening, collectibles of either unattractive or loose black women were created to keep white men from marrying them.

Like their female counterparts, black men were also subjects of collectibles. Collectibles targeting black men attributed qualities like laziness and ignorance, to them. For example, the “coon...[were] an attempt to reduce African American men to ridiculous, stupid, and even beast like comic figures” to diminish “African Americans as rivals for jobs” (Goings 43-44). Depictions of the “coon” operate as visual castrations of the black man, in order to maintain the hierarchy between the two races. White collar and supervisor positions were intended specifically for white men and the comic “coon” stereotype enforced ideas about the inferiority of black men. Many blacks were disgusted with the coon stereotype and felt more distant from the American dream than ever. However, Goings points out that many African American male entertainers wrote coon songs. In many cases, black singers were forced to include the word “coon” in order to have their songs performed. Some African American men, if they wanted to audition for a performance, had to learn a coon song to be considered for the part. While many blacks took part in their own degradation for financial gain, Goings writes that this was just another “...cultural learning process that directed the population to see blacks as inferior to whites” (Goings 47).

As mentioned in the introduction, in his 2000 stand-up performance “Killin’ Them Softly,” the comedian Dave Chapelle jokes that black people are stereotyped as being “genetically predisposed to liking chicken.” Although Chapelle frames this as a joke, this stereotype has a long history as illustrated in a twentieth century postcard (fig. 9) showing a black man hiding in a chicken coop. Goings argues that the stereotype of blacks loving chicken came from slaves hiding from their masters in chicken coops. If this postcard depicts a slave, he could be hiding for various reasons. The black man in the postcard is a caricature, depicted as clueless, idiotic, and beastlike. The slave does not stand up straight like a proper human being, but instead crawls as if he is one of the animals, and therefore should be treated as such. As Dave Chapelle attempted to point out in his comedy skit, the idea that blacks are born to like chicken is a ridiculous stereotype that oppresses the black community.

Conclusion:

Stereotypes are no accident; they are a system of ideas used to keep people in their place. The repetitive nature of stereotypes reminds people of that social hierarchy and, with each new generation, discretely blends and is reflected in contemporary culture. As we have seen, paintings, newspaper articles, and collectibles have been used to depict blacks in demeaning ways. Slaves and emancipated African Americans, who often had no control over their representations, were forced to deal with stereotyped images. However, many black artists at the time and today continue to use black stereotypes to their advantage. Whether they are resisting, criticizing, or integrating stereotypes into their performances, they keep them relevant. For example, if we compare William Heath’s *A Pair of Broad Bottom* (figure 1) to a press photograph of rapper Nicki Minaj (fig. 10), we

can see that the idea of the sexually explicit black woman remains prevalent in today's society. The rapper's pose and lack of clothing, make her bottom the focal point of the image, and present a similar message to the representation of Baartman. Since Nicki Minaj's recognition by mainstream media in 2009, there have been countless articles about her and other black women who physically enhance their butts using silicone. For example, a 2013 CBS news article, entitled "Report: Deaths from Illegal Butt Injections May Be on the Rise" points out that butt injections could possibly increase a woman's posterior to a dangerous point; deaths have even been reported. Articles such as these prove how harmful, and influential Nicki Minaj and other pop culture artists are. Along with her image, Nicki Minaj's sexual lyrics embody the stereotype of the black woman as a jezebel.

Similarly, the rapper Eminem, a white man who adopts the stereotypical role of a violent, black criminal for his own personal gain, can be read as an example of a minstrel performer in blackface (fig. 11). While Eminem is not wearing actual blackface, his lyrics, in songs like "Kill You," suggest that he has adapted the persona of a violent black man and uses it to his own advantage. It is unclear which is worse, black rappers who degrade themselves for financial gain or white artists who adopt black stereotypes for the same reason. Either way, as we will see in the next chapter, both black and white rap artists in the 1980s and 1990s integrated early black stereotypes into their performances, allowing stereotypes of an inferior, aggressive, and hypersexual black man to live on through their lyrics and visual representations.

Chapter Two: Rap and Representation

Introduction:

A large part of this thesis focuses on the idea of agency. Chapter one demonstrated the ways in which slaves and emancipated African Americans became the subjects of negative representations. Chapter two will focus on 1980s and 1990s rap artists, and their contemporary adaptations of black stereotypes such as the inferior, hyper-sexual, or criminal black man. Many twentieth-century rappers have integrated earlier depictions of blackness into their performances.

For example, W. T. Lhamon Jr, in *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop* argues that hip-hop dance moves also originated from minstrel routines. Lhamon uses rap artist M.C. Hammer as an example, claiming that “In pushing the aim, Hammer more closely embodies early blackface energy at the level of mass culture more than anyone...” (Lhamon 220). In this quotation, Lhamon references M.C. Hammer’s dance move “the running-man,” which appears in his “Can’t Touch This” (1990) music video. Although the move is called the running-man, the dancer does not actually move anywhere. Instead, the dancer simply stands in one place while their hands and feet move up and down to the beat of the song. While Lhamon relates the running-man to minstrel performances, where the performer is “running in place-but never arriving,” I would argue that the running-man also relates to runaway slave advertisements (fig. 12 and 13). A comparison of M.C. Hammer’s dancers in the video to the representation of runaway slaves, reveals that their bodies are very similar. Marcus Wood and Lhamon have both argued that in most slave advertisements one leg is always up, signifying the idea that the slave is “running in place-but never arriving” (Lhamon 221). In other words, the

immobility of the slave is symbolic for several reasons. First, it represents the idea that even though the slave is attempting to run away, they will eventually be caught and returned to their rightful place on the plantation. Secondly, the lack of movement implies that the slave's condition is permanent. They will either be a slave or a runaway slave for the remainder of their lives. This comparison implies that moves such as the running man and Michael Jackson's "moon-walk" allude to similar ideas about African Americans' lack of social and economic mobility (Lhamon 221).

Like M.C. Hammer, many other rap artists include material from minstrel shows in their performances. This chapter will focus on 1980s and 1990s rap artists, such as N.W. A, Eminem, Tupac Shakur, and The Notorious B. I. G. and their modern-day representations of the minstrel character, known as the "brute." Even though these rappers have integrated black stereotypes into their performances, this thesis will also argue that there are some artists whose lyrics and images resist these stereotypes. OutKast and DJ Jazzy Jeff, and the Fresh Prince are examples of rap artists who challenge black stereotypes by depicting themselves as they want to be seen, instead of someone else's standards.

History of Self Representation:

African Americans have been challenging black stereotypes long before OutKast and the Fresh Prince. In order to challenge these negative representations, freed slaves, such as Frederick Douglass and Sojourner Truth, had to find a way to represent their true selves. In *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw, a Professor of Art History at the University of Pennsylvania, writes that "Douglass argues that until African Americans began to represent themselves

they would not find artists capable or interested in portraying them with the sensitivity that the serious representation of individuals required” (Shaw 13). In other words, freed African Americans had to take control of their own images. The only way African Americans could overcome these common negative representations was to depict themselves in a way that told their personal version of the African American experience.

One way that freed African Americans were able to challenge old stereotypes was to hire artists to depict African Americans as they wanted to be seen. For example, as seen in the pendant portraits of Nancy and William Lawson done by William Matthew Prior in 1843, African Americans began to invest in their appearance as a marker of social status and desired the same luxury goods as their white counterparts (Fig. 14 and 15). Shaw explains that the two paintings were done within a span of nine days from each other and could have cost over twenty dollars apiece. Therefore, Mr. and Mrs. Lawson were not only wealthy enough to afford these paintings, but were also determined to have them. In the paintings, Prior pictures a well-dressed African American couple, which differs entirely from the depictions of blackness examined in chapter one. The couple is not represented as intimidating beasts or comical characters. Instead they are shown as husband and wife, an indication of familial ties that were rare and often neglected in representations of black individuals in the ante-bellum era.

The physical appearance of the husband and wife are also important. Their hair is neatly groomed and the couple wear elegant clothing that mirrors their financial status. From their facial expressions, we can tell that neither is angry or aggressive; instead the husband and wife are represented as calm and comfortable within their surroundings. The husband smokes a cigar while the wife reads a book, indicating that she is educated. They

are not savages on a plantation, but instead are a well-off couple enjoying their time at home. These portraits indicate that, given the right opportunities, African Americans are able to uplift themselves and attain the same financial and educational position as middle to upper class whites. Through this depiction, the Lawsons indicate that they do not want to be seen as “others,” but instead as human beings. Portraits such as these, challenge period notions about blackness and reveal the ways in which freed African Americans chose to have themselves pictured. Although these portraits did not change racist ideology or public opinion, they do show that African Americans, on occasion, could control their own images and present themselves in a positive light.

Following emancipation, the burden of positive representation became greater. African Americans now had the opportunity to decide how they wanted to be presented and, with this power, they could dismantle many of the negative stereotypes that hindered their public image. Saidiya V. Hartman, Associate Professor of English at Columbia University, describes African American’s new-found power in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*:

Emancipation announced the end of chattel slavery; however, it by no means marked the end of bondage. The free(d) individual was nothing if not burdened, responsible, and obligated. Responsibility entailed accounting for one’s actions, dutiful suppliance, contractual obligation, and calculated reciprocity. Fundamentally, to be responsible was to be blameworthy (Hartman 125).

Hartman explains that emancipated slaves were now in control of their actions and therefore had to take responsibility for themselves. Aspects of life previously denied them, such as education, livelihood, and moral duty, fell on the shoulders of newly freed slaves. Most importantly, for the purposes of this thesis, African American were responsible for their public images. Freed African Americans not only obtained freewill,

but also independent agency. Along with agency, as Hartman points out, came the burden of responsibility over one's image. As we have seen throughout chapter one, following the end of slavery minstrel performances and black collectibles were used as tools to reinforce black stereotypes. Although many of these performances and collectibles were produced or distributed by whites, there were also black artists who participated in the dissemination of these stereotyped goods or performed in minstrelsy shows for financial profit. For example, in "coon" performances black men were not allowed to audition or perform non- "coon" songs.

The word "coon," a derogatory term used to describe African Americans as lazy or dumb, mirrors the word "nigger," another negative term used by slave owners to dehumanize their slaves. Both terms carried over into post-emancipation parlance and supported white supremacy and the continued dehumanization of African Americans. However, today rap artists have adopted "nigger," but dropped the letters "-er" and added "-a." In this way, they claim ownership over the word. In a 2013 interview with Oprah, rapper Jay Z defended his use of the "N" word" stating, "I believe that a speaker's intention is what gives a word its power. And if we eliminate the N word, other words would just take its place. ...". Although Oprah did not follow up with this question, I would have asked: what exactly are the artist's "intentions" for using the word? In his response to Oprah, Jay Z argued that taking ownership of the word removes power from the previous owner and allows those disenfranchised by that term to assume agency of it. So, when Jay Z refers to himself and others as a "nigga," he is taking the power of the word away from his white counterparts and placing it onto black hands. However, if we return to Hartman's idea of the burden of responsibility, I would argue that black rappers

like Jay Z do not choose the responsible path. Instead of erasing the “N” word from their vocabulary or using the word as an inspirational lesson or warning to inspire the black community to strive for better, the way that rappers use the “N” word ends up insulting themselves and other black people. In this way, the intention of the word has not changed, because rappers like Jay Z continue to use the “N” word with the exact same connotations as slave owners.

