

# A CENTURY OF CELEBRATION: DISRUPTING STEREOTYPES AND PORTRAYALS OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE MEDIA

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Over the past century, media representations of African American culture, people, and their communities, have been a major force in shaping the ways in which they are portrayed in popular culture. One reason for this significant impact on their portrayals is that U.S. media outlets<sup>1</sup> have expanded, adapted, and have, through the years, become more easily accessible to the public. Consequently, media outlets continue to be powerful tools that not only serve as backdrops that illuminate and capture indelible imageries that become associated with African American communities, but also reflect the substantial influence of these relevant and epoch-related media sources (from early newspapers and magazines to radio and television, and on to today's internet outlets). Yet, regardless of the medium available in any given era, there is one thing that has remained ominously constant -- the collective images of African Americans, especially males, have been distorted<sup>2</sup>. These distortions have long fueled controversy due to their often-negative implications for, and impact on, perceptions of African Americans. The persistence of these negative perceptions and stereotypes, which are continually propagated through popular media, have historically been a challenge to alter due to the lack of African Americans in positions of power in film, radio, television, and publishing. However, even with this past scarcity of African Americans in key media positions, African Americans have continued to make significant strides by finding astute methods to challenge ways in which African Americans have been portrayed historically and contemporarily. However, if historical trends hold true, these individuals are few and far in between and can only affect change at this level in small numbers.

W.E.B. DuBois' notion of the "Talented Tenth", if applied to affecting change in media representations of African Americans, means that only a handful of people have had the ability to have a direct effect on challenging negative stereotypes—largely actors and actresses, publishers, and television moguls. However, this model of limited resistance is giving way to a new vanguard – the concerned public. In other words, it can be said that, "*We are all activists against the negative constructions of African Americans; if you have a computer, tablet, or smartphone, that is!*" Today's vanguard has taken on a more contemporary face – that of social media. Social media has created an effective tool of resistance for challenging, protesting, and overcoming negative stereotypes of African Americans in the media. This article will offer a brief history of the struggles and triumphs in representations of African Americans and further show how social media has become a vital strategy, if used prudently and deliberately, for challenging messages and constructs harmful to the African American community.

## Hollywood

Any discerning media consumer should ask the question: *Is what we see and hear in the media a true representation of African American culture?* This question has long been debated in the African American community, and in an article written by Angela Coleman reflecting her thoughts on the power of film and a medium, she states:

Ever since its inception, the cinema has influenced the way moviegoers view life. This was an especially powerful reality in early Hollywood films, which depicted their own interpretation of social mores and moral proclivities to mesmerized, largely naive audiences who accepted what they saw on the screen as truth.<sup>3</sup>

Still today, most of what is consumed through film (and later radio and television) is a representation composed of an amalgam of popular tastes and desires and the understanding of media professionals (studio executives, scriptwriters, directors, producers, etc.), who were and are also consumers of these images -- many that are, as they relate to African Americans, wholly negative. However, this is not a new phenomenon. These negative constructions of African Americans have, more often than not, been fodder for White Americans (and others globally) since before the Civil War. The most egregious and dehumanizing of practices for the entertainment of the White masses was the Vaudevillian practice of blackface. On the Vaudevillian stage, White performers would darken their skin using burnt cork and lampoon African American males (primarily). The strange twist is that in order for Black performers to get work, they too would have to perform in blackface. Although one can easily challenge the humanity of this, many of the African American performers forced to don blackface eventually created characters that were far beyond the foolish caricatures they portrayed. For instance, Bert Williams injected heavy doses of humanity and displayed a mastering of his craft that was undeniable.<sup>4</sup> But

it is important to know that the negative stereotypes were fomented alongside the rise of blackface performance.