For example, in “Takeover,” Jay Z’s 2001 diss track targeted at the rapper Nas, Jay Z raps “Roc-A-Fella is the army, better yet the navy/ Niggaz’ll kidnap your babies, spit at your lady.” Here Jay Z is referring to himself and his record label as “Niggaz” who will physically assault women and children. While these lyrics are meant to promote drama and drive album sales, the savagery shown towards women and children reinforces the stereotype of the aggressive and violent black male. Also, the use of the “N” word in relation to physical assault connects the word to negative actions and, since Jay Z is referring to himself as a “nigga,” aims that negativity towards himself. Ultimately, although it may not be Jay Z’s “intention,” by continuing to use the “N” word Jay Z and other rappers reenact black stereotypes in their performances.

By introducing stereotypical depictions of African and African Americans, that originated under slavery, into pop culture, rap artists allow these old stereotypes to remain relevant and perpetuate. Through their lyrics and physical appearance, rappers in the 1980s and 1990s adopted personas that mirrored earlier negative representations of blackness.

Black Male Stereotypes and Contemporary Rap:

In *Scripting the Black Masculine Body: Identity, Discourse, and Racial Politics in Popular Media*, Ronald L. Jackson II, Assistant Professor of Culture and Communication Theory at Penn State University at University Park, describes how the media portrays and distributes images of the black body to the public. As discussed in the introduction, Jackson argues that the media highlights cultural and racial difference allowing society to focus on difference and cast the black body as “other” or subhuman. Jackson describes the black stereotype as the “I-Other dialect” which is used to “...transfer one’s own ‘baggage’ to the Other so that it does not have to deal with it” (Jackson 75). In other words, if blacks are understood as inferior, then “I” (European whites) must be the opposite. Whites differentiated themselves from blacks through skin color, dialect, behavior, and any other characteristics that would further prove their superiority. The need to maintain power over the black body came from the fear and anxiety of the unknown. However, if blacks are continuously placed in stereotypical roles, then they are no longer feared because their repetitive presence becomes familiar. Jackson offers two examples of how the news and other media outlets popularize a stereotype of the black criminal. The black criminal stereotype, which stems from the minstrel character known as the “brute,” is violent and often feared (Jackson 83). This reoccurring role of the “brute” has assisted in culturally associating all black men with violence, criminal activity, and hypersexuality. The first example that Jackson offers is a story of a white mother who purposefully left her two children in a car as the vehicle drove into a river. The mother then told the police that a black man had stolen her car with the children inside. Immediately the police believed her and news articles and television broadcasts

swept the nation in search of this fictional black character. The mother was so easily believed because black men have historically been depicted as criminal suspects. The mother herself believed that she would get away with her crime because so many people, like herself, associate blackness with criminal behavior. The second example of the media's influence on and distribution of black male stereotypes is a research study that was conducted to find the connection between crime and "Afrocentric features" (Jackson 83). During this study, participants were given photographs of random people, along with old news articles of both positive and negative stories. The participants were then instructed to match the photographs with the articles they came from. According to Jackson, "participants misidentified Blacks who had 'Afrocentric' features with more violent crimes," even though the photographs pictured award winning and middle-class black citizens (Jackson 84). Similar to the case of the mother who accused a fictional black male of kidnapping her children, this research study underscores how cultural associations between criminality and blackness are pervasive. The media and news outlets sensationalize black crime, leading many to associate the stereotype of the violent black criminal with the entire black race.

Jackson explains that the stereotypical aggressive and violent black criminal has transformed from the nineteenth-century minstrel "brute" to the twentieth-century rap artists. Rap music is another outlet that conveys such stereotypes to the public. Rap artists have allowed themselves to be depicted as the "brute" for fame and financial gain, although now they refer to themselves as "gangstas" and "thugs." Often the rapper's true identity is sacrificed for increased album sales. Once again, the black body is used as a commodity and sold to the public as a stereotyped image. However, this time it is black

music producers and rappers who are allowing their bodies to be exploited for money. The gangsta or thug, as Jackson explains, are often in conflict with the law. As will be examined later, some artists even publicized their court appearances, which were ironically scheduled in the same period as album release dates. These “bad boys” not only hardened their appearance, but made their thug-life lyrics believable through public performances of criminality. Other characteristics of the gangsta or thug center around their outlaw behavior. They are presented as violent, selfish, territorial, and without family values. The gangsta or thug’s self-interest separates them from the community and implies that they are heartless and non-committal.

Male rappers who portray gangstas and thugs often have zero respect for women, evidenced by the common use of the term “bitch” to describe black women in rap songs. Black rap artists also utilized the term “pimp” in order to describe their relationships to women. As Jackson points out, rappers cannot be seen as emotional or weak. Therefore, the persona of the pimp allows men to have relations with multiple women without threatening their egos or image. The pimp, which rapper Snoop Dogg often refers to himself as, mirrors the same ideologies as slavery when “...black slaves functioned as devices of labor for their master... [the black woman’s] ...body and mind are summarily exploited, abused, and treated as instrument” (Jackson 120). Under slavery, the black female slave’s body was used for her owner’s sexual and reproductive purposes; likewise, the pimp abuses the black woman’s body for his own financial gain. There is no love in these relationships, because that would imply that the black woman is deserving of equal affection. The gangsta, thug, and pimp personas are contemporary versions of the minstrel “brute” and are deeply rooted in rap culture. Their roles cast the black

performer as a criminal or a pimp. If we examine the origins of rap music, we will see how these negative depictions of blackness were already prevalent, before rappers even took the stage.

In the introduction of *Hip Hop America*, Nelson George correlates hip-hop music to 1915 boxing matches, "...where young African Americans step into an arena to verbally, emotionally, and yes, physically bash each other for the pleasure of predominantly white spectators" (George 1). White audiences enjoyed this type of entertainment, while African American men participated for little pay and bragging rights. The same can be said about hip-hop's famous battles, which have aided in starting and destroying many hip-hop artists' careers. Hip-Hop began in the 1970s on the streets of New York City. Hip-Hop's first generation, as George calls them, were black and Latino kids from the Bronx who hired DJs to play at street parties. According to George, DJs and producers, including Herc, Bambaata, Grand Wizard Theodore, and, later, Grandmaster Flash, were the founders of hip hop. Their new technique of "break spinning" R&B hits, such as James Brown's "Sex Machine," to a faster beat popularized the genre's party-like sound (George 17). According to Grandmaster Flash, the first rappers, or as they were called during the 1970s "rhyme technicians," were the two brothers Kid Creole and Melle Mel, whose fast back and forth rhyming solidified the idea of rapping as a form of communication (George 18). Rapping back and forth between two artists soon shifted from two artists speaking to each other to one artist communicating solely with their audience. Hip-Hop was music for people who loved to party and have fun. The rhymes were light hearted and often playful. George also implies that the hip-hop generation gave birth to break-dancers and graffiti artists and the Bronx,

during this era, was filled with expressive artists, whose unique talents helped jump start hip-hop.

However, the South Bronx was not seen by the American public as soulful and cheerful. The media shaped a different perception of the borough in the public's imagination. As George writes, "Hollywood capitalized on the 'South-Bronx-as-hell image' in a number of exploitive films..." (George 10). For example, *The Warriors* (1979) depicted the Bronx as a dismal area where violent gangs and superior police officers were at war with one another. Such movies, painted the Bronx as a negative and unwelcoming place, encouraging middle and upper class white audiences to consider it a "bad place." For all of the artistic experimentations happening in the Bronx, it was unfortunately over-shadowed by media representations of its bad attributes. The idea of blackness became associated with crime and violence, as the majority of the people living in the South Bronx were black and Hispanic. This is not to say that gangs and poverty did not impact the community; however, they were not the only defining characteristics of a diverse, vibrant New York City borough.

Indeed, gangs, poverty, and drugs gave gangsta rappers ammo for their lyrics. Gangsta rap is a mid-1980s derivative of hip-hop music, but unlike hip hop it originated in the streets of Los Angeles, California. The music focused on crack, violence, and police retaliation. Scholars such as George have argued that "Gangsta rap (or reality rap...) is the direct by-product of the crack explosion" (George 42). In this quote, George explains that crack led to crime, explicit sexual behavior, gang affiliations, broken homes, and the incarceration of black men, all of which made the perfect biography for a gangsta rapper. The streets of L.A were inspiring for young rappers, who

mimicked everything they saw, from the clothes and gang colors, to hand gestures and street dialect. Rappers offered audiences a look into a world that fascinated and terrified many consumers. However, taking real-life stories and claiming them as one's own threatened the authenticity of gangsta rap. Very few of the rappers who spoke about "ghetto life" actually lived it. As George explains, they may have known people who actually lived these lives and borrowed their stories. However, these rappers obtained information for their lyrics; if they were dishonest about their lives, then they exploited a community for their own profit. Both South Central Los Angeles and the South Bronx are impoverished communities, with under-educated citizens living in dangerous surroundings. Some of these rappers, especially those from middle class families, used the suffering of others for their own financial gain.

N.W. A.

In *Nuthin' but a 'G' Thang: The Culture and Commerce of Gangsta Rap*, Eithne Quinn writes that the fact that "...N.W. A. adopt[ed] the role of street gang members...as vehicles through which to recount first-person tall tales of ghetto life for pleasure, protest, and profit." In doing so, they established "...the foundational feature of gangsta rap" (Quinn 25). The importance of N.W. A.'s first person-narratives evoke Jackson's "I - Other Dialect." However, here the roles are reversed and the "I" represents the rapper telling the story. The "I" concept is important to understand for several reasons. When rappers refer to themselves as violent, criminal, and sexual animals, it brings truth to these stereotypes because the rappers are justifying them. If a white man depicts a black male as a savage, they would be considered racist. However, if a black male calls himself a savage, it reinforces and brings truth to the stereotype. Secondly, the "I" is important

because it justifies the rapper's story. Gangsta rappers needed consumers to believe what they were saying in order to sell albums. These artists needed an outlet that allowed them to connect with their audience. The use of first person narratives allowed artists and their consumers to have a shared experience. Quinn also points out that rappers, such as N.W. A., gave interviews and authorized documentaries that were shown on television and supported their testimonies. As the audience watched their biographies, they become impressed with the rapper's "rags to riches" storylines.

Los Angeles provided N.W. A. with the material it needed to make and promote successful albums. As Quinn explains, "In some ways, the televised beatings and consequent rioting, both sited in LA, presented the biggest publicity campaign that gangsta rap ever had" (Quinn 90). Violence, drugs, the mistreatment of women, and the other criminal activities that came along with living in "the hood" made for great public entertainment, which the media promoted. Indeed, what allowed N.W.A. to surpass other Compton-made artists was their affiliation with the 1991 Rodney King beating and subsequent riots. In order for a gangsta to be a gangsta, they had to face some form of opposition. How they achieved notoriety is not only by gaining the respect of the people, but, more importantly, by overcoming whatever stands in their way. N.W.A. needed an "underdog" tale to solidify their criminal personas, so they made the police their rivals. N.W.A's hit, "Fuck the Police" (1988), from their critically-acclaimed album *Straight Outta Compton*, skyrocketed to the top of the Billboard charts. Anti-police sentiments were mutual throughout the streets. The police were not just N.W.A's rivals, but the black community's as a whole. However, what many audiences, who blasted the rap anti-police anthem in their cars, didn't recognize was how these lyrics actually harmed the

black image. For one, it reflected poorly on the black community. As violent riots were publicized on televisions, onlookers saw a crazed and violent community. As the police are considered superior figures in society, going against them was to go against the law. In turn, the black community was not seen as the “underdogs,” but as the enemy. Secondly, as Quinn points out, what people seemed to forget was that the group N.W.A. was not a political revolutionary group, but entertainers who could say “F*** You” to the police. That did not make it so for everyone else.

N.W.A.’s *Niggaz4Life* (1991) was gangsta rap’s first Billboard number one album. Quinn credits the majority of the rap group’s success to the major video exposure gangsta rap received on MTV and BET. These channels allowed gangsta rap to reach a broader audience, as many of the videos played during after-school hours. Although gangsta rap was originally meant to attract young black men, increasingly a large portion of its audience was young, and white. Gangsta rap became so popular with the white community, that “Billboard reported that N.W.A.’s *Niggaz4Life* sold out in many rock and heavy metal outlets, bought mainly by white teenage males” (Quinn 86). What attracted white males to gangsta rap was the idea of the rapper as outlaw. The rules do not apply to the rapper and he does not care about the consequences. Rebellion – against parents, schools, or authority figures – was a common theme in rap, metal, and rock music. These lyrics offered young, white, male teenagers a way to escape their own reality and enter an alternative universe where they themselves were also above the law. This parallels the ways that minstrel blackface performances of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries offered white audiences the same form of escapism. While they may not literally be wearing blackface make up, the white male appropriation of black

“gangsta” culture, such as baggy jeans, gold teeth, and an overall “street mentality,” allowed these youths to adopt a false black identity. In doing so, however, these white men are not judged in the same way that black men are. In other words, young white men who imitate rappers can do so without facing consequences.

According to Quinn, gangsta rap reached white audiences more easily than blacks cross-over to rock or metal. I would argue that the reason that rock and metal bands do not sell well within the black community relates to racial performance and the legacy of minstrel shows. Black bodies have always been a form of entertainment for white audiences. Whether in blackface performances, boxing matches, or sporting events, the black body has always been a commodity for the white market. However, blacks have not historically been entertained by white performers and the spectacle of blacks looking at a white body defies most historical precedents. While I am not saying that all blacks are opposed to white music, cultural and historical precedents mean that whites are more familiar with the idea of the black body as a form of entertainment than blacks are with the white body. Some successful white entertainers, such as Elvis Presley and Ed Sheeran, have adopted elements of blackness in their music and performances, enabling them to cross over to black audiences and attain success. This level of cultural appropriation is delicate, and white artists must carefully construct their images in order to reach the black audience without coming off as unauthentic. If their appropriation is too obvious, they can be perceived as fraudulent and may risk their careers, as exemplified by Vanilla Ice. One way for white artists to achieve success in the black community is through associations with other black performers who validate their image.

Some white artists have been very successful at integrating black stereotypes into their performances-, encouraging audiences to believe their made-up personas.

The Real Slim Shady?

Detroit native Marshall Bruce Mathers III, aka Eminem, sold a record breaking 172 million albums. In order to avoid the same fate as the white rapper Vanilla Ice, who had one hit but was then ridiculed for his “corny” rap style, Eminem had to adopt the role of a stereotypical black criminal and aggressor. His vulgar, violent lyrics and music videos fulfilled those stereotypes. As a white rapper, Eminem succeeded in catering to both black and white audiences. While he made music that related to black people, young white teens also lived vicariously through Eminem’s image. Eminem looked white, had a white family, and embraced himself as the “white boy rapper.” This acknowledgment of his white identity allowed him to be accepted by white audiences, who could listen to his songs without feeling threatened. Eminem’s association with Dr. Dre also allowed him to smoothly transition into rap culture. Following his career with N.W.A., Dr. Dre’s label ‘The Aftermath’ produced rappers such as Snoop Dogg and built a gangsta reputation. When Eminem joined the label, he only needed to adopt the persona of a gangsta in order to be welcomed by audiences, who now associated him, regardless of his color, with his label and the reputation of Dr. Dre.

In “Behind the Mask: Eminem and Post-Industrial Minstrelsy,” author Russel

White writes that

Eminem’s oeuvre represents a post-industrial updating of the sort of racial burlesque performed by those white actors who adopted blackface in the nineteenth century to send up and parody mainstream values and

ideologies...Eminem's performance draws upon and merges together elements of black vernacular street culture. (White 66).

In other words, Eminem is a modern-day blackface performer. Every aspect of his persona, from his sagging pants and head bandana to his violent lyrics, are borrowed from black gangsta rappers. Dr. Dre was heavily involved in shaping Eminem's rap persona, as Dr. Dre had already experienced this type of transformation in N.W. A. Although Eminem is not literally wearing blackface make-up, he – like the white minstrel performers before him – hides behind a mask. As White suggests, Eminem's cover-up is his on-stage alter ego Slim Shady. Slim Shady is a character Eminem adopts when performing on stage or shooting music videos. Slim Shady, unlike Eminem, is a gullible, clown-like character, who is unaware of his actions and, often, does not care about consequences. Slim Shady is a contemporary version of the black "coon," the dumb-founded black character who, through careless, uneducated behavior represents the black man as mentally inferior to whites. So, while Eminem himself is a white man, his alter-ego Slim Shady mirrors the stereotype of the intellectually inferior black man. Slim Shady gives Eminem an excuse to perform black stereotypes. Slim Shady's lyrics and actions do not reflect upon Eminem because it is understood that they are two different people.

Eminem's super ego, Slim Shady not only adopted the role of the aggressive, hypersexual black man, but also embraced his "whiteness" by referring to himself as white-trash. As White argues "...Eminem's self-identification as white, trailer-park trash plays a key role in establishing his authenticity and credibility in the eyes of his fans" (White 72). As this quote explains, white-trash is equitable with the "ghetto." Poor, uneducated, socially disempowered white Americans, who occupy their own version of

the “hood,” perceive themselves as outcasts and the subject of discrimination. Eminem was able to capitalize on the disenfranchisement of poor, white Americans, by casting himself as one of them. In many of Eminem’s songs, such as “Cleaning Out My Closet” (2001), the rapper speaks about growing up poor with a drug addicted mother and a father who abandoned him. Through his loosely autobiographical film *8 Mile* (2002). Eminem was able share his origin story and relate to white audiences and members of the black community who may have had similar experiences. In the film, Eminem plays a car technician by the name of Jimmy “B-Rabbit” Smith Jr. The film is centered around Jimmy’s impoverished lifestyle, and his attempts to succeed as a white rapper. Eminem’s persona, such as the character in *8 Mile*, allow for his skin color to become less important than his lyrics and biography. Furthermore, Slim Shady was able to mask his white identity by donning a hockey mask in several of his music videos. This was strategically used to hide Eminem’s white skin. Yet at the same time, hockey is predominantly played and watched by white men, signaling that Eminem is white.

Finally, White describes, Slim Shady’s constant disrespect towards black women in his lyrics. In an interview in *The Source*, Eminem blamed his decision to refer to black women as “dumb chicks” on his youth; however, his alter-ego Slim Shady was actually acting out the role of a stereotypical black rapper. The stereotype of the aggressive, hypersexual black male, which originated from the minstrel “brute,” has been a part of rap culture for years and has transformed into the “Mack” or the “Pimp.” As “traditional gender roles” changed in the 1990s, black men became insecure and needed a way to regain their position as head of the household (Quinn 135). At the same time, the pimp persona originated in rap culture. Rappers utilized the pimp persona as a way re-establish

the traditional gender roles between black men and black women. Rappers were not literally pimping women out on the street, but instead used the pimp's lifestyle as a metaphor to illustrate how men should rightfully be the head of the household. Quinn mentions that rappers, such as Ice Cube, adopted the character of the pimp as a way to showcase their dominance over women. For example, in Ice Cube's song "It's a Man's World," the rapper goes back and forth with a female lyricist named Yo-Yo. In the song, Ice Cube tells the woman that it is his job to bring "home the bacon."

This need for rappers to demonstrate their power over their female counterparts is a result of black women's dominating presence in the workforce. In the 1990s, "51 percent of black women worked professional jobs, compared with 34 percent of black men" (Quinn 132). Hip-hop scholar Ethene Quinn suggests that the success of black women made black men feel threatened and afraid of being seen as useless and subordinate, and some black rappers adopted the pimp persona in order to restore their place in the gender hierarchy. Quinn goes even further and argues that the pimp persona taught young men that love equated to weakness and that the only way to gain respect was to earn it through force. The more successful black women became in the workforce, the more they were verbally disrespected by black men. Terms such as "bitch," "hoe," and "chicken-head" were integrated into rap's vocabulary as a way to belittle black women and enforce gender hierarchies. By referring to black women as "hoes," street slang for prostitutes, rappers insinuate that intimate relationships are strictly based on the exchange of money for sex and not on love. In this example, the black woman loses her self-worth, is sexually active with numerous men, and is, likely, unmarried. Casting the black woman as an immoral "hoe" is similar to earlier stereotyped representations of the

black “harlot” or “jezebel.” To justify the sexual exploitation of black female slaves, stereotypes perpetuated the belief that black females were naturally more sexual. This attitude towards black women, rooted in historical racism, is mirrored by some rappers in their misogynistic treatment of black women as sex objects.

Tupac and The Notorious B. I. G.

This “battle of the sexes” continued throughout the 1990s as feuds between rappers became a way quick and easy way to sell albums. As rap battles excited audiences, who enjoyed cheering for their favorite rapper, at the same time, these feuds placed black rappers against one another and assisted in reinforcing violent and criminal stereotypes in the black community. Between 1991, and 1997, Tupac Shakur and The Notorious B.I.G. staged a public feud and battled for the title of best rapper alive. While the Los Angeles-based Tupac Shakur presented himself as a shirtless poet, the Notorious B.I.G. was a New Yorker in a slick suit and tie. Both rappers’ broke album sale records and had experience with crime and violence. Their feud promoted album sales, and their adoption of criminal personas perpetuated black stereotypes in mainstream rap and culture.

For instance, Quinn describes how Tupac’s mother was a member of the Black Panthers and at one point, while pregnant with Tupac, was tried for allegedly attempting to bomb several shopping centers around New York City. She was exonerated. Likewise, Tupac’s stepfather disappeared and was on the FBI’s “most wanted list.” Tupac was also in trouble with the law, including an altercation with two police officers that ended with shots being fired. Although Tupac was not charged, these biographical details justified his public performance as an “outlaw.” Indeed, Suge Knight, the head of ‘Death Row

Records' (Tupac's label), encouraged Tupac to harden his image in order to achieve success. Tupac's transformation into a "thug" is apparent from a consideration of the titles of his first three albums. Following the 1991 release of his debut album, *2Pacalypse Now*, Quinn argues that Tupac's titles changed, indicating a shift in mentality. His second album, *4MyNiggaz* (1993), and third album, *Me Against the World* (1995) reveal that Tupac went from being a representative of his community to a self-interested outlaw.