Media expert Donald Bogle's now classic text, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, is a seminal text regarding African Americans and media.<sup>5</sup> In his book, now in its fourth edition, Bogle delineates the history of longstanding African American stereotypes (most of which are listed in the title of the book).<sup>6</sup> A central point Bogle makes is that these stereotypes continue to persist today. There are direct lines between the cartoonish foolishness of the Sambo, the character "J.J. Evans" of the groundbreaking situation comedy *Good Times*, and the sometimes grossly exaggerated activities of, for example, the *Real Housewives of Atlanta* or cast members of the popular *Love and Hip Hop Atlanta*.<sup>7</sup> Though these shows may not set out to cast African Americans in ways that denigrate an entire race, there are many articles<sup>8</sup> that question the ethics of producers who encourage cast members to engage in speech and behavior that, while gaining ratings, certainly damages perceptions. The damage done by the sustaining of these negative constructions is not to be taken lightly. Patricia A. Turner pointed out that "stereotyping objects in popular culture that depict blacks as servile, primitive, or simpleminded [subtly] influences" [viewers] and goes on to explain how such "seemingly harmless images reinforce anti-black attitudes."<sup>9</sup>

Historically, when Hollywood began making "talkies" (movies with sound) the need for blackface naturally subsided, but the stereotypes persisted. This was actually a double-edged sword. With one cut of the sword, African American actors suddenly found more opportunities for work. The other cut however, made them implicit in the perpetuation of stereotypes like the mammy (i.e., Hattie McDaniel's mammy in *Gone with the Wind*—which earned Ms. McDaniel the first Academy Award for a Black actor), the Sambo (i.e., Lincoln Perry's Stepin Fetchit), the pickaninny (i.e., Billie Thomas' Buckwheat character from the *Little Rascals/Our Gang* short films), and the tragic mulatto (i.e., both versions of the film *Imitation of Life*).

Hollywood actors and filmmakers, specifically from the 1920s to the 1960s and beyond, such as, Sidney Poitier, Lena Horne, Ruby Dee, Ossie Davis, and Dorothy Dandridge, and Oscar Micheaux, challenged these constructions through their work. They took risks, broke down racial barriers, and withstood racism to take on some of those controversial roles. For example, Ruby Dee shared details from her early days in Hollywood and the barriers she faced being one of the first Black actresses:

I remember going to Hollywood and feeling intimidated, a little inferior... There were no African Americans in the technical areas; I didn't see any black cameramen or grips or electricians. No makeup artists. No black people in wardrobe... I dreaded when I went to get my hair done, because I knew they wouldn't know what to do with my hair.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Ruby Dee's husband, Ossie Davis, who was an actor, civil rights activist, screenwriter, and director, added to the conversation on how Black performers and actors responded to the racism during Hollywood's early years.

As performers and actors, we took ourselves rather seriously. We saw the racism, what had been done as World War II veterans were coming home. Black soldiers were being lynched, some of them getting killed trying to vote... We set out to eliminate it.<sup>11</sup>

As we celebrate the actors, performers, and actresses who began to break down racial barriers to better represent Blacks in films, we also acknowledge that Hollywood later began to more fully broaden their spectrum and embrace more diversity in the 1980s, and well into the 1990s. During the 1980s and 1990s, there appeared to be a shift to more positive representations of African Americans in the film. However, while the movie industry seemed to pursue more accurate portrayals of African Americans, we should not overlook the fact that this struggle to move beyond these negative representations was and is especially challenging on the small screen, and a look at the forbearers who fought for change via this medium is warranted.

## Television

In television, one of the first wildly popular programs featuring a Black cast was *The Amos and Andy Show*, which ran from 1943 until 1955.<sup>12</sup> Originally a radio program that utilized the caricatures of African Americans promoted through blackface racist stereotypes, the television iteration kept the spirit of the radio program intact while casting Black actors. This show was somewhat of an enigma because even though it promoted these stereotypes, it was just as popular in the Black community as the White community, albeit for different reasons. In the Black community it was an opportunity to actually see other Black folks on television<sup>13</sup> while Whites seemed to enjoy the show as just a regular comedy. Either way, a show characteristic that could be seen as problematic was the use of the excess malapropisms (misuse of vocabulary) which,

when combined with already negative perceptions of African Americans, could, for some, perpetuate the “coon” stereotype of the inarticulate and mentally inept black man.

In the 1960s and 1970s somewhat watered-down manifestations, but persistent stereotypical depictions, of the “coon” and “mammy” characters were featured in shows such as *Sanford and Son*, *The Jeffersons*, *Good Times*, *What's Happening*, and *Diff'rent Strokes*. Although not an African American, television producer Norman Lear, the creator of *All in the Family*, *Maude*, *Good Times*, *The Jeffersons*, and *Sanford and Son*, successfully used his White privilege to challenge many of those negative stereotypes and offered a clearer window into the Black community's culture and struggles. For example, the first few seasons of *Good Times* featured story lines that mined the challenges of poverty for a hard-working African American family. Plus, it was the first depiction of a Black nuclear family. However, the tragedy of *Good Times* was the rise of J.J. and his outlandish and often cartoonish behavior, along with his catch-phrase “dynamiiiiittteeee!!!,” which eclipsed the socio-cultural, political, and economic commentary of the show and was at the center of criticism and debate.