Tupac's album titles and court appearances signified his status as a "thug." In order for his lyrics to be believable, Tupac also needed to look and act the part. His physical appearance validated this persona, as surrounding Tupac's "Thug Life" tattoo "... were names, slogans, and icons that had coded meanings... [that Tupac wore] ... as badges of honor..." and were visible to his audience (Quinn 177-178). In this way, Tupac mentally and physically adopted the stereotypical role of the black aggressive male criminal. He was often shirtless displaying his muscular body, which inspired both intimidation and desire. He also displayed his bullet wounds as if they were honorary medals. Tupac's performance of dangerous black masculinity not only taught young boys that blackness equates to violence, but it is also could narrow their outlook on life and encourage them to believe that street life is all their future holds. Further, while Tupac crafted his fictional persona for personal gain, this persona was interpreted by the media as an authentic reflection of black male youth. For example, hip-hop journalist Kevin Powel stated that Tupac "...personified and articulated what it was to be a young black man in America," while film director John Singleton argued that "Tupac is the original young Black male" (Quinn 180). While these statements flatter the artist, they pigeonhole young black men. Tupac's performance of criminality reinforced black stereotypes and,

along with commentary from journalists and filmmakers, encouraged audiences to consider Tupac as a reflection of the entire black community. This allowed black men to be compared and identified with rappers, such as Tupac, who are known for their criminal behavior (authentic or not), thereby perpetuating these stereotypes.

While N. W. A. framed the police as their enemy, Tupac cast The Notorious B.I.G. as his rival. The east-west coast battle between Tupac and the “King of New York” was widely publicized. The west coast rap scene reigned on the top of the Billboard charts and west coast rappers saw P. Diddy and his ‘Bad Boy’ record label (B.I.G.’s label) as a threat. According to Quinn, Tupac and Suge Knight instigated a feud with Bad Boy records by claiming that they were responsible for Tupac’s five bullet wounds (Quinn 183). Although P. Diddy and Biggie denied the claim, the east-west coast rivalry was born. The feud increased album sales on both sides, but ended with Tupac’s death in 1996.

The Notorious B.I.G. was born Christopher George Latore Wallace in Brooklyn, New York to a Jamaican mother who worked as a school teacher. In the introduction of Holly Lang’s *The Notorious B.I.G.: A Biography*, the author describes that, “Wallace drop[ed] out of high school to instead sell crack on the streets...” He was arrested for the possession of weapons in 1989 and placed on probation for five years. Biggie’s demo track appealed to producer P. Diddy, who signed him in 1992. Just like Tupac and N.W.A., Biggie played the part of a “gangsta.”

In “Biggie Envy and the Gangsta Sublime,” author Michael S. Collins writes that “The original convictions and blanket media coverage nevertheless provided invaluable reinforcement for the late twentieth-century stereotype of ‘young black males’ as

incarnations of violence. In a sort of gesture some have compared to minstrelsy, Biggie pulled the stereotype on like a mask” (Collins 912). In other words, as Collins suggests, Biggie’s rap persona was akin to the minstrel type the “brute.” Through Biggie’s image and lyrics, he integrated many of the same stereotypical characteristics of the “brute,” such as intellectual and physical inferiority and criminality. For example, in his song “You’re Nobody” (1997). Biggie raps that “When I die, fuck it, I wanna go to hell Cause I’m a piece of shit, it ain’t hard to fucking tell. It don’t make sense going to heaven with the goodie-goodies Dressed in white. I like black Tims and black hoodies” (Collins 920). These lyrics reinforce the stereotypical inferior and criminal black man in several ways. First, Biggie claims that he is “a piece of shit” and does not deserve to go to heaven. The rapper hints at the fact that he is unworthy of going to heaven by verbally degrading himself. People who go to heaven live by good moral standards; by saying that he does not live up to these standards, Biggie implies that he is a villain. The “brute” was an earlier version of a “menace to society,” and in these lyrics Biggie mirrors that representation. Whether through violence or crime, Biggie implies that, while some people deserve to go to heaven, he does not. In addition, Biggie’s reference to “black Tims” (Timberland boots) and “hoodies” (sweatshirts with hoods) further equates blackness with negativity and reinforces the relationship between criminal activity, racial profiling, and street wear. Timberland boots and hoodies were popular street attire and were therefore worn by rappers. When seen in videos, where rappers cursed, acted violent, and appeared to be engaged in gang-related activities, these items of clothing became associated with criminality. Therefore, Biggie’s rap persona, which played on

deeply ingrained stereotypes, negatively impacted the black community, especially inner-city black youth.

OutKast, DJ Jazzy Jeff, and the Fresh Prince

In contrast to Tupac and Biggie, who adopted angry, criminal black male stereotypes, some black artists sought to define themselves in ways that would resist or challenge negative assumptions towards blackness. The Atlanta-based rap duo André 3000 and Big Boi created the rap group OutKast in 1991. As the group's name implies, OutKast and their unique lyrical sound differ from East and West coast rap. Although they use some explicit language, OutKast's performances playful and charismatic; their costume design and lyrics imply, at least, an attempt to resist stereotypical representations of black men. While black performers, such as N.W.A. and Tupac, have adopted the intimidating "gangsta" rap persona, OutKast does not portray themselves as one-dimensional. They combat the idea that emotions equate to weakness and present fully developed, well-rounded characters through their music. For instance, in the "International Players Club" (2007) music video André 3000 wears a Scottish kilt while he gets married. In "Owning Black Masculinity: The Intersection of Cultural Commodification and Self-Construction in Rap Music Videos," author Murali Balaji argues that

Andre's use of a kilt in the wedding reflects a flamboyant dress style that seems to mock and resist the hip-hop regalia of his peers and alternately shows subversion to the aesthetic traditions of a wedding. In a strong but sublime way, the kilt is a symbol of resistance to the hyper masculine images of Black men in hip-hop videos and challenges the homophobia ingrained in hip-hop culture, asserting a performance of identity that seeks to deviate from hegemonic construction (Balaji 29).

In other words, this video is an example of how OutKast attempted to redefine the black male image. Instead of showcasing a violent criminal, OutKast demonstrates a softer side of black masculinity. Although André 3000's groomsmen tease him for getting married in the video, he insists that he is making the right choice because he does not want to end up alone. While black men are usually represented as forceful or threatening, André 3000 represents a black man who opts to settle down. The video also alludes to the idea of a black man as calm and peaceful. In comparison to Biggie, who highlighted an adventurous, dangerous gangsta lifestyle through his lyrics, André 3000's lyrics suggest he is searching for consistency. Although Balaji argues that the video promotes promiscuity, as Big Boi and a pimp in the video discourage André 3000 from getting married, the video is a rare rap-based depiction of a black couple getting married.

Similar to OutKast, DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince's "Summer Time" (1991) and "Parents Just Don't Understand" (1988) represent positive kid-friendly rap music. The explicit language and sexual overtones of west-coast rappers influenced many parents in the late 1980s to ban the genre from their homes. This in turn created a communication gap between those parents, raised during the Civil Rights Movement, and their "first generation hip hop" children (George 1). These parents fought for many of the opportunities their young black children enjoyed, like the simple luxury of sitting at the front of a bus. However, these liberated children raised with hip-hop had a privileged attitude. Recognizing this problem, DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince took an alternative approach and produced rap music for both kids and parents. While the curse-free duo was enjoyed by parents and their children, they also offered an alternative to hard-edged west coast rap. The music of DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince was simply

about having fun, and the image of blackness it presented was playful, charismatic, and innocent. However, targeting a younger generation was difficult, as tweens and teenagers rely on their parents for money to buy albums. They also, eventually, grow up and their tastes matures as they do. While DJ Jazzy Jeff and the Fresh Prince were popular with tweens when they were young, as they aged they transitioned to more age-appropriate music.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, rappers such as OutKast, DJ Jazzy Jeff, and the Fresh Prince resisted stereotypical representations of black masculinity, such as criminality or aggressiveness. However, gangsta rap artists, such as Eminem and Tupac, integrated stereotypical depictions of blackness into their performances. Elements of the gangsta rapper's performance, including clothes, lyrics, and hand gestures, mimicked earlier minstrelsy performances. Because these rap artists replicated stereotypical representations of blackness, audiences had a hard time moving past stereotypes. As illustrated by Tupac, rappers influence audiences' perceptions about the black community. The stereotypical black criminal was consistently reinforced through Tupac's image and lyrics. The repetition of such stereotypes encouraged both black and non-black audiences to believe that Tupac represented all young black men. These stereotypes affected black men, who found it harder for to find jobs and detach themselves from the "gangsta" stereotypes. However, rap artists of the 1980s and 1990s are not the only entertainers who perpetuate black stereotypes in popular culture. As we will see in chapter three, twenty-first-century black actresses have also resisted, integrated, and criticized black stereotypes in their performances.

Chapter 3: Blacks on Television

Introduction:

In this chapter, we will consider the agency of twenty-first century black television entertainers, who integrate stereotypical depictions of blackness into their work. Black stereotypes are not only represented in the rap community, but also in contemporary television. In *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, Darnell Hunt explains that television:

... serves as [a] social space for the mediated encounters that distinguish the lived experiences of today from those of old, as a place for us to vicariously sample our fondest desires or our most dreaded fears, as a comfort zone from which we can identify with our heroes...or confirm our differences from undesirable Others (Hunt 1).

As described, television plays an important role in establishing how we view one another and ourselves. The fact that television is an audio and visual medium makes it successful at perpetuating stereotypes. Television programming airs in the homes of millions of dedicated viewers and, as viewers watch their favorite television shows ideologies and stereotypes creep into the audience's unconscious and shape their perception of the world. Just as late twentieth-century rap music had a dangerous effect on the black community, contemporary black television has an equal amount of influence on its thirty million viewers (Hunt 1). As chapter two focused on the representation of black stereotypes by male rappers, this chapter considers black female stereotypes represented by women on television. While many black, male stereotypes, such as the "brute" or the criminal, are also represented on television, the focus of this chapter is on

television shows with a black female lead, including *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* (2008 -), *Black-ish* (2014 -), *Empire* (2015 -), and *Insecure* (2016 -). Each of these programs resists, integrates, or criticizes black female stereotypes through their performances of blackness.

According to author Darnell Hunt, racial difference is something that is learned. Hunt suggests that “It is no accident that ‘race’ in the contemporary sense emerged with European colonization of the ‘New World,’ and that ‘black’ and ‘white’ races were created in tandem around the same time that Europeans identified Africans as the group best suited for slavery” (Hunt 4). From the time Africans arrived in America, they needed to be ostracized and cast as the “other” in order for slavery to be accepted. Africans were therefore represented as savage, intellectually incapable of governing themselves, and better off enslaved and in the care of their masters. This racial hierarchy is enforced through portraits, minstrelsy performances, rap, and television. Hunt describes the repetition of old stereotypes as ‘enlightened racism.’ Historical stereotypes are constantly being reinvented in order to fit the needs of the current time period. While derogatory terms, such as the “N” word, are considered outright racist today, a more insidious form of racism persists. This contemporary form of racism connects crime and welfare with stereotypes of blackness in order to continue to cast blacks as racial inferiors or “others” in American society (Hunt 4).

One way that these black stereotypes are represented is through television. Television programming influences audience’s perceptions of the world by depicting a

‘mainstream’ point of view, which privileges homogeneity and erases difference (Hunt 10). Through the media, the “individual” is slowly eliminated. Television therefore plays an important role in indoctrinating its audience. As Hunt explains, the idea of “viewer’s choice,” and “television ratings” are all part of an illusion to deceive the public into thinking that we have a choice in television programming. In fact, Hunt points out that “The contemporary media industry...is controlled by a handful of multinational media conglomerates whose market power overrides virtually all other forces in shaping the programming choices that confront viewers” (Hunt 16). Television programs are carefully planned and include specific characters, settings, and plots, which collectively work together to influence the general public. Hunt explains that while blacks watch more television than other racial demographics, “80 percent of television directors” are white (Hunt 17). Therefore, white executives, producers, directors, and writers largely shape the view of black life and black experience represented on contemporary television. Therefore, what is likely being reflected on television is a whitened depiction of blackness, one influenced by historical stereotypes.

It has frequently been difficult for black film and television directors to create authentic stories about the black experience. While black directors could operate independently and depict blackness the way they saw fit, financial and distribution constraints often led them to join forces with Hollywood production companies that offered them money to direct television and film as the production company demanded. According to *Black Lenses, Black Voices: African American Film Now*, Mark A. Reid writes that:

To this day, major studios attract the most talented black stage and screen actors, employ highly skilled technicians, and use the most up-to-date film technology, which independent filmmakers and productions can not afford unless they have some business affiliations with the majors (Reid 8 and 9).

Major studios provided black filmmakers and producers with the means to execute projects. This, in turn, allowed for the filmmaker or producer to continue their career. As is the case with rap artists and record labels, film and television producers and directors face the same pressures to create black characters and narratives that white audiences will be comfortable seeing on screen.

Reid points out that between 1912 and 1970 several black independent film and television producers, directors, and writers worked outside the confinement of mainstream media. For example, the two brothers George and Noble Johnson founded the Lincoln Motion Pictures Company in 1916. Some of their works included *The Realization of a Negro's Birth* (1916) and *A Man's Duty* (1920). According to Reid, "Lincoln films avoided lengthy dramatizations of criminality or drunk, vulgar, and licentious behavior, and their films promoted racially uplifting narratives in which the black hero reaps material and spiritual rewards for adhering to the Protestant work ethic" (Reid 10). The Johnson Brothers were one example of the few black owned production company that experienced independent success. Unfortunately, as Reid points out, many other black filmmakers, such as Oscar Micheaux in 1928, ended up filing for bankruptcy. However, a year later Micheaux established *The Micheaux Film Corporation* 'with an infusion of white capital,' which produced films addressing such "controversial issues as racial lynching, interracial intimacy, racial passing, urban poverty, and criminality" (Reid 10). Similar to underground rappers, black film and television directors and producers were not provided with the same financial and institutional backing as white competitors

Regine Lawson MLA_Thesis 55

in order to promote and distribute their work. Without this support, they could not attract big names actors who would bring attention to their work. Therefore, many early independent productions suffered in quality. This forced black film and television producers and directors to comply with mainstream studios, which often requested stereotypical depictions of black characters. As with black performers in minstrelsy shows, whether these black producers, directors, writers, and actors disagreed with how they were representing black life is unclear. What is clear is that major production companies maintained control over the narrative of the black body and represented black stereotypes on screen.

In contemporary television, familiar representations of blackness, which originated under slavery and were popularized in minstrelsy performances, are modernized and manipulated to meet the needs of contemporary society. There are several stereotypical roles for black actresses. Three of the most common black female minstrelsy characters represented in contemporary television are the Mammy, the Jezebel, and the Tragic Mulatta. Each perpetuates stereotypes about black women, including that they are servants, angry or masculine, hypersexual, or a gold digger. In this chapter I examine these three types and trace their adaptation in twenty-first century television shows, such as *The Real Housewives of Atlanta*, *Black-ish*, *Empire*, and *Insecure*, in order to question whether they integrate, criticize, or resist these stereotypes.

The Mammy

As Lisa M Anderson writes in *Mammies No More: The Changing Image of the Black Woman on Stage and Screen*, “The racial stratifications of the United States ensured that there are many communities in this country whose only exposure to black

people is through the media” (Anderson 1). As she outlines, in the nineteenth century minstrel performances in the North were the first introduction many northerners and European immigrants had to black people or black culture. Therefore, the perception of blackness demonstrated on stage was perceived as authentic. In this way, the female minstrel characters became a representation of all black women and the black woman’s identity was only understood by what was shown on stage.

One of the earliest minstrel representations of black women that has perpetuated on the screen is the Mammy, epitomized by Hattie McDaniel in *Gone with the Wind* (1939) (fig. 16). According to Anderson, the Mammy character is identified by her dark skin color, signature head tie, apron, and plus size figure. The Mammy was in charge of taking care of the slave owner’s home, wife, and children. Her main priority was to cater to her master’s needs, while her family life was attended to only after work was done. In some minstrel performances, the Mammy was depicted without a family. This strategy emphasized her as an asexual slave dedicated to pleasing her master. Sometimes the Mammy didn’t even have a name. Anderson describes the Mammy character as a precedent of Aunt Jemima. Two stereotypes of black women originated from the Mammy type: the servant and the angry, masculine black women. These became popular on stage and, later, on screen. As the “servant mammy,” the black woman is not given her own individuality, and her opinions and viewpoints do not matter. The Mammy is depicted as unattractive and is not romantically involved. Likewise, her children, if she has any, are never seen on stage or film, because their needs come second to the master’s. The Mammy’s only purpose in life is to please her white counterparts. As the “angry mammy,” the black woman emasculates black men by taking on the role of head of the

household. This character dismantles the black man's pride by being disrespectful and belittling black male characters. She is usually a single mother who disavows help from men, but, because she is a woman, ultimately fails at raising her children alone.

A contemporary version of the “servant mammy” is the character Miranda Bailey in *Grey's Anatomy* (2005) (Figure 17). The creator of the hit series is a black woman named Shonda Rhimes, whose other hit show *Scandal* (2012) will be discussed later on, as it also integrates stereotypical depictions of black women. In an online blog post entitled “Miranda Bailey - The Grey's Anatomy ‘Modern Mammy,’” author “hevenema” relates Bailey to the mammy type, arguing that Miranda, aka “the Nazi,” embodies certain characteristics that mirror the Mammy character. For one, her nickname comes from her tough attitude towards her residents. A hard, outspoken, and aggressive black woman fulfills the angry, masculine mammy stereotype. Miranda's attitude towards her job is also typical of the mammy type, because it comes before anything else in her life. In the first episode of the show, Miranda is placed in charge of the new residents, who are all white, with the exception of Cristina. These residents become the focal point of Miranda's life. She not only instructs them professionally, but also guides them through important aspects of their lives involving relationships, family, and other non-work related adventures. The audience becomes so involved with the other character's lives that we do not find out that Miranda has a husband until the second season. What really links Miranda to the mammy type is that her close coworkers and friends at the hospital do not know about her personal life either. Unlike the other characters, whose personal and professional lives are always discussed, Miranda's character, like the Mammy, is stripped of her individuality. Miranda's black husband is also emasculated, as he takes on

the role of a stay-at-home dad. Here, the traditional husband and wife roles are reversed as Miranda becomes the family breadwinner and her husband takes care of the house. This domestic arrangement allows Miranda to completely focus on her residents at the hospital. As a result, Miranda has no life outside of the hospital and her personal life is put at risk due to her devotion to work. Her husband eventually divorces her because she is constantly at work instead of with her family. Along with Miranda's physical appearance – she is a plus-size woman who wears a large white medical jacket to mirror an apron – her devotion to her white interns over her own family implies that she is a contemporary mammy.

The Jezebel

The second popular black female minstrel character, the Jezebel, is also a white fantasy of the black experience. However, unlike the Mammy, the Jezebel is a sexually driven character whose attributes were supported by racial science. Anderson argues that:

Western biologists were fascinated with the sexual practice and sexual organs of blacks. The famous African woman Sarah Bartmann... was kept as a specimen for public viewing while she was alive, and after her death, her genitalia were dissected and put on display. The genitalia of blacks were deemed larger than the average for whites, a notion that led scientists to the conclusion that blacks must be much more sexually active, unrestrained, and even sexually aggressive (Anderson 86).

The Jezebel was created as a mirror of the hypersexual black male, and her hypersexuality offered a rationale for the sexual exploitation and rape of black women by white men. Since black women were not held to the same moral standards as white women, it did not matter if the black woman was married. Anderson goes on to explain that, under slavery, one of the ways that white women were able to stay virgins until marriage was because their male suitors had sexual relations with female slaves and therefore did not

pressure white women for pre-marital sex. As a minstrel character, the Jezebel's only purpose in life is to please her sexual appetite. She, like the Mammy, has no individuality, and her life is defined by sex. The Jezebel's attire is very revealing and attracts men to her, not her intelligence or motherly instincts. According to Anderson, the exposure of the Jezebel's skin mirrors that of the slave's body on the auction block.

The Jezebel minstrel character has evolved into the contemporary stereotype that associates black women with sexual aggression and hyper-sexuality. This stereotype has been adopted by popular entertainers, including Madonna who "...is not an icon for white women; black women attempting to express their sexuality by donning this particular costume become an icon for black female sexuality *and* embody the streetwalker in one step" (Anderson 99). In addition, many black female actresses adopt roles that depict them as hypersexual, in turn allowing audiences to believe that all black women are sex-obsessed.

One example of a contemporary television character that embodies the Jezebel stereotype is Olivia Pope in *Scandal*. Another show created by Shonda Rhimes, *Scandal* is loosely based on George Bush's public image advisor Judy Smith, a black woman who is now co-executive producer of the show. In *Black Women and Popular Culture: The Conversation Continues*, Natasha R. Howard argues that the Jezebel's "...thin figure and lighter brown complexion is what has historically been appealing to white men." Olivia Pope has a medium brown skin tone, slim figure, and attracts the sexual attentions of the white, married President of the United States (Fig. 18). According to Howard, Olivia and President Fitzgerald's affair mirrors that of the sexual relations between the female slave and her master. Howard even argues that the White House is a metaphor for a southern

slave plantation, while Fitzgerald is the master, Olivia is the slave, and the First Lady is the jealous wife. The interactions between the First Lady and Olivia consist of accusations about Olivia sleeping her way to the top. However, Howard argues that “Fitz sexual advances toward Olivia are dominating, overtly aggressive, and subtle forms of rape” (Howard 27). There are several instances where Olivia resists Fitz’s temptations, but ultimately gives in. One example is when Olivia is leaving Fitz’s son’s baptism. Fitz goes after her, follows her into a room, and attempts to kiss her. She slaps and pushes him away, but eventually gives in. Although Olivia allows the affair, their sexual liaisons occasionally seem like rape because the sexual encounters are always initiated by the white male character through aggressive, forceful gestures. It is as if Fitzgerald truly believes that Olivia belongs to him and he has the right to do whatever he pleases. Howard implies that the show is unpopular with black female working class audiences both because of Pope’s affair with a married man and because it teaches young black women to settle for any man instead of the right one. Olivia Pope is a black woman whose sexual appetites allow white, married men to use her body for their sexual desires and is therefore a modern-day version of the minstrel character Jezebel. Pope’s explicit sexuality identifies her as a modern adaptation of this black female stereotype.