Nevertheless, in the 1980s and well into the 1990s, there appeared to be a shift to more positive shows such as *The Cosby Show*, its spin off *It's a Different World*, and *Family Matters*, *Roc*, *Hanging with Mr. Cooper*, and *Frank's Place*. During this decade, the number of African American programs ballooned, and with that ballooning there came a broader spectrum of characters and situations. Not to say that this was the era of panaceas, for challenges in representation still persisted, but this era of television is proof-positive that the protests and activism of the Black Hollywood community and many others, pushed for better representations, if not more accurate representations.

## Magazines

In 1945, *Ebony* magazine was born. The magazine was for Black people by Black people. In an article written by Sharon Shahid, she suggested that *Ebony* emulated *Look and Life* magazine, yet had goals which centered on the achievements of Blacks from “Harlem to Hollywood” and to “offer positive images of blacks in a world of negative images.”<sup>14</sup>

Founded by publisher John H. Johnson, *Ebony's* first cover ironically did not feature a glamorous black entertainer or an African-American “first” but seven boys — six of them white — from a program to improve race relations. Although, this was a bold and courageous move by Mr. Johnson, which interrupted the status quo, across America, the first issue

sold out at 25, 000 copies. Circulation peaked at nearly two million in 1997. Other magazines such as, *Jet*, *Essence*, *Vibe*, *Sister 2 Sister*, *Right On!*, *The Source* and a host of others have continued to break down African American stereotypes by supplying their readers with rich, positive, and inspiring images and interviews from African American communities. But, these are magazines in which African Americans have had to carve out a space that allows them to appreciate their genius, creativity, beauty and value in ways that other mainstream media do not consistently provide. Moving forward, there is hope that social media and social networking sites, if used pragmatically, will fill this void.

With social media in our midst, African Americans must realize that though they have moved into the Information Age and new millennium, the struggle against stereotypes continues. However, the bright side is that in these spaces, African Americans can have more control over their images and how they are constructed. These spaces offer a bigger platform for expressing and furthering protestations of stereotypes, and are indelible parts of the social media/social networking fabric.

## Social Media and Social Networking: A Help or Hindrance?

Today, society has entered the social media craze phase with over 70% of online adults possessing Facebook accounts.<sup>15</sup> According to an annual report on American journalism, African Americans are more socially active online than other ethnic groups.<sup>16</sup> While these data do not predict online news consumption directly, they show that African Americans are, in fact, active online in great numbers. The data also show that African Americans are more likely to have created their own web content — by blogging, microblogging and social networking — than Whites or Hispanics. Almost a quarter (22%) of blacks created or worked on their own online journal or blog, compared to 14% for whites and 13% for Hispanics.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, African Americans use social or professional online networking sites in greater proportions than whites. For example, “[i]n May 2010, some 71% of African Americans said they used online networking sites like LinkedIn<sup>®</sup> or Facebook<sup>®</sup>, compared with 58% of whites.”<sup>18</sup> With these numbers as a starting point, it is clear to see that social media and social networking are vehicles for African Americans to take charge of their online presence and to combat the previously-mentioned negative, distorted representations that are presented via other media outlets — but, is that happening?

Whether the social media network is Twitter<sup>®</sup>, Facebook<sup>®</sup>, Instagram<sup>®</sup> or any other media outlet, it is clear that African Americans are represented in substantial numbers;

yet, the question still remains: Are African Americans doing their due diligence to eradicate the stereotypical portrayals that have plagued their communities through their media presence for over a century? After all, African Americans can film, post, and write about their own existence, opinions, trials, tribulations and triumphs. Within their social media presence, there are no known outside editors or producers portraying them in a derogatory manner. With that in mind, if the medium and message are not being controlled by outside forces, why are there still so many disparaging images present? Some might say that many African Americans are themselves affected by negative messages about themselves in the mainstream media and, therefore, are internalizing these messages. Many of these messages may lead them to perpetuate a slave mentality that lends itself to believing what others think about who they are, what they are worth as people, and how they should behave.<sup>19</sup> “Specifically, scholars state that images in the media have a negative impact on black perceptions of self . . .”<sup>20</sup> Correspondingly, others would say, just because black people were freed from slavery, mentally they are susceptible to a culturally dominant, patriarchal and racist vision of their value in US society.<sup>21</sup> And, yet, there are still others who, conversely, see the value in themselves and their communities and are using social media and networking as tools to effectively challenge racist stereotypes and ideologies. These African Americans are gearing up for a peaceful, but shrewd social media revolution.