The Tragic Mulatta

The third and final black female minstrel character that will be discussed in this chapter is the tragic Mulatta. The tragic Mulatta differs from the Mammy and the Jezebel, because she is a mixture of black and white. Although her light skin color allows her to pass as white, ultimately, because she is half black her story can only end in tragedy. According to Anderson, the tragic Mulatta uses her lighter skin to advance in the world.

She is slimmer than the Mammy and, instead of an apron, wears a large hat. The tragic Mulatta is a bi-product of the Jezebel's sexual encounters with the slave master. She is a constant reminder to both black and white women of the sexual abuse affiliated with slavery. In describing the Mulatta, Anderson writes that:

The mulatta was also seen as the potential savior of her people; her limited access to education, money, and influence should be used to better her black community of origin or so it was thought by whites. When occupying such a position, she is either treated as superior by other blacks or disdained or resented by those with darker skin because her life as the master's favored is easier than theirs (Anderson 49).

The idea that some blacks are presented with better opportunities in life because of their skin color relates to Eastman Johnson's, *The Freedom Ring*, discussed in chapter one. Johnson's painting documented the freeing of light skinned slave girls and assisted in creating a belief that light skinned slaves deserved saving more than dark skinned slaves. Over the years, ideologies such as this help to create resentment between light and dark skinned blacks. While darker blacks resent those who are mixed, in turn, mixed race blacks are left between two cultures, both of which want nothing to do with them. The story of the Mulatta is called "tragic" because her blackness will not allow her to have a happy ending. As Anderson implies, blackness does not equate with success or satisfaction and the tragic Mulatta's story proves that by constantly ending with her death.

The television series *Girlfriends* (2000-2008), created by the black female writer and producer Mara Brock Akil, includes a contemporary version of a tragic Mulatta. Played by actress Tracee Ellis Ross, who is mixed race, the character Joan Clayton lives in a white world. In "Semiotic TV Show Analysis on 'Girlfriends,'" Rilee Stewart writes

that “The ideology that the ‘lighter skin’ in the black community is looked at as an advantage in America is evident in the series. Joan is the main character who is half-black and white, and has [a] very fair skin tone. Joan is the most successful and the leader of the group that seems to hold the most stability...” (Stewart). The author states that Joan’s successful career as a lawyer allows her to be financially and emotionally independent. After giving up her career as a lawyer, Joan opens her own restaurant. Joan, unlike the other female characters, has freedom of mobility within the work world. Although, her darker-skinned friend Toni is a successful real-estate agent, her constant need to marry a man for money overshadows her professional career. However, because Joan is a tragic Mulatta, her life cannot be perfect. Two events occur that threaten her happiness. The first is her inability to remain friends with Toni. Their battle mirrors the resentment darker blacks feel towards their lighter-skinned companions. As a dark woman, however, Toni constantly defines Joan as black (fig.19). While Joan is light-skinned, she is also clearly bi-racial. Her kinky hair, light toffee complexion, and thin nose and lips communicate this. Secondly, the lack of respect shown towards Joan at her job proves that even though she is half-white, her blackness will continue to hold her back in a white-dominated law firm. Joan constantly battles with her white co-workers for promotions and overall recognition. However, because she is half black and a woman, her hard work is taken for granted. Joan Clayton’s character is an adaptation of the tragic Mulatta, because it identifies the problems faced by mixed race women who exist between two worlds and cannot achieve happiness. In *Girlfriends*, Joan does not get a happy ending.

The Mammy, Jezebel, and tragic Mulatta are all black female characters that originated in blackface minstrel performances. While early minstrel shows had all male actors, women eventually played the black female characters. Although played by women, they still wore heavy makeup and clothing in order to exaggerate the characters' Afro-centric features. For black women, two physical features that were emphasized were their "nappy" hair and enlarged backside. These features were seen as grotesque abnormalities. As mentioned in chapter one, the contemporary female rapper Niki Minaj proudly exposed her large posterior and has influenced women to risk their lives through plastic surgery in order to look like her. While today overly sized bottoms may seem attractive to some, in nineteenth-century minstrel shows they were used to satirize the black female body. These two physical features, nappy hair and a large backside, have become defining characteristics of black femininity and are represented in contemporary television shows.

Black-ish

In the pilot episode of Tracee Ellis Ross' new show *Black-ish* (2014-), Ross' character Rainbow and her husband Dre are having a discussion about what it means to be "really black." According to the husband Dre Johnson, played by Anthony Anderson, Rainbow's mixed race background prevents her from truly understanding what it means to be black. Ross plays a bi-racial woman whose mother is black and father is white. However, unlike in *Girlfriends*, Ross is a doctor and the show centers on her husband, their four kids, and Dre's father. In *Black-ish*, Ross continues to play the part of the tragic Mulatta who faces resentment from the black community. For example, during their conversation, Dre accuses his wife of being "black-ish," not black, because she is racially

mixed and did not have the same life experiences that he did. Rainbow's response to this comment is "If I'm not 'really black' then can someone please tell my hair and ass." As previously mentioned, minstrel shows used black women's nappy hair and large posteriors as a way to mark the black woman's identity and mock them. Rainbow defines her blackness by her nappy hair and big bottom. This implies that she believes that these two physical attributes signify her position as a black woman and indicates that these physical stereotypes are ingrained in black culture.

While this chapter focuses mainly on female stereotypes, there are a number of male stereotypes represented in the show. Dre Johnson is the patriarch of the family and takes pride in his accomplishments. In the opening scene of the first episode, an alarm goes off and the instrumental version of Kanye West's hit song "Jesus Walks" (2003) plays in the background. The lyrics of this song foreshadow the plot of the first episode for the audience. The song starts playing before any of the family members are shown on screen and automatically associates the family with rap music. In the opening lines of the song, Kanye says "We [the black community] at war/ We at war with terrorism, racism, /but most of all we at war with ourselves." This is a strong message that acts as a road map throughout the episode. Dre is constantly at war with not only his employees, but also his own family members. The audience learns that Dre has been made Vice President at work. However, the excitement doesn't last long when he finds out that he is head of the "Urban" division, or as he calls it "the black stuff." Dre feels he was chosen for the position because he is black and decides to show them what black really is by creating an advertisement depicting gang violence, Malcolm X, and the 1992 Los Angeles riots. By showing this video to his white employers, Dre reinforces several black

stereotypes. The gang violence and L.A. riots depict blacks as wild and dangerous. This almost costs Dre his job.

The second part of Kanye's lyrics talk about the black community being at war with "ourselves." When the eldest son Andre confesses to his father that he wants to join a field hockey team, have a Bar Mitzvah, and go by the name Andy instead of Andre, Dre nearly has a heart attack. Dre fears his son is turning into a "white boy" and tries to convince him to join the basketball team because it is a family tradition. In this example, Dre worries about his son "acting white" because he does not comply with black stereotypes, like an interest in basketball. While it is offensive to think that basketball is a "black sport," the pressure of sticking to the status quo is exactly what stereotypes encourage. Stereotypes limit peoples' abilities, because they represent cultural beliefs about a person based on race, gender, sexual orientation, or age. In the show, Andre is criticized for wanting to step outside of his culture because field hockey is not considered a black sport. Andre's confinement within racial stereotypes raises the question, what exactly does "black-ish" mean? Dre refers to Rainbow as black-ish because of her mixed race, and Andre is black-ish when he chooses field hockey over basketball. The show implies that there is a common way of *being* black and, when people turn away from that particular way, they lose their blackness and become black-ish. The problem with this term is that it works, like stereotypes, to keep blacks in their place. A black person who speaks proper English, gets good grades, and becomes a doctor should not be considered less black than a bank teller or crossing guard. Once we label certain actions as black, white, or in-between (black-ish) then it allows for the creation of race-based stereotypes. Although *Black-ish* tackles many issues that are relevant to the black community, it also

promotes blackness as difference. As Darnell Hunt argues in *Channeling Blackness: Studies on Television and Race in America*, focusing on differences allows for blacks to be represented as “other.” The audience attends to what makes us different instead of the things that bring us together. While *Black-ish* highlights a black man’s perspective, many black television shows focus on black women.

The Real Housewives of Atlanta

According to the *New York Daily News*, in 2015 *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* had an average of 3.737 million viewers weekly. In this series, cameras follow an all-black female cast around and record their day to day routines. These women have jobs, families, and engage in altercations that, sometimes, result in criminal records. One black female stereotype that is integrated into *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* is the gold digger, otherwise known as “the Sapphire.” According to Marquita Marie Gammage, in *Representations of Black women in the Media: The Damnation of Black Womanhood*:

When black women are displayed in reality television as materialistic, they fall victim to the century-old stereotype of a Sapphire. The Sapphire stereotype is commonly known for being overtly committed to careers, while abandoning family and using sex to advance. The Sapphire caricature is also described as being irrational and self-centered (Gammage).

Unlike the Jezebel or the Mammy, the Sapphire is obsessed with rank and value. She desires high quality possessions and will do whatever it takes to get what she wants. The Sapphire type was a way to dismantle the ideal of the nurturing black mother. By replacing her familial priorities with money and status, the Sapphire often abandons her children to fulfill her own person needs. The women on *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* flaunt designer handbags, multi-million dollar mansions, and fancy cars. The show

centers less around the women's families and more on their business ventures. The ultimate goal of the women is to obtain more money and, the wealthier they become, the more damaged their family seems. As the popular gossip publication *Ok Magazine* reported, there have been twenty divorces across the *Housewives* series.

One example of the women as Sapphires is in the season seven reunion show, when Porsha is accused of dating a married man from Africa. Throughout the season, Porsha refused to disclose who he was, and he never appeared on camera. However, Porsha continued to prove that her relationship was real by bragging about how much money he spent on her. Another character, Nene implied that Porsha was trading sex for fancy cars and jewelry. As Gammage wrote, "Black female cast members are often questioned about their ability to afford luxury items, when they appear to spend beyond their limits. Their spending habits are deemed irrational, self-serving, and not affordable without outside funds" (Gammage). The Sapphire is the original stereotype of black women as gold diggers. A gold digger is a woman who does not have a job and refuses to support herself financially. A gold digger's only goal in life is to find a wealthy man who will take care of all her monetary needs. In Kanye West's hit song "Gold Digger" (2005), he states, "Now I ain't saying she a gold digger/ But she ain't messing with no broke niggas." The hit song implies that black women will not date a man, no matter how good he is, unless he is wealthy. Because of the gold digger stereotype, when black women are seen with luxury items it is often assumed that they paid for them with the help of a wealthy man. "Outside funds" is what Gammage calls black women's ticket into the life of luxury. *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* perpetuates the stereotype that black women

must sleep their way to the top, because there is no way they can afford expensive items on their own.