## Social Media and the Revolution

Many African Americans are using social media and social networking sites to encourage their followers to become social justice advocates. They are using these sites to thrust their readers into “more critical spaces”<sup>22</sup> that send a wakeup call related to the challenges facing their communities. As an example, the Hoodie campaign garnered several hundreds of thousands of followers on Facebook and other internet sites in the wake of the murder of teen Trayvon Martin<sup>23</sup>. As well, the use of social media mobilized over a million people who read and opposed the Florida *Stand Your Ground Law* and who sympathized with and supported the Martin family. Other social media outlets, such as *The Root* and *The Griot*<sup>24</sup>, provide their followers with “thought –provoking” commentary on black news, national events, and other related content. But, the authors would be remiss if they did not pay homage to an early “griot” who used music as his medium and set forth a call for social activism through this provisional media outlet.

Gil Scott-Heron, another pioneer in the media, broke down stereotypes and contributed greatly to African American communities through his most famous song, *The revolution will not be televised*. His message was, and still is, very powerful, and is illustrated in the excerpt from the song:

*You will not be able to stay home, brother.  
You will not be able to plug in, turn on and cop out.  
You will not be able to lose yourself on skag and  
Skip out for beer during commercials,  
Because the revolution will not be televised.  
Green Acres, The Beverly Hillbillies, and Hooterville  
Junction will no longer be so damned relevant, and  
Women will not care if Dick finally gets down with  
Jane on Search for Tomorrow because Black people  
Will be in the street looking for a brighter day.  
The revolution will not be televised.*<sup>25</sup>

Although, there are many interpretations of the song, Gil Scott-Heron’s precursor to today’s rap anthems spoke about politics, race, and racism in a time-bound, yet, timeless protest song. In this cult classic he reminded us that the “revolution” would not be televised and that it doesn’t take place at a specific time. He further intimates that it’s not planned, and it has no sitcom or commercial value. But maybe, just maybe, the song can be interpreted as a call for the changing of one’s mind, attitude, and beliefs. A change in one’s perception of self and a call to embrace a new way of uplifting our communities that goes beyond anything we can imagine. Maybe he had the foresight to know that literally, the revolution would not be televised.

Maybe Gil Scott-Heron knew the revolution would not be televised, but “fought” on social media. If this stretch of the imagination is true, then he was prophetic when he stated that one cannot just sit and wait for the revolution to come to their doorstep or just watch it pass by like a parade in the street. One must move to the “streets looking for a brighter day”; in other words, find other paths to solve your problems. This can be interpreted, at least in this particular article, that in today’s



shifting media landscape, the internet will become our “streets” and social networks will become the medium of this timeless revolutionary message. The revolution will *not* be televised, but it can be tweeted on Twitter, organized through Facebook, and shared on Instagram or LinkedIn. Social media can now be a powerful tool to unite the Black community.

If the medium is the message, African Americans can use social media to build up the Black community and to celebrate a century of Black life, history and culture. Social media can be used to support community leaders and mentor youth. African Americans can now, send singer James Brown’s message with a new twist: *Tweet it loud, “I’m black and I’m proud!”* Through social media, African Americans can become the change they want to see in their communities and neighborhoods. They can learn from the historical encounters with media outlets, and begin to challenge the status quo, dispel images of shiftless, lazy and unintellectual beings, and gain economic wealth that will secure and sustain the next generation of African American leaders. Through social media (or whatever medium is available) African Americans should celebrate another 100 years in the media, but with their own sustainable and positive twists. After all, the revolution can now be organized through tweets, and mobilized through Facebook leading to mass marches in the streets. The call is for African Americans to advocate for themselves on social media and to tear down media representations that damage their standing in our communities, because we all know that if we wait for this to happen through traditional media . . . it will not be televised.