Empire and Insecure

Two black television shows that illustrate black women's experiences in the workplace are *Empire* (2015 -) and *Insecure* (2016 -). In "'But She's Not Black!' Viewer Interpretations of 'Angry Black Women' on Prime Time TV," Philip Kretsedemas writes that:

These depictions of angry black women have taken the media portrayal of the isolated black professional into new territory. Instead of merely being socially distant, the black professional poses an imminent threat to their work mates (both white and non-white). The upwardly mobile black person is [...] associated with aggressive, flamboyant behavior that emphasizes their racial Otherness. What is most distinctive about the current era is that media depictions of black women have become the primary vehicle for conveying these messages to (mostly white) television audiences (Kretsedemas 154-155).

The angry black woman combines the Mammy's emasculating power over black men and the Sapphire's money hungry attitude. As black women become successful in their professions, they spend less time at home. A career driven woman creates a shift in traditional gender roles and is threatening to most men. As Kretsedemas argues, one way to keep black women out of the workforce is to depict them as overly passionate, intimidating, and angry. As the stereotype of the angry black woman perpetuates, employers have become leery of hiring black women because they fear their overbearing, sassy attitudes or the perception of their business as "ghetto." As a result, black women are not judged by their qualifications but by their skin color.

Empire's lead female character, Cookie, is a stereotypical angry black woman. Although Cookie is actually a loving and sympathetic mother, because of stereotypes, her compassion and strong will comes off as manipulative and aggressive. Cookie, played by Taraji P. Henson, is introduced in episode one leaving jail after completing seventeen years of a thirty-year drug sentence. Once released, Cookie immediately goes to visit her sons. While the two eldest welcome their mother with open arms, the youngest son, who was not raised by Cookie, is alarmed by her sudden return and refers to her as a "bitch." Cookie's next stop is to her ex-husband's record label, half of which she claims belongs to her because it was her drug money that started it. Seventeen years ago Cookie took the fall for her husband so he could start the company, but now she declares "I'm here to get what's mine!" Cookie is misunderstood and constantly judged by people who do not know her story-, but think that because she went to jail they have all the information they need to make assumptions. Her sons mistreat her; while the eldest uses her to gain control of the company, the youngest wants nothing to do with her. Meanwhile, her ex-husband wants her thrown back in jail. In a male-dominated setting, she is outnumbered and given little respect. However, Cookie's tough attitude allows her to remain strong and deal with the constant power struggle between herself and the men in her life. Cookie's character is an example of a tough-skinned black woman who deals with dominating men. In general, women are often not taken seriously and are put in situations that force them to work ten times harder than their male counterparts in order to prove themselves. However, the defenses of black women are often mistaken for anger and sass, as is the case with Cookie. The representation of women like Cookie perpetuates the stereotype that black women have bad attitudes. This makes them undesirable in the workplace. In Cookie's

case, her dire financial situation in comparison to her ex-husband, who owns a million-dollar record company, mirrors the pay disparity between men and women in America, where women make only 83 cents for every dollar men make. Black women are held to an even higher standard; this makes obtaining and then keeping jobs much harder for black women.

While Cookie struggles to deal with the black men in her life, HBO's hit series *Insecure* illustrates how the angry black female stereotype affects black women in a predominantly white workspace. *Insecure* centers around two women, Issa, who works at a non-profit organization for inner city black kids, and her best-friend, a corporate attorney named Molly. The third episode of the season, "Racist as F***," provides insight into how Issa's and Molly's jobs, and their interactions with their white co-workers, demonstrate the effects that black stereotypes have on black women in the workforce. In this episode, both Issa and Molly are confronted with the task of teaching the younger black generation the importance of "double consciousness." This concept was introduced by the well-known sociologist and historian W.E.B. Du Bois in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Du Bois writes that, as a black man, "He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American, without being cursed and spit upon by his fellows, without having the doors of Opportunity closed roughly in his face" (Du Bois). In other words, stereotypes that target the black community have made it difficult for blacks to explore or express their true selves. In fear of not being accepted or isolated by their peers, blacks have learned to suppress their identities, and take on one that is more likely to be socially accepted. So in a sense, one person becomes two. However, taking on too many roles can result in one person either completely losing a

sense of who they are entirely or sacrificing their culture for the sake of another. In each case, the individual is lost and forced to comply with behaviors that white society has deemed acceptable.

Insecure uses the idea of a double consciousness to describe how black experience is divided between being around other blacks and being around whites. Double consciousness is learned in the black community in order for blacks to “fit in” with their white counterparts. As Issa and Molly attempt to, metaphorically, teach their younger selves the idea of double consciousness, the episode ultimately reveals what happens when young black children do not learn the harsh realities of “fitting in.” We begin with Issa’s storyline. She and her co-workers are taking inner-city middle school students to a “Beach Day” where the children volunteer to help clean up the beach. Many of the children, who are black, have never been to the beach and complain about the hot weather. The children would rather have gone to the movies, but Issa insists that it is important to expose them to experiences they are not used to. When the students act loud and rowdy, Issa’s white co-workers become nervous. In an attempt to calm the children down Issa informs them that “I need you to remember that we are not home right now. We are in *mixed company*. And a positive attitude can go a long way in making a truly worthwhile experience worth the wait.” The children reply by acting like children and completely miss Issa’s message. They are not yet aware that they are supposed to act a certain way around white people. The children see nothing wrong with being themselves and therefore refuse to put on a front. Although Issa is seemingly embarrassed by the students, it is also implied that she is jealous of their innocence. It reminds her of how easy things were before she learned about race. Darnell Hunt, in *Channeling Blackness*:

Studies on Television and Race in America, argues that racism is something that is taught (Hunt 4). These children go to a predominately black school and do not know what it is like to be judged by the color of their skin. As an adult, Issa does know how being stereotyped as a black person can be harmful to her career.

Molly's story takes a different turn as she is confronted with a young new intern. As Molly walks with a white male coworker, she mentions that there is a new black intern. In response, the coworker states, "I don't see color, I just see someone to fetch me coffee." While her white male co-worker may be oblivious to race, Molly is consumed by it. To Molly, this is a new black intern in a law firm dominated by white culture. Her reaction demonstrates that for many black professionals' race is always prevalent in their work environment. Part of being black is always having to deal with race. Later, Molly realizes that the new intern, Rasheeda, is being obnoxiously loud in the main hallway and using "slang" terminology. Molly immediately calls the intern into her office and offers her some advice on how to properly act when in the presence of white people. Molly tells the intern "Girl you know how these white people are. If you want to be successful here, you gotta know when to switch it up a little bit." The improper use of certain words in Molly's speech is an example of "switching it up." Molly speaks standard English with her white co-workers, but as she confronts the black intern Molly uses "familiar language." The conversation between Molly and Rasheeda demonstrates double consciousness when at work. In other words, work is not the place for blacks to be themselves. Blacks must assimilate into the workforce by acting as "white" as possible in order to avoid being stereotyped as "ghetto." Eventually, the young intern disregards Molly's advice and is fired. According to Molly's (white) supervisor, Rasheeda was not

fitting in with the law firm's "culture" and had to be let go. If we compare Molly's story with Issa's we can see that they directly correlate with one another. If the young black children that Issa mentors do not learn to acquire a double consciousness, they will ultimately end up like Rasheeda. It is an unfortunate reality, but one that Issa, Molly and minorities throughout the United States have come to, at least, acknowledge.

Conclusion:

Contemporary black television programs, in their own unique way, each integrate, criticize, or resist black stereotypes. While *The Real Housewives of Atlanta* uses black stereotypes to promote drama and good entertainment, programs such as *Insecure* demonstrate how black stereotypes affect society as a whole. Some argue that slavery dehumanized the master as much as it did the slave. Likewise, stereotypes harm all of society. For example, those who believe that all black women are difficult to work with, in turn, create an awkward and uncomfortable workspace for themselves and black coworkers. In *Insecure*, for instance, whenever Issa's white co-workers disagree with what she says they email their concerns to her white friend Fretta because they are not sure how Issa will respond to direct criticism. This is a perfect example of how the stereotype of the angry black woman affects, not just Issa, but everyone on the job. The workplace can be stressful, and when unnecessary drama is added, it makes it even more uncomfortable. Race should not be the deciding factor in how co-workers interact with each other. The black female stereotypes examined in this chapter – the servant or angry, masculine black women (mammy), the tragic mulatto, the hypersexual female (jezebel), and the gold digger (sapphire) – are rooted in minstrel shows and represented on

television. These stereotypes about black women are perpetuated within contemporary society through the media and play a part in hindering the lives of black women.

Conclusion

In *Primetime Blues: African Americans on Network Television*, author Donald

Bogle writes that

The weekly primetime series had a greater effect on viewer's perceptions of African American experiences than almost any form of television.... With primetime series, viewers could see the same black characters in the same place with the same expected tangle of relationships at the same time week in, week out (Bogle 5-6).

In Chapter one of this thesis, I mentioned that the success of the influence of stereotypes over the public is highly dependent on repetition. Bogle's quotation emphasizes the role of repetition as a key characteristic of primetime television shows. This repetitive formula is also similar to the ways that particular minstrel characters repeatedly reappeared in minstrel performances and were recognizable based upon stereotyped characteristics. In order for stereotypes targeting the black community to be seen as authentic representations, they had to be imbedded into the viewer's subconscious. For example, nineteenth-century audiences who had little to no contact with blacks, including white northerners and European immigrants, came to understand blackface minstrel characters as true representations of black people. Minstrel shows represented the same characters with the same attributes, which provided the audiences with a fixed representation of that character. For instance, the minstrel "brute" was always violent and hypersexual. All of his actions within the performance legitimized who he was as a person. The "brute" would never act out of character, because this would individuate him and make him relatable. This repetition of minstrel types, who stand in for an entire race and legitimate stereotypes, is also seen in gangsta rappers' personas and on black television. Black performers reinforce the idea that the black body is a knowable subject through the adoption of stereotypical representations. Because black entertainers allow

Regine Lawson MLA_Thesis 76

themselves to be depicted as the “brute” or the Mammy, stereotypes of the criminal black man and the angry black women will continue to be broadcasted to the public. The Mammy and the brute are modernized by black rappers and actors and integrated into their performances, which allows these stereotypes to remain relevant.

Many stereotypes targeting the black race began under slavery. As long as Africans were represented as savage sub-humans, then slavery could be perceived as the best place for Africans. As we saw in chapter one, in paintings such as Richard Ansdell’s *Hunted Slave*, many techniques were used to reinforce stereotypes about Africans and African Americans. The painting of the runaway slave fighting off a pack of dogs was not intended to provoke sympathy for the slave, but instead was used to illustrate the slave as a beast. Slaves were often depicted as overtly passionate individuals who allowed their emotions to get the best of them. The slave in the painting, whose bare skin mirrors that of the dogs, alludes to the idea that the beast and African are one in the same. Following the end of slavery, stereotypes were used to maintain the status quo. As white Americans sought to maintain their status as the superior race, stereotypes helped to reinforce the idea that blacks were inferior by repeating pre-Emancipation ideas. In paintings, black collectables, and mass media entertainment, such as rap music and black television shows, these same stereotypes, born under slavery, reappear. Today they have been modernized and manipulated to meet the needs of the current era.

A key generator of the stereotype was the minstrel show, a popular nineteenth-century public entertainment. Many minstrel performers wore oversized clothing to mock the character’s body and overall appearance. Today, large clothing is seen as a positive attribute, popularized by rap artists and adopted by audiences. For example, baggy pants

have been picked up as a form of street wear for many black men. Nelson George argues in *Hip Hop America* that rappers' audiences mimic the clothes that entertainers wear in music videos. A rapper's style, which is usually endorsed by a particular clothing line, can become a worldwide trend. As mentioned in chapter two, viewers idolize their favorite performers and, not only want their money and fame, but also want to look like them. A rapper's look defines his status. Therefore, if a rapper is making thousands of dollars wearing a certain type of clothing, then his admirers will pick up on those same trends. The rappers in the 1980s and 1990s adopted the sagging jean style and popularized it amongst their audiences. Tupac Shakur was one of many rap artists famous for wearing sagging jeans that exposed his underwear. Hip-Hop scholars, such as George, argue that the sagging jeans style came from prison, where men who sagged their jeans offered themselves for sex. The sagging jeans also mirror the over-size clothing that minstrel actors wore in performances. To emphasize the black man's inability to dress properly, the minstrel character would sometimes trip over his long clothes, which caricatured him as clumsy, foolish, and childlike. The adoption of a similar clothing style by rappers, like Tupac, reinforces the social inadequacies of the black man.

Furthermore, in television and film, black female actresses play characters that also support black stereotypes. As we saw in chapter three, the Mammy icon stereotyped black women as angry or masculine. According to Anderson, as the Mammy was often depicted as a single parent she ultimately "...fails in her attempt to protect her own children... [and becomes the] ...image of the inner-city single parent." Therefore, "she is blamed for continuing poverty, gang violence, and rising pregnancy rates in teens" (Anderson 40). The Mammy was also a way to depict broken black families. In the black

family, stereotypes perpetuated the idea that the dead-beat father was not always present, while the single black mother was incapable of running the house-hold on her own. In order to be both the mother and the father and support her family, many mothers worked two jobs. In doing so, children were often left to their own devices. This allowed them to get into trouble. Unattended black children are shown in many African American films, such as Spike Lee's *Crooklyn* (1994), which depicts a black mother struggling to support her family. The mother in *Crooklyn* is often at work, like the Mammy, while her children are unsupervised. The Mammy is one of many stereotypes used to depict the broken black family. This stereotype can lead audiences to believe that blacks do not respect traditional family values.

Although many entertainers integrate earlier black stereotypes into their performances, there are several black artists that have resisted and criticized these same stereotypes. The rap duo DJ Jazzy Jeff and The Fresh Prince and the television show *Insecure* are two examples that challenge audience's perceptions of the black community. While The Fresh Prince did not sell as many albums as gangsta rap artists like Tupac, it could be argued that he did more good for the black male image. Instead of portraying himself as the stereotypical black criminal, The Fresh Prince offered a new representation of the black man as playful and charismatic. In spite of widespread stereotypes popularized by performers like Tupac, not every black man was in a gang, promoted violence, or was disrespectful to women. The Fresh Prince helped to dismantle many of these stereotypes by representing himself as fun and less intimidating. Likewise, the HBO series *Insecure* challenges black stereotypes by depicting them as burdens on the black community. In chapter three, we explored how stereotypes, such as the angry black

woman, “ghettoized” the black community and caused women of color to develop a “double consciousness.” In the show *Insecure*, stereotypes do not just hinder black women from acquiring professional jobs, but also burden black women with the responsibility of teaching the younger black generation how to behave in a way that is socially acceptable. As described, the two main characters in *Insecure* attempt to mother black youth by telling them to act less like themselves – in actuality, they must behave less like black stereotypes. The fact that the two women feel like they need to teach children how to behave in a way that mirrors their white counterparts demonstrates how stereotypes negatively affect the black community. In turn, by showcasing how stereotypes affect blacks, the show also illustrates the ways in which stereotypes hinder society as a whole.

When represented in music and television, stereotypes that target the black community negatively affect all audiences. As Hunt argues, stereotypes have the ability to tell us who we are and, more importantly, they emphasize who we are not (Hunt 1). For example, if blackness is associated with crime, poverty, and ignorance, then in turn, whiteness must be the opposite. In many ways, just as under slavery, stereotypes depict blacks as inferior to whites. However, blacks are not the only race depicted as less than whites. Latinos are frequently stereotyped as the help. Similarly, when the hit MTV reality show *Jersey Shore* (2009-2012) debuted, many Italian viewers boycotted the show because of its stereotypical representations of Italian-Americans. As scholars, such as Darnell Hunt, have argued, racial stereotypes in the media focus audience attention on what makes us different. Therefore, viewers define others and themselves by images represented in music and television. This encourages audiences to base life’s successes

and failures on racial identity. Just as Andre's character in the show *Black-ish* is criticized for choosing field hockey over basketball, stereotypes hold many back from experiences they might otherwise be interested in. Similarly, if we revisit the comedian Dave Chapelle's experience when the waiter automatically assumed Chapelle would order chicken before he had the chance to, stereotypes reinforce preconceived notions. While stereotypes will likely never go away, people have the freedom and agency to choose how they will be represented. It matters how individuals decide to be represented. Audiences, artists, and actors can either comply with stereotypes, the way some of the rap artists and black television performers examined in this thesis do, or they can challenge and defy these stereotypes, choosing to define themselves instead by their actions.

Figures

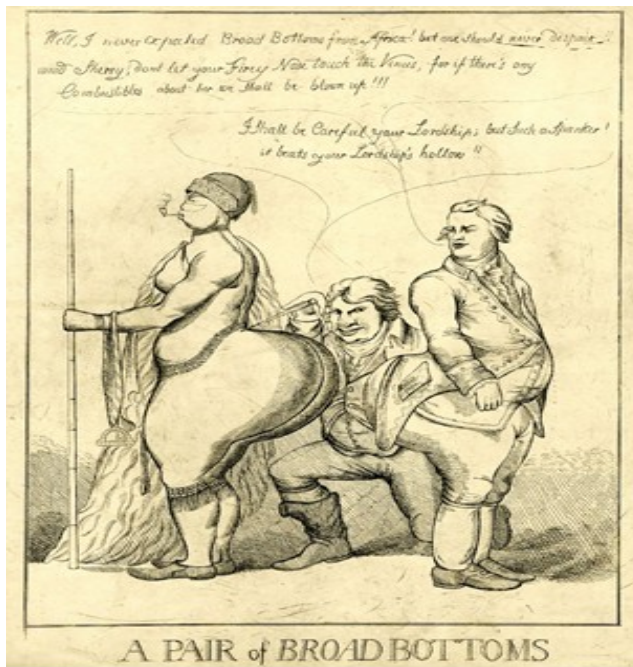


Figure 1. William Heath, *A Pair of Broad Bottom*, 1810, as seen in Marcus Woods' *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*, pg. 16



Figure 2. Richard Ansdell's, *Hunted Slaves*, 1861, as seen in Marcus Woods' *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*, pg. 96.



Figure 3. Marie Adrien Persac, *St. John, St. Martin Parish*, 1861, as seen in John Michael Vlach's, *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, pg. 18.



Figure 4. Nicolas De Largilliere's, *Portrait of a Woman Perhaps Madam Claude Lamber de Thorigny*, 1696, as seen in Gwendolyn Dubois Shaw's, *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Centenary*, pg.19.



Figure 5. Eastman Johnson, *The Freedom Ring*, 1860, as seen in Gwendolyn DuBois' *Portraits of a People: Picturing African Americans in the Nineteenth Century*, pg. 153.



Figure 6. Winslow Homer, *A Visit from the Old Mistress*, 1876, as seen in Alex L. Boylan's, *Landscape of Slavery: The Plantation in American Art*, pg. 117



Figure 7. Mr. T Rice as the Original Jim Crow, as seen in W.T Lhamon, Jr's, *Jump Jim Crow: Lost Plays, Lyrics, and Street Prose of the first Atlantic Popular Culture*, pg. 9



Figure 8. Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose salt and pepper shakers made by F.F Mold Co. of Dayton, Ohio. Ca. 1940-1950s, as seen in Kenneth W. Goings', *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping*. pg.25.



Figure 9. Black Collectible Postcard, 1930s-1950s, as seen in Kenneth W. Goings', *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping*. pg.82.



Figure 10. Rapper Nicki Minaj, 2015. Internet: <http://plasticsurgerygal.com/butt-implants/nicki-minaj-before-and-after-butt-implants-buttock-proof>



Figure 11. Rapper Eminem, 2013. Internet:
<http://www.theblaze.com/news/2013/01/07/has-rapper-eminem-really-become-a-born-again-christian/>

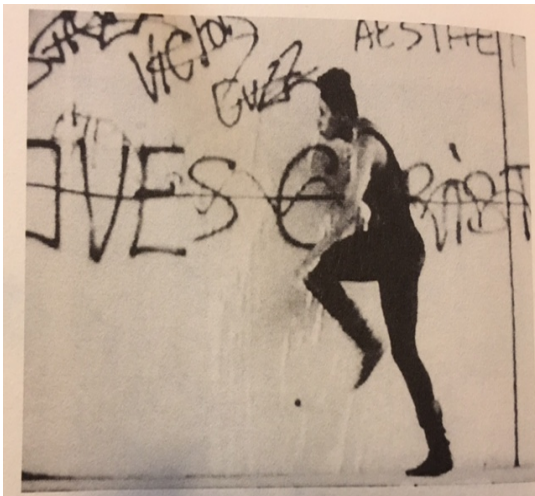


Figure 12. A member of M. C. Hammer's Posse dancing the Run Step in "Hammer Time," 1990, as seen in W. T. Lhamon Jr's *Raising Cain: Blackface Performances from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, pg. 222.



Figure 13. Runaway Male slave, 1840, as seen in Marcus Woods' *Blind Memory: Visual Representations of Slavery in England and America 1780-1865*, pg. 81.



Figure 14. William Mathew Prior, *Mrs. Nancy Wilson*, 1843, Oil on canvas 30 x 25in. (76.2 x 63.5cm), Shelburne Museum, Shelburne Vermont



Figure 15. William Mathew Prior, *Mr. William Lawson*, 1843, Oil on canvas 30 x 25in. (76.2 x 63.5cm), Shelburne Museum, Shelburne Vermont



Figure 16. Hattie McDaniel as Mammy on *Gone with the Wind*, 1939, internet: <http://black-face.com/Hattie-McDaniel.htm>



Figure 17. Chandra Wilson as Miranda Bailey on *Grey's Anatomy*, 2005-, internet: <http://www.cosmopolitantv.es/series-y-programas/anatomiadegrey/personajes/4400/miranda-bailey/>



Figure 18. (From left to right) Anthony Howard Goldwyn as President Fitzgerald Grant and Kerry Washington as Olivia Pope on *Scandal*, 2012-, internet: <http://www.tvguide.com/news/scandal-washington-goldwyn-1062619/>



Figure 19. Tracee Ellis Ross as Joan Carol Clayton on *Girlfriends*, 2000-2008, internet: <http://www.tvmaze.com/characters/88999/girlfriends-joan-carol-clayton>

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