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#### (Endnotes)

1 A media outlet is defined as a publication or broadcast program that provides news and feature stories to the public through various distribution channels. Media outlets include newspapers, magazines, radio, television, and the Internet. Accessed July 23, 2014 from [http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/media\\_outlet](http://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/media_outlet).

2 Social Science Literature Review: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys. Opportunity Agenda. Accessed July 24, 2014 from <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Media-Impact-onLives-of-Black-Men-and-Boys-OpportunityAgenda.pdf>.

3 Angela Coleman, “The Portrayal of African-Americans in Hollywood Cinema Before 1940,” Yahoo Voices, February 6, 2007, accessed April 13, 2014 from <http://voices.yahoo.com/the-portrayal-african-americans-hollywood-cinema-185873.html?cat=7>

4 For a sense of the difference between White performers in blackface and African American performers in blackface see the following links: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hkN6UITP1Fs> and [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-\\_swtbi2F0](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-_swtbi2F0)

5 Bogle, D. (2001). *Toms, coons, mulattoes, mammies, and bucks: An interpretive history of blacks in American films (4<sup>th</sup> Ed.)*. Bloomsbury Academic.

6 There is not enough space in this essay to do full exploration of African American stereotypes. For particularly powerful sources see the Bogle book and the Marlon Riggs documentary, *Ethnic Notions* (California Newsreel, 1986).

7 Although traditionally Samboes were African American male stereotypes, it can be argued that the real housewives of Atlanta or cast members of other reality shows may promote a contemporary manifestation of the Sambo.

- 8 For Example, Media Ethics Magazine, NPR's Popular Culture News: Monkey See; Ethical 'Reality': A Proposed Code for Producer's to Live By.
- 9 Patricia A. Turner, *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and Their Influence on Culture* (Anchor Books, 1994).
- 10 Ruby Dee, "Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis," in *Legendary African American Elders Speak: A Wealth of Wisdom* eds. Camille O. Cosby and Renee Poussaint (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 92.
- 11 Ossie Davis, "Ruby Dee and Ossie Davis," in *Legendary African American Elders Speak: A Wealth of Wisdom* eds. Camille O. Cosby and Renee Poussaint (New York: Washington Square Press, 2004), 94.
- 12 Mark Sawyer, "Commentary: Blackface is never O.K.," *CNN* October 14, 2009, accessed June 20, 2014 <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/asiapcf/10/14/sawyer.blackface/>
- 13 It has been noted that the show was in fact a very funny program, but may not be for a contemporary audience.
- 14 Sharon Shahid, "65 Years Ago in News History: The Birth of Ebony Magazine," *Newseum* October 29, 2010, accessed June 19, 2014 from <http://www.newseum.org/news/2010/10/65-years-ago-in-news-history-the-birth-of-ebony-magazine.html>.
- 15 "Social Media Fact Sheet," *Pew Research Internet Project* (n.d.), accessed June 20, 2014, <http://www.pewinternet.org/fact-sheets/social-networking-fact-sheet/>.
- 16 Emily Guskin, Paul Moore, & Amy Mitchell, "African American Media: Evolving in the New Era," *The State of the News Media: An Annual Report on American Journalism* (n.d.), accessed April 13, 2014 from <http://stateofthemedial.org/2011/african-american/>.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).
- 20 Social Science Literature Review: Media Representations and Impact on the Lives of Black Men and Boys. Opportunity Agenda. Accessed July 24, 2014 from <http://www.racialequitytools.org/resourcefiles/Media-Impact-onLives-of-Black-Men-and-Boys-OppAgenda.pdf>.
- 21 Joel Williamson, *A Rage for Order: Black-white relations in the American south since Emancipation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986).
- 22 Personal Communication, J. Flynn. July 24, 2014.
- 23 Million Hoodies Movement: <http://www.mhoodies.org/> and Trayvon Martin Foundation: <http://trayvonmartinfoundation.org/>
- 24 These sites provide thought-provoking commentary on Black issues: The Root: <http://www.theroot.com/> and <http://thegrio.com/>
- 25 Gil Scott-Heron, *The Revolution will not be Televised* (song lyrics), accessed June 19, 2014, <http://www.gilscottheron.com/lyrevol.html>